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Chair

The Honourable Larry Bagnell

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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.)): Good morning, everyone.

This is meeting number two of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. Today we will be considering committee business.

I'm going to state the obvious for some of you guys who have been here for a long time and you might be hearing things that you already understand, but there are some new members. We usually start all the committees with routine business. At the beginning of a session, committees normally agree to a number of routine motions to facilitate the organization of their work. These routine motions are generally the same in all committees, with some exceptions or variations. A committee can adopt whatever motions it wants; however, and if they wish, members are certainly free not to adopt them. We'll be doing them one by one.

We will now proceed with routine motions. We have a paper copy this time if you want it. It was also distributed to you in that briefing book at the first meeting in the attachment. We have paper copies if anyone wants them. We'll distribute them now.

Mr. Arnold Chan (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): We're still trying to figure out [*Technical Difficulty—Editor*] the source and where it's going to, so my apologies.

The Chair: Okay. The messenger is going to do it.

The ones we're distributing are the ones that were used as a base last time around. Obviously there will need to be a few minor administrative amendments, but anything the committee wants to discuss as well....

We'll do each motion separately. If anyone is using their iPad, the motions are in section 5 of the committee briefing book, which is accessible from the "other documents" icon. Normally, in the future, you will get all the documents electronically, so if you want paper copies for the committee, you should print them out and bring them.

Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I must remember to call you that from now on, Larry.

I wanted to ask something. I'm not sure if you can answer this or if the clerks can answer this. Are all of these routine motions the same as they were as adopted—not as presented at the first meeting, but as adopted—in the last Parliament? Are there any changes from

the way they were as adopted by this committee—they can be two different things—in the 41st Parliament?

The Chair: I'll let the clerk answer that question.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Joann Garbig): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Yes, the text was extracted from the minutes of the meeting in October 2013 when these motions were adopted by the committee.

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay. Is this a reasonable time in the meeting for me to raise specific questions with regard to individual items here? Should I wait for a different point in the meeting for the purposes of allowing the meeting to flow smoothly?

The Chair: We're going to do each of them one by one, so when it comes to the one you want to talk about, then bring that point up.

Mr. Scott Reid: That sounds fine to me. So this is literally what was adopted in October 2013.

The Clerk: Yes.

Mr. Scott Reid: All right.

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Chair, I would like to pick up on the structural issue of the parliamentary secretaries, just to finish that off. I notice that there has been some change from the last meeting. We're not at the full promise yet, but we've managed to go in the right direction at least three places. My question remains, Chair. I'm seeing six members. I think the government gets six. One of them is Mr. Lamoureux, who is the parliamentary secretary.

Correct me if I'm wrong, please. I want to get this clarified, because it affects all the committees. If you don't mind, Chair, this is the first one, and it matters.

Through you, I will ask Mr. Lamoureux this.

The commitment from the government was that you were looking seriously, if you hadn't outright committed, at pulling parliamentary secretaries off the committees, since, at least you could argue, having them on committees impedes the independence of the members, given that the parliamentary secretary can use the whip structure to, if nothing else, put pressure on the members to follow the parliamentary secretary. Goodness gracious, if people don't—trust me—there's going to be trouble. You don't have to comment, but we all know how this works.

I think it's a great idea to give the committees more independence. We supported it. I think we're trying to be more like the mother ship in Britain, where they're really seen to be a lot more independent than our committees are. We have a long way to go, but one of those first good steps was the notion from the government that it would pull parliamentary secretaries from the committees.

Again, I raised that the other day. Mr. Lamoureux said he was going to give me an answer. So far, the only answer I see is that he's a voting member of the committee, and he's moved down three chairs. I can assure you the whip effect of a majority government is not affected by whether he sits there or there.

If I could, I'd like to get some clarification from Mr. Lamoureux that the government is going to pull parliamentary secretaries off the committees, because it would seem to me that this is going to set the pattern. Given that the government says it wants to do more work by committee where members can be more and more independent, I fail to see how his presence today supports that goal.

• (1110)

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson, the House of Commons passed a motion regarding who is on this committee. Mr. Lamoureux is not a voting member of this committee. He's like any other member of Parliament. He's welcome to sit in. I'm the sixth government member on the committee.

Mr. David Christopherson: Okay. I accept that. So he's not a voting member, but he's still here, and he still carries the clout of a majority government and the will of the Prime Minister.

The Chair: Well, he's here, as are, I hope, all parliamentary secretaries, to provide information from the minister.

Mr. David Christopherson: Are you going to defend him, now, Chair? Is that your role? Are you defending the government position?

The Chair: I'm defending that the parliamentary secretary is here to provide information from the minister.

Mr. David Christopherson: No, I'm sorry, Chair. Larry, I'm sorry. This is not going to work, man.

You're an independent chair. We'll battle out the partisan aspects, but I don't want to have to fight you too on a partisan issue. With great respect, sir—and I mean this—it sounds to me as though you're acting like a government member defending something the government is doing, when what you should be doing is refereeing us as we wrestle this issue to the ground.

The Chair: Mr. Lamoureux.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Christopherson, I appreciate the concerns you have. I think that as much as possible, we need to be sensitive as to why we're actually here. I have a vested interest in this particular committee, and as do other members of the House of Commons, I have the right to be present.

I suspect that many of the things that take place in the procedure and House affairs committee will have some direct and indirect impact on the whole issue of what's taking place in the House. I'll use the Standing Orders as an example. I like to think my expertise might be of benefit to committee members.

I think you underestimate the important role as defined by the Prime Minister that committees have. He wants to see committees being more proactive and productive in engaging with all members. All members of this committee—all the Liberal members, and I'm sure you and the Conservative members—will contribute through healthy debate to whatever is on the agenda. If I can assist or contribute in any way, I look forward to doing that.

As one of the committee members, I can tell you that I have no intentions of voting. I am not a voting member of the committee, nor as a parliamentary secretary have I asked to be a voting member. I like to think I'm here to complement the members who are on the committee, and nothing more than that.

You'll find that the members on the committee representing the government are very independent in their thinking. If there are ways in which I can be here to support them, I'm more than happy to do that.

The Chair: Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid: Mr. Chair, I just wanted to say a couple of things.

One, I can see that our clerk is right. These really are the motions that came from 2013. We'll have to read them carefully, because they do say such things as “that Dave Mackenzie be appointed” chair of the subcommittee on private members' business, which was what we wanted at the time; it was a government member. Another spot in there refers to the number of seats and kind of assumes that the New Democrats are here, the Liberals are there, and the Conservatives are over on that side of the House.

My point is that, yes, these really are what we adopted. That confirms, of course, that Mr. Lamoureux is not on the committee.

I have a couple of suggestions regarding Mr. Lamoureux' role. It's not my place to say how he'll choose to conduct himself, but I have a suggestion just for clarity.

Kevin, you don't have to do this, but I would suggest that you sit at that end so that it's clear that these are the members of the committee, and anybody can see that you're not actually on the committee. You're just sitting at the table to listen and so on. That's the system we had when Elizabeth May came to this committee to deal with private members' business. She sat separately. It became clear that she was there not as a regular member of the committee.

That's one thing, and it's just a suggestion. You don't have to do that. It's just an idea. It reflects informal practices.

The second thing, though, is that if you're not a member of the committee, I think you actually have to get the unanimous consent of the committee to speak every time. I could be wrong, but I think that might be the case.

I see that the clerk has anticipated me and is pointing to the rules, so maybe we could get clarification on that.

• (1115)

The Chair: One second: can you add Mr. Graham to the list?

A voice: Yes.

The Chair: Standing Order 119 reads as follows:

Any Member of the House who is not a member of a standing, special or legislative committee, may, unless the House or the committee concerned otherwise orders, take part in the public proceedings of the committee, but may not vote or move any motion, nor be part of any quorum.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you.

Just to be clear on that, if you don't mind, that then means that when we're having discussions like this, Mr. Lamoureux or presumably anybody else—or even, in theory, everybody else—can turn up here and seek a.... We'd need a big table for this to be done, but they could get a place at the table, put up their hand, and be recognized by the chair to participate in discussions like the one we're having right now. Is that correct?

The Chair: Yes, unless the House or the committee orders otherwise. So if we say no, the committee can deny them.

As you know, your having been on committees for a long time, any member of Parliament can come to any committee, and can participate unless the committee decides no.

Mr. Scott Reid: My understanding, when it comes to things like questioning witnesses, is that it only occurs in a case where a member is substituted in for somebody else in order to participate in the questioning and to then take their place in the normal rotation.

I don't think you're disagreeing with me. I see that you're nodding in confirmation with me. Okay.

But in a debate like this one, you would simply recognize anybody who is at the table who is a member of Parliament to participate in the discussion.

The Chair: Unless the committee orders otherwise or decides otherwise.

Mr. Scott Reid: Unless the committee orders otherwise. All right.

I don't want to seem uncollegial here, but that does present us with a problem that I can anticipate. The problem is that the committee consists of a majority of members from the government party; so Liberals can show up and participate, including slowing down any proceeding they don't like, by just coming along and participating in the debate.

In all fairness, history shows that you don't really need to draw on other members when you have Mr. Lamoureux at your disposal, because he has a remarkable capacity to offer voluminous thoughts on almost any subject on no notice whatsoever, and I mean that in the nicest way. Nonetheless, if anybody from any other party does the same thing, that will be shut down, and I think that is an issue.

I don't have any specific thing I'd propose right now, but I'll probably come back to this at our next meeting in January with a thought as to how we could modify this. I'll suggest a motion to be adopted by the committee which effectively would say that any intervention ought to involve the consent of the committee at any given time. The government, if it really wants to do something like this, can still override this, but I think there ought not to be more widespread participation.

This doesn't say that Mr. Lamoureux shouldn't be here, that he isn't welcome here. In my mind, he is very much welcome here. I just wanted to say that I think this is a problem, something that could be subject to misuse, and we want to prevent that from happening.

The Chair: Okay. I don't want to belabour this too long. Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: Well, I might want to.

Through you, Chair, I'd like to begin in terms of the comments from Mr. Lamoureux.

Most of what you said, Mr. Lamoureux, would stand if we were at two weeks ago and were having a blank slate discussion, but the problem is—and you can't erase the history—that you did arrive here at the last meeting and took the helm position, and you were the only member who spoke. Clearly, there was an intention that you were going to lead things.

Not only that, but normally, as a rule, this committee is staffed by, if you will, or has members on it who have experience, because of this sort of leading role that this committee plays in many of the activities of the House. That's why it has certain special rights. We always meet at the same time. We don't rotate. For the other committees, a lot of their stuff goes through that. There's all that kind of thing.

This is a very important committee, incredibly important in terms of the House, so for Mr. Lamoureux to be here.... Mr. Chan has some experience, I grant you that, but not much—I think a year or two after a by-election—and virtually everybody else is new. If you're going to throw newbies onto the committee, it makes sense that you'd bring in a seasoned veteran who would lead it.

Where would that seasoned veteran be? Oh, it's you, so any sense that this is just you dropping by because you're interested really doesn't hold any water. The fact of the matter is that you're here to ride shotgun on behalf of the PMO to make sure this committee does exactly what the Prime Minister wants, and guess what—that's the way it was the last time.

I raise this because the government is the one that has made such a big deal about wanting to be seen as the vehicle for change. I support that, and for some of the changes they want to make, I support those things. What I'm having trouble with is the words of the government versus the actions of the government. So far, when it comes to parliamentary secretaries on committees, there is nothing about their actions that link up with their words.

Mr. Lamoureux has every right to be here according to the rules, but I want to remind him that his Prime Minister stands up every day and talks about transparency, accountability, sunny ways, and how things are going to change, and so far, all we've seen from this government vis-à-vis PROC is the same old same old same old.

I would like to know as we're moving forward—maybe Mr. Lamoureux can point it out to me—when he's taking actions that support the government's words, because so far, they don't.

An hon. member: I'd like to—

•(1120)

The Chair: I'm sorry. We have Mr. Graham, Ms. Vandenbeld, and then Mr. Chan.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham (Laurentides—Labelle, Lib.): Mr. Christopherson, I would just like to know if you consider Tyler to have no experience.

Mr. David Christopherson: Pardon me?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I've spent many years sitting behind you next to your assistant, and I'm wondering if that makes me have no experience whatsoever.

Mr. David Christopherson: As a member of Parliament?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Well, I've been—

Mr. David Christopherson: As a member of Parliament? Come on, David, you've been around long enough. Don't do this. You can do better than this as your starting gambit.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I'd like to—

Mr. David Christopherson: If you're going to take a position, make sure you can defend it, David. If you're going to act like a veteran, then you had better make sure that you're going to be dealt with like a veteran.

Now come on. Nobody here has any real experience on this committee. Come on.

The Chair: Order.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: David, I'd like—

The Chair: Next in the order is Ms. Vandenbeld.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): I do want to address that issue, because I think that's a slight against members of this committee. We may not have experience on this committee or in this Parliament, but I for one was the director of parliamentary affairs to the government House leader, and I've been an adviser to a number of parliaments on parliamentary reform with the Global Programme for Parliamentary Strengthening in the United Nations Development Programme. I think you will find that we are not as easily cowed as you think we will be, and I think you'll find that we will contribute fully to this committee.

An hon. member: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

The Chair: Mr. Chan.

Mr. Arnold Chan: I want to address Mr. Christopherson's comments.

At the end of the day, this is part of the overall discussion. We still have to ultimately look at what the role of parliamentary secretaries will be. That is the actual function of this particular committee. Let's have that particular conversation, right? At the end of the day, we will determine—

Mr. David Christopherson: We're going to define the work of the parliamentary secretaries?

Mr. Arnold Chan: We're going to determine the rules that will ultimately govern that function—

Mr. David Christopherson: I'm interested.

Mr. Arnold Chan: So let's have that conversation.

Mr. David Christopherson: I'm very interested.

Mr. Arnold Chan: We'll set the necessary agenda and have that conversation at the appropriate time.

Mr. David Christopherson: Did you say that this committee is going to define the role of parliamentary secretaries? Because I second that.

The Chair: Order, please. Please speak through the chair, when you're recognized.

I think people's opinions are well known on that. I'd like to get on with routine business and do the motions we have before us. If people would like to come back to this later, we could.

The first motion, which I'll read out and then ask someone to propose, is on the analysts' service. This is routine. It allows someone from the Library of Parliament to help us out:

That the Committee retain, as needed and at the discretion of the Chair, the services of one or more analysts from the Library of Parliament to assist in its work.

That has been moved by Mr. Hoback.

Is there any debate or any objection to this motion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: I'd like to introduce Andre Barnes.

Welcome. It's great to have you back. We couldn't do this without you. We really appreciate all the staff. He has experience, as you know.

I'll read out the second motion as it is, but then I'll ask for an amendment, since, as you know, we're making a change here:

That the Subcommittee on Agenda and Procedure be established and be composed of the Chair, the two Vice-Chairs, one Government member and the Parliamentary Secretary.

Mr. Chan.

•(1125)

Mr. Arnold Chan: I'd like to propose an amendment to delete what it says after “the two vice-chairs” where it says “one government member and the parliamentary secretary” and to substitute the following wording: “two government members”.

The Chair: The motion now reads:

That the Subcommittee on Agenda and Procedure be established and be composed of the Chair, the two Vice-Chairs, and two government members.

Is there any discussion?

Mr. Hoback.

Mr. Randy Hoback (Prince Albert, CPC): Could we have a clarification? When you say “two government members”, that means two government members who are actually members of this committee. Is that correct?

Mr. Arnold Chan: That's correct.

The Chair: We'll have Mr. Christopherson and then Mr. Reid.

Mr. David Christopherson: I thank Mr. Chan. I support part of his motion, of course, the part that strikes the parliamentary secretary. That won't come as a shock. My difficulty is with putting two government members on.

Chair, I would seek your guidance on some of this. Most of the steering committees I've sat on have been one of two configurations. One is where the chair was actually the government representative and then there were two other members from the other two parties, which was very problematic. If you hearken back to some of the concerns I raised about your chairing a little earlier, there is the issue of the chair trying to represent a party at a steering committee, even though it's very informal, while at the same time being the one who referees the discussion, which is very difficult.

I moved a motion at public accounts committee, a number of parliaments ago, whereby we actually changed that and put on a formal government member and one from each of the recognized parties, and then the chair did its thing.

My understanding is that most steering committees don't bring non-unanimous decisions; at least that's been my experience. The steering committee tries to reach consensus. If there is consensus, which there is most of the time, in my experience, then things are brought forward to the full committee to vote on.

If the steering committee can't agree, then we don't have a power play on the steering committee such that the majority, meaning the government, gets to carry the day and bring the recommendation back. It can exercise its majority right at the committee, but the steering committee process is not a decision-making body per se. Everything we do has to come back to the main committee to be supported.

As we all know, the whole idea of steering committees or executives is to facilitate the business of the committee. There are a lot of details, just routine stuff. It puts together the schedule. Nobody's playing any games. It's just straight up front, boom, boom, here's what we're trying to achieve and how can we best do this as a committee. As I said, 95% of the time there's agreement, because it's only about how we do our business, not about what the decisions are.

With that in mind, I would just ask the government to please consider the idea of a chair, a government representative, and then one representative from each of the recognized parties. In this case it would be the Conservatives and the NDP. Again, if there's no consensus, then it doesn't come back here by majority vote, because it's not a decision-making body. If it's a consultative body, and if all their decisions have to come back here, and the government has 100% guarantee that their will, because they have a majority, will always prevail, then it would seem to me we could facilitate things if we stayed with a chair and one from each of the recognized parties.

Thanks, Chair.

Mr. Arnold Chan: Since I moved the amendment—

The Chair: No, it's Mr. Reid and then Mr. Chan.

Mr. Arnold Chan: My apologies, Chair.

Mr. Scott Reid: I just want a bit of clarification. Is that effectively a proposal to amend Mr. Chan's amendment, and if so, are we debating it?

Mr. David Christopherson: If I have any support for it, it is.

Mr. Scott Reid: Could you word that as a subamendment, then? Then we could debate it.

Mr. David Christopherson: I would move to amend the amendment, so I guess it's a subamendment to Mr. Chan's amendment, to strike everything after the words "government member", and leave out the two government representatives and the parliamentary secretary.

Joann, I seek your assistance in trying to make some sense of that.

Mr. Randy Hoback: The chair and two vice-chairs is what you're saying...?

Mr. David Christopherson: The two vice-chairs.... No. You need a government member if you're going to do the one, two, three, so we would stop after "government member". We would just stop it there.

Madam Clerk, I don't know if that constitutes a subamendment. I would seek your guidance.

The Chair: If I got that correctly, the motion would read that the Subcommittee on Agenda and Procedure be established and be composed of the chair, the two vice-chairs, and one government member.

Mr. David Christopherson: That's correct, Chair.

The Chair: Okay. There is an amendment on the table for discussion.

Mr. Reid is next in line.

Mr. Scott Reid: My question at this point simply becomes this.... I can comment on this, but I first want to confirm it. Is this actually a subamendment, or is it a new amendment that can only be dealt with as an item of business when the first amendment is disposed of, given the fact that it is not really an amendment to it but a replacement for it?

I'm asking for your advice on that before I go any further.

Mr. David Christopherson: Arnold, I don't know your thinking, but you can accept it as a friendly amendment and move things along if you're in agreement.

Mr. Scott Reid: I don't know if that works here. I think that's *Robert's Rules of Order*, not parliamentary procedure.

An hon. member: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

The Chair: The old procedures weren't really a motion, so the first motion we were dealing with was Mr. Chan's motion, and we have Mr. Christopherson's first amendment, so we're debating the amendment.

• (1130)

Mr. Arnold Chan: Do we need a seconder?

The Chair: No. We don't need seconders at committee.

On the amendment, Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid: I actually had a different suggestion.

David, this is not me speaking against your motion. It's simply that I was going to propose an amendment, and it's easier to debate your amendment in a fully informed manner if you know what my amendment was going to be.

I was going to suggest that it would be the chair and the two vice-chairs, and then after that we would just say "two government members who are both permanent members of the committee". My logic in suggesting this was, and I guess still is, that this would ensure that it's people who are actually involved in the working of the committee and have some knowledge, that it's not some outsider. In particular, it rules out the possibility that one of those two members could be a parliamentary secretary.

The problem with Mr. Chan's original motion.... Arnold, this is not me trying to say there's anything nefarious about it. It's simply a door that remains open. It could be two government members who could be two members of the committee or two members of another committee who have no actual knowledge here and are simply there to impose the will of the whip. Potentially, it could even be one or more parliamentary secretaries, at least in theory.

This was designed to shut that down. I have to say that although Mr. Christopherson's suggestion doesn't fully shut that down, it accomplishes roughly the same goal.

That's my contribution. It's not an argument for or against Mr. Christopherson's original proposal. It's simply how I was thinking of dealing with the same subject matter. I throw that out for others who are debating this issue.

An hon. member: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

Mr. Scott Reid: No, no. I just wanted to explain so that people will act in an informed manner when they're voting on Mr. Christopherson's subamendment; that's all.

The Chair: Before we go on, Mr. Reid, when members are referred to with respect to subcommittees and things, it is always members of the committee.

Mr. Scott Reid: Is that correct?

The Chair: That's the convention, so your motion is redundant, just so you're aware of that.

Mr. Scott Reid: I actually was not aware of that. Is that correct? I'm sorry. I'm sure that on private members' business—I know this for a fact—we've had members on that subcommittee, which is a subcommittee of this committee, who were not members of this committee. Unless there was some other wording that precluded that, I think that convention has already been breached, as it were, and the actual wording in the motion could be helpful to plug that hole in the dike, so to speak.

An hon. member: Do you think you're going to be open to that amendment?

The Chair: Okay. We have to deal with Mr. Christopherson's amendment. We'll think on that, okay? Who's next?

Mr. Chan is next and then we have Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. Arnold Chan: Mr. Chair, I just want to ask Mr. Reid a quick question.

I'm actually fine if you propose that as an amendment, Mr. Reid. The only question on which I wanted to get clarification from you is this. Let's say we needed substitution; if it's the two government members who are part of this committee, that precludes us, so if we needed a substitution, could it only come from the permanent members of the committee?

Mr. Scott Reid: That's correct. That's what I mean, yes.

• (1135)

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: I'm surprised they don't know, given the vast experience they claim to have.... But I don't want to be like that, so I won't say it.

Here's the thing, Chair: I think I get a sense of where this is going. You can see that my biggest concern is that the steering committee becomes just a mini-me of the committee, which really is pointless. I guess I'm seeking from you a clarification that my interpretation was the correct one, that you will use and that the clerk supports.

I had mentioned earlier in one of my soliloquies that the committee would not make recommendations that did not have consensus, where there wasn't unanimity, that it wouldn't be majority rule. Could I get a ruling from you on whether or not that is exactly correct? Or is there something different in terms of how that steering committee functions and how it reaches its decisions, and the relationship between those decisions and this committee?

For example, I had said that in my experience, only where there is unanimity do those recommendations come forward. Where there is not unanimity among, in this case, the three recognized parties, then it comes to the committee as an unresolved matter with no recommendation from the steering committee. Conversely, if the government were looking at the steering committee to actually win majority votes, and that would carry the strength of a positive recommendation...which is much harder to stop, especially if it's the government that's sending it and the government has all the votes here.

It's really important, in my opinion, Chair, to be clear from the get-go on whether or not the steering committee makes majority decisions that are then recommended to the committee. Or is it only decisions and recommendations that have unanimous support at the steering committee that come forward in that fashion?

The Chair: I'll ask the clerk for clarification on that, and then we'll go to Mr. Hoback.

Mr. David Christopherson: Great. Thank you.

The Chair: The clerk suggests it's up to the call of the subcommittee; however they want to work and what they want to bring forward, it's up to them.

Mr. David Christopherson: Then, Chair, I would seek, through you to Mr. Chan, some assurance that we're not looking at changing things.

I mean, here's the thing: You're now telling me the committee will decide for itself. If the government wins the argument and they get two members, that means they're guaranteed to win every vote, so why wouldn't they go to the subcommittee to argue they want the rules that way? They have the votes to force them. Then there's the whole system I was talking about, where the subcommittee, or steering committee, becomes nothing but a mini-me version of this committee with all its political dynamics.

I'm not trying to pick fights, by the way; I really do like working together, but we have to get the ground rules correct. I need some clarification from the government, in light of that ruling, on how they're going to interpret that at the subcommittee, because it matters whether we give agreement or not to two.

Let me put my cards on the table. If it's going to be consensus, fine, bring two. I don't think it's helpful. I don't think it changes anything. It just gives somebody another meeting. Maybe you need that, with all the caucus you have. That's fair enough. But it doesn't change the dynamic. If we're into a situation where it's majority vote as opposed to consensus, then, number one, we've moved away from some of the more independent tools available to this committee to work together, removed from the government, which supposedly is your goal.

If I could get that assurance, it would certainly make it a lot easier for me as we go forward. Otherwise, if you tell me that you're going to take two votes, change the rules in this Parliament, different from the last Parliament, to beef up the government strength in a subcommittee that's supposed to be as non-partisan as possible, I'm going to have some real difficulty with that, and I mean real difficulty, because it affects everything we do going forward, and it may likely set the template for the rest of our committees.

I say, with the greatest of respect, that if we want to get through the rest of our work, the government would be well advised to be very clear on what their intention is. I hope it's on the small-d democratic side and not the capital-C control side.

• (1140)

The Chair: Thank you. We have Mr. Hoback, and then Mr. Chan, Mr. Lamoureux, and Ms. Vandenberg.

Mr. Randy Hoback: Mr. Chair, in the spirit of moving this along, why don't we just deal with his subamendment and vote on it? I think Mr. Reid would have an amendment that he would like to make also. I don't think we're going to see any more discussion that's going to bring any more wisdom to the discussion.

The Chair: Do you want to call the vote on the amendment?

Mr. David Christopherson: As a point of order, you can't shut down debate in a committee. I want the floor, please, if nobody else does.

The Chair: Okay, we're going to the other interventions at the moment. It's Mr. Chan, then Mr. Lamoureux, and then Ms. Vandenberg.

Mr. Arnold Chan: Mr. Christopherson, it really comes down to our actual practices and how we conduct ourselves. We absolutely agree that the point of the steering committee is to operate under consensus, and if we can achieve that, that's exactly how we should

proceed. We have every intention of working collaboratively with the other parties with respect to establishing that.

All we're proposing to do is to put into effect the replacement of the parliamentary secretary, within the standard past practices of the composition of this particular committee, and to replace that simply with a government member. That's all.

What you're proposing, really, is to change the composition of the committee and to change the actual membership balance.

Mr. David Christopherson: I had a question, Mr. Chan, and my question was very clear—

The Chair: Mr. Lamoureux, you're next in the order. Do you defer?

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Yes.

The Chair: Okay, then we have Ms. Vandenberg.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Mr. Chair, just to be realistic about the purpose of this amendment, you see that the only real effective change is replacing a parliamentary secretary with a government member. The reason for that is so that the parliamentary secretary is no longer a member of the subcommittee. Everything else remains exactly as it always was and there's no reason to think that the behaviour of the subcommittee or anything would be any different than it has been. The only effective change is replacing the parliamentary secretary.

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: The government can go so far saying "the way it used to be", but you came in here saying you were going to change things, make them better and more independent, and give us more independence.

I hear all of the arguments. I say to the government members, with the greatest of respect, that I asked the chair whether or not it would be majority rule or consensus. I've been around here a while; you listen to every word. Mr. Chan said that they were going to try to achieve consensus, but what I have not yet heard is whether or not only decisions that are unanimous will come forward to this committee. If that's the case, we don't have as big a problem. In fact, I don't think we have a problem. I don't like it, but I can live with it.

However, if the government is going to say the chair has now recognized the subcommittee has the right to decide whether it's going to be a majority decision or unanimous consensus building as a requirement, and that this has not been decided and will only be decided by the subcommittee.... I'm asking, in the spirit of the new sunny ways and openness of the government, whether it is saying that it is interested in keeping things the way they were and having less control from the PMO in terms of the work that we do. I just need to hear crystal clear that the subcommittee will not make recommendations to this committee that aren't unanimous.

If I get that assurance, we don't have a problem. If I don't have that assurance, you might want to settle in.

The Chair: Are there any further interventions?

Mr. David Christopherson: I'd like the floor.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I had asked for some clarification. I now have the floor again. I'm asking, through you, if whoever's in lead over there would give me the assurance that, indeed, the decisions of the steering committee will be unanimous and that it's not going to be a partisan arena, as it hasn't been in the past. I'm seeking that clarification.

If the government's not willing to follow that aspect... We've already been through some dancing with the parliamentary secretary. It only took a week and a half and suddenly the words aren't lining up with the actions. This is important. The work of the steering committee is crucial, especially in a committee like this, which often has a huge workload.

Mr. Chair, as you know, one thing that was very helpful the last time was the character and personality of the previous chair. I voted for you. I was hoping that the same sort of thing would happen. We need to be able to work together, because we do deal with a lot of issues that are not partisan. If the very core driving our agenda is not being decided in a consensual manner, but rather is being decided by a majority vote, it is legal but it is not sunny ways, and it is not openness, and it is certainly not an improvement.

I'm having trouble even understanding why they're having so much difficulty with it. The whole idea was that they wanted to give committees some independence and the first thing that we're wrestling with is to get them to let go of control so we can have some of that independence.

Either the PMO is going to run all of the committees the same way that it did for the last decade, with all due respect, or you're actually going to do things differently, which means that we do things differently.

• (1145)

The Chair: Are there any further interventions?

Mr. David Christopherson: Mr. Chair, I still have the floor, and it looks like I'm going to have it for some time, because I want an answer. I'm entitled to an answer.

It's not an unreasonable thing for me to ask a government that says they're going to be open to tell us how the heck they're going to be running the steering committee or whether the committee is going to be allowed to run it, and so far, the silence from the government is deafening. It tells me that they still want control. They want to grab control of this committee by the throat and wrap it in some nice sunny ways and words and all that, but at the end of the day, here's the problem for the government.

I think I'd better settle in, because this is going to go on for a while. Here's the problem the government is going to have: slowly but surely, you're going to find out that every little deviance, especially when it comes to independence and some of the things you talked about in the House, is not going to go away. If the government wants to have the trappings or use it as a cloak but says "We're still in control and nothing has really changed", this is exactly the way to do it.

I see an honourable member shaking her head. I have been over there too. I understand, but the fact of the matter is that we deserve some assurances, not just words about sunny ways, but real, concrete action.

People in Canada were tired of it. This government promised something new, and a lot of people I know and like and respect agreed with that idea and voted for them in order to have that change. The cameras aren't on in here, but those people wouldn't be very impressed with this. This is not impressive for a government that says they are not trying to control committees and that in fact, conversely, they want to make sure that committees are more independent.

All we're asking for, all I'm asking for, is the assurance that when we're at the steering committee, it will not be the PMO that's driving the agenda. The way we do that is to say that the steering committee is non-partisan. We represent partisan interests at the committee, but we're trying to reach a non-partisan agreement, an agenda.

Let's say we're doing hearings on a report and we're going to decide how many witnesses to have, how much time to allot, and the order of witnesses. Those things really aren't partisan, unless we're really fighting, and that's a different matter, but most of the time on this committee we aren't. Those are the sorts of things we'd be dealing with at committee. Our defences are down and we're working together.

However, it's a whole different ball game if, at the end of those discussions, the government gets to dictate the agenda by virtue of a majority-controlled recommendation from the steering committee. Guess what? When a majority-controlled recommendation comes from the steering committee, the government members are going to vote for it 10 times out of 10.

Now, some of you can go on the record and say that's not going to be the case. Be very careful. I caution you about doing that, because this is how things will be.

The only way they could be different is if we sat down in a steering committee and at the end of the day, if we hadn't come to an agreement, we would have failed. I would have failed my caucus; the Conservatives would have failed their caucus, and so would the government members have failed their caucus if we couldn't come to an agreement, given that our job is to put together a non-partisan agenda that the committee could then endorse. Then the politics of what we do would take over in between, but to leave it the way it is with the government unwilling even to clarify makes it pretty clear that this government has no intention of doing anything different from the last government.

I have asked for the government members to respond. I'm not getting any signal yet that they are, so I'm going to be a little while, because I want this clarified. It affects every one of our committees.

I still—

• (1150)

The Chair: Hold it. We have a point of order.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Mr. Chair, my point of order is on relevance. My understanding is that the subamendment that the honourable member is putting forward is on the number of members of the committee. He's suggesting only one government member as opposed to two government members. However, the discussion is about whether that subcommittee would operate on consensus or not, which is not relevant to the actual subamendment that was put forth.

The Chair: What he is talking about is somewhat related to the amendment, so I will let it continue.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you, Chair. I appreciate that. They know me. We'll be here awhile.

Again, that would be another attempt to shut me down by Madam Vandenberg when we're in camera, which I would tell her, and which David would know, was a technique of the government all the time. When it couldn't win an argument, it would shut down the person who was making the argument.

Again, despite all its intentions, it's not as easy as you would think to deliver what the government promised or quite frankly, somebody would have done it by now. The fact is that it's difficult, and when you're the government, it's tough to let go, but then you're the one who made the promise to do that. You're the government and you're not doing that. You want to hang on to the ability to control the committees through majority votes at the steering committee and majority votes here. You attempt to shut me down on my debate because you don't like the arguments.

I have to tell you that I know you feel this is all right and that I'm way out of line, but that's exactly where the previous government was. It may have had different motives. It may have enjoyed trying to shut us down more, but the fact remains that it was trying to shut us down, just as my friend Anita across the way tried to do with me.

I come back to my main point, Chair. People can make me stop talking really easily. Just give me an assurance that we're not going to have partisan majority control politics at the steering committee. That's not an unreasonable request for an answer, which I'm not getting. I'm not getting even a "no", and I have to tell you that all of this is symptomatic of what the last government did.

For all of you who are new here and who are thinking that all of your words and good intentions alone change things, I don't question them, and I believe with all my heart that you're all here for the right reasons. You really do want to change things, but what I'm putting in front of you is that you're acting exactly like the previous majority government.

I still have the floor. Mr. Chan would like to speak, and I'd like to get back on the speakers list.

The Chair: On the speakers list so far we have Mr. Richards, Mr. Chan and then Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. Christopherson, I have been a bit lenient, but some of your arguments have been repetitive, so when you come back, please say something new.

Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): Having been a member of this committee for the last couple of years of the previous Parliament, I can see both sides of the argument here. I was actually a member of the subcommittee, as was Mr. Christopherson. I believe Mr. Lamoureux would have been there as well at that time. I think it worked reasonably well in the past. Of course, things always come back to the committee for a final decision anyway.

However, I do understand the point Mr. Christopherson is making about one member. There is certainly some fairness in there, so I am

a little bit torn on this one. I would be comfortable either way. I think the important point—and this is where I wanted to go, and I think Mr. Reid gave important context earlier—is that we ensure that they are, in fact, members of this committee. Mr. Christopherson's concern, despite the government's promises, is with the idea that the parliamentary secretary would sort of direct how the committee would function. Despite the government's promise to the contrary, I think both parties in the opposition are really seeking to avoid having the parliamentary secretary, on behalf of the Prime Minister's Office, directing and controlling what the committee does. That certainly is the concern Mr. Christopherson has been raising. I think Mr. Reid's suggestion that we ensure they are permanent members of the committee is the more important of the two.

I am hopeful that the government will seek to address some of the concerns being raised here and to find a way to compromise, because I do believe that's the important point here.

• (1155)

The Chair: Before Mr. Chan goes ahead, when Mr. Christopherson comes back, I wonder if the committee would consider, if we're not in agreement with this yet, putting it to the bottom of the routine motions here and seeing if there are some we can agree on. You don't have to answer that yet.

Mr. Chan.

Mr. Arnold Chan: Let me first address Mr. Christopherson's point. I think we're more preoccupied by form than by substance. You're proposing a change in the composition of the committee. We have every intention of working co-operatively, but there may be times when we ultimately can or cannot agree. All we're proposing to do is to simply remove the parliamentary secretary and replace that person with a government member. That was the practice we were basically adopting.

I want to turn to the points that both Mr. Reid and Mr. Richards raised with respect to the substitution question. My concern is that I think the intention here was to remove the parliamentary secretary as being one of the potential substitutes. I have some trouble with the idea that they must be only the permanent members of the committee. Sometimes one of us is sick or away for a protracted period of time and we need the opportunity to substitute somebody else in from the government caucus to represent us so that we have our six on this particular committee.

I don't want it to be so restrictive that we can't actually bring in someone else to replace us on this particular subcommittee.

The Chair: We have Mr. Christopherson, Mr. Lamoureux, and Mr. Reid, in that order.

Mr. David Christopherson: I'm prepared to defer to others. I've had a lot to say. As long as I can maintain another spot on the speakers list, I'll let the others speak now.

I heard your suggestion. I'm not really there, Chair. A lot of it, again, is goodwill. I want to bring goodwill, but I'm not getting any from the government. I don't see how I can just set that aside and pretend it's there and have goodwill for everything else. Either there's goodwill on this and the government is serious about changing its ways, or it isn't.

I'd like to get back on the list. Thank you.

The Chair: We have Mr. Lamoureux, Mr. Reid and Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Chair, like Mr. Christopherson, I have had the opportunity to sit on PROC for the last couple of years. I've also had the opportunity to sit on the subcommittee, and in my experience, there has been a very high sense of co-operation and consensus. I cannot recall there ever being a vote on the subcommittee. I have found the subcommittee to be very helpful. It does have its meetings; they are fairly straightforward. They then come back to the full committee for a vote.

I think what we need to look at is what we're actually debating right now. I say this in my capacity as a person with first-hand experience having sat on both committees and having seen how both of them actually operated.

I look to you, Mr. Christopherson, to provide comment, as I'm sure you will, in regard to this. Can you ever recall over the last two and a half years an incident where there was controversy at that subcommittee? I don't think we need to read something into something that's just not there.

If we look at the change that's being proposed, Mr. Christopherson, you continue to question the integrity of the Prime Minister's willingness to seek changes on standing committees. You're in the opposition. You can do all you want in regard to that. It does not diminish the attempt by the Prime Minister to make significant, positive changes to the committee. He is also making committees more open for dialogue.

This amendment, the change that's being proposed, does one thing: it takes the parliamentary secretary [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. You've made reference to the importance of the procedure and House affairs committee. It is one of those senior committees to which other committees will often go. It is something we should be taking very seriously. I for one am taking it very seriously.

I listened to you, Mr. Christopherson, when you talked about, well, why was I sitting where I was? In order to try to show goodwill on my part, I thought, okay, fine, I'll change the location of where I sit, if that happens. I don't intend on being here at every meeting, per se. I'm not exactly sure of my role; I'm trying to better define my own role on it. All I know is that I do have an interest in it.

We have very capable individuals sitting on the government side, and we should not be questioning their integrity or their experience. It's much like many of your caucus colleagues who come before committees, many of them for the very first time. I don't believe you'll find Liberals questioning their integrity or their capabilities to perform.

I understand and I can appreciate that all members, including Liberal members, are anxious to see committees get to work to get the job done. Then, I believe, we'll get a better sense in regard to what role other members will be playing, including parliamentary secretaries. But I think we have to provide the opportunity for time to pass and to see what kind of work committees will be able to do. I'd like to think that a year from now you'll be looking at it and saying that these committees are in fact more productive and members are able to actually contribute by bringing forth

amendments, and that you'll see amendments being accepted. At least that's what I would anticipate.

I'm very much aware in terms of what it is and many of the arguments that you've put forward, and I respect them. Having said that, if we go right back to the core rule, to what it is we're actually trying to do today, I don't think it's that much.

I had intentions of providing some comment today, because there were House leader discussions that involved all three House leaders. I was hoping to be able to share some of those thoughts. Maybe if we can pass this through, we will be able to get that opportunity. I'd like to think, because of the discussions that included your own House leaders, we'd be able to enter into at least some discussion on that, but in order to do that, we have to go through these rules.

• (1200)

Now, my experience of going through rules, and I've done it on more than just PROC, is that for motions of this nature, it's typically fairly quick. There's no surprise. In the documents before us that we're expected to pass, there aren't going to be any surprises from us.

No one should have been surprised that we're taking the parliamentary secretary off the subcommittee. That's all we are doing in this particular amendment. There is no other change to it. It is the government's intent that the representatives on that subcommittee be members of PROC. There is absolutely no change.

My suggestion—and that's all it is; it's just a suggestion—is that maybe if we could get through this motion we could then enter into a discussion, if it's the will of the committee and the chair to have some sort of discussion on agenda, because I know you were very concerned about the coming agenda. We were hoping to be able to do that, because today will likely be, or could be, our last day, unless the vice-chairs and the chair get together and reconvene the committee.

I'm hopeful that you'll appreciate that there is no hidden agenda here. What we want to do is to just see the motions pass, to take into consideration taking me off the subcommittee, and to make sure there's a different membership because of the switch in places inside the committee, with the Liberals, not the Conservatives, now being the government and so forth. That's it.

Then we can continue on and we can even have an open debate, possibly, if that's what the committee wants, after the rules have been passed, but that will be up to you. We're not going to...at least I don't think the chair or members of the committee are going to attempt in any way to shut you down.

• (1205)

The Chair: We have Mr. Reid, Mr. Christopherson, and then Mr. Angus.

Mr. Scott Reid: Mr. Chair, I want to respond first to something that Mr. Lamoureux said, and then to a prior comment Mr. Chan made. They're different subjects, but that's how it works.

With regard to Mr. Lamoureux's comment, he invited Mr. Christopherson to think back over the last three or four years, and he said, "I don't recall any controversy at the steering committee." First of all, I want to add a little plug for my former government, which gets beat up on so much as being so awful in so many ways. I mean, oh my goodness. That was at the time when we had a majority on that subcommittee. We actually acted responsibly and consultatively. A Liberal member has actually just said so, alleluia, choruses of angels, and peace to all men, yay. It's Christmas. It's Hanukkah. It's all good. I just had to say that.

More substantively, my experience on this committee goes back 11 years. I was here with Ed Broadbent way back in the day. I feel a bit like one of those grizzled *poilus* who entered the French army in 1914 and somehow were always in a different place when the shells landed and were still there in 1918, having gone through multiple generations of others. It was not always sweetness and light with regard to the subcommittee. There were significant problems, not so much back in the very beginning when it was the Martin minority government, which was when I first came on, but during the two Harper minorities, there were problems with the subcommittee.

An hon. member: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

Mr. Scott Reid: What was that? Were there votes in the subcommittee? I wasn't actually on it, so I can't tell how it worked. My point is that—

The Chair: I'm sorry, but on a point of order, we're not in camera right now and subcommittee meetings were in camera, so you can't really disclose what happened.

Mr. Scott Reid: In all fairness, I actually can't tell whether there were votes, so you needn't worry. I was not there.

What I can tell you is that the agendas they came forward with were not always those that matched with.... They had not been arrived at in a manner that appeared to indicate that from those of us watching it—and our meetings were not in camera so they're on the record—and we had a lot of punch-ups. I think our clerk may have been there at the biggest punch-up.

You weren't doing it yourself. You were just watching.

They weren't literal punch-ups, but they were the next closest thing. We actually dissolved into complete disorder. There was a vote of no confidence in our chair. He was replaced by Joe Preston, who then immediately.... You may remember this.

Were you on the committee then, David?

Mr. David Christopherson: I remember. I came in after, but I know the battle, yes.

Mr. Scott Reid: All right. It's sort of legendary.

He then refused to actually convene the committee or chair the meetings. All of this was over a number of different things. It was over an attempt to find the government in contempt of Parliament, which we thought was an illegitimate use of the committee's mandate and authority, and also an abuse of the facts, to be honest.

In the end, the Canadian people backed us up when we had an election on the subject back in 2011. The point I'm driving at is that there was not this consensus and there was considerable division.

Historically, just to establish that record, it has been an issue. That does not mean to suggest it would occur again. My sense, if we're talking about whether it would be consensus or not, is that there is a different dynamic in majorities than there is in minorities and you probably wouldn't get it. But I want to make sure that everybody understands the full record, that it is not something that has happened every single time.

Having said that, Arnold, with regard to your comments.... To be honest, I don't have as clear a memory of your comments as I had at one time. Mr. Lamoureux's comments were so long that some things have now faded away.

Mr. Arnold Chan: My point was just on who could substitute on the subcommittee. I asked you a question to clarify whether it had to be one of the permanent members, and your answer was "yes". I indicated then that I had a substantive concern with that, because I feel it restricts our ability in terms of substitutions and that it should be a government member.

In the past year, as you know, I suffered from cancer. If I was away for a protracted period of time, this would have just made it much more difficult for us to substitute me. We're all busy people. We're not suggesting that we don't want one of the permanent members. They're simply more familiar. But I don't want to preclude that capacity of our sometimes, on occasion, having to bring somebody else in as a substitute.

The key point for us is the removal of the parliamentary secretary, with which we would be fine. If you want to explicitly say that, I'm fine with that. I'm more concerned about our inability.... It's our intention that in most instances the substitute would be a permanent member of the committee because we are more familiar with what's going on. However, I don't want to fetter our ability to put someone else in, just in that circumstance where we don't have a permanent member of the committee who's available to come in and substitute and we must draw on somebody else. That's all.

● (1210)

Mr. Scott Reid: There are two things about that. Number one, what Arnold and I are discussing is, strictly speaking, not relevant to Mr. Christopherson's amendment. It's relevant to the amendment that I haven't made yet, so I'll respond to him and in the event that we get through Mr. Christopherson's amendment and move on to mine, I will simply refrain from repeating these comments.

With regard to the substantive point that Arnold's making.... I'm now copying my colleague, Tom Lukiwski, because he always refers to everybody by their first names. With regard to what Arnold's saying, I disagree when it comes to this subcommittee—not other subcommittees, just this one—for the following reason.

We have subcommittees in various things. I chaired a subcommittee that dealt with the Ethics Commissioner and her mandate to adjust our code of conduct and Conflict of Interest Code, which I suspect we will return to. When we get to that particular item or others like it, I will not be suggesting that it should be a permanent member of this committee. In the past, we had people who were not permanent members of the committee and that was fine. It was people who had a particular understanding of the issues related to conflict of interest.

On this one, however, I think that actually being involved in the committee and having an intimate personal knowledge of what's going on is really key to being on the steering committee. That's the reason that, on this particular subcommittee, just the steering committee, I think it's essential to have permanent members. I always thought that this was a problem in the past whenever we veered away from it, including when my government veered away from it and introduced people who didn't have an intimate knowledge of the problems.

I also want to point out with regard to this discussion that the private members' business subcommittee is dealt with. I said in earlier comments that I've seen members who are not members of the standing committee on the private members' subcommittee. It turns out, and the clerk pointed this out to me, that there is a separate standing order, Standing Order 91.1, that deals with membership on the private members' business subcommittee. It has a different set of criteria for membership that has nothing to do with our normal rules. Nothing we do here will relate to that. We can continue to have non-members of this committee on that subcommittee. That is fine, and I agree that it's fine because a knowledge of how that business works doesn't really relate to what we do here. Appeals from there come here, but we could argue that it's better to have someone who's not a member of this committee because you shouldn't be hearing an appeal to your own ruling.

I just wanted to get that clear. The steering committee is the one exception.

Arnold, I do take your point about people being ill, but there is a pretty large number of government members. It is actually more of an issue for us and especially an issue for the New Democrats. I am vaguely hopeful that Mr. Christopherson will hear my point on this because it relates to him, and I hope that he'll think about it. There are five government members, excluding the chair, on this committee, so you'll have people to draw upon if you need to. There is a tiny bit of an issue for us, as we have three Conservatives in opposition, but there's only one New Democrat. It's conceivable that, effectively, if we do what I've been recommending, where only permanent members go on—

Mr. David Christopherson: I wouldn't have a substitute.

Mr. Scott Reid: You wouldn't have and that could be an issue. Arnold put that thought in my mind. I'd be interested in your comment on it, but if you don't want to do it now, because we are dealing with your subamendment, not mine, that's fine.

I'll stop now. Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson and then Mr. Angus.

Mr. David Christopherson: Chair, I'll pick up on Mr. Reid's last point just while it's fresh in my mind, and I have a number of other thoughts from previous speakers.

Mr. Reid, through the chair to you, your point is well taken. I think what would mitigate it in a huge way is exactly the issue I'm trying to get resolved. If the steering committee didn't have the political majority control power to control a motion that comes here, in the affirmative or in the negative, then it wouldn't matter as much because there would either be total agreement.... If you're not on there, you run the risk that you don't know what's going on, but for

the most part, if somebody is on there from somewhere else, if it's by consensus, it's not as big a problem. There are two big issues, as I see them, with your point. If you get somebody on there who doesn't really know what is going on at the committee, it's a little difficult to be part of the steering committee that looks ahead, especially if you're in a bit of a jackpot and you're trying to get out of it. It's very difficult if you're not one of the ones who are there, but it's a lot easier for us on this side of the House, the other recognized parties, if there's a consensus model so that at the very least it's not being partisan-driven that way, and then when it comes here we still have the opportunity, but your point is well taken.

If I might, I would say just a couple of things, Chair. First of all, both Mr. Lamoureux and Mr. Chan have been sort of urging us to get on with things and to watch the clock, since this may be our last day. I want to remind colleagues that it was on Tuesday when we assembled all the things it takes to pull a committee together that the only thing we did was elect a chair and two vice-chairs. We had an hour and three-quarters or an hour and a half available, and I was ready to start working, but the government had no interest at all, so, I'm sorry, but the argument that the NDP caused major problems because they backed up the committee and the work couldn't get done isn't going to wash. The government has to remember that on Tuesday it shut us down after we did the least amount of work possible. I leave that with you.

Second, through you again, Chair, with respect to Mr. Lamoureux, I hear what you're saying and I don't necessarily disagree, Kevin. I think Scott was right that there actually were a few examples in which there were problems, but I agree with you to the extent that most of the time it's not an issue. When I link that with what the government has said it wants to do with committees, it reminds me of my old negotiating days back when I was in my twenties negotiating collective agreements and how whether an employer said "may" do something or "shall" do something could cause a strike. On the one hand, "may" means they might or they might not depending on how they feel that day. "Shall" means there is an obligation.

Unfortunately, Mr. Lamoureux, you didn't quite get your notes in order, because while you were arguing that we're always going to get along, Mr. Chan is on record as saying—I'm paraphrasing—that's likely to happen, but sometimes we'll disagree. There's the big "but". Either the government wants the PMO to have the ability to control the committees or it does not. I again put forward that the government already has control.

I'm going to acknowledge that there's about a 99.9% certainty, if not 100%, that other than in some freakish scenario, I'm going to lose votes and the government's going to win. That is going to happen 10 times out of 10 whether it's in any committee or in the House, and, Chair, I'll be the first one to say that under our current system, as flawed as it is, that's the way it needs to be. I accept that. I'm not trying to rewrite the election results; as much as I might like to do that, I'm not trying to do that.

There's backup control for the government, and I do get that, but at the end of the day, you have that at committee. No matter how many times I place a motion or the former government members place motions, we're going to lose if the government decides it doesn't like those motions. That is just life for us. The government gets to win every time the government wants to win.

I've been there. It's glorious. It's great. It's wonderful walking into a room, whether it's the House or a committee, knowing that 10 times out of 10 you're going to win. It's a great feeling, but you have that, and you made a promise that you're going to do things differently, so arguments about what we did in the past carry only so much weight when the government came in on an agenda of change. Arguing status quo really is arguing against your own agenda.

• (1215)

If you want to have two members on there, fine. That's not a hill I want to die on. However, if you're going to say that those two members are going to use their voting clout to force things through, that's not the intent of a steering committee. Even if the government doesn't get its way at the steering committee and there's no recommendation, the government lead—possibly Mr. Chan, if we're going by seniority and the fact that it won't be a parliamentary secretary, so it could be Mr. Chan or anyone else—is going to put forward a motion that reflects the argument that was made at the steering committee. They didn't win it at the steering committee because the rules of the steering committee provide for as much consensus as possible. The structure is meant to provide that. Then, when we don't have unanimity and we come here, Chair, I can all but guarantee that the government lead is going to move a motion that, just coincidentally, reflects everything that the government members wanted to do in the steering committee.

I don't have a problem with that. You're going to place that motion. The most we can do is debate the hell out of it and delay things, as I'm doing now, to make a point on something. We can do that, which we're entitled to do, assuming that you're not into railroading mode yet. You still have that backup at this committee.

Again, if you wanted to change things, this isn't even that big. I'm really quite surprised, Kevin, that you're letting us get this far down the rabbit hole, because this isn't going to reflect well on you either. This thing should have been boom, boom, boom, out of here. We could have been done on Tuesday.

All I'm trying to do is to help the government. Let's turn this and look at it differently. I'm trying to help by facilitating your agenda to make committees a little more independent. They're not going to be totally independent, because you have that majority vote. Fair enough. Again, nobody's arguing that. You have the right to make the decision. We can squawk and complain all we want, but you have that power. They used to have it; now they don't and you do.

Okay. However, if you really want to change things and you want us to feel that committees are more independent, that we're actually reflecting what we think rather than what we're being told from on high....

That still applies to our parties. It's not as tight when you're not in government, but we all have leaders, whips, and House leaders, so those things still come into play at this committee. Other than the parliamentary secretary not being on the committee, there's not a lot of change to the power structure. It's a good start, but it doesn't really change the dynamic, and nobody's pretending it should. I'm not saying that you're evil for not doing that. That's the way it is. You get the final say.

However, if we really want to make things more independent—and this is not new; most of the steering committees I've sat on have operated by consensus. If we couldn't agree, the matter was bounced over to the committee with no recommendation. The government members would have done their homework, and Mr. Chan, for example, if he were the lead, or Ms. Taylor, if she were the lead, would put forward a motion that would exactly reflect what the government was saying in the steering committee. We would be fully expecting it, and then we'd have our array of measures and tools to respond, such as discussing and talking and holding things up and all that other stuff. That'll all come into play here, but at the end of the day, you win. Fair enough. But now a government that says it wants to do things differently wants to control the one place in committee work where there are no cameras and nobody sees the transcript, except for a very few people who have to get permission. It's like Maxwell Smart's cone of silence. Nobody knows what's going on.

They're fun meetings, quite frankly, because people are intelligent and they're funny in their work. If you've been around a long time, as I have, you actually get more of a thrill when you try to work together instead of fighting, because fighting is just the same old same old. Working together is a lot of fun; it really is, especially if you have serious challenges and you're working together. That's done a lot better in a collaborative relationship without the partisan aspect of power voting.

• (1220)

Mr. Lamoureux, you just finished saying that you didn't expect it to be a problem. I don't disagree with you, but I have to listen to your colleague who sits besides you, who said that there's going to be occasions where...and that as soon as we get there...even if it's just one time.

I say again to Mr.—

• (1225)

The Chair: On a point of order, Mr. Christopherson, could you please not repeat yourself. You can't keep on repeating the same argument and keep the floor.

Mr. David Christopherson: How am I repeating myself? I'm talking about the dynamics that are happening in a steering committee that show why my argument is the one that I think should prevail. Help me understand where I'm repeating myself, Chair.

The Chair: You've said that a number of times.

Mr. David Christopherson: I'm allowed to say it as many different ways as I want, as long as I'm saying it in a different way; I'm not using the same words.

I mean, really? Is that where we are? Anita is trying to shut me down. Now you're trying to shut me down. Here we are, with you telling us it's a whole new era, and all I'm doing is making arguments that we actually change things—like, really do it rather than talk. Come on.

I'm willing to relinquish, if you're tired of hearing from me, as long as you have other speakers and I can go on the list. I'll be glad to do that. But if that's not the case, Chair, I'll continue to talk about the things that I think are relevant to the matter in the motion that I put before us.

The Chair: We do have other people on the list.

Mr. David Christopherson: Very well. I'll be glad to defer.

Madam Clerk, would you put me to the bottom of the list again. Thank you.

I'll relinquish the floor.

The Chair: Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid: On a point of order, this is not to question... Well, it is to question something you've just done, but it's not to question the integrity of what you've done. I just want to find this out for clarification and future reference, because I have a feeling that the issue of relevance may come up again; I'm just saying.

As chair, are you actually allowed to call people on relevance, or do you have to wait for one of the members of the committee, on a point of order, to raise the issue of relevance? This is just so that we know that it gets done in the right manner in future.

The Chair: It's in the judgment of the chair.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you.

The Chair: As I think committee members know, you can't be repetitive or out of relevance.

We have a long list now: Mr. Angus, Mr. Richards, Mr. Chan.

Mr. Angus.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and welcome back. The last time I saw you was in a bookstore in Yukon, when I thought you were retired.

The Chair: I was.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Charlie Angus: I hope in your new capacity you won't be calling points of order on me in my attempt to help things along.

I also want to say welcome back to Mr. Chan. I'm very pleased to see that you went through your treatment and that you were elected. I

would have preferred a New Democrat here, but I'm very happy to see that you're in good health, and so it's good to be here.

For the new members who might find this very tedious—I see a little rolling of the eyes—the issue before us today is the idea of “Trust us. We're great. This is the new era.” Mr. Lamoureux, on the question of whether my friend was questioning the word and the integrity of the Prime Minister, far be it from us over here to doubt the Prime Minister's word, but I wouldn't take it to the bank.

I say that because I've been here since 2004. I've served on good committees and I've served where it was a little toxic. I've served on committees in which we had a constitutional crisis and members actually interfered with the separation of the roles of the legislative branch and the courts, and we had to sometimes filibuster almost all night just to re-establish some of these basic rules.

How did that happen? Well, committees are made up of personalities. In politics there are sometimes big egos, and we're very partisan by nature. No matter how much we say we're going to be sunnier, this is the nature of it, and sometimes these committees can break down.

What is really reassuring from the Prime Minister is the message that he's taking the parliamentary secretaries off the committees. Mr. Lamoureux, it's great to see you in the House; it will be great to see you off this committee.

Those were promises. We've talked about this, and I've heard this for many years. Because of the power that the parliamentary secretary holds, I didn't actually believe a prime minister would do it. This is a really positive step, because the fundamental failing of the committee structure in the Canadian Parliament is that we are reduced sometimes to very juvenile status and to voting strictly along partisan lines. When the parliamentary secretary raises his or her hand, all hands go up on one side and all hands go down on the other side.

When I was over in the U.K. and sat in on a parliamentary committee hearing, I felt so silly as a result of the experience I've had in five Parliaments here. I couldn't figure out who was on the government side and who was on the opposition side. I was stunned that they were working together, and this was on an international affairs committee. I thought of how much our committee system has deteriorated, to the point where we have become a mirror of the House of Commons and we vote along whipped lines. That the Prime Minister has said that we're going to remove the parliamentary secretaries is a very powerful thing. With the Liberal majority, I don't think anybody is going to be voting for me to be chair of the aboriginal affairs committee that I'm on, but that we can choose a chair is a very powerful thing.

One of the things we need to look at, though, again goes back to the role of the subcommittee. In 2004 I was completely naive. I had no idea. I believed in the peaceable kingdom and I believed in trust. I've learned that unless you actually have it in the rule book, trust lasts sometimes as long as a meeting, sometimes not even that. However, I've had some really good chairs who saw their role as trying to build consensus so that we could actually work together and get something done.

Why this is really important for PROC is that PROC plays a very special role. It's where MPs of all parties have to look to deal with some very substantive issues, so its non-partisan nature—not that it is non-partisan, but to the extent it can be—is much more important than, say, on the ethics committee, which was sometimes like a WWF cage match in terms of its political toxicity. I get that. Some of our committees are more partisan than others. I wish you all very well and I'm very glad I'm not on it.

However, this is a committee that is entrusted. All parliamentarians put our faith in you, even though we know, as David said, that 10 times out of 10, if the Liberal members vote one way, that's how it's going to pass. However, within the subcommittee the idea of consensus has always been the one area where the chair could bring some sense of whether we could get a working plan, take that plan and come forward. If we don't have that consensus, it comes back here anyway in whatever motion gets brought and how people want to debate, and the majority vote wins.

• (1230)

I think what's really important for my colleague is consensus. I've sat beside David in the House, and when he whispers he's as loud and as opinionated with his own party's members as he is with you, so for you new members, don't take anything personally over there.

David is very passionate about this. What I'm hearing, and I think it's a very coherent argument, is that it's not the number or the membership but the idea of consensus. If we're not going to get consensus at the subcommittee, it goes back. The majority will rule. Our motions will be defeated or accepted and Conservative motions will be defeated or accepted, but it's the power within the subcommittee that changes the dynamic of the working relationship.

I would love to trust you all. I'd love to trust the Prime Minister. These are very early and sunny days, but I've been in five different Parliaments and I've seen that sunny ways lead to stormy ways. We get bogged down in issues. In some of our committees, our personalities don't work. I've seen some chairs who are extraordinary, but in the case of other chairs—not you, Mr. Bagnell—I don't know how they got the job. No names will be mentioned.

This committee sets the example that the Prime Minister's word is really going to change the nature of committees. I think that when this change comes out of here, it will send a message to our other committees.

I have to say that in the last Parliament, I became a lot more partisan than I ever was in my previous political life. I want to ratchet that down. I'm tired of it. I want to get something done.

We're not going to build the peaceable kingdom here so you can go back and do what you're going to do, but I'm appealing to my colleagues here to recognize that if we can just incorporate the principle of consensus into the subcommittee, we can get this thing passed and we'll all be going home for Christmas.

It is a principle that has ramifications beyond just this committee. It will send a very clear message that the Prime Minister is serious about his word. I think all of our backs are going to loosen up and we'll start to find ways to find more consensus. We're going to start to see committees doing the job that Canadians expect them to do.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Angus. It's good to have you here.

Go ahead, Mr. Chan.

Mr. Arnold Chan: Thank you.

First of all, Mr. Angus, thank you so much for your very kind comments. Please give my regards to your better half, Brit, whom I haven't seen in a while. Tell her I said hello.

Look, my only real point, and the point Mr. Christopherson raised that I want to get back to and address, is that we're all members of Parliament. First of all, again, all we're trying to do is remove the parliamentary secretary. My point is that we shouldn't fetter the independence of each particular parliamentarian in doing what they ultimately decide to do, even at the steering committee. Our intention is to arrive at consensus, but what you're saying is that it's actually trying to predetermine whatever's discussed at the steering committee. That's exactly what I'm saying: we shouldn't prejudge the outcome and say what might happen if we don't arrive at consensus, because all it takes is one member to filibuster at that point and force it back to committee.

I take the point that at the standing committee we can ultimately do whatever we need to do in order to get an agenda set. It is our intention to come to consensus, so watch how we practise. That's my point: watch how we practise over the next little while. Let's just get this passed. If it really becomes a problem, let's bring it back up at that time.

We're not doing anything other than presenting the intention of removing the parliamentary secretaries and beginning the work, so let's begin the work.

• (1235)

The Chair: Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: Mr. Chair, this is probably almost long forgotten at this point, but in his last intervention prior to this one, Mr. Chan made a point about the proposed amendment, if we ever get to it, that Mr. Reid was looking to make.

In regard to that argument, I want to point out that as it sits now and as we were suggesting it would sit in the future, the motion actually says that the subcommittee would be composed of the chair and the two vice-chairs. What that actually means is that no one can substitute for the chair, no one can substitute for me, and no one can substitute for David. The three of us would have to be there, so actually there is more flexibility for the one or two government members, whatever the case might end up being, to substitute, with the change forcing them to be a permanent member of the committee.

There are actually far more options for those government members to substitute somebody in, given that there are five of you. There may be three or four potential substitutes, so I actually don't see that being an issue at all. I think that can be accomplished and not cause any issues for government members in being able to substitute in. It would be the three of us, the chair and vice-chairs, who would actually...

There's never been a problem in the past with it that I can recall. Certainly in my experience on this committee and on other committees on which I've sat on a subcommittee, we never had an issue. We were always able to find a way. You can find a time to meet when those members can be available. I don't think that's an issue at all.

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson is next, and then Mr. Lamoureux.

Mr. David Christopherson: On the off chance that Mr. Lamoureux is going to respond to my concerns in a positive way, I'd be prepared to defer to him and speak after him, or I'll take the floor now.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: I will be very brief.

I have actually been enjoying the comments. There were many things that made a lot of sense. One of the things that I might suggest, David, when we talk about trying to set the agenda, is that maybe one of those agenda items could potentially be a study of our standing committees. That could turn into a positive thing for us all, not only for our committee but for other committees. It might be an option worth exploring when we talk about future agendas for the PROC members who are on that subcommittee list.

I don't think it has to be controversial. I think there are a number of good thoughts with regard to how subcommittees or committees can work for the Parliament of Canada, and we should approach them with an open mind.

I would just emphasize here that I can appreciate your concerns. I'm going to go back to my experience with the subcommittee, which was actually fairly encouraging. I'm not going to prejudge what's going to ultimately take place. I'm not even going to be on it, because I'm the parliamentary secretary, nor do I have a desire to be on it, but I would be interested in hearing the outcome, if it's possible. If you don't think we can pass the rules today, then fine. We can continue having this discussion now. It might be better if we passed the rules and then got right into the discussion we're having right now and sent a couple of recommendations to the subcommittee. One of those recommendations could be to look at how we can enhance committees so that all parliamentarians feel more genuinely empowered, as well as to come up with some sort of report. That could be a report for us.

I was involved in some House leader discussions today which I was hoping to share with members. That's one of the reasons I came today, but maybe the House leaders can disseminate that information to individual members on PROC at a later time if it's not possible today.

• (1240)

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I didn't really hear what I wanted, but of course the government won't just come out and say "absolutely not." They're still hoping they can get through this.

Look, I hear what you're saying and I appreciate the tone and I appreciate the respectful discussion. I'm enjoying it too. I would enjoy it more if we could bring a little more democracy to the whole thing.

You and Mr. Chan have repeated a number of times, and I'm sure your other colleagues agree, that you have every intention of reaching consensus. I don't question that. I truly honestly do not. I believe that's what you intend. I even believe it may be that way most of the time.

However, as my friend Mr. Angus has pointed out and as those of us who have been around here for a while know, you'll find that idea will quickly fall by the wayside. Let's face it: the government does have an agenda and they have to deliver on it in order to get re-elected in four years. Fair enough. Therefore, there will be times when they're going to want this committee to do certain things and go in a certain direction. Fair enough. You have that control here at the committee. However, maintaining absolute control of the steering committee tells us that the government will utilize it whenever it suits their purpose. As we move on and have more arguments and get more entrenched—and Mr. Lamoureux and to a certain extent Mr. Chan know this—things take on a life of their own, and you can't always separate the politics of what's happening in the House of Commons with what's happening here. As a result, sometimes we can really get into it here at this level.

Again I come back to the government's statement that they want things to be different. If you want things to be different, then you have to do them differently, and maintaining this power structure that allows the government to lower the boom when it suits them is the antithesis of a body that meets with a goal of consensus.

I think a reasonable person looking in from outside the Ottawa bubble would understand that if the government gets absolute control at the committee and absolutely everything from the steering committee has to go to the full committee, the government maintains 100% control. We're not arguing with that power structure, but what we are saying to anyone on the outside looking in is that the steering committee is where we're trying to agree on the rules of how we proceed, what witnesses to have in what order, and all the things that can take forever if ten of us sit there. You know the old saying about ten people writing a letter. That is in contrast to a smaller group without the political attention, without the cameras, without the games. You can't even win a vote. It's just working together. If we put that in place, at least we would have a little more democracy and a little more independence. It's only a little, but it matters. It matters when the government says that sometimes they'll have to. Well, all it takes is that one time, and the whole idea of that model is gone. It's either a consensus body or it isn't.

I wouldn't normally have made as big a deal of this with the previous government at the beginning of various Parliaments. I might reaffirm it at the individual committees, but clearly we're making this a big deal. I am making this a big deal on behalf of my caucus, because we believe in the idea of more independence for committees. We believe that independently ourselves. We believe it, so we support the government's initiative to do it, but you're not going to get a pat on the back just for a nice speech with a nice smile. It has to be more than that, and this is little. There will be a lot of people who watch what happens here who will be paying an awful lot of attention. It will not be the general public, but there are people who pay an awful lot of attention to what goes on. They understand very clearly how important these internal matters are, and given that PROC is the first committee, it really is setting the template.

•(1245)

I know my friend Mr. Angus will be going to his committees and arguing for the same thing. If he can use PROC as an example and say, "Look, they clearly made it understood that it is consensus only, so how could we do it any differently here", it's going to carry a lot of weight. I would think that by then the government's message would be that they're at least going to loosen the PMO's control over the steering committee, where we get along anyway.

Most of the rules of the committees are like that. In public accounts it was always that way, until the government eliminated the steering committee. That could be your next step, but it also would be the antithesis of what you were saying, so I come back to my argument again and say to the government that this is not a big deal. I think, Mr. Lamoureux, you're making a big mistake, unless this is another example of same old same old and this committee really is under marching orders and they've all been told to do what Mr. Lamoureux tells them to do and we're going to see that applied at all the committees.

If that's not the case, I don't know why on earth, Mr. Lamoureux, you are allowing this issue to become a big political deal, because if we don't get it resolved, it's still going to be hanging over us in the new year. It's not as though we have an unreasonable position. All I've asked in order to support your motion that there be two government members is that we stay with a consensus model. If you want to say that's not where we were last time, I don't care how you word it, but that's where we go now.

I want to do this. I have been impressed so far. I don't mind telling the government members that I was impressed, Mr. Lamoureux, that you responded as quickly as you did to the concerns I raised. As you know, when we did that in the past, we'd be heard out impatiently and then ignored, and they would move on. That was not by Randy, but there were those who would do that to us, so I do appreciate that you responded. I appreciate that. I continue to have to push you, but you do continue to respond, and that's good. A lot of us were absolutely flabbergasted that we actually had a real, open vote for the chair. In the past we used to call it an open vote, but when the government benches only put forward one name, it was kind of hard to find where the democracy was versus the command and control model. It looked the same, and in reality it was.

We were no better. We knew who the official opposition lead was going to be for vice-chair and we knew the third party vice-chair, which was a given. In the past we all knew those things ahead of time. This time the government said it was going to do things differently, and it did, and it was a thrilling exercise in democracy. I know Mr. Chan didn't take it personally, because I think he already knows the respect those of us who have seen him in action have for him. It was more a matter of experience. I keep saying that and I know it rubs the wrong way and I get that, but nonetheless, I think you'll come to agree over time that having someone with a lot more experience is actually to our benefit.

That's the way we saw it. Either way it's a Liberal, and when I go home at night, it doesn't matter to me which one of you is in the chair. However, it does matter in terms of how the committee meeting proceeds, and I think experience is an advantage. It's the same with the Speaker. I voted for the current Speaker. Of course

everybody would say that now, but I did. There were some good candidates, but it was based on that experience of having sat on all sides of the House. When I became a deputy speaker at Queen's Park, I had been on the government side as a cabinet minister, had been in the third party, and had been a House leader, so I felt equipped. Whether I was up to the task was for my colleagues to determine, but I felt equipped to take the chair knowing and understanding where everybody was coming from.

All of that is to say those are good improvements. They are little teeny-tiny changes but good ones, so you get an attaboy or a happy face or a gold star or whatever you want. That was great, but it's small. Now we're starting to move into the area of power, and in a democracy, power is determined by a majority, a clear majority of 50% plus one. That is a clear majority and that's how we make decisions.

•(1250)

You still have that control here, but now you want to maintain it even though you say you won't use it. At least the Conservatives, to their credit, would say, "No, we're the government and nothing's coming out of that committee that we don't control. Next argument." You were left making your arguments, but they didn't go anywhere. It would drive us crazy. Some might argue that's why the configuration of the House is now the way it is: because of that kind of attitude—present company excluded, of course.

Now we have a new government that says it wants to do things differently. You've done that tinkering around the edges. We've given you the full credit. No one's trying to deny you your right to be complimented for the fact that we have an elected chair and we actually had to have a vote because we had two names on the ballot. Do you remember the old Soviet Union? They used to say they had a great democracy, except that nobody else except their choices could run, and they'd call it an election and say they won. That's what we used to do around here. You've changed that. Congratulations, but that's the easy stuff. That's the low-lying fruit.

The tougher stuff—and this is why it's easy to make the pledge but not so easy to honour it—is that we're actually talking about power. What I'm suggesting here doesn't alter the power alignment. The government still wins every vote 10 times out of 10. The only thing we're talking about is whether the PMO still has a grip on the throat of the subcommittee of PROC or it doesn't. You don't have to give up...you're not losing anything other than a command-and-control power technique that should be the antithesis of what you have said you're going to bring for change. If all you do is change and tinker around the edges but at the end of the day the power play is still the same old same old, then the wrapping may be different, but it's still the same lump of coal as a gift.

Again, the government wants to continue to receive accolades and to be patted on the back for what they're doing because they've made a good start, but it's only a start, and it is not unreasonable.... I was so glad my friend Mr. Angus talked about Britain. I wish we all had a chance to either go there or have a presentation on it. I've never been there, but I've certainly watched a lot of their committee meetings through different committees. It's amazing. It's a whole different world.

I like to think that's where the current Prime Minister is looking, that it's to that kind of independence, where a committee is a committee and you don't lose your chance to be a parliamentary secretary or a cabinet minister by opposing something the government has brought forward, or questioning it, or by supporting an opposition amendment that just, in your gut, in your experience, makes sense. It sounds like that's what should be happening all the time. In the past, you didn't have to be here too long to realize that's not necessarily how things function when the rubber hits the road.

Again, the government is not going down the road of the previous government and saying "Too bad, so sad." They're saying, "No, we're still maintaining that we want to be different, that we want to open up the committees." Here's the first chance where it really matters. All we're saying is to let the subcommittee act in a non-partisan way. Where it comes to agreement, which is most of the time, and when it comes forward with positive recommendations, you in the government still can change your mind and kill them if you want to. You don't lose anything other than hyper-control.

Hyper-control is saying as soon as the thing starts that you have this issue by the throat and you're not going to let go until you get the outcome you want. That's where we were. This government says they're going to take us somewhere else, and yet the first time we talk about power at committees, you're right back where the government members were, and there's no real argument for it except, "We want control, super control, maximum control—all control." We've been there. You ran against that.

This is an easy one. It really makes me wonder about some of the other changes you want to make. Are you really that serious? All we're saying is to let the members of the steering committee come together.... In many ways it's the grunt work of committees, because you're sitting down and hammering out which witness can't make it at such a time because the clerk says they were contacted and they can only do it at that time, so how about if you need a special meeting to do that or you need to change the times.... These are the kinds of variables there are when you're working together.

• (1255)

You're not thinking of the agenda. You're really not. Unlike the other committees, it's not just policy where the government agrees, the opposition disagrees, and there are a few exceptions. We deal with an awful lot of things here that are not partisan. For instance, if any one of you or any one of our colleagues—my friend Mr. Angus knows more about this than I do in terms of the process—is accused of acting in an unparliamentary fashion or of denying privileges to other members, or if there is anything to do with a member, with ethics, and it goes to the Speaker, as soon as the Speaker thinks there's an issue, guess where he sends it. Here.

I don't know about the new members, but I'm pretty sure I know the former government members and my own colleagues well enough, and I have to tell you that if it's my reputation hanging by a thread, I'd like to know that at least the consideration of how I'm going to be dealt with is going to be decided in a non-partisan fashion. I'd like to know that when there is an agreement about how to proceed about my integrity, my reputation, my political life, my representative on that committee agrees that the process is fair. That's why this matters.

I don't need the attention. I don't need the headlines. Like all of you, I just got elected, and for better or worse, I'm here for four years. You'll find over time that I get far more enjoyment out of working together than fighting, although I do it. I'm kind of good at it. I'm from Hamilton and that's what we do, and when it's necessary I try to rise to the occasion, but after all these decades, it's not my favourite thing. My favourite thing is that when we have a huge problem, we all have an interest in finding a solution that's not partisan. Trust me, that's when you really feel excited, because then you are really making a difference.

As you know, on a lot of committees, especially those like public accounts, we try to come up with unanimous reports. If we get a unanimous report where it's positive for the government, it's deserved, and where it's negative, it's deserved, because everyone has supported it. If it's just a report that says the government says the Auditor General was wrong and the government is wonderful, while the opposition members say no, the Auditor General was right, they're all wrong, and it's horrible, what have we achieved? It's the process, but what have we really achieved?

When we have agreement, then we're getting somewhere. Again, Chair, the whole idea is to make this committee work. I know that members are getting tired of hearing this. They're thinking, "My God, how long can that guy go? Is this really that important?" But I'm going to tell you that what we do right now.... I thought it was interesting when Mr. Chan, I believe, said that if it doesn't work, we can bring it back in a few months. Well, it doesn't work like that. Whatever rights the opposition fails to get in the early days of setting the rules are rights they are never going to get, because what happens is that the politics of the day take over. We each get entrenched into our situations.

If you think it's hard to let go of power now when you've really just started to get control of it, wait till you see how difficult it is six or twelve months down the road when you've been exercising that power and are glad you got it because the pesky opposition is making your life difficult and you see how nice it is to be able to step in and make them go away. That's the reality.

So with the greatest of respect, Mr. Chan, the whole idea that we could bring this back for review sounds good, but in the real world, it doesn't work that way and doesn't hold.

Let me try this. In the interest of trying to find some agreement in these dying moments, Mr. Chan, rather than six months of going with the government having all the power, maybe we could set it up in such a way that it is consensus and we revisit it in six months. Do the consensus for six months and let the government experience what it's like when the oxygen of democracy comes into a steering committee. Then, if they still believe that we're stifling their electorally given right to govern, let's bring it back and hash it out in public and we'll talk about what our experience has been. I suspect that our experience will be exactly the experience that Mr. Lamoureux has talked about in the past, which I've affirmed, and which Mr. Reid has commented on, which is that usually we do get along.

If that's the case, Kevin, this is a slam dunk, man.

•(1300)

I can't believe you're going to let this committee go in a couple of minutes without this being resolved. You're going to report back there, and your one responsibility was to make sure that this committee got its independence, and got set-up out of the way, so that you could actually leave the stage.

You have to go back and report, "I failed. Oh, and by the way, we're now going to have a big issue about whether or not the Liberals will demand to have control at steering committees." Really? That's really what you want the narrative to be going into the Christmas break and into the new year? Because that's where we're heading.

I've offered you a reasonable response. I've just offered you another reasonable amendment. The only way I could be more reasonable in your eyes, it would seem, would be to completely cave and collapse. That's not going to happen, because this is important.

I don't know why you're letting it become a *cause célèbre*. There are people out there who care about these things. Ever heard of Kady O'Malley? She knows these things better than most of us in this place. They matter to her, and she has a great ability to convey to the outside world why it matters to them.

Mr. Scott Reid: Mr. Chair, on a point of order, I apologize, but I see by the clock that it's past our stopping time of 1 p.m. I just wanted to draw that to your attention.

The Chair: Noted.

If we come back at the next meeting, you will have the floor and we'll continue with this topic.

Mr. David Christopherson: Very good, Chair. I appreciate that.

The Chair: Okay.

The meeting is adjourned.

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