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Chair

Mr. Pat Finnigan

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● (1630)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Pat Finnigan (Miramichi—Grand Lake, Lib.)): I'll call the meeting to order.

Mr. Drouin.

Mr. Francis Drouin (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, Lib.): I know we're about to leave and I'm sorry to the witness, but I put a motion on the floor last Wednesday and I'd like to call a vote on it now, just because we're not going to be back until May 2, and we don't have any work on May 2.

The Chair: The motion was that the committee undertake a study on Canada's next multi-year agricultural policy framework at its earliest convenience, including sections on Canada's suite of farm income safety nets and the role of discovery science and innovation in the sector; that the committee hear from government officials and a wide and diverse range of industry representatives and interest groups from every region of the country; and that the committee report its findings to the House.

Are we ready for a vote?

Mr. Chris Warkentin (Grande Prairie—Mackenzie, CPC): No, I think this is unfortunate that we have such limited time and we scrambled back here to make sure that we had time to hear from our witnesses that have come. We don't have all members here to vote on it, so I think it would be inappropriate. We still haven't heard from the minister officially, but having spoken to the minister privately, I can tell you that the minister has assured me that he has not instructed nor would he really view the involvement of this committee as helpful at this point with regard to Growing Forward 3. As a matter of fact, he was very clear that until he knew what the provinces were going to allocate in terms of budgets, it would be unlikely that we would have anything to contribute from this committee.

I think it's an unusual thing. It's unfortunate. I'm hopeful that we can defer this motion to another time so that we can hear from the witnesses, get their testimony on the record at least, and then proceed back to the House when the bells start to ring, because we do know that they're proceeding.

It's interesting that we have games going on in the House to limit debate and limit the ability for opposition members to have their voices heard. We don't want to do that yet here in this committee today, and it would be disturbing if we had the conduct of the House now come over to this committee. I would ask that the honourable member withdraw the motion for the time being, so we can have a robust debate about this at another time and be able to hear from these witnesses. These witnesses are here for a short period of time. We have a very limited period of time to hear from them. If we could proceed with their testimony, I think that would be helpful.

The Chair: Mr. Longfield.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield (Guelph, Lib.): Mr. Warkentin and I had a conversation. After the last meeting, I did speak with the minister, and the minister said that we control the destiny of the discussions, but he also said that our input would be valuable for the sessions that will be happening in July, that even having the minutes to our meeting and to see what our conversation was at the committee would be valuable for him.

We've discussed this motion now for two meetings, and I think we need to try and get ahead of the motion so that we can get our agenda going and so the clerk has time to get witnesses. We're back in our ridings next week. We could get right to work on the new program as soon as we get back.

The Chair: Mr. Warkentin.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: Yes, I think that this is what needs to be cleared up. Obviously, I don't think it's fair for the minister to be caught between “he said, he said”, but I have spoken to the minister and I think it would be important. We've asked many times for the minister to have provided to this committee in writing what he would like this committee to look into. I've told the minister and I've told all members opposite that I want to be helpful. I don't want to just be engaged in busywork right now, because what I've heard both from the provinces as well as from the federal minister is that at this point, there's not a lot that we could contribute to the discussion.

What I'd like to do is have this motion put to the side. We have witnesses here. I think it's important that we hear from the witnesses now that we have them here in the room, and defer this motion until another time. We'll have an opportunity to debate the motion and to figure out a schedule moving forward. There are a lot of motions that have been brought to this committee relating to a whole host of things. This isn't the only one, and the suggestion that we would spend the rest of the year looking at this gives all the impression of just engaging in busywork and not engaging in the things that producers have asked us to do.

Obviously, we would like to complete the study with regard to the Trans-Pacific Partnership. We'd like to hear from farmers and commodity groups across the country. We've only started doing that. The Liberal members voted against completing that study and putting a report to the House last meeting. I'd like to have some understanding as to why it is that the Liberals want to do that.

We also have a number of other motions that have been brought forward by ourselves, by the NDP member as well, who hasn't been able to get back here yet. I think it's appropriate that if we're going to have a discussion about the planning of this committee, as the Liberals asked last committee meeting....

The Liberals took some offence at the fact that our NDP colleague brought a motion forward in the middle of committee hearings. They felt that we should do that in the context of a planning session, so let's do that. Let's be respectful to each side. Let's bring all of our ideas to the table and let's have members debate that another time. Let's hear from the witnesses right now and we'll figure all this out at a later meeting. I think it's inappropriate. I think it's disappointing. I think it was Speaker Milliken who talked about committees using their majority to overrule the minority and chastised committees for doing that.

Let's reflect on the fact that committees can be constructive. They can have people from all sides bring forward their ideas, and we can actually do things that producers across the country would expect us to do. It's not a single issue, as has been proposed. There are multiple issues that need to be discussed and we need to figure out when we can set some time aside to hear what all committee members' views are on this and proceed in that way.

I would encourage members opposite to put this motion aside for the time being, and let's hear from the witnesses. Let's hear the testimony and let's proceed in that way.

● (1635)

The Chair: Are there any other comments?

We will now bring the motion to a vote. Is it the pleasure of the—

Mr. Chris Warkentin: Jacques was asking to intervene.

The Chair: I truly did not see you. I asked if there were—

Mr. Chris Warkentin: Yes, Jacques would like to comment.

The Chair: Please, be firm and be quick as I want to call this to a vote.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lévis—Lotbinière, CPC): I agree with my colleague, Mr. Warkentin. Historically, the agriculture committee has worked together because the issues being discussed are very important and really affect the life of farmers.

Today we had the opportunity to welcome three witnesses, who will have to come back, no doubt. We would have liked to have heard them speak today.

We are debating a motion and we're not done yet. I'm sure others here want to continue debating it.

The interpretation is a real mess. What the minister seems to have told you and what he seems to have told us is different. The Minister of Agriculture has two versions of his mandate and vision of agriculture. We see a problem with that.

The Minister of Agriculture has a lot of experience, and we know him very well. I've known him for 10 years. I would tend to believe my colleague Mr. Warkentin's version that it isn't so urgent and that other topics are more urgent.

Tomorrow we will have to debate a motion in the House of Commons tomorrow thanks to my other colleague Ms. Brosseau because we are unable to discuss it here. There are many ways of debating agriculture, and we can do a lot of things in committee. If we never get to do them in this committee, we will have to do them in the House of Commons on opposition days or during emergency debates. In the long term, that isn't the best way to operate.

Let's assume our responsibilities and finish what we started, instead of discussing something that will not be implemented for two and a half years. We need to let federal and provincial public servants come to an agreement on Growing Forward 3. We need to be presented with a proposal that seems to have some agreement, if we want to study this issue and present recommendations. Certainly, if we are too premature on the issue, it won't even be considered.

I'll pass things over to the chair. I think that other people here would like to say something. So I'll let the second opposition party have a chance to speak. Ms. Brosseau would like to say something as well.

● (1640)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Brosseau, go ahead.

Ms. Ruth Ellen Brosseau (Berthier—Maskinongé, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm sorry. I left after the vote, then I saw the sign that we were going to resume our meeting. From what I understand, we're debating Mr. Drouin's motion on Growing Forward 3.

There are witnesses waiting impatiently, I guess, to speak to the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Last Monday, the committee debated a motion that I put forward. I thought it was important that we at least do a study on the Trans-Pacific Partnership. The agri-food industry is waiting impatiently to come and talk about its support, its fears and its concerns about the Trans-Pacific Partnership. So I think it's very important to do a study and table a report to Parliament with recommendations. The Liberal government wants to move forward with the Trans-Pacific Partnership, but it says it wants to consult everyone, including Canadians and the industry. I think it's extremely important that we study it in committee.

We conducted a study in the past of the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement between Canada and the European Union. We came to a consensus and everyone worked well on the committee. We had an important report with recommendations to table in the House.

I thought I'd arrive on time, but the committee is debating a motion to study Growing Forward 3. But I think there are other more pressing issues, such as diafiltered milk, the Trans-Pacific Partnership and grain transportation.

I'm a bit frustrated that this subject was tabled so quickly. I'll also point out that the committee is still missing a member.

Those are my comments for now.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Brosseau.

Mr. Shipley.

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Quickly, as we do have witnesses.... It's sort of unfortunate. What I really don't understand, and we've not actually got an answer yet from the Liberal leadership or from the party.... We had a full discussion with some people on the Emerson report, which is the extension to come in about wheat from the Fair Rail for Grain Farmers Act . We had a report and recommendations in the report. We had a number of the commodity organizations that wanted to have their say. We actually had them here. We didn't invite them here to talk; they only met with us separately, and then we sent them on their way because the leadership of the Liberal Party did not want to talk about the transportation and rail issues.

It's not just about grain. I actually talked with the fertilizer people this morning. They have the same sort of issues. They have the same things they want to talk about, but we just cut them off at the legs and said that we don't want them at this committee. We actually have a report and a recommendation. We could actually get their discussion and their recommendations. It comes from a report from this committee. We've done that. We've shut them out.

We have transportation and we have the TPP. We've had two rounds. We have folks here from the dairy industry who significantly get a lot of the communications and the talk about any trade deal that is ever signed. We have Mr. Glenn from the Canadian Young Farmers' Forum, who I had the very fortunate opportunity to be with at the young farmers out in Vancouver. However, we're stuck because all of a sudden, you want to derail this sort of issue and go to one where actually your own minister has talked about the timing in terms of it actually being the provinces right now that have to deal with this. They're the ones that will actually set some of the framework. They're the ones that will actually determine the funding part on their front. The federal government, at 60% basically helps to facilitate, negotiate with them, in terms of the final result, and you have to realize too that the federal government doesn't have a vote.

I'm trying to understand, Mr. Chairman, why we have this big desire to move on something that we all want to do, in a timely manner, but the Growing Forward 2 into Growing Forward 3 is not the issue today. It will be the issue when we come back, and in the summer, later on, the committee could be called, but right now, I agree with my colleague.... I'm looking at the wording and it's basically, I think, just to spend time. I'm not sure where it's going to go. In fact, I'm not so sure that your minister is inclusive at this stage of where it's going to go, and what our real purpose would be in terms of being able to come up with something that's very productive in terms of Growing Forward 3. It is an important document. It is important not only to the government and to the provinces, but particularly to all the commodities and the organizations that have an interest in it, including the innovative and research component of it.

Mr. Chair, I'm not going to take any more time. It's on the floor, but it's important that you hear from those of us who have actually had a pretty tight conversation with those commodity organizations and actually plan on listening to them before we make a decision to support moving ahead on something like this now.

● (1645)

Mr. Chris Warkentin: We do have a steering committee that's been set up by committee members. The appropriate thing to do would be to have the members of the subcommittee get together even over the next little while, and sit down and have a discussion about this. It's really unfortunate that this whole meeting has devolved into this.

An hon. member: Stop talking.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: Mr. Chair, that's the disturbing thing. We have members across the way saying to just stop talking. It was those same members last committee who were telling my colleague in the NDP that it was inappropriate that she moved a motion during the hearings. Now today, they've done the same. I'm disturbed, Mr. Chair, not only because they've done this, but now they're telling me to stop talking.

They're doing that in the House right now. They've now allocated a day for a debate on an important and substantive bill. They've talked about being open and transparent, being welcoming to the views and opinions of others, and yet what we have is members are now chastising us, telling us to quit talking and to quit supporting our agricultural producers across the country who have asked us to bring other issues to the floor.

If this motion passes, let's be clear. The Liberals have talked about having 20-some meetings that would take the entire rest of this session of Parliament for this discussion. We have issues of grain transport. Provisions of Bill C-30 will expire in the summertime. On August 1, when Parliament is not sitting, those provisions will expire. Farmers and shippers have asked us to call on the government to extend those provisions. If it is the Liberals' intent to stop us from having a discussion and supporting our agricultural producers across the Prairies who have demanded and asked for us to bring this conversation forward, if we're going to hear again and again to quit talking about the things that matter to farmers, well that's disturbing.

We're seeing them engage in those behaviours in the House. They decried the procedure in the House to limit debate in the last Parliament, but in those cases, there had been five and six weeks of debate sometimes and then there was a procedure to move to the vote. Now they're shutting down debate after a single day on a substantive and a comprehensive bill. What we're seeing again in this place is they're saying, “We're going to move this motion, so quit talking, because we want you to talk about nothing else for the rest of this session of Parliament”.

Well, I'm going to talk more about grain transport. I'm going to talk about the necessity of passing the TPP and addressing the concerns of agricultural producers. I'm going to talk about diafiltered milk. I am going to talk about the things that producers are asking me to talk about. I'm going to talk about the necessity for labour supply in slaughter facilities. I'm going to talk about building supply chains that support our agricultural industry. I'm going to talk about the things that farmers have asked me to talk about, and if the Liberals want to shut me up, I think what they're going to find is that I'm going to talk even more and defend farm families who are depending on this side to educate that side, apparently, about the priorities that the farm families have.

What I would ask is for the Liberal members opposite, rather than telling us to quit talking, to embrace our conversation, embrace the needs and the desires and the expectations of farm families across this country and do some heavy lifting and do some good work to ensure that farm families have the support that they need from their government and from the minister.

We as committee members have an important and great role to play. We have the opportunity of bringing forward concerns that farmers have asked us to bring forward. This motion would limit debate on all of those things for the rest of this session. There are provisions and elements within industry, which affect farm families, that cannot wait for months and months while we debate a program on which we have been told by the minister that we will have next to no say.

● (1650)

So, if we're looking for busywork, this is exactly what the Liberals are trying to pass. But I will not shut up. I will continue to talk about the things that farmers and commodity groups have asked us to do. The more that they tell us to quit talking, the more we're going to talk.

The Chair: Madame Brosseau.

Ms. Ruth Ellen Brosseau: Mr. Chair, I would just like to add my voice to that of Chris. I think I said it a little while ago. It's kind of funny to be agreeing with the Conservatives so much.

How committee used to work is we tried to find consensus on a lot of issues. We used to have great studies at ag committee and we were able to produce reports and recommendations for the minister. The minister would come in and meet with us quite often. I really thought that after the election we would get along and we would find consensus at committee, but that's something we haven't been able to find at committee, sadly, after a few months.

I was happy that we were able to look at diafiltered milk and talk about milk proteins at committee, but they were two short meetings. We could have written a report and sent it to the House.

We have witnesses here and I'm sorry they haven't had a chance to speak yet.

I just want to reiterate the importance that we do maybe look at other subjects that are more important and more pressing, like the Trans-Pacific Partnership. I've said it before and I'll say it again: consulting Canadians is important. This is an important trade deal. It's vast, thousands of pages, and it does impact the ag industry, and having an in-depth study on that with recommendations to Parliament would be important. Tomorrow we're going to be looking at milk proteins in the House of Commons and eventually we'll have to vote on my motion dealing with milk proteins and applying the rules already in place.

The Trans-Pacific Partnership is important. Yes, the international trade committee is travelling and it is doing consultations, but the ag piece is really important. We could hear from different commodity groups. I do think we had a really great meeting earlier this week. I can't wait to hear the testimony from the witnesses we have today.

I think Chris mentioned also the importance of looking at grain transport. Bev and I were on the same committee when we were looking at C-30. We know how important it was for all parties to get consensus and work on making that piece of legislation the best it could be. The NDP put forward quite a few recommendations. Some of the provisions, four provisions, will be sunsetting on August 1. I think all of us have heard from different stakeholders about the importance of making sure that some of those provisions do not sunset. They're going to be going fast, right? We're getting into crazy season. We've seen it today, with votes occurring in the middle of a committee meeting. It's only going to get worse in May and June, with time allocation and pushing forward certain bills that need to be dealt with before we leave for the summer.

Grain transport was something that, on this side at least, we really wanted to have dealt with at committee, have witnesses come and talk about the importance of keeping some of those provisions and making sure that the government gets recommendations from this committee, because it will take an Order in Council and then it will take a motion in the House. We have lists of people and groups that would want to come in and talk about how they were negatively impacted a few years ago and talk about maybe infrastructure investments that could be done to make sure that rail is moving and people are on a level playing field when it comes to grain transport and the transport of all commodities.

It's frustrating and it saddens me a little bit to see that we've made it to this point, and Growing Forward, we will look at that. The committee did look at that, Growing Forward 2, in the past. We spent a few weeks at least—I could probably ask the analysts how long we actually spent on it—but we had great witnesses come in and we submitted recommendations. But we're not getting much clarity from you right now on what that'll look like and we don't have much information on what the structure will look like for Growing Forward 3. There are so many issues that we need to be dealing with instead of Growing Forward right now. There is grain transport. There is the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Chris talked about busywork. I saw a lot of busywork in other committees. I know what it smells like and looks like, and this kind of smells like that.

● (1655)

The Chair: We'll have to end this meeting as the bells are ringing.

I want to apologize to our witnesses. These things happen, I guess. I'm new to this, but hopefully, if ever we get you back here, we'll be able to hear you.

Thank you, members.

The meeting is adjourned.

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