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Chair

The Honourable Larry Bagnell

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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order. This is meeting number 13 of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs in the first session of the 42nd Parliament.

At the moment, we are in public, but as I indicated, members, since we are planning to discuss witnesses for our first order of business for the study of a family-friendly House of Commons, I would suggest that we go in camera.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): Mr. Chair, before we get there, I appreciate that. but there's an item of business that ought to be dealt with in public before we go in camera. That is the motion I moved back on February 25, which has been discussed but not voted on at every meeting since that time, relating to the members of the Senate advisory panel.

You may recall, it was to bring them before this committee within the month of March to deal with all aspects of their mandate. Just to make the point here, this was raised before March had started, and it has been raised at every meeting in the month of March, as well as at the last meeting in the month of February. There's only one more meeting in the month of March, and therefore, it seems reasonable to have a vote on this motion, up or down, today. So, I wonder if we could just deal with that item of business.

I have nothing to add to the discussions we've had about this, except to note that if it is of concern to the Liberal members, who have been delaying a vote on this for a month now, that the month of March is nearly over and it would be difficult to get the members of the panel and that at this point the actual first run of appointments has been made, I accept the validity of all those points and would be prepared to accept a friendly amendment that the members of the advisory panel be invited to come here in March or April, depending on what works for them.

I wonder if we could deal with that item first, and then I'd be happy to go in camera to deal with the witness list for the family-friendly changes to the Standing Orders.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Christopherson and then Ms. Sahota.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): I just wanted to echo Mr. Reid's request that we deal with that motion. I mean, at some point, even now, you could suggest that it's a bit after the fact, but there are points to be made, and if we're not dealing with it now, then I can't imagine when we would.

I agree. We should do it now.

The Chair: Ms. Sahota.

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): I'm okay with going ahead and having the vote now. Let's do it.

Mr. Scott Reid: Ms. Sahota and others, I would say simply this. If the amendment were made to extend it so it could be dealt with in March or April, thereby giving us... March means having the witnesses here on Thursday, which might be problematic.

If that amendment were to be made, would that seem like a reasonable amendment? Obviously, the amendment can't be made if it's not supported by a majority of the committee, so I just ask that question.

It would simply allow the witnesses to come here in either March or April. We have only one meeting left in March. It might genuinely be inconvenient for them at this point to come in on 48 hours' notice, especially as they are in different places and there's an issue with having to first set up some kind of meeting, presumably involving multiple teleconferences. I see the logistical issues. That was the suggestion. It gives a bit more flexibility.

Mr. David Christopherson: You mean on your motion.

Mr. Scott Reid: Yes. I'm just trying to be as reasonable as possible.

Also, frankly, David, since you raised this, it is to make the point that, if this is voted down, it is because of the desire on the part of the government to simply have as closed a system as possible and as little public information as possible, and not to give an excuse to say that oh, well, there's no time.

Mr. David Christopherson: Good. I appreciate that. Thank you.

Thanks, Chair.

The Chair: Are there any comments?

David.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham (Laurentides—Labelle, Lib.): I will just say very briefly that I've already made my point fairly clear as to why I disagree with the intent of the motion. It's not about the schedule, and I am prepared to vote at this time.

Mr. David Christopherson: There's one more thing. We have to agree to do it first. I was just saying that it's not a vote. We actually have a debate under way that we have to pick up on.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I'm prepared to vote when you are.

The Chair: Okay. Does anyone else want to speak to this motion?

Mr. Scott Reid: You mean to the amendment, right?

The Chair: I mean to the amendment.

Would everyone consider that to be a friendly amendment, to say that in March or April they could come?

Is there any objection to that? Okay, we can consider it amended.

(Amendment agreed to)

The Chair: Let me read the motion:

That the federal members of the Independent Advisory Board for Senate Appointments be invited to appear before the committee before the end of March or April 2016, to answer all questions relating to their mandate and responsibilities.

All in favour of the motion.

• (1110)

Mr. David Christopherson: Whoa, whoa. I would like to speak.

The Chair: Okay. I did ask if there was more debate and no one said anything.

Mr. David Christopherson: I'm sorry. I was listening to you wrap things up, and you switched from describing to action. I'm sorry.

I wanted an opportunity to respond, and particularly to Mr. Graham's comments, because I believe that was one of the last presentations we heard. He was kind enough to reference me in his remarks and I want to return the favour.

In responding to his screed of March 8, it was interesting that he said:

David Christopherson referred to this lack of a vote as a big mistake as we walked out of the room, a comment which I found regrettable as I do in fact have a good deal to say on the topic and appreciate having the time to say it.

Fine. I let him off the hook and the member wants to draw attention to it. That's fine.

The fact of the matter is that we were in the middle of a committee meeting. The government wanted a vote that would affirm the selection list to their new selection process, and we were having all kinds of debates here. The government really wanted that motion and, of course, they were going to win it because they have a majority. We all went out of our way to extend the meeting so that we would stay in order and the government could get to that motion, and the second to last thing we dealt with was an opposition issue. Then, instead of the government taking advantage of all the planning they had done and the extending of the meeting and going on for five or 10 minutes, instead of actually having that vote, they walked out and left the vote sitting on the table.

I was just pointing out the lack of focus, and the lack of the government's keeping an eye on what it wanted to achieve. They blew it.

Then Mr. Graham felt it necessary to give me an opportunity to point out again how the committee didn't even seem to know what they were doing. Anybody who's looking a little quizzical can go back and check the minutes. You'll see exactly what I'm talking about.

At the moment the government could have moved the motion they wanted, which was that this committee would have formally, even with the opposition voting against it.... With a majority they would have carried it and they would have got their affirmation. Instead, they didn't let it happen. After all the work we did to get to that part of the meeting so they could have this particular vote, we got there and they didn't call for the vote.

You want to give me an opportunity to underscore the incompetence of the government members on that particular issue again, so I'd take the opportunity, Mr. Graham.

I also found it quite interesting that further into the diatribe, he said, "As it happens, I do like the Senate in principle, and believe it has a fundamental and inherent value to our process...".

I just wanted to say, Chair, through you to Mr. Graham, that this sounds like the ultimate Liberal insider. I don't know how much real-world work the member has done between school and getting involved in politics, but I know that the member is very active in the Liberal Party, very well connected, very well respected, I might say, and very well regarded. But this whole idea of "Oh, I'm that comfortable with the Senate and I want to bring it nice and close", that's the viewpoint of the ultimate insider who sees a Senate appointment as the culmination of an insider's career.

The last thing I wanted to mention was that—I'm actually laying the groundwork for using this later, but I'm mentioning it now because it was in this context—Mr. Graham further said:

While nobody on this side of the room knows how many motions were introduced and defeated, under the Conservatives' draconian use of in camera meetings, I would be hard pressed to believe no attempts were ever made.

On that one, I agree, and I intend to use that quote, if I can recall it at the time—because I have a lot of stuff—when we get back to my in camera motion, because it does speak directly to that.

I just wanted an opportunity to do that and to point out to colleagues that I agree with Mr. Reid. I mean, there was an attempt, and there still is, to try to deal with goodwill, for the most part. We're going to get into our troughs of partisanship, as I just did, but for the most part, we try to rise above that, and I don't think the government played fair with this at all. I'm not attacking, but there really was an attempt to be fair-minded on the part of Mr. Reid in terms of trying to have a timely visit by the minister.

If colleagues from the government benches will recall, it's in the committee Hansard. I actually said that I was going to take a risk and "trust the government", because I wanted an absolute date for when the minister would come. Instead they insisted on language that said "when it fits the minister's schedule". I raised the concern that's often used as a fig leaf, and when the time comes, they claim their schedule doesn't let them come. Then they can't come to the committee until it's far from being timely. That's exactly what happened, unfortunately.

•(1115)

I want to point out to the government that I'm very disappointed. I did go out on a limb. You didn't need my vote to win, but you did need it to provide some sense that you weren't playing politics and were trying to be fair-minded. I took you at your word. I gave you my precious vote and said that I would trust, and I think that trust was betrayed, quite frankly.

It looks to me like the government has played games with this whole thing. In particular, the official opposition has been very strident in going after the government in terms of the detailed process on this, but so what? I mean, that's part of the process. Part of the problem is the secrecy around the selection process with the Senate. I'm not sure that the government has done themselves any favours by the process that they followed.

I just wanted to get a couple of those things off my chest. Unless somebody sparks a further response from me, I'm ready to vote.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid: There are just a couple of things that I think are relevant.

Mr. Graham indicated that he had given us reasons earlier why he would be voting against this motion. I'm hoping to persuade him to reconsider voting against it on the following basis. He, along with Arnold Chan, indicated that we didn't need to get the members of the advisory panel back. Notwithstanding the fact that members of the advisory panel were prohibited from answering some questions, or in some cases I was prohibited from asking questions on the basis of the mandate we'd had at the earlier set of meetings, he said that we didn't need to get them back because those questions would be answered by the minister when the minister was here.

We got the minister here on March 10 and asked her a number of questions. In answer to some of the questions, she said, "I don't know. That's not what I was in charge of. It's a panel that has set up certain processes and acted independently of my control."

Therefore, these are questions that I believe Mr. Graham may well have believed, in good faith, would be answered by the minister when she was here on March 10. She indicated that she could not answer them at that time. It was not a matter of her withholding information from us. She simply did not possess that information. The members of the panel were the only ones who could answer these questions.

There are some additional questions that seem logical to ask at this time, given the nature of the appointments. In fact we have literally no information at all—at all—on the reasons for this new information or these unexpected changes, the most obvious one being the appointment of seven people to the Senate when we were promised five. Something happened that was a deviation from the initial announcement and from, I have to assume, the initial plan as well. It does seem unlikely to me that the Prime Minister would have announced appointing five people, all the while thinking—I could do my Montgomery Burns imitation here—that he was really going to appoint seven people to the Senate. Even if he did have that kind of Mephistophelean inclination, I just don't think he'd use it for this

purpose. And I'm not accusing him of being Montgomery Burns, just to be clear about that. But something happened that made us go to seven instead of five.

Here's my question. It's not the only question I want to ask, but it's a question I would want to ask. We are told that the way the process is set up, the panel makes five recommendations for each vacancy. The Prime Minister has the discretion to take from the list or to not take from the list. Now, when it comes to someone like Chantal Petitclerc, I find it hard to believe that her name was not on the list. But when it comes to the former head of the transition team for the Prime Minister, I mean, was he actually nominated through that process or was it simply an old-fashioned kind of nomination, where the Prime Minister says he needs somebody who he thinks will be a good representative of the government in the Senate? It's not, incidentally, an unreasonable position to take; it's just unreasonable to take it while pretending you're taking a different approach.

That could be what happened. Mr. Harder may or may not have been appointed through the regular process. I would want to ask that question. Was he one of the people who was on the list, or was he someone who was appointed from outside? If we say this is a transparent system—and the word "transparent" is used, not "quasi-transparent", or "opaque", or "frosted glass", but "transparent"—then that's a reasonable question to get an answer to. The government gave no indication. They didn't say that, yes, they got.... The Prime Minister could say this, by the way. He's under no obligation not to indicate that, yes, he took him from outside the list. Likewise, the head of Premier Wynne's transition team was appointed. Was she from outside the list or not?

It's possible that both these people were recommended by independent nominations that came from the charitable sector, or a union, or something like that. It's possible that wasn't the case. But these seem like reasonable things to be asking. There would be a limit to what we can ask because of the "Protected B" status of information contained on those nomination forms, but we can comply with those rules and still ask some of the questions I'm outlining here.

•(1120)

It seems reasonable to bring them before us to answer those questions, which do not put them in a position of disclosing information that it's inappropriate for them to disclose, given the formal agreement, or vow, or oath, or whatever it is that they undertook when they first came here. I'll conclude with that.

Finally, in the spirit of precision that my friend Mr. Graham likes so much—he pointed out, of course, on a previous occasion, that I had talked for 1,200 seconds in elaborating my points—I just want to point out that because we didn't deal with this at that meeting as I had requested, this has been delayed now since February 25, through March 8, March 10, March 22, which is today, which means that thanks to the unwillingness of the government to take a vote until a month had passed and the process was completed, we have been delayed by 139,968,000 seconds. I would like to bring that delay to a conclusion, although I'm in no position to stop others from speaking. Perhaps, if people are willing, we could try having our vote now.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Reid, for that precision.

Is there any other debate on the motion?

We'll call the vote on the motion.

Mr. Scott Reid: It's a recorded vote.

The Chair: Yes, it's a recorded vote.

(Motion as amended negatived: nays 5; yeas 4)

The main item for business for this meeting is the witness list, the list that we got yesterday. Normally we go in camera to discuss witnesses. I'd just ask the committee....

Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: Mr. Chair, I would bring to your attention the fact that my motion is still outstanding regarding in camera.

However, I think that given the government's proposal that witness lists be in camera and the fact that at this stage I'm not likely to oppose that, although we haven't finished the discussions, I just wanted to say that I'm willing to go in camera on this in the absence of having set those ground rules, given that the matter at hand is not as divisive. Certainly, it's not a partisan divide and therefore, I don't think we'll get into the kinds of problems that we could if we haven't clarified what we can do in camera and what can be said outside, etc.

All of this is to say that I will support going in camera as long as it's understood that it's without prejudice, that we're not setting a pattern, and it's based on the belief that this is a non-partisan and non-controversial issue, and therefore, we should be able to do it without having finalized those rules.

I'm still looking forward at the earliest opportunity to get back in and nail that down so that as we go forward we don't have these lingering questions about what our rules of engagement are.

With that understanding, Mr. Chair, I'd be prepared to support going in camera to deal with the witness list.

• (1125)

The Chair: Is the government and the opposition in favour of going in camera?

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Yes.

The Chair: It's agreed. So we'll break for one minute.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

[Public proceedings resume]

• (1210)

The Chair: Okay, I'm going to ask again whether there is anyone opposed to the motion.

Mr. David Christopherson: Well, it's in public now. They won't know the motion if you don't read it.

The Chair: This is your motion.

Do you want to say it, or do you want me to say it again?

Mr. David Christopherson: I couldn't repeat what you said if my life depended on it, and I'm not sure you can.

The Chair: The motion is that the Speaker be asked to present to the committee a proposed change, or options of changes, to the Standing Orders, to deal with the concern he raised about him having

the ability to deal with the hours of Parliament during or following an emergency.

Is anyone opposed to that motion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: The motion carried. It's our understanding that we'll deal with that as an issue by itself.

Now, what would the committee like to go on to?

Mr. David Christopherson: I'm okay with going with mine. The problem is that the point person on this particular file on the government side is not here, and I would certainly be respectful if they wanted that point first. If they want to plow ahead anyway and somebody else takes the lead to negotiate with me, I'm prepared to do that, but I'm also prepared to respect the fact that the member is not here.

He's done the homework to be the point person. If the government would prefer, I'm prepared to defer to the next available opportunity.

• (1215)

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I think the member would appreciate the deferral.

The Chair: He'd appreciate being here?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Yes, a deferral would be appreciated, sir.

The Chair: Okay, we'll wait for that.

Mr. David Christopherson: We don't need a motion. We just need to understand that we won't do that right now out of respect for the honourable member. We'll pick it up as soon as we can, at the first opportunity.

The Chair: Understood. Thanks, everyone, for the co-operation on that.

I do have another item that we should probably briefly chat about.

We have two witnesses who we need for main estimates, should we decide to call witnesses. One witness is the Chief Electoral Officer. We have to do the main estimates for his budget. Then we need to do the main estimates for the House of Commons, so we need the Clerk for that, and there's a deadline. The Clerk would be with the Parliamentary Protective Service, because they are two votes. I think we could do them both in the same hour.

What's the deadline for estimates before they just go ahead without us?

The Clerk: May 31.

The Chair: May 31.

Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): Absolutely we should be bringing them forward. I think it's important, and we should do it as soon as we can.

The Chair: The suggestion is that we do this as soon as we can and that we definitely do it. It's our option whether or not to do it.

An hon. member: *[Inaudible—Editor]*

The Chair: Could they get here in half an hour? Probably not.

We could see if either of them is available, though the Clerk is not available on Thursday. It's pretty short notice. I'll work with the clerk to try to fit that in before May 31 for one hour.

Do we all agree that before May 31, we will have one hour for the Clerk and the protective services for those two votes, and one hour for the Chief Electoral Officer for the main estimates on Elections Canada?

Mr. Blake Richards: We've had the Clerk here, but particularly with the Chief Electoral Officer, we might want to have a whole meeting for that. We've just been through an election. There are probably some significant questions. I think it would be advisable that we have a separate two-hour meeting with the Chief Electoral Officer to review the estimates.

The Chair: We are already having a two-hour meeting with him on May 3.

Mr. Blake Richards: Yes, that's obviously for an informal informational session. We've been through those before.

I think it's important that he be here to answer questions from members. I think it should be a two-hour full meeting for that.

The Chair: Are there any comments on that?

The suggestion is that the Clerk and protective services be one hour for their estimates, but the Chief Electoral Officer be two hours for his estimates.

Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid: I'll just ask whether it is the intention of the Liberal members of the committee to block Conservative members, and me in particular, from asking questions other than those relating purely to the Chief Electoral Officer's estimates.

If, for example, I want to ask him about the timelines necessary to execute changes to the electoral system, or the point he made in his annual report that holding a referendum would require six months of preparations, that kind of thing—that's been very much on our minds on this side of the House—are the Liberal members going to say I'm not allowed to ask? Will they say, "Sorry, you can only ask about his estimates", thereby denying us a chance to find out about another aspect of the transparent system, or are they going to be okay? I'll just ask them that.

The Chair: Could you not ask him that on his two-hour briefing? Are you asking whether they're going to allow it?

Mr. Scott Reid: I want it to be in a place that's actually public, so it's on the record and it's a public event, not at some....

The Chair: We'll go to Ms. Vandenbeld and then Ms. Sahota.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): The Chief Electoral Officer is an officer of Parliament. Presumably, if we want to bring him in on any issue, we can ask him to come.

I'm cognizant, again, that we have a lot of witnesses to hear on the family-friendly Parliament study. When the Chief Electoral Officer comes, the estimates take one hour, so we can have that discussion. If there are other issues that you want to raise and ask the Chief Electoral Officer, I would imagine that we could let him know the subject area broadly and then have him come on that area, so he could be fully prepared if we're going to talk about other topics.

I would propose that we plan for one hour on the estimates and have him come for that. Should there be other topics, we can plan for calling the Chief Electoral Officer for another meeting.

● (1220)

The Chair: Let me give an update from the clerk.

Normally, the discussions on the main estimates are very broad, which would allow what you're asking for, Mr. Reid. Also, if we want to include his report on plans and priorities, it's often done at the same time as the main estimates.

Mr. Scott Reid: That would be part of—

The Chair: —the main estimates session.

Mr. Scott Reid: —the main estimates. He did mention in his report the requirement for additional time.

The Chair: That would be game.

Mr. Scott Reid: All of that makes me think that, given the broad range of questions that ought to be asked, it would be more than a single hour. If we don't get him this spring on this, enough time will have expired that the door may have closed on certain options. It was the matter that I raised in my last question to the minister before the last break. It prompted some discussion. The Broadbent Institute indicated that it was also worried that the door was going to start closing very soon on certain options, potentially only being open for one type of change to the electoral system, which happens to be the one that the Prime Minister indicated a year ago is the one he likes. You can understand why I would want to have two hours.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thanks, Chair.

Ordinarily, I would agree entirely with bumping it up to two hours. I'm not opposed to it, but we do have a two-hour session tentatively set for May 3. That is to talk about everything to do with elections, virtually any question. I thought your guidance was pretty good, Chair, because you're right. At committee, you're allowed a lot more latitude than you are in the House, as a general rule. On estimates, you're allowed even further latitude because of the tradition and the nature of that business; people aren't boxed in to only being able to talk about one thing. If during the course of that meeting, we come up with issues that are going to be outside the parameters of the May 3 meeting, then by all means there should be a motion to extend it. It will be in public, so all of the pressure will be there. If there's good cause, we can set up a separate meeting to deal with that issue. But I suspect—and this is why I'm comfortable going with the process the way it's outlined—that virtually anything that we on the opposition, or the government, might want to ask would be eligible in that two hours and to raise the issue at least in the estimates process, where it can be signalled that we can talk about it further.

If we get to the point where something really important comes up during the meeting on the estimates, and some of my colleagues have said that they want to utilize that broader net, that's fair enough. I intend to do the same thing. I'm assuming the Chief Electoral Officer will just say that we can talk about that on May 3 with no problem, in which case we don't have a problem. But, if for some reason, and I can't think of what it might be now, but if something came up where it's not going to fit into the two hours, it's a legitimate issue, and we need more time, then by all means it's understood that a motion will be placed at that time and we as a committee would consider continuing.

I really think this is a safe way to go. The failsafe in there is that, if there are questions that can't be asked and/or can't be deferred over to the May 3 meeting, then by all means there's legitimacy to calling for that meeting to be extended for that sole purpose of talking about that one issue, if that's the only way we can get at it. I think this provides us with the opportunity to do that, if need be. Between this meeting and the two hours, I'm expecting that certainly any of the concerns I have, and I'm also anticipating any that other members may have, would be in order, would be allowed, and would be dealt with through one of the three venues offered up: the estimates hour, the two hours on May 3, or if necessary, a special meeting to deal with a special issue.

Thank you.

Mr. Blake Richards: Based on that, it sounds to me as though you're saying it's probably quite important that meeting happen prior to the May 3 briefing.

Mr. David Christopherson: Yes.

Mr. Blake Richards: So you mean the two-hour meeting in public with the Chief Electoral Officer here.

The Chair: Do you mean the estimates?

Mr. David Christopherson: I mean so we have somewhere to send things if we want to talk about them further and not eat them up at that meeting.

•(1225)

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. David Christopherson: That's the only way that will work.

The Chair: So should we do two hours for the estimates and priorities and plans?

Mr. David Christopherson: We should have one hour on the estimates, but that meeting should happen before May 3.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: We'd have one hour for the Clerk, and one for the Chief Electoral Officer. That would be two hours.

Mr. David Christopherson: But it has to be before May 3, before the next meeting.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: That's fine. It's one meeting on the estimates with one hour for the Clerk and one hour for the Chief Electoral Officer.

Mr. David Christopherson: We'd have all the options in front of us, and we could either extend that meeting or push things to the May 3 meeting.

The Chair: Before we go any further, I want some clarification.

My understanding is that the Chief Electoral Officer traditionally in June also brings a report on recommendations regarding the election that's just passed.

Mr. David Christopherson: Is that for the May 3 meeting?

The Chair: I don't think so. He's traditionally done two reports, one right after the election on how the election went, and that's what the briefing is basically about. Then later in the year, in June or when they've finished their analysis and everything, they come to PROC with a number of recommendations. Obviously, now we couldn't do that until probably the fall, if that's going to be the case—

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: That would give him an opportunity.

The Chair: —which is probably fine as we're a few years out from an election.

Mr. Blake Richards: So not knowing when that will take place, obviously it's important that we proceed with our plans. I'm firmly of the belief that one hour with the Chief Electoral Officer, given the magnitude of what he has to do and given some of the questions surrounding some of the changes that are coming.... There are a lot of questions for the Chief Electoral Officer. An hour is not very long and he has a very big mandate on behalf of all Canadians on our democratic freedoms. I think a two-hour session with him in public, at which there's an opportunity to ask about the estimates and other questions related to them is important.

I'll also add at this point that I am really troubled by the fact that we're starting to get more and more of this idea, and we've heard it again today, that we're going to box in members of Parliament about what they can and can't ask. If the Liberal government intends to try to do that, that's really quite concerning, because we're talking about the privilege of each individual member here to ask questions on behalf of their constituents. I'm really quite troubled by the fact that we're starting to get into this scenario where it's "Well, provide us a little bit of an idea ahead of time as to what you want to ask about and maybe we'll box it in so that we can't ask about other things". That is really quite concerning to me. We don't want to start going down that road, because members of Parliament should have the freedom, on behalf of their constituents, to ask about whatever they choose to ask about when we have an officer of Parliament here before us.

The Chair: We have two proposals, I think. Mr. Christopherson proposes that we have the Chief Electoral Officer for an hour on estimates, and then anything that we can't cover be deferred to May 3. Mr. Richards, and I'm sure the opposition agrees, proposes that we should have the estimates for two hours and also the briefing for two hours.

Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: It seems to me, Chair, that right now the only difference is whether or not the initial meeting is one hour or two. I hear the arguments that Mr. Richards makes, and I don't disagree with anything that he is saying, but I am looking at the totality of all our responsibilities and all the things. We just finished talking about how tough it's going to be on that file, and I said that new stuff is coming, and here we are, already eating up more and more time. Time management is one of the key things that we do, and a lot of this stuff is non-partisan.

I hear Mr. Richards' points and I'm listening very carefully especially on this particular file. I like his attitude. I'm going to say parenthetically that I kind of wish I had heard that attitude a year or two ago. However, it's refreshing that it has arrived. But it seems to me—

Mr. Scott Reid: I can explain. There's an explanation as to why that happened.

Mr. David Christopherson: Do you want me to go on? I can: tick, tick, tick.

It seems to me though that we're not denying ourselves any options with what I've put forward, because I put forward that instead of two hours, we could do one hour with the understanding that virtually anything that would take more time would legitimately be part of the two-hour meeting. Keep in mind that with this officer, we have three hours planned for the very near future.

Again, if it's something that can't be dealt with within that one hour, we have the option of sending it over to the May 3 meeting when we'll have two hours with him. We've also agreed that if

something comes up during that discussion that doesn't fit into the two-hour mandate of our meeting but we still believe is worth pursuing, it's understood that a motion would be placed and we would debate whether or not to continue that meeting.

I guess I'm saying why schedule that second hour, when every hour matters to us, if we don't have to? If it's necessary, we will, but if it's not necessary, we won't.

• (1230)

The Chair: I suppose for goodwill if one of the government members wanted to give up some time to the Conservatives during that time if they had more questions, that would be a possibility too. I will leave that up to the members.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: It's always a possibility.

The Chair: Ms. Sahota, you were on the list a long time ago and I ignored you. I'm sorry.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I think keeping it within one meeting is a good idea because, as Mr. Christopherson and I mentioned, we have a ton of things on our schedule. I think it's neat to keep the estimates and the Chief Electoral Officer within the one meeting, so one hour each. I agree, and any questions that we can't ask that day for whatever... If you wanted to ask a particular question, you would probably be able to. I don't see why not.

We wouldn't be under the standing order that we were under for some of the other witnesses, which seems to be why there is some anxiety on that side. So within that time there should be plenty of time for everyone to ask the question that's most important to them.

The Chair: The understanding is we would have one normal meeting for the main estimates, one hour for the Clerk and the protective services. In fact, if we finished a little early with that, we would then go on to the Chief Electoral Officer.

Then on May 3 we'd have his two-hour session and try to get anything in that we didn't in the first, but if there's still stuff, then we'd have a motion to call him back for yet another hour sometime. Is that okay? That's a compromise.

Mr. Blake Richards: We're obviously not thrilled about the idea, but we see the numbers and we get where it's going.

Mr. Scott Reid: We spent most of an hour debating on whether or not to spend an hour asking questions.

The Chair: Okay, so that's how we'll proceed. We'll see if the clerk can attract these people at those times before May 3.

Is there any other business that people may think I've missed? Clerk, is there anything I missed on our to do list?

It's okay.

Does anyone have anything else? If not, we'll adjourn early.

The meeting stands adjourned.

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