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Chair

The Honourable Larry Bagnell

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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.)): Good morning. Welcome to the 153rd meeting of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

For members' information, we're sitting in public.

Before we start, related to what we just saw, do you remember when we were discussing parallel chambers and also the elm tree and there was a question about who has the authority? You'll get this notice soon, but I had the researchers look into it and in 1867 when the Constitution was created, there was a transfer to a government department and then at the same time it was placed under the control of the Department of Public Works and Government Services.

You'll get this. It's being translated but I thought it would be interesting for people to know where the authority rested.

The minister can come on Thursday, May 16, related to the main estimates for the Leaders' Debates Commission.

The order of the day is committee business. I've asked the clerk for a short list of potential items of business that the committee discussed, which has been handed out.

These matters have been raised in committee or put on notice in recent weeks. Although there is no obligation for members to put their items forward for today's discussion, I thought it could help guide us in our deliberations.

I open the floor to the committee.

Ms. Kusie.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie (Calgary Midnapore, CPC): I'm not sure if I have to raise a point of order further to the situation with the bells and unfortunately where we had the time allocation vote on the last visit of the minister, but I wanted to bring forward again the motion I had.

I'm not sure. Was it tabled or did we just dismiss it because we were concerned we didn't have enough time to debate it?

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Andrew Lauzon): The suggestion was that the committee would come back to it.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Okay, I do have another copy of it today here again.

The motion asks that we “continue the study of Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections; that the study consist of five meetings”—since the group didn't like the original 12 meetings I suggested, although I feel there is enough material for that when we cover all aspects of the spectrum from privacy to disinformation, which is the term that Jennifer Ditchburn prefers as indicated at the Policy Options breakfast this morning. I was happy to see our chair Larry Bagnell there.

Although there is not a lot of new information unfortunately but it would consist of five meetings so I think that seems reasonable. I recognize, in the context of the time that's left, it might be hard to fit this in, but five meetings seems enough.

Especially from my meeting with parliamentary secretary Virani it seems as though this would be a service to the government to help them get information. I'm seeing more and more that it's unfortunate the government wasn't able to consider this earlier because I see the solutions being very high level and complex, but perhaps even if we could provide any recommendations or insight, I think the minister would genuinely benefit from it and appreciate it as would, therefore, the government and Canadians, of course, which is the reason we're here.

As I said, it would consist of five meetings and the findings would be reported to the House.

Mr. Chair, thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Just before I open the discussion I want to welcome Mr. Guy Caron to the committee. Just to let committee members know, I spoke in glowing terms of his role as a member of Parliament yesterday in the House. He comports himself very professionally so we like to have him at this committee because the members here are very forward thinking as well. It's great to have you here.

Mr. Guy Caron (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, NDP): Thank you.

The Chair: To open discussion, we have Mr. Nader.

Mr. John Nater (Perth—Wellington, CPC): I don't want to say too much. The motion is self-explanatory. I do think it's important that we, as the PROC committee, undertake the study. Five meetings are reasonable, but I don't think it's a hill that we're going to die on. If there's some flexibility, it would be important.

The one point I want to get on record is that it would be important to hear from at least the chair, if not all five members of the panel that's been created to oversee interference in the upcoming election. Even in the short period of time between when it was announced to today, we've seen a change in membership on that committee based on changes in the people who hold those positions.

There's a new Clerk of the Privy Council, who was the DM for foreign affairs, so it's a new position there as well. It would be important to hear from at least the chair, the Clerk of the Privy Council, if not all five members of the committee. Whether we do that in camera, if that's necessary, I don't think anyone would be opposed to that. At least hearing from the chair and members of the committee would be important, given the context of our being five months away from an election.

• (1110)

The Chair: Mr. Bittle

Mr. Chris Bittle (St. Catharines, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

I'd like to thank Ms. Kusie for bringing this motion forward. However, we're in the last bit, the final stretch, and we had already gone through these matters. We had extended discussions and debates related to our elections on many occasions, but especially in our consideration of Bill C-76.

I know a lot of that time was filled up with debate unrelated to the matter itself and protecting Canadians, and there was an extended filibuster on that. That would have been an excellent opportunity to extend our study on that, but it's late in the game.

I know there's work already being done by the ethics committee on topics related to this. We've already discussed it and I don't see us getting into this at this particular stage.

The Chair: Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): I want to confirm, for the discussion of this and any other items that come forward, and I think I'm right in looking at the schedule. We have 11 meetings left, not including today's meeting. One of those is taken up with having the minister, so I believe that's 10 additional meetings.

The Chair: Half of one would be with the minister.

Mr. Scott Reid: Fair enough, we have 10 and a half left.

It's probably unlikely that we're going to spend an entire meeting again on the committee schedule, our agenda. Am I right on that? Okay, so we have 10 and a half meetings. For anything we discuss, we should bear that in mind, because the issue now essentially is that one item will crowd another off the list. That is true regardless of which motion we're speaking to, or which subject matter we're speaking to.

The Chair: Mrs. Kusie.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: I certainly appreciate Mr. Bittle's comments with regard to the discussion and evaluation of topics during Bill C-76. Unfortunately, I was not here for the bulk of it, but I feel as though that was really with regard to the legislation at hand. It was an opportunity to reflect upon, truly, the experts with regard to what I believe is the greatest challenge and the greatest threat facing our democratic institutions in the coming year. I don't think that is outrageous, outlandish or an exaggeration.

I want to be sure that the government is very clear on what it's doing and the message it is sending to Canadians in rejecting such a study. It's very grave. It's very serious. In our committee, this is potentially the greatest responsibility we have to the Canadian public, coming up within the short time frame. To reject a study on this is truly to do a rejection of our due diligence to the integrity of the election.

As a member of Parliament and as a shadow minister for democratic institutions, I don't want to accept that responsibility, that lack of due diligence and evaluation, so I would really ask that the government consider the message that it is sending to Canadians about its seriousness with regard to the integrity of the election in rejecting this motion.

• (1115)

The Chair: Do you have any comment on Mr. Nater's possible proposal that the meetings be in camera?

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Yes, I would absolutely be open to anything that we can find that will provide us some insight or shed some light. I genuinely believe the government, as in many nations across the world stage, is struggling to find, in this case, concrete legislative solutions, but also solutions in general to a challenge that has a significant effect on society.

Here, specifically, I'm speaking in terms of the integrity of the election, but beyond. I think it could do a great service to not only the integrity of the election but also to the piggybacking of the work, as my colleague Mr. Bittle mentioned at ethics as well. It would only enhance and maybe even confirm some of the work that they have done before us. I believe that's a piece of what they have done over there in regard to the privacy, largely.

Here we deal with matters that are more concrete, more specific, more real life, more immediate, for certain. Again, they have done this work, which I think is good, valuable work, and I have had conversations with the chair, my colleague—my apologies, the name of his riding escapes me right now—as well as other members of the ethics committee, the member for Thornhill, the member for Beaches—East York—

Mr. David de Burgh Graham (Laurentides—Labelle, Lib.): You can use their names here.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Sorry. I appreciate that. I am formal by nature too, David, coming from the diplomatic world.

I feel as though this would—

Mr. Scott Reid: In all fairness, your name is longer than your riding name, I think.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: You have a middle name, too.

Mr. Scott Reid: I do have a middle name but out of courtesy to my colleagues, I don't share it.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Okay, well, now I'm curious. I'll have to sneak a peek at your driver's licence or passport sometime.

The Chair: The chair is Mr. Zimmer.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Of course, yes, Mr. Zimmer, since I can refer to him by name.... Thank you.

I generally feel that there would be so much to gain from this in so many dimensions of the public sphere and perhaps the private sphere as well, which, of course, we are not obligated to...but can certainly move towards that.

Again, I would really urge the government to consider this. I think even three or four meetings would provide great benefit if we received good briefing notes from ethics on where they left off. As I said, that's only one dimension of privacy. It doesn't get into the disinformation. Disinformation, I guess, would be the greatest other area for study. I really believe this would be of significant benefit to the government, and it would be a disservice to Canadians, since we have this time, to not look into it.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Do we know exactly what the ethics committee did on this?

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: I would have to check, but their study was largely related to privacy, as I understand it. I would ask our analysts to expand further if they have any more information specifically regarding the Cambridge Analytica scenario. I think they're doing a lot as well, as I understand it, with the grand committee, which is scheduled to meet, I believe, at the end of May in terms of privacy solutions.

But again, privacy is just one.... I see this as a component of election integrity. When I say "component", maybe if I had to assign a percentile, it's 20% or 30%. Once you get into disinformation and databases, I would say 20% or 25%. I see it as a component, but I don't see it as the full picture or the full evaluation of what is required to attempt.

Again, I take great responsibility for this even within my own party, within the opposition, doing my own research and making recommendations from our point, but here certainly for Canadians it's a piece of it but it's not the entire picture. I think we owe it, as I said, to Canadians to attempt to get a piece of the bigger picture and attempt to provide the executive of our government with some concrete recommendations and potential solutions insofar as the time frame goes, because unfortunately, we are down to a very small time frame. As well, this touches on our time frame, our role as a single-nation state because I think that many of the solutions that are required become multilateral considerations.

Thank you, Chair.

• (1120)

The Chair: Mr. Graham.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I have a quick question.

What is the objective? What are we actually hoping to achieve?

If we do this study and we table it in the House, all we are really achieving is putting on the record all of the vulnerabilities in our election just before the election happens.

Here are the weaknesses. Good luck, everybody. Thank you.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: As I said, the objective would be to provide recommendations to the minister in an attempt to maintain

the integrity of the election insofar as possible. That to me is the objective.

I think that our analysts are capable enough and we as a committee are prudent enough to be able to manage the content of the final report to have some control over that.

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): Can I ask you a question?

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Yes, sure.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: You can continue having the floor. I'm just trying to....

The Chair: We're missing protocol.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I'm just curious about how our recommendations are actually going to be....

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Implemented?

Ms. Ruby Sahota: No, not implemented. Sorry.

I wonder how they're going to be better than what they would be able to recommend themselves, those who are responsible for making sure our elections are secure, when we don't really have the clearance to really get the information and what the threats that we're facing actually are. I feel like we're going to get a very surface-level understanding of what the issues are. Those recommendations are really not going to hold a lot of weight because I think there are better people who have the necessary clearance to really know and understand what the threats are that we're facing. They have so much more information and tools at their disposal than our committee would really have to tackle that issue properly.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: First of all, let me say I'm very fortunate to have top secret clearance. It's a process that's very uncomfortable. I'm not sure everyone in this committee would want to undertake it.

Beyond that, I definitely hear what you're saying. I do consider this when I am personally evaluating solutions. Having said that, I think those with the knowledge are only a piece of the puzzle. It falls upon us for two reasons. One is for us to take in coordination the testimony of those with specifically.... It generally seems to fall to those with the technical knowledge. I would expect that, and that's why I proposed five meetings. Considerations from members of the media, academia, policy perspectives, which could be either of those two or other non-government organizations.... It falls upon us to collect the information and evaluate it. That's the one way that I see it.

I do see what you're saying, it's definitely been, not an obstruction but a consideration, and again something that was brought up in the Policy Options breakfast. It's something I also mentioned when I was at ethics as a witness, which is that certainly while as a former member of the public service of Canada I have great faith in our public service, I'm always very concerned about how we retain those candidates with the knowledge necessary. I might have even mentioned it here: Do you have to go to San Jose for a weekend, or go to the headquarters of Fortnite in an effort to obtain them? But I see that only as small piece, because I think there are many facets of society and many players to implicate and listen to.

The second one would be, in consideration of all that information amassed, if you will, the recommendations that we would make.

I just thought of this now as well. I look at the responsibility we agreed to take at the G20, G7 Charlevoix to be a global leader in this area. In fact, I would say that our doing this study helps fulfill our commitment to be this leader. Was it the G20 or the G7? It was G7 Charlevoix.

I think it was G7, anyway, where we committed to be leaders in this space. As parliamentarians, let's follow through on that. Thank you very much.

• (1125)

The Chair: Mr. Nater.

Mr. John Nater: Thank you, Chair.

I just want to make a couple of points, in response to some of the discussion.

Mr. Graham made a point that we're going to have to put a report in and show all our weaknesses. That is a concern, but is it any less concerning than the alternative, which is that we bury our heads in the sand and say there are no threats to our democracy, no cyber-threats or threats from foreign influence? I think that would be an even more concerning direction to take, that we assume there are no threats or we bury our heads in the sand and say that we as parliamentarians don't see that threat.

That would be my first point, that there are threats and we recognize there are threats. There is no sense in denying it. We might as well address the concerns head on.

The second point is more general. Ms. Sahota touched on it a little as well, in terms of who the experts are in this field. Certainly the experts are there, and they are a part of the apparatus of government.

At the end of the day, Mr. Christopherson mentioned not too long ago that the Elections Act and elections are part of the bread and butter of this committee. This is what the committee is mandated to do within our Standing Orders. Our responsibility is the Canada Elections Act, and certainly the protection of our elections from foreign threats, from cyber-threats, is part of what we are mandated as a committee to study and to undertake.

As for shying away from this study because we aren't the experts, well, most parliamentarians aren't the experts on any number of the subject matters that may come before committee. It is our responsibility as democratically elected parliamentarians to undertake these studies, to undertake the recommendations. We do that by going to experts within the field, whether it is CSE, CSIS or other departments responsible for these things.

I sense where the room is at, in terms of where this motion is going. I just think it would be a shame if we, as the procedure and House affairs committee, did not at least undertake a study on this matter. I will leave it there, Chair.

The Chair: Ms. Sahota, were you saying that the security committee of the House of Commons has more clearance, or whatever it is called, so it could have more information?

Ms. Ruby Sahota: They do. Yes, the intelligence committee... public safety. All of us don't have the clearance that's needed. I do agree with what Mr. Nater is saying. We undertake a lot of studies. We're not the experts. Our job is to listen to the experts, but I still

don't think that those experts.... I feel it's still going to be such a very high-level type of study that we're not going to be able to get down to real solutions in order for our agencies to take appropriate measures and actions.

It'll inform us a little, but I don't know what it will really achieve at the end of the day. If we had lots of time, I would like the idea. We would need lots of time to really get deep into that issue.

• (1130)

The Chair: Is there any further discussion?

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Can we have a recorded vote, please?

(Motion negated: nays 5; yeas 4)

The Chair: I just want to put my bias into committee business. Hopefully, sometime before the summer, we will do instructions to the researcher on the parallel chamber, because we've done so much work on it. I know Mr. Reid has a motion on it, too.

Go ahead.

Mr. Scott Reid: This actually is not on the parallel chamber. On March 1 I circulated a notice of motion. I will not move the motion at the moment. I'd like to invite a little bit of discussion about it first.

The motion is about changing Standing Order 108(3)(a) to amend our own mandate. People can read the motion itself, but essentially it creates a situation where we would have a couple of new responsibilities. We would be reviewing and reporting on all matters related to the Centre Block rehabilitation project and the long-term vision and plan for the precinct—without intruding upon the responsibilities of others in this regard—and providing a report back on an annual basis to the House of Commons regarding any discussions or hearings we've had. Specifically, we would be undertaking a study and reporting back to the House by the end of this Parliament.

People seemed generally receptive to the general idea. I'm not sure if they were as receptive to this specific motion. In particular, I'd asked Mr. Bittle to get a sense of whether or not his own House leadership was generally favourable to the idea—possibly even favourable to the motion itself—and he said he'd get back to me. So I wonder if we could just have a brief discussion about whether or not there is an openness to moving forward with the motion or perhaps, in a less specific way, to moving toward taking some responsibility, and maybe a lot of responsibility, for providing oversight on this very significant and expensive project.

The Chair: Thank you.

Yes, I think there was not only general support from all the parties. There were also some passionate interventions by members of Parliament that they definitely wanted input into future renovations of both this building and Centre Block—that it's our workplace and we should have some input. I think it was agreed to by the administration that we didn't have sufficient input into the renovations to this building in particular.

I'll open the discussion. I don't want to prejudge the committee, but I think there was certainly positive reception for something in this line. People might have suggestions on the wording, but let's hear from the parties.

Mr. Bittle.

Mr. Chris Bittle: Thank you so much.

I did undertake Mr. Reid's request. I did speak to individuals. It didn't come up again and I forgot to update him, but we have no concerns with this. We're happy to discuss this as an item in positive terms and move forward on it.

I don't know how you wish to structure it. Mr. Simms and I were discussing beforehand how this might look. I don't know if we need more than a meeting to really go through it. I think both of us said that we'd like to hear from you about how you thought a "study" would look, but that might just be a matter for discussion between us.

In terms of a witness, I don't even know who that would be. We were thinking a meeting or two related to this would be reasonable, but we're happy to hear from you on how you see this coming forward. We're more than happy to discuss this and we think it's a good initiative.

Mr. Guy Caron: Mr. Chair—

• (1135)

The Chair: If I may, Mr. Caron, Mr. Christopherson is very passionate about this committee having input into the Centre Block renovations.

Mr. Guy Caron: I understand, but I have one question for Mr. Reid about this.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Guy Caron: When I was at the public accounts committee, I remember studying the rehabilitation of some of the buildings. Is there such a project with the public accounts committee or with the AG?

Mr. Scott Reid: The Board of Internal Economy does. I haven't heard of public accounts being involved at all, but that doesn't mean they aren't. It may just be that I'm ill-informed. Definitely, the Board of Internal Economy is involved.

The trouble, in a nutshell, is that the Board of Internal Economy can't report back to the House. Ultimately, it's the House itself that would want to assert—I hesitate to use the word "control", because we're talking about a building that's shared with the Senate—the kind of oversight that lets us say definitively that we want this feature to be present, or we are profoundly unhappy with the timeline that's been proposed, or that cost structure needs to get signed off by somebody. It has to be the House of Commons as a whole.

The trouble is that the board can't report to the House. We can report to the House. It could be any committee, but it needs to be a committee of Parliament—an actual committee, as opposed to the board—doing the detail work of hearing the witnesses, keeping track of the changes from one year to the next through multiple Parliaments, because the Centre Block won't be finished until multiple Parliaments have gone through, and potentially multiple changes of ministers and even possibly governments.

All we can do is report to the House. Then the report can be debated and potentially enacted, and it becomes a House order to the

people who are actually doing this work on our behalf. That's the logic of it.

Does that answer your question?

Mr. Guy Caron: It does.

I just wanted to see if what was taking place through public accounts or through the AG office was a punctual thing or a recurrent thing, but it seems to be punctual.

Mr. Scott Reid: Yes.

The Chair: David Christopherson is on public accounts. If they were doing anything on those topics, we would have heard loud and clear.

Mr. Guy Caron: He would have reported it.

Mr. Scott Reid: May I respond to Mr. Bittle?

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Scott Reid: First of all, I want to ask if it would be appropriate, in your opinion, for me to move the motion.

If it would be, why don't I do that? Then I'll speak very briefly to the question of how many meetings and that kind of thing.

The Chair: Does everyone have this?

A voice: Yes.

Mr. Scott Reid: Let me move the motion.

In speaking to it, I would just say that I don't have strong opinions on how many meetings we ought to have. Because the report date is the very last day we're sitting, I suggest that we don't have to tie ourselves in. We can fill in empty spots that arise with the other matters we're discussing here.

The Chair: Mr. Reid, for people listening on the radio, could you read at least the first paragraph of your motion, so they know what we're discussing?

Mr. Scott Reid: Forgive me. I listen to this, too. Yes, I will read the motion:

The Committee undertake a study of Standing Order 108(3)(a) to consider amending the Committee's mandate to include the review, study, and report to the House on all matters pertaining to the Centre Block Rehabilitation Project and the Long Term Vision and Plan (LTVP) for the Parliamentary Precinct, notwithstanding other review or oversight authorities, by adding the following new subsections to Standing Order 108(3)(a):

Then it goes to (x) because there's an enumerated list. This is the end of a very long list in that particular standing order:

(x) the review of and report on all matters relating to the Centre Block Rehabilitation Project and the Long Term Vision and Plan (LTVP) for the Parliamentary Precinct, notwithstanding other review or oversight authorities that exist or that may be established;

I'll do the rest in French.

• (1140)

[*Translation*]

(xi) the review of an annual report on the Centre Block Rehabilitation Project and the Long Term Vision and Plan (LTVP) for the Parliamentary Precinct, including current and projected timelines, the current state of incurred and projected expenditures, and any changes therein since the last report on these matters, provided that the committee may report on these matters at any time, and that the committee annually includes a recommendation respecting the continued retention of Standing Orders 108(3)(a)(x) and 108(3)(a)(xi).";

and, that it report its recommendations to the House no later than its last meeting in June 2019.

[English]

The Chair: Good.

Maybe the minute-taker could use the motion we handed out, because it has the letters behind that you didn't read out.

Mr. Scott Reid: Yes, that's right.

The Chair: Due to timing and everything, I would suggest that we try to do it in May, because you never know what's going to come before this committee. There could be points of privilege or something.

Mr. Scott Reid: That's true.

The Chair: We wouldn't want it to fall between the cracks.

Mr. Scott Reid: I agree with that. I do want to say one other thing here, that we submit the recommendations to the House, essentially for the change to the standing order, and then we simply see. If the House is willing to support it by unanimous consent, we could go forward, or if not, we could just let the matter die in the House, but we would report back in time to give the House that choice.

I only think it makes sense to pursue something such as this if it has widespread support.

The Chair: What if it did die in the House for maybe one vote or something? Is there an option to recommend it to the PROC of the next Parliament? The PROC of the next Parliament can either agree or disagree with our recommendation, but at least it would be on their agenda.

Mr. Scott Reid: Part of the reason I said that was that the only way to get a vote in the House is to have a concurrence debate. As a practical matter, it's very hard to arrange a concurrence debate that late in the Parliament. My natural inclination on something such as this, to look towards unanimous consent, is doubled when you face that type of practical consideration.

As someone who has been on the committee a long time, I would just say, there's no formal mechanism, but the next PROC is likely to take very seriously that which was said by the current PROC on something such as this.

The Chair: It is or isn't likely to do so?

Mr. Scott Reid: It is, pretty much so.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: What's stopping us from sending a recommendation letter to the next version of ourselves? Have you thought of that?

Mr. Scott Reid: That's true.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: PROC could write a letter to say to our future self that it should look at these issues that we raised.

Mr. Scott Reid: It's like the movie *Groundhog Day*, where he breaks the pencil so that his future self, when he wakes up, will know.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: That's right.

As a practical matter, that's what we can do with this, and say, "Dear PROC of the 43rd Parliament, follow this."

Mr. Scott Reid: Yes.

The Chair: I think I had Mr. Nater on the list.

Mr. John Nater: Maybe just following up on that, there's also the option for the next PROC, as part of the routine motions at the beginning of the 43rd Parliament, to do a routine motion that PROC undertake an ongoing study every six months or every calendar year on this. That's an option, too.

Just very briefly, in terms of our limited time going forward, personally I think it would be nice to hear from Mr. Wright from the public works department on this matter. He seems to be the designated departmental official on this. It would be nice to hear from him one last time before we adjourn for dissolution.

Perhaps a potential second witness would be the architects we had previously before the committee: Centrus, or something such as that.

The Chair: Do you mean the ones we had at the December meeting?

Mr. John Nater: Yes. It would be just to hear whether there have been any updates in terms of what they've found since we vacated the premises, whether there's anything new that they can share on that matter.

The third and final point would be an actual briefing from someone, whether that's Mr. Wright or someone else, on the long-term vision and plan, what is actually currently on record as having been approved going forward. There were different suggestions at the last meeting of what was approved, when it was approved.

Mr. Reid has talked before about the second phase of the visitor welcome centre. I think we're all in the dark as to exactly what is currently approved in terms of this blasting on the front lawn to dig a new visitor welcome centre. It would be nice to know what has been approved and what's currently the plan.

Those are the three points we could do, whether that's in one single meeting or two half meetings. They would generally be the witnesses I'd want to hear. That's somewhat independent of the actual motion itself, because the motion is recommending a change, but it ties in, hand in hand.

• (1145)

The Chair: Would you want them before we finalize the motion?

Mr. John Nater: I don't think we necessarily need that. They're somewhat independent, because the motion is a structure to report.

I'd personally like to hear from those witnesses before we adjourn this Parliament. I'm flexible on that.

The Chair: It makes sense to me.

Mr. Bittle, I think you asked the question of Mr. Reid.

Mr. Chris Bittle: That's fine. If it's a meeting or two, that works for us.

The Chair: Mr. Reid, you have Mr. Nater's suggestion.

Mr. Scott Reid: I think we should deal with that as a committee, rather than amending the motion to contain it. I would suggest scheduling it.

The Chair: Yes.

Did you want to have a meeting on the motion, or do you want to have a meeting with those witnesses and then have the motion at the end of that meeting? What are your thoughts?

Mr. Scott Reid: Why don't we try to see if we can adopt the motion now and then move towards that?

We aren't actually tying ourselves to a specific number of meetings. That allows maximum flexibility for the committee to have as few as one and as many as the committee decides.

The Chair: The proposal is to finish discussion on the motion right now, and then I'll go to discussion on the other people. Is there any further discussion on the motion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: It's unanimous.

Now let's discuss a meeting for the witnesses Mr. Nater just suggested. Is anyone opposed to our trying to get those witnesses in as soon as possible for a meeting?

The Clerk: Committee members will recall that we've had witnesses already on an ongoing study having to do with the Centre Block rehabilitation project. I just asked the chair whether the witnesses suggested by Mr. Nater would be a continuation of that study, or whether the witnesses would be specifically tied to the study on the potential recommended standing order change.

Mr. John Nater: I think Mr. Reid's motion is almost a stand-alone. I suspect the witnesses won't be speaking directly to the change in the committee's mandate. Certainly, they're connected, but I think it would be a stand-alone motion.

My only question is whether we would need to hear witnesses from the clerk, perhaps on this motion itself, but I don't know if that would be necessary.

The Chair: Mr. Reid's motion, as the clerk says, does refer to undertaking a study. Do we need the study now that we've approved the motion? We've approved a motion that says we're going to undertake a study.

Mr. Scott Reid: The study is of Standing Order 108(3)(a).

The Chair: Right.

Mr. Scott Reid: The real question is whether this is the right way, whether we want to recommend these changes to the Standing Orders themselves. That's what we would be reporting back to the House on.

If we invite witnesses, it will be not so much to say, "Hey, tell us more about this." Rather, it's to say we're trying to figure out whether or not this particular change will work, and if so, what sort of reporting over the next decade or more they would be making to us, or who else we should be contacting.

For example, I think in Mr. Wright's most recent appearance, he referred to our parliamentary partners. It was unclear to me who the parliamentary partners were. We would be trying to figure out the practicalities of who they're communicating with now, how authority is flowing through, who is authorizing the contracts that have been, I gather, given out for the changes to the visitor welcome centre—the visitor welcome centre phase two—and who they've consulted with

in terms of the impact this is going to have on the other uses for the front lawn.

I'm just looking at that one part of the project, but I assume it's going to have an impact on our Canada Day celebrations for the next decade or so, and that this is being cleared by somebody.

Do you see what I'm saying? It's all about how the reporting works and how they would interact with us, how their other parliamentary partners would interact with us. At the end of hearing some of that witness testimony, we'd be better equipped to say whether or not these suggested changes to the Standing Orders make sense or are a bad idea. Then, our report back could—

• (1150)

The Chair: Those witnesses would be related to this study of the standing order.

Mr. Scott Reid: That's what I would suggest, yes, as a way of figuring out whether.... Even if in the end, the committee decides that these suggested changes to the Standing Orders are not a good idea, we would as a group have a clearer idea about where the lines of communication are and are not. All we know for sure right now is that whatever loop there is, we're outside of it, and so apparently are most of the other people in the House of Commons.

The Chair: Okay. We'll have a meeting with the witnesses that Mr. Nater suggested, and then we'll have a meeting on your report, basically, reporting back as to whether or not we make a recommendation on those standing order changes.

Mr. Scott Reid: That's right.

The Chair: Is that okay?

Just review the witnesses for the clerk again, the ones you suggested, Mr. Nater.

Mr. John Nater: My suggestions would be Mr. Wright from public works, or whomever else is deemed necessary from public works; the architects we had at the December meeting to see if there's anything new; and then an appropriate authority to go over the long-term vision and plan for what's currently been approved. Whether that would be from House administration or....

The Chair: Okay, so we have one hour where we would have the first two witnesses, and you said in the second hour there would be a presentation of the long-term vision and plan. They know that there is a presentation of that plan—

Mr. John Nater: Yes, so whether it's within the same two-hour meeting or one hour and one hour, we'd do whatever works for the witnesses.

The Chair: Okay. We'll try to do it in the same meeting. If not, is that okay?

We'll set another meeting to make the report and discussion as soon thereafter as we can on the schedule.

Is everyone in agreement with that? Good.

We'll go to further committee business.

Mr. Scott Reid: I have another two actually.

The next thing I had on the list that was circulated here was that a motion was put on notice about having the commissioner of Canada elections appear in relation to SNC-Lavalin. Should I read that motion, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay. The motion is simply:

That the Commissioner of Canada Elections appear before the Procedure and House Affairs Committee to discuss the illegal contributions made by SNC-Lavalin to the Liberal Party of Canada and his decision to issue a compliance agreement.

The Chair: Don't forget, when you're doing your list about committee members, my bias of giving direction to the researcher on the parallel chamber study that we did.

Is there discussion on the motion that was just read?

Go ahead, yes.

Mr. Scott Reid: Mr. Côté provided a brief statement on the subject as well. I will read this into the record. Unfortunately, I only have it in English or else I'd distribute it. I apologize for that. He says, and this was on May 2:

In light of renewed media interest in a 2016 decision by the Commissioner of Canada Elections to enter into a compliance agreement with SNC-Lavalin Group Inc. and certain allegations made concerning the circumstances surrounding the conclusion of this agreement, the Commissioner wishes to provide clarifications in the interest of maintaining public confidence in the integrity of the Canada Elections Act's compliance and enforcement regime.

The Commissioner carries out his compliance and enforcement mandate with complete independence from the government of the day, including from the Prime Minister's Office or any Minister's office, from any elected official or their staff, and from any public servant. At no time, since the current Commissioner was appointed in 2012, has an attempt been made by any elected official or political staffer to influence or to interfere with any compliance or enforcement decision that did not directly involve them as the subject of the investigation.

I guess this next part was intended as a statement by the commissioner. This must be intended as the part that's for media quotation, because it's indented and in italics.

The independence of the Commissioner is a key component of our electoral compliance and enforcement regime. In my time as Commissioner, there has never been any attempt by elected officials, political staffers or public servants to influence the course of an investigation or to interfere with our work. And I want to make it clear that if this ever happened, I would promptly and publicly denounce it.

He obviously was very concerned about that. He then provides a little bit of background information.

Compliance and enforcement decisions are taken in a manner consistent with the Compliance and Enforcement Policy of the Commissioner of Canada Elections. Paragraph 32 outlines the various factors that go into determining which compliance or enforcement tool is most appropriate in a given case. With respect to SNC-Lavalin, some of the factors that were taken into consideration are outlined in the compliance agreement.

As noted at paragraph 32(b) of the Policy, the evidence gathered during an investigation is an important consideration in determining how to deal with a particular case. This calls for an objective review of the evidence that has been assembled to assess its strength. In this regard, it should be noted that a compliance agreement may be entered into on the basis of evidence meeting the civil standard of balance of probabilities, while the laying of criminal charges requires evidence that meets the criminal standard of proof beyond a reasonable doubt.

It should be noted that through amendments to the Act made with Bill C-23 in 2014, the longstanding practice of the Commissioner to not provide details of investigations was confirmed, with the adoption of clear confidentiality rules. This is consistent with the manner police and investigative agencies treat information related to their investigations

That's the statement. I think that indicates some limits that we would have to place on ourselves with regard to confidentiality. I think we would, as a committee, as long as we're cognizant of that, be able to get some useful additional information as to how this policy functions and how it functioned in this particular case.

I will just say that I accept at face value the commissioner's statement that there was no attempt made by any elected officials or political staffers to interfere or influence. We're simply trying to figure out how this all works and to see to what extent this is consistent with other practices. The obvious parallel here is with the Dean Del Mastro prosecution that resulted in the laying of charges.

I don't know what the commissioner would say. I can kind of guess based on his statement, but only if he comes here can we get a full explanation, so that is the basis and the rationale for the motion.

• (1155)

The Chair: Mr. Bittle.

Mr. Chris Bittle: Thank you so much.

There has been a troubling pattern over the last little while at this committee. First, we had the Clerk of the House of Commons here, and the Conservatives brought down their whip to question his integrity without any evidence. They did this even though the Clerk had reached out to the House leader's office directly to ask if he could proceed, but there was no response and his integrity was questioned.

Then the Chief Electoral Officer came. I know we may disagree on certain points of policy, and I know we have disagreed with the Conservatives about recommendations that have been made. I haven't been on this committee since the start, but we have had an incredible working relationship with the Chief Electoral Officer. I didn't think it would be possible for any member to stand up and question his integrity. Well, that happened last week as well when the honourable member from Carleton gleefully called him a "Liberal lapdog". I think I got it wrong last time, and he corrected me, and he was gleeful in that correction. Then they brought someone else in to do this, and I hope the members who are typically here wouldn't engage in this, but they questioned his integrity even though he had no involvement. The law says he has no involvement and there's no evidence that he did, but there was a gleeful willingness to question his integrity

Then in the next hour there were valid concerns about the way in which David Johnston was appointed. We heard it from Mr. Christopherson, and we heard it from the Conservative Party last time, and there was disagreement as to that. I would have thought that David Johnston would have been one of the individuals in this country whose integrity could not be questioned, based on his work, yet we had the Conservative Party question his integrity. He had to defend his own integrity, inviting his detractors to look at his lifetime of work. All of this was done without any evidence, without any provocation. Now, once again, Conservative Party wishes to call in another public official to question their integrity without any evidence.

I don't know if they appreciate the irony of doing this, of calling in an independent prosecutor to question their decision. I've used this term before, "the Nobel Prize for irony". I don't know if that's a thing but it seems you're in the running. You criticize the government for contemplating asking a question about the direction of a prosecution and a deferred prosecution agreement, and you had that out there for a couple of months. "How dare you?" they said. We heard this for two months and no laws were broken, as stated by the witnesses. "How dare you even think about asking such a question?"

Now we wish to call an investigator, an independent investigator-prosecutor from the office of the director of public prosecutions, and question this person about their decision. It boggles the mind and it is unbelievable how desperate the Conservative Party is to have SNC discussed that they are willing to go back on everything they have said over the last couple of months in order to achieve that goal.

At the end of the day, my understanding is that the justice committee is still going through its estimates process, that the commissioner of Canada elections is still under their jurisdiction in terms of the estimates process, and that there will be an opportunity....

• (1200)

I don't think I'll be supporting the motion at the end of the day anyway, but I'd like to clear it up just so we have a really truthful motion. I'd like to propose an amendment so that the motion reads:

That the Commissioner of Elections Canada appear before the Committee to discuss the illegal contributions made by SNC-Lavalin to the Liberal Party of Canada and the Conservative Party of Canada and his decision to issue a compliance agreement to SNC-Lavalin and Pierre Poilievre.

Mr. Scott Reid: Chris, do you have the wording to give to us?

The Chair: Mr. Bittle, he was just asking if you have the wording.

Mr. Scott Reid: Forgive me, I was up with David discussing what we'll be doing this summer—

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Scott Reid: —and I suddenly realized we were through the rhetoric and onto the substance. I didn't get back in time to start making notes, so that's my bad.

Mr. Chris Bittle: The amendment would be at the end of the second line, which would read, "to the Liberal Party of Canada and the Conservative Party of Canada".

• (1205)

Mr. Scott Reid: Forgive me. Can I just stop and ask a factual question in the middle of that? Was the illegal contribution you're referring to made to the Conservative Party of Canada or was it to a riding association of the Conservative Party of Canada? Do you know?

Mr. Chris Bittle: I'm not 100% familiar, but if you're supportive of that, that's a question that can be asked.

Mr. Scott Reid: Does anybody know the answer to that question? The compliance agreement with Pierre or with his campaign suggests it was to his riding association as opposed to the Conservative Party itself—unless this was in the context of his being the minister at the time. I'm just trying figure out what.... You can understand my concern for precision. I don't want put down a

factually incorrect statement in a motion. If you can figure that out—I just don't have the information in front of me—then we could.... I see what you want to do. I want to make sure it's correct, and then we could probably vote in favour of it.

Chris, Stephanie looked this up on the CBC's website. It says here—and I'm quoting from the relevant news story—"The Conservative Party of Canada netted far less as a result of the scheme. The party received \$3,137, while various Conservative Party riding associations and candidates were given \$5,050." Are we sure this is in the context of the...? Yes, it is. Sorry, I'm just seeing this now, \$83,534 to the Liberal Party, various Liberal associations....

Would you be open to a bit of an amendment to your amendment, Chris? No. Do you mind if I...?

Mr. Chris Bittle: Let's hear it. I'll hear it, fair enough.

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay. Yes, that's true. Anyway, let me tell you what it is and you can decide about it.

I think what we're getting at is that if we're going to do this, it would make sense to make it to the Liberal and Conservative parties of Canada and various riding associations of the Liberal and Conservative parties of Canada. That would be the suggestion. What you're really doing is that you're pointing out that, in addition to SNC-Lavalin having given money to the Liberal Party of Canada, it gave it to the Conservative Party of Canada, which is obviously factually correct. Additionally it was to various riding associations of both parties.

If we want to bring in Pierre Poilievre, I assume it's because we're making reference to his riding association. I assume it must have one of them. Nepean—Carleton, I'm guessing. Therefore, we would have to make reference to the riding association donations or we're getting someone who literally can't talk to the subject matter. I would want, as well, to extend it to include the relevant members of Parliament, both Conservatives and Liberals, for both parties. That might take a bit of research to find out who they are, but would that seem reasonable to you? We're basically trying to extend the net to include everybody who has been included on both sides.

The Chair: Mr. Caron.

Mr. Guy Caron: To which we should add, actually, that in the same article, they're talking about four candidates for the leadership of the Liberal Party who received funds as well.

Mr. Scott Reid: Is that right?

Mr. Guy Caron: Yes, according to the article. I have it in French, too.

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay. Unfortunately, this is not my phone. It just locked, so I can't....

Maybe, if we're doing that, we should say, "and leadership candidates" and then "consult with any or all of the individuals who were...".

Guy, I'm looking at you for this. If we're mentioning Pierre by name, we should probably mention any of the people involved who signed compliance agreements.

•(1210)

Mr. Guy Caron: In the article, there are no names involved, so I cannot tell you which ones.

Mr. Scott Reid: Right.

I'll stop there because I've managed to not actually come up with a single wording, but that would be my suggestion as to how to deal with this amendment.

The Chair: Where exactly are we, Mr. Reid?

Mr. Scott Reid: I'm waiting for a response from Chris.

Mr. Chris Bittle: I don't agree to this as a friendly amendment. We believe that the hypocrisy of this should be pointed out. That's why the motion should include.... I believe that if we say "Liberal Party of Canada" and "Conservative Party of Canada," we've included riding associations and whatnot. I think that's—

Mr. Scott Reid: Including their riding associations...?

Mr. Chris Bittle: To me it doesn't matter, but I think the important thing is to have.... I guess the most shocking thing was to have Mr. Poilievre come down here and question the integrity of the Chief Electoral Officer and the commissioner of Elections Canada.

He himself received and negotiated a compliance agreement, which is a valid legal settlement, so if the Conservative Party is going to criticize what the commissioner did on one thing, they should also attack Mr. Poilievre's also receiving one, and maybe demand that he see his day in court as well. Let's keep it all in there. I'd like to keep my amendment as it is.

A voice: If he could be asked to provide a wording—

Mr. Scott Reid: He's not accepting the wording, so there's no need for a revised wording.

I'm going to suggest another revision then. I'm very glad this is not an in camera meeting.

I'm working from what I have written down as Chris's proposed amendment, which is itself an adjustment to my motion. It would read, "That the Commissioner of Canada Elections and Pierre Poilievre appear before the Committee to discuss the illegal contributions made by SNC-Lavalin to the Liberal Party of Canada and the Conservative Party of Canada and their riding associations, and his decision to issue compliance agreements".

The Chair: Is that a subamendment to the amendment?

Mr. Scott Reid: I guess so. I don't actually know at this point what it would be procedurally.

Could it be considered a subamendment? Is that permissible?

The Clerk: Yes.

Mr. Scott Reid: Let's do it that way. That way we can have an up and down vote on that one if we wish, or further debate.

May I assume, Mr. Chair, that we're in the debate on the subamendment now?

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay.

I think this accomplishes covering most things. It does not cover the four contributions that Mr. Caron mentioned with regard to party

leadership contestants, simply because I think we were spiralling into a lot of confusion, but it does deal with the key subject matter at hand, which is SNC-Lavalin's unlawful contributions. Nobody disputes that because there are compliance agreements out there. Everybody's in agreement, including the recipients, that these were not lawful contributions. This provides a really good opportunity to look at the underlying question.

I went to some lengths, in reading that statement, to make the point that this is not about trying to cast aspersions on any elected official or staffer up here. This is about trying to find out how justice is administered in this particular case, and there is no better way to do it than via a study that encompasses all those who were recipients of these illegal contributions at the level of electoral riding associations.

That's my sales pitch.

•(1215)

The Chair: Ms. Kusie.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: I feel as though, Chair, this has the same theme as my previous suggested motion.

Mr. Bittle, are you sure? This really will be the WWF of PROC. We're getting into the creamed corn here. This is bad. I'd like to offer the government one more opportunity. Let's put the motion as it is. We'll do a recorded vote. If it reveals nothing else, there's no harm, no foul, and we move on. I suggest that to the government, just make sure.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Is there any further discussion before we vote?

The committee will suspend for a couple of minutes.

•(1215)

(Pause)

•(1220)

The Chair: Are we ready to vote on the subamendment?

Mr. Scott Reid: Yes. We would like a recorded vote.

The Chair: We will have a recorded vote.

(Subamendment negated: nays 5; yeas 4)

The Chair: We're now on the amendment.

Mr. Scott Reid: I was jotting down my own notes for the subamendment. I didn't get the amendment.

Could either Chris or the clerk read it?

The Chair: Chris, do you want to?

Mr. Chris Bittle: At the end of line two, it's "and the Conservative Party of Canada". Then it ends, "and his decision to issue a compliance agreement to SNC-Lavalin and Pierre Poilievre."

Mr. Scott Reid: Would you be able to say "compliance agreements", plural?

Mr. Chris Bittle: Yes.

Mr. Scott Reid: Forgive me, but I have one other question to ask. You're aware that the Pierre Poilievre compliance agreement is not with relation to SNC-Lavalin. That's on a separate matter.

Mr. Chris Bittle: I'm aware.

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay. Good. I have no further comments.

The Chair: We'll have a recorded vote on the amendment.

(Amendment agreed to: yeas 9; nays 0)

The Chair: Now we'll have the vote on the motion as amended.

Mr. Scott Reid: I'd like a recorded vote.

The Chair: We'll have a recorded vote.

Just for the wording, Mr. Reid, would it be a friendly amendment that the committee "invite" the Commissioner of Canada Elections to appear?

Mr. Scott Reid: Yes. If everybody else is agreeable to it, I certainly am.

The Chair: We have a recorded vote on the motion as amended.

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

The Chair: Carrying on committee business, I'll go to Mr. Caron, but I'm wondering if I could get the permission of the committee to use Thursday's meeting to give instructions to the researcher on our parallel chamber report.

Mr. Reid.

• (1225)

Mr. Scott Reid: I'd be fine with that.

The Chair: Is anyone opposed?

That's great. We'll do that on Thursday.

Mr. Caron.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Guy Caron: I'd like to say that I am quite pleased to set aside the motion Mr. Christopherson wanted to present and to let him introduce it at some subsequent date. I will not introduce it this morning.

[*English*]

The Chair: Okay. We're not discussing that motion today.

On that list I handed out, is there anything we haven't dealt with yet?

Mr. Scott Reid: There's my point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: We tried to do things while you were away, but it didn't work.

Mr. Scott Reid: The point of order I wanted to.... You remember when this came up. We had a committee meeting on April 11. The bells were ringing and we had a witness, I believe, so you opened the meeting and sought unanimous consent so that we could hear some testimony from the witness. You obtained unanimous consent as soon as the meeting was in session. We heard from the witness and then people went off to votes in the House.

My own interpretation of the Standing Orders is that the chair of a committee cannot have unanimous consent to begin the meeting. Therefore, it is out of order to begin a meeting when the bells are already ringing. By way of contrast, if the meeting is already taking place, it's an easy matter to get that note.

The practical significance of this—it's not a vast significance—was that a number of people, me included, did not come to the meeting on the assumption that it wasn't happening. This really was a good faith misunderstanding or a different interpretation of where the rule lies.

I think my understanding is correct. I'm prepared to accept that my understanding might be incorrect, but one way or the other, I'd like to see it resolved.

The problem we face is simply this: In this committee, in any committee, you can't make a decision that locks the House in place. We always say we are the masters of our own affairs in committees. Of course the same is true in spades in either direction, but I think it would be helpful to try to figure this out. I'm not exactly sure of the right mechanism for doing that, for getting a yes or no answer to my own interpretation of the Standing Orders. I simply throw that out to other members to think about.

The Chair: I'll give you two options, Mr. Reid. I'll give you the short answer or the long answer. The short answer is that there's nothing in the Standing Orders that precluded me from doing that. There is a thing in the Standing Orders precluding me from doing it if the bells start during a meeting, which would leave us two choices.

We cannot do anything, but there are two choices. We could make a suggestion for a change in the procedures of our committee so that it's clarified or we could actually do a report to the House and try to get it changed for all committees.

The long answer is that I could read out what I just said in great lengthy terms as prepared by the clerk, if you would like.

Mr. Scott Reid: Is it an option? You sound somewhat reluctant.

The Chair: No, I'm fine.

Mr. Scott Reid: The other option, as I said, is that you could circulate it. It would be helpful to have that in writing.

Ultimately, as I've said, I'd like an instruction from the House to have the standing order explicitly say it means this or it means that; either is satisfactory. Having it explicit is what I'm really after.

• (1230)

The Chair: We could solve it for our committee quite easily by making it something here. If you want it to go to the House for all committees, then that's more problematic, but we can do that.

Mr. Scott Reid: I only want to suggest that if committee members are willing to do that. I may be the only one who's fixated on this, and if that's the case, then I would be wasting people's time pursuing it. Could we actually start with getting a sense of what other people think, and whether this is just my own fixation as opposed to a real issue? If they think it's a real issue, then we should, I think, look at taking it to the House, and if they think it's just me, then I should just let the matter drop.

The Chair: Okay, that's a good point. Just so people know what we're talking about. This is Standing Order 115(5):

Notwithstanding Standing Orders 108(1)(a) and 113(5), the Chair of a standing, special, legislative or joint committee shall suspend the meeting when the bells are sounded to call in the Members to a recorded division, unless there is unanimous consent of the members of the committee to continue to sit.

That's what happens if the bells ring while we're here. However, it's silent on what happens if they ring before. That's what we could clarify either for our committee procedures or propose to the House for all committee procedures, because it's not clarified. But as Mr. Reid's asking what the thoughts of the committee are generally, we'll open it up for that.

Mr. Caron.

[Translation]

Mr. Guy Caron: I am reluctant.

What I am trying to avoid in this committee are unforeseen adverse effects. I think that if the bells start to ring and the meeting has not yet begun, it is the responsibility of the chair to reconvene the meeting sometime after the vote the bells signal has taken place.

The possibility of beginning the meeting while the bells are ringing may raise various problems, and different strategic tactics could be used by certain parties, subsequently. I would have trouble accepting an interpretation according to which the chair would be authorized to begin a meeting while the bells are still ringing.

Consequently, I do not agree, not necessarily for reasons I can explain right now, but because of the potential use of that provision as a probable loophole later.

[English]

The Chair: Yes, I think that's a good point.

Just to let you know the context of this particular one, it was a minister who was here on the estimates and ministers are really hard to come by, so we wanted to at least get their opening statement because we might not get it. All the representatives who were here from each party agreed, as well as the two vice-chairs, so that all the parties had agreed at the time, but we did not make the effort to contact Mr. Reid or others who weren't here, which was probably a mistake. That's just to let you know the context.

But you've made a very good point that you wouldn't want that type of interpretation to be misused.

Are there any other thoughts?

Mr. Scott Reid: I would say that we hopefully can get some Liberal feedback of some sort. They're not normally shy about contradicting me.

The Chair: Mr. Graham is never shy.

Go ahead.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: My own instinct is that if the chair has the consent of members of all parties, then I don't see a problem. That's my own personal opinion. If any of the parties objected, I totally get it. It shouldn't happen, but when people from all parties present say, yes, we can do it, I can't find a reason not to allow that.

The Chair: Mr. Bittle.

Mr. Chris Bittle: I wasn't there for that meeting. Who was in attendance when the meeting started?

The Chair: Ms. Kusie, do you remember? You were here and Mr. Christopherson was here, I think.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Yes, I was here. At the very beginning, no one was here except the minister and me. Then it was Mr. Christopherson and I think Linda trickled in at some point. I don't....

The Chair: There was a quorum.

Mr. Chris Bittle: There was a quorum and there was consent. I guess that's the question I have. There was quorum and there was consent to hear the witnesses. Even if there were a rule in place, would that have been acceptable?

I appreciate it and I'm happy to just proceed going forward that, in the absence of consent, we wouldn't start a meeting if the bells were ringing. I appreciate Scott's concern. I don't think it was malicious. It was to get a minister's statement in. I guess I don't have strong opinions either way on the subject, but I understand the concern. There seemed to have been, from my understanding, consent to proceed. Even if there were a rule in place, the seven minutes or eight minutes allotted to the minister still would have gone forward. I guess I leave it to the committee. Again, I don't have strong feelings either way.

• (1235)

The Chair: Part of the point in that particular case was that we'd come back after the bells, for sure, but there may not have been time to ask questions of the minister. By getting her statement out of the way, it certainly made sure that when she came back there would be time for questions. It was more of a functional thing—we were just checking out if everyone was okay—rather than a procedural thing.

Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid: Again, I emphasize that I think everything was done with the best intention of conforming with the Standing Orders as they were sincerely believed to be in the minds of those who were present. It was unanimous consent. You asked for it and they gave it. Clearly, everybody who was here thought so, and that was the majority of the committee, which means, ipso facto, that the impression I've had of the Standing Orders is a minority impression.

One thing that's clear is that there's not an enormous appetite to discuss this at this time. We've now had a chance to discuss this, and it's a public meeting, so it's on the record. I don't think we're going to be in a position to make recommendations to the House as a whole. Maybe we could just conclude the subject by getting an indication from you as to how you would act in a parallel circumstance, should it arise between now and the end of this Parliament, and we'll know whether to head for the House in such a situation or to head here.

Before I ask you for that, I'll just say that it's not as problematic for this committee. We are meeting directly below the House of Commons, which is one floor up. It would obviously be a more serious practical matter if it was a meeting that was taking place in the Wellington Building, say, or the Valour Building, which will never arise for us but does arise for others.

That's not to push you in either direction, because nothing you do here will have a precedent for anybody else. It is simply to point out that you can validly go one way or the other, as long as you are clear as to which practice you'll be following, we'll know.

The Chair: My sense, from the comment we just had, is that there didn't seem to be a problem if all parties that have a seat on the committee were in agreement. I think that on the next occasion I would also endeavour to do not only that, but also, if possible, send a quick email to every member of the committee so that one of the few people, like you, who didn't come to the room would know that we were going to proceed that way.

I don't think this would happen very often, but that's how I would proceed.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Is that okay with everyone? Is there any further business before the end of this meeting?

For Thursday, can you come back with your ideas for the researcher on our report on parallel chambers, including recommendations to make sure that it doesn't fall off where it goes from here.

Then, on Thursday, May 16, the minister will be here on main estimates on the debates commission.

Mr. Caron, is Mr. Christopherson coming back?

Mr. Guy Caron: I'm sure Mr. Christopherson would actually know that. You said the one hour for the minister. Do you usually have officials also presenting if there are any further questions?

The Chair: The ministers usually bring officials with them. I think this minister has always had officials from the Privy Council Office with her to answer questions.

She doesn't make a lot of decisions related to the expenditures of the debates commissioner, so we had the debates commissioner already. He came before committee and answered a lot of the questions that people might have had on the specifics. The committee also asked for her to come. Any time she's come before us, she's always had officials with her.

• (1240)

Mr. Guy Caron: If there were a desire from, say, David to have the officials stay afterwards, if there were more questions but the minister was no longer available, would that be something the committee would consider? At this point I would ask the committee to keep it open until David comes to see if that's his wish.

Mr. Chris Bittle: Typically I wouldn't have an issue with that, but this is very narrow with respect to the debates commission. The official came to answer questions on that, David Johnston. We've already gone through that. I imagine there will be some questions related to the debates commission but it will go beyond that. We had all of the officials who are making the decisions on the debates commission. Otherwise, if there is a grand appetite.... I don't know, but that's already happened.

Mr. Guy Caron: I just want to leave it open until David comes back.

Mr. Chris Bittle: Fair enough.

The Chair: That's it. I thank the committee. I think it was a very professional discussion and we dealt with a lot of business.

Thank you. The meeting is adjourned.

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