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Standing Committee on Public Accounts

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Tuesday, February 25, 2020

Chair: Mr. Dean Allison



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• (1110)

[*Translation*]

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Michel Marcotte): Honourable committee members, I can see a quorum.

I must inform the members that the clerk of the committee can receive motions only for the election of the chair. The clerk can't receive any other motions, hear points of order or participate in the debates.

We can proceed to the election of the chair.

Pursuant to Standing Order 106(2), the chair must be a member of the official opposition.

I'm ready to receive motions for the chair.

Mr. Steinley, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Mr. Warren Steinley (Regina—Lewvan, CPC): I nominate Mr. Dean Allison.

[*Translation*]

The Clerk: Mr. Steinley moves that Dean Allison be elected chair of the committee.

Are there any other motions?

[*English*]

Hearing none, is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt the motion?

I declare the motion carried and Mr. Dean Allison duly elected chair of the committee.

(Motion agreed to)

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Chair (Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West, CPC)): If the committee is in agreement, we're going to proceed with the election of the vice-chairs.

Mr. Green.

Mr. Matthew Green (Hamilton Centre, NDP): As we all know, there's still a process happening with PROC. We know that the China-Canada committee took it upon themselves as a committee to add a third vice-chair. I would like to test the will of this committee at this point in time to see if there would be a willingness to entertain that motion here, to add a third vice-chair for the welfare of this committee.

The Chair: The challenge I have right now is that because it hasn't been approved by PROC, it's still not in process.

I could put this to the will of the committee.

Wait until PROC? Is that the consensus we have?

Mr. Fergus.

Mr. Greg Fergus (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Mr. Chair, yes, I'd love to do that; and secondly, we discussed this issue over at ethics yesterday.

I would appreciate that the first order of business at the next meeting would be to deal with that issue.

The Chair: Mr. Green.

Mr. Matthew Green: Just so we are clear, through you, Mr. Chair, there's nothing preventing us from doing it now. China-Canada has already done it.

The Chair: My understanding is that it would actually be going against the Standing Orders as they are now.

Mr. Matthew Green: Because that committee was struck at the House it had—

The Chair: Why don't we just wait until we see? PROC has to move that, and then we can certainly entertain that again.

Mr. Matthew Green: Sure.

The Chair: Do we have any nominations for vice-chair?

Mr. Blois.

Mr. Kody Blois (Kings—Hants, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I'd like to nominate Mr. Lloyd Longfield as a vice-chair.

The Chair: Mr. Sorbara.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara (Vaughan—Woodbridge, Lib.): Are there two vice-chairs on this committee?

The Chair: Correct. We're just going to do one at a time.

This is the first one, which should be the government.

(Motion agreed to)

We need a second vice-chair as well.

Mr. Sorbara.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I look forward to working with this committee and with you as chair over the next coming weeks and months.

I would like to nominate Maxime Blanchette-Joncas as vice-chair, please.

The Chair: Mr. Green.

Mr. Matthew Green: Mr. Allison, you're going to get to know me really well.

I'm also going to go ahead and put my own name forward for the nomination and call the vote, and allow that to happen in anticipation of PROC.

I can nominate myself. It's in order.

The Chair: All right. There will be a ballot, then, so just give us a second to organize that.

The Clerk: Since more than one candidate has been nominated, pursuant to Standing Order 106(3), I'm required to preside over the election of the second vice-chair by secret ballot.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sorbara moves that Maxime Blanchette-Joncas be elected second vice-chair of the committee.

Matthew Green moves that Matthew Green be elected second vice-chair of the committee.

Are there any other motions?

There aren't any other motions.

I'll briefly explain the process.

I'll distribute a ballot to each committee member. You must clearly mark your choice on the ballot by printing the candidate's first and last name, and place the ballot in the ballot box when it comes to you. We'll then count the ballots. I'll announce the elected candidate. If no candidate receives a majority of votes, another round of voting will take place in the same way.

• (1110) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1115)

The Clerk: I declare Maxime Blanchette-Joncas elected second vice-chair of the committee.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, BQ): Can we reveal the results of a secret vote?

The Clerk: That's not the practice.

Mr. Greg Fergus: It wouldn't be a secret vote.

[*English*]

The Chair: Now we're going to move forward with the adoption of routine motions. I will go through the list. We'll have a bit of business to discuss after routine motions are done. I don't want to say that this will be a short meeting and then it ends up not being one, but it will be a shorter meeting than we're used to.

The Clerk: The members of the committee received by email on February 6 the list of the routine motions adopted by this committee during the previous Parliament. Of course we're not bound by them, especially since the membership has changed a little, so num-

bers might change, but these are an indication of what type of motion this committee usually has.

The chair will be receiving motions.

The Chair: Mr. Green.

Mr. Matthew Green: I have two motions and wanted to make sure that I presented them at the appropriate time. One is on quorum and one is on in camera proceedings. Would it please you, through this committee, that I bring them up at the appropriate time during the course of the routine motions, or would you like me to hold them until after?

The Chair: I'd ask you to hold that one, around in camera.

• (1120)

Mr. Matthew Green: Then you want the quorum motion during the routine proceedings, and then the in camera motion after.

The Chair: That's perfect. Thanks.

Mr. Longfield.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield (Guelph, Lib.): I have routine motions that we have been using, with a section on independent members' clause-by-clause.

I'm wondering whether we could use ours.

The Clerk: Is it very different?

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: This is what we're using in other committees. It was negotiated with all parties in this Parliament.

The Chair: Okay. Can we distribute them, then, and we'll have a look at them.

Maxime.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: I just want to point out to the other members that the Bloc Québécois wasn't on the committee in the previous Parliament. As a result, we most likely need to review some motions regarding in camera meetings and the questioning of witnesses.

We know that some arrangements, some routine motions, have already been established. However, I wanted to raise this issue and inform my fellow members.

[*English*]

The Chair: We're going to go through each motion one by one.

Mr. Longfield, please read them. I will give people a chance to make sure they're onside. Where it's appropriate, Mr. Green can jump in.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

First of all, on analysts:

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

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: I invite the analysts to come to the table.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: We've got some great analysts.

The Chair: Mr. Fergus.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Greg Fergus: Mr. Chair, before we begin, could the clerk introduce us to his fellow analysts so that we can all learn their names? We'll be working with them for the next few months, if not years.

The Clerk: Yes, gladly.

First, I should mention that I won't be with you for very long since I'm replacing your clerk, Angela Crandall. She's on sick leave at the moment, but she should be back on Tuesday, March 10. Her name is on the committee's website.

Since I used to be a clerk for the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, I know Mr. Theckedath and Mr. Léonard very well. I worked with them for almost two years. André Léonard and Dillan Theckedath have been analysts at the Library of Parliament for several years. If I remember correctly, they've been working with the committee for six years.

Is that right?

Mr. Dillan Theckedath (Committee Researcher): Five years.

[*English*]

The Chair: Excellent.

Mr. Longfield, would you like to proceed?

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: I move:

That the Subcommittee on Agenda and Procedure be established and be composed of five (5) members; the Chair, one Member from each Party; and that the subcommittee work in the spirit of collaboration.

(Motion agreed to)

On reduced quorum, I move:

That the Chair be authorized to hold meetings to receive evidence and to have that evidence printed when a quorum is not present, provided that at least four (4) members are present, including one member of the opposition and one member of the government, but when travelling outside the parliamentary precinct, that the meeting begin after fifteen (15) minutes, regardless of members present.

• (1125)

The Chair: We have a motion on the floor.

Mr. Green, you wanted to add some comments here.

Mr. Matthew Green: Thank you very much.

Just to reflect the changing dynamic of the minority government, I would amend the motion to read:

That the Chair be authorized to hold meetings to receive and publish evidence when a quorum is not present, provided that at least four (4) members are present, including two (2) members from the opposition and two (2) members from the government; and that in the case of previously scheduled meetings taking place outside of the Parliamentary Precinct, the Committee members in attendance be required to wait for 15 minutes following the designated start of the meeting before they may proceed to hear witnesses and receive evidence, regardless of whether opposition or government members are present.

The Chair: As I see the difference, you're asking for two members of the opposition and two members of government versus one and one.

Mr. Matthew Green: That's right.

The Chair: Mr. Blois.

Mr. Kody Blois: This motion on reduced quorum was adopted in the agriculture committee. It was brought forward by the NDP member there. I can only speak to my experience on that committee, but we saw it as no problem and accepted it.

The Chair: Are you speaking for the Liberals when you say you have no issue with this current motion?

Mr. Kody Blois: I'm not. I'm speaking on behalf of myself in discussion, and I believe on behalf of the Liberals we are okay with this.

The Chair: Is there any other discussion from the Conservatives or from the Bloc?

Mr. Longfield, we'll need to withdraw your motion, and then we'll put forward Mr. Green's motion.

We're going to make a slight change in the French, just to make it more legible. We'll have the clerk do that.

They both have the same mistake.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Matthew Green: I apologize.

[*English*]

I'm still learning.

(Motion agreed to)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Matthew Green: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll move forward with Mr. Longfield.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: On the questioning of witnesses, I move:

That witnesses be given ten (10) minutes for their opening statement; that, at the discretion of the Chair, during the questioning of witnesses, there be allocated six (6) minutes for the first questioner of each party as follows: Round 1:

Conservative Party

Liberal Party

Bloc Québécois

New Democratic Party;

For the second and subsequent rounds, the order and time for questioning be as follows:

Conservative Party, five (5) minutes

Liberal Party, five (5) minutes

Conservative Party, five (5) minutes

Liberal Party, five (5) minutes

Bloc Québécois, two and a half (2.5) minutes

New Democratic Party, two and a half (2.5) minutes.

(Motion agreed to)

On documents distribution, I move:

That the Clerk of the Committee be authorized to distribute documents to members of the Committee only when the documents are available in both official languages and that witnesses be advised accordingly.

(Motion agreed to)

On working meals, I move:

That the Clerk of the Committee be authorized to make the necessary arrangements to provide working meals for the Committee and its Subcommittees.

(Motion agreed to)

On witnesses' expenses, I move:

That, if requested, reasonable travel, accommodation and living expenses be reimbursed to witnesses not exceeding two (2) representatives per organization; provided that, in exceptional circumstances, payment for more representatives be made at the discretion of the Chair.

(Motion agreed to)

Concerning staff at in camera meetings, I move:

That, unless otherwise ordered, each Committee member be allowed to have one staff member at an in camera meeting and that one additional person from each House officer's office be allowed to be present.

(Motion agreed to)

Concerning in camera meetings and transcripts, I move:

That one copy of the transcript of each in camera meeting be kept in the Committee Clerk's office for consultation by members of the Committee or by their staff.

(Motion agreed to)

Concerning notice of motions, I move:

That a forty-eight (48) hours notice, interpreted as two (2) nights, shall be required for any substantive motion to be considered by the Committee, unless the substantive motion relates directly to the business then under consideration, provided that (1) the notice be filed with the Clerk of the Committee no later than 4:00 p.m. from Monday to Friday; that (2) the motion be distributed to Members in both official languages by the Clerk on the same day the said notice was transmitted if it was received no later than the deadline hour; and that (3) notices received after the deadline hour or on non-business days be deemed to have been received during the next business day and that when the committee is travelling on official business, no substantive motions may be moved

(Motion agreed to)

● (1130)

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: The next motion concerns independent members and clause-by-clause. This is the new motion.

I move:

That, in relation to the Orders of Reference from the House respecting Bills,

(a) the Clerk of the Committee shall, upon the Committee receiving such an Order of Reference, write to each Member who is not a member of a caucus represented on the Committee to invite those Members to file with the Clerk of the Committee, in both official languages, any amendments to the Bill, which is the subject of the said Order, which they would suggest that the Committee consider;

(b) suggested amendments filed, pursuant to paragraph (a), at least 48 hours prior to the start of clause-by-clause consideration of the Bill to which amendments relate shall be deemed to be proposed during the said consideration, provided that the Committee may, by motion, vary this deadline in respect of a given Bill; and

(c) during the clause-by-clause consideration of a Bill, the Chair shall allow a Member who filed suggested amendments, pursuant to paragraph (a), an opportunity to make brief representations in support of them.

The Chair: Mr. Green.

Mr. Matthew Green: While I appreciate the spirit of the motion, I have a question, as a relatively new person. Do we receive bills in public accounts? Through you to the clerks or the analysts, have we ever received bills here?

The Clerk: I don't remember in the past 10 years that there were any.

The Chair: There were just reports, for the most part from the OAG.

Mr. Matthew Green: We can pass it, I guess. It's empty and meaningless. We'll just go for it.

The Chair: Mr. Theckedath.

Mr. Dillan Theckedath: If something were to amend legislation regarding the statutory powers of the Auditor General, which isn't very common, that is the typical legislation that could come here. There could also be something pertaining to the presentation and release of the public accounts within the spectrum of the Receiver General and the office of the comptroller general, in that the Office of the Auditor General provides an audit opinion on them, but for the most part, no.

I just wanted to give context to the committee about that.

Mr. Matthew Green: That's fair.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Mr. Green, let's go now to your additional motion.

Mr. Matthew Green: This is on in camera proceedings. This is just for the benefit of transparency to the public. I move:

That the committee may meet in camera only for the following purposes:

(a) to consider a draft report;

(b) to attend briefings concerning national security;

(c) to consider lists of witnesses;

(d) for any other reason, with the unanimous consent of the committee;

That all votes taken in camera, with the exception of votes regarding the consideration of draft reports, be recorded in the Minutes of Proceedings, including how each member voted when recorded votes are requested;

That any motion to sit in camera is debatable and amendable.

The Chair: Mr. Kelly.

Mr. Pat Kelly (Calgary Rocky Ridge, CPC): In recent history I can't even think of a circumstance under which we would move in camera.

We do meet in camera generally to discuss our work plan, notwithstanding the subcommittee on agenda. It was common practice in the previous Parliament to discuss our work program and a few other issues as a full committee. I would suggest this isn't the kind of committee where this debate about the nature of committee and the nature of in camera meetings would take place. I don't know that we need to deal with this here. The issues behind this motion are contentious at other committees.

I hope this is a committee where we have an expectation that partisan agendas and whatnot, which are a part of what we do here in Ottawa, are not done at this committee. I don't see the need for this motion at this committee. In particular, it excludes the one time this committee, with the agreement of all parties, would go in camera. This isn't a committee where the government side, with its majority, would move to go in camera and force us in camera. That never happened in the last Parliament. It's really not a concern that I have.

• (1135)

The Chair: Mr. Fergus.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Greg Fergus: Mr. Chair, yesterday, at the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics, a similar motion was tabled. However, some of the provisions differed from what Mr. Green is moving.

Since this motion differs from how things were done at another standing committee, can we slow down and take five minutes to read the proposal?

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Green.

Mr. Matthew Green: I came up against some similar concerns in the previous committee where I moved this, and at that point I was happy to table it to give people the opportunity to figure it out. It's either important or it's not. If it's not important, then we could probably put it off until the next meeting for people to be able to digest it. It's just a standard motion I've been bringing.

The Chair: If you're okay with that, then why don't we just table it for now? If you want to bring it forward on Thursday, that will give everyone a chance to look it over.

As for the historical context from the clerk—

The Clerk: We can wait to do that.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I will point out we have a couple of people who have some experience here. Ms. Yip and Mr. Kelly were on this committee before. I sat on this committee back in 2004, so it's been a few years since I've been here. The rest of you are fairly new. It is great to see everyone here.

As I understand—and maybe the analyst will talk about this—in the last Parliament this committee had 70 unanimous reports. That's the spirit of camaraderie around here in the way things work. That's what I hope we can move forward on. There are not a lot of partisan points to be gained here. We're dealing with someone highly respected, the Auditor General. That's a great context to start with this committee.

Mr. Green.

Mr. Matthew Green: I have before me some additional routine motions. I don't know if the other parties have them. The follow-up processes and the departmental action plans have been added, as well as the gifts to be presented to visiting delegations.

This was circulated by the clerk, I believe.

The Chair: We could look at those motions that relate specifically to public accounts.

Do you want to read them?

The Clerk: The first one is on the follow-up process, because it's part of the work being done by—

Mr. Matthew Green: My apologies for the interruption, but wouldn't it make sense for me to read them in as actual motions, and then we can discuss them?

The Chair: Yes. That's what we were doing, but go ahead.

Mr. Matthew Green: I'm just not sure a clerk can read in a motion. Can he?

The Clerk: I can read it; I cannot move it.

Mr. Matthew Green: Perfect. Please continue.

The Clerk: Okay, but I'll need you to move it.

That the Committee Chair and staff be authorized to:

review Government responses to recommendations made by the Committee during the 42nd Parliament;

acknowledge by letter, on the Committee's behalf, receipt of Government responses where they respond clearly and completely to recommendations or request further information or clarification, as required;

monitor the implementation of Government commitments made in response to Committee recommendations, and request further information as required; and

report to the Committee on these activities in a timely fashion.

• (1140)

The Chair: All right. Can I have someone move that?

Mr. Matthew Green: I so move.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Mr. Fergus.

Mr. Greg Fergus: Is it possible to get a written version of this?

The Chair: Absolutely.

The Clerk: You got it on February 6, with my email saying, "Welcome to the committee".

[*Translation*]

Mr. Greg Fergus: Excuse me.

[*English*]

The Chair: Now we go to the last motion.

The Clerk: On departmental action plans:

That all organizations that have been subject to a performance audit or a special examination [report] by the Office of the Auditor General of Canada provide a detailed action plan to address the audit recommendations which have been agreed to - including specific actions, timelines for their completion and responsible individuals - to the Public Accounts Committee and the Office of the Auditor General...within six months of the audit being tabled in the House of Commons; and

- That organizations that are invited to appear before the Public Accounts Committee to discuss the findings of an audit should, when feasible, provide an action plan to the Committee prior to the hearing; and

- That action plans and progress reports received by the Committee be published on the Committee's website.

The Chair: Mr. Steinley.

Mr. Warren Steinley: I was wondering whether, given that it says, “organizations that are invited to appear before the Public Accounts Committee to discuss the finding of an audit should, when feasible, provide an action plan to the Committee”, we should put a date on it, such as a couple of days before, so that we’d have time to review it before they came to committee.

If they present it at the committee, we don’t have much time to read it, but if they could present it a day or two before, maybe we could have it and review it and come forward with better questions.

The Clerk: We can, certainly. It would be an amendment to this.

Traditionally, it has sometimes been tricky. Usually these—I don’t know the figure, but more than half of them—were provided beforehand, but not always with a whole lot of time remaining.

The Chair: Mr. Kelly.

Mr. Pat Kelly: Mr. Steinley raises an excellent point that. In practice, in the previous Parliament, most of the time that is in fact what happened. We would receive a report of the Auditor General; we would then have a study in which, a number of weeks later...

The organization would have received the report and known many of its conclusions before it was even tabled by the Auditor General. It would have plenty of time to get its act together and create an action plan. Typically, there would be a response that we knew ahead of time.

The failure of a department to actually do what you are commenting on and provide us with a timely action plan to address the report would make for a very uncomfortable meeting for any department that came here and failed to do exactly that. That’s why perhaps it should be right in the motion that they do so, but—

Mr. Warren Steinley: I would ask that.

• (1145)

Mr. Pat Kelly: —if a department came in without a plan and without acknowledging a report of the Auditor General, they would get ripped apart by this committee, I would hope.

The Chair: Mr. Blois.

Mr. Kody Blois: I agree with Mr. Kelly’s points. As opposed to perhaps reading it into the motion, we try to make sure that’s a practice that we communicate—whether through the clerk as a committee, or through you, Mr. Chair—to the departments, that if they can send it in advance for us to review, that would be helpful.

I don’t know if it’s required to be read into the motion, which I think is what Mr. Kelly is getting at.

The Chair: Mr. Steinley.

Mr. Warren Steinley: Listening to my colleagues, should we put something like, “in advance they must bring forward...prior to coming to the committee”? I understand that days might not work, but putting strong wording would ensure that people who come before the committee understand that we should have their action plan before they appear.

The Clerk: Are you thinking about a specific time frame, 48 hours, or days, weeks?

Mr. Warren Steinley: I’d be okay with 48 hours, but my colleagues have said that sometimes the precedent has been that they have brought this forward. Deadlines are always good. If it’s in the routine procedures, I think that would be a good thing.

The Chair: Mr. Sorbara.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: What was the standard practice in the prior committee?

The Clerk: It changed a little throughout the years. The motion you have here is the third version of the last Parliament. They adopted the first version of it at the beginning. At first, they changed specifically “departments and agencies” by adding “all organizations”; and they added at the end, “special examinations”, which was not included at the beginning of the previous Parliament.

If you go back to the beginning, the first motion was in March 2009. There has always been a reiteration of this motion, slightly changed, but overall the whole idea was that every time the Auditor General presents reports in the House, automatically the departments, organizations, or whatever, were required to provide an action plan, which the clerk would then put on the website. That’s why our website is different from all the others. It starts with all the action plans from all previous parliaments. They’re all there. If there is an update to the action plan, it’s put there, too.

The job of the auditors at one point is to review those and say, “Oh, this hasn’t been done”, or “this is okay”, or “we are lagging”, or whatever. Then they produce a report to you once or twice a year and say, “So far in the past year we notice that some recommendations were not followed”, or “some action plans are lacking”, or whatever. Then the committee had a follow-up mechanism to make sure that action plans and reports from the Auditor General and from the committee were followed, to track whether departments were following our advice.

The Chair: Mr. Longfield.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: As a new member of the committee, I’d be interested in that website. I haven’t seen that.

The Clerk: It is www.ourcommons.ca/Committees/en/PACP.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: This was a motion adopted by the committee in its prior incarnation.

The Chair: Correct, and what they want to do is make an amendment to add “that the reports be provided 48 hours in advance to the committee”.

Mr. Blois.

Mr. Kody Blois: On the 48 hours, again, I think Mr. Kelly spoke to it. It’s not necessarily needed, but I don’t see any harm in using it.

I can’t speak for the rest of my colleagues, but I’m pretty sure that we’re fine.

The Chair: Mr. Sorbara.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Let me go back to the clerk.

What would the 48 hours' notice do logistically for the reports, and what would the implications of that be?

The Clerk: Basically, it ensures that you would have the action plan at least 48 hours before a meeting with, let's say, the Department of Industry. You have 48 hours to go through it, so you're ready when they appear. When they say something, you can go back and say, "Hey, in your action plan, you are saying that."

• (1150)

The Chair: Mr. Theckedath.

Mr. Dillan Theckedath: To follow up on Michel's point, in the interests of comprehensiveness and to answer your question, it is important to have these at the meeting. Generally, the members of the committee have the action plans, which are a more concrete explanation and "go forward" with regard to the way they are going to address the recommendations of the Auditor General.

In very complex audits that are pan-governmental and that may involve multiple departments, the coordinating efforts required to ensure that everybody is playing from the same rule book and that everybody is going to integrate their responses and actions... Sometimes, depending on when the report is done, there is still a lot of negotiating between the audited entity and the Auditor General. That can happen up until a report is finalized, packaged and tabled in the House. Sometimes those things require more time for certain departments, and in certain cases to provide a proper action plan.

It's a very good thing to have them at the meeting, absolutely, but there may be an occasion when a department may not have been able to be as thorough with regard to preparing an action plan.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: I thank the clerk and the analyst for that answer. I will be voting no on this amendment. I will stick to the motion that we had before.

The 48 hours sounds like a panacea to the world. It's not. I think that, with regard to co-operation and coordination within departments, we need to give them some flexibility. I'm assuming that in the prior incarnation of this committee, members of Parliament in all parties received the reports in the time necessary to review them, whether it was 24 hours in advance or otherwise.

I do not support this amendment.

The Chair: Mr. Kelly.

Mr. Pat Kelly: My apologies, Mr. Chair, for intervening twice on one motion. The point of having the motion changed from an expectation to a requirement is still valid, but in reality I would hope we get them a lot more than 48 hours ahead anyway.

As I said, these audits are tabled. We don't usually get around to studying a particular report until many weeks after it has been tabled. In fact, by the time the Auditor General has even tabled the report, the department already knows what's coming and is already working on these things, and it is under pressure to demonstrate progress.

The panacea is actually that we have a comprehensive, coordinated report well ahead of the meeting—more than 48 hours. Not

even having a requirement in the motion, however, is, I think, the weakness that the mover of the motion has identified.

I would support it for that reason, then; so that nobody could come to a committee and say they didn't have to respond.

The Chair: Mr. Green.

Mr. Matthew Green: Are there occasions when it might be the case that they're presented at the actual meeting?

Mr. Dillan Theckedath: Yes.

Mr. Matthew Green: I couldn't fathom a situation, given the work we're trying to do, in which we would not want to have a report in advance, in order to read prior to asking questions.

I fully support the 48 hours. I think it's in order and quite right to have the ability to review in advance of the meeting a document on which you're going to have a presentation.

The Chair: My understanding from the analyst is that sometimes they provide it on the day; sometimes it's after the fact, depending on the coordination.

Mr. Matthew Green: Yes, totally, so I fully support this.

The Chair: If there is no more discussion, I'm going to call the question on the amendment.

Mr. Fergus.

Mr. Greg Fergus: Forgive me, Mr. Chair. I am new to this committee, and as I like to say, I'm a modest man with much to be modest about. I'm trying to figure this out.

I personally don't like having reports dropped on me on the day. If a report were to come to us that was just dropped on us like that, has it been this committee's tradition to say: "Thank you very much for dropping this report. We understand that for whatever reason you just couldn't get it to us earlier. We'll see you in two days"?

• (1155)

Mr. Dillan Theckedath: Chair, I'll give a bit of context to explain. We've been a bit deficient, perhaps.

The audits are tabled in the House of Commons. The committee agrees to discuss how it will deal with them. Members choose, and we then plan a course of action on which audits will be studied.

Typically, the departments that are to have a hearing here will give an action plan, but the action plan is one thing. There's usually an opening statement as well, and that opening statement almost always addresses each recommendation and how they are going to proceed. The action plans are typically used by the analysts in drafting the report.

The key components, then, are the audit, the testimony at the hearing, and then the action plan. We present it in the draft report along with a recommendation for each OAG recommendation. The committee then gets to debate and discuss it.

The analysts will be taking a look at the action plans a bit more thoroughly. Then the committee adopts the report, it's tabled and the government has 120 days to respond to us. We might give them a longer time, depending on the report.

That is the general sequence of the work.

Then the analysts, as Michel said earlier, follow up. The department says they will fix this bridge by that date. We then examine all the progress reports from that department to make sure that they report that the bridge has been fixed. That's the series of how we work.

The action plan is only one element that the committee will use in its proceedings. The report has already been tabled by the OAG; there will be an opening statement that will be provided, as well as the action plan. All of that comprehensively forms part of the report.

Mr. Greg Fergus: Thank you for that, Dillan.

Just to make sure, you are saying that we frankly, then, don't need this.

Mr. Dillan Theckedath: No, I would not say that, sir. I did not say that.

Mr. Greg Fergus: Of course you wouldn't. Let me rephrase that.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Greg Fergus: No, that's fine.

Ms. Jean Yip (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): I seem to recall that last year, sometimes there were last-minute results provided to the action plan, so I am going to vote no.

The Chair: We are first going to have the vote on the amendment, which is to add the "48 hours".

The Clerk: As I understand it, the amendment will be to strike out the words "when feasible" and add after the words "to the committee" the words "48 hours prior to the hearing".

Mr. Warren Steinley: Yes.

[*Translation*]

The Clerk: In the French version, the words "si possible" would be removed from "d'une vérification remettent si possible un plan d'action au Comité," and the words "48 heures avant la tenue" would be added.

[*English*]

Mr. Warren Steinley: I'd say "at least 48 hours", because we don't want the departments to think that they only have to give 48 hours. They can do it earlier than that, but no later than 48 hours.

Mr. Dillan Theckedath: This would speak further to Mr. Steinley's point. The standard of practice for the Library of Parliament is to provide briefing notes 48 hours in advance as well. This, then, would dovetail nicely with when you would get your information package, if you wanted this change.

The Clerk: Do you want "at least" or "no later than"?

Mr. Warren Steinley: I think "no later than".

The Clerk: The motion will be that we strike from the main motion the words "when feasible" and that we add after "an action plan to the committee" the words "no later than 48 hours".

[*Translation*]

In the French version, the words "si possible" are removed from "d'une vérification remettent si possible." The words "pas plus tard que 48 heures avant la tenue" are added after "un plan d'action au Comité."

[*English*]

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Am I too late to ask a question?

The Chair: No, go ahead.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: With this amendment, what happens if the 48-hour period is past and we are into the 47th hour?

• (1200)

The Clerk: Technically, you can be mad; you can crucify them if you want. There is, however, no—

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: There's no binding...?

The Clerk: —no penalty per se, but it is a pressure.

It is a little like the whole system of action plans. You need to know that ever since they started requiring action plans in 2009, that requirement has not been provided in the Standing Orders of the House. It was a brand new mechanism.

This is the only committee that did it. It was so good that in the last Parliament, two other committees wanted to do the same—specifically the environment committee did—for their report.

The idea might spread; the action plans may become something more regular, especially because since 2009 the government has accepted this requirement, even though they were not bound. It is a kind of tradition to do it.

The Chair: Mr. Theckedath.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Dillan Theckedath: I want to add something.

I think that it's possible to hold productive meetings and discussions with witnesses on the key aspects of an issue even if we haven't received their action plans. That's only one part of the picture.

Mr. Greg Fergus: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: We're going to vote on the amendment now.

(Amendment agreed to)

(Motion as amended agreed to [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

Thank you very much.

Is there anything else for routine motions?

Yes, Mr. Green.

Mr. Matthew Green: I understand from my predecessor that from time to time there are visiting delegations. The last recommendation here is put forward:

That the Clerk of the Committee be authorized to purchase an appropriate gift to be presented to visiting delegations, and that the Chair report it to the Committee.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Thank you very much for the routine motions.

We're not going to do a whole lot of business today. What we want to do, though, is provide a calendar of what we could possibly do at our next meeting, on Thursday.

There are a number of things I think would be helpful to the committee, as I'm told by the analysts and the clerk, which would include some briefings from the Auditor General. There are a couple of different organizations involved. We have some past chairs who would like to come in, including Mr. Christopherson, Mr. Sorenson and Mr. Murphy.

Would it be okay to schedule those? You'll get a calendar that we'll talk about on Thursday. We'll make sure everyone agrees.

I would like permission to invite the Auditor General in on Thursday to give us a briefing for an hour and a half. Then we'll set aside another half hour of committee business on what can we look after over the next couple of weeks. I'm thinking mostly until the end of March, because we have some break weeks and our schedule is rather goofy.

If that's okay, we'll move forward. When the calendar is done, I'll have the staff distribute it to all the members. You can bring the calendar with you and you'll have a chance to see what we're trying to move forward on in terms of getting people up to speed with some background and some briefings.

Mr. Fergus.

Mr. Greg Fergus: I think that's a wonderful idea, Mr. Chair. Thank you very much for it.

[*Translation*]

I just want to know whether we'll come back to the issue regarding the third vice-chair when we discuss committee business.

[*English*]

The Chair: Yes. Absolutely.

We can discuss this on Thursday, but we're trying to get a few people in here to give us the lay of the land in public accounts. Then we will continue to upgrade this agenda as we move forward.

We will, then, work on getting the Auditor General in on Thursday for our meeting, probably for an hour and a half. Then we'll also have half an hour to discuss the future business agenda. There are a number of things we need to do.

I just want to mention that there is an annual auditor generals conference every year around the country. Typically, that's about

the only travel this committee does, and it's very beneficial. There are provincial members as well. It is from August 16 to 18.

I want to have a motion right now to look at going to the liaison committee to get funds for our committee to travel to it. Once again, it's a great experience—it's a learning experience—and I know that previous committees have done this. This year it's from August 16 to 18 in Victoria, B.C.

I'm going to ask the analysts and the clerk to come up with a budget for us that we can send over to liaison committee. Is that okay?

• (1205)

Mr. Dillan Theckedath: Mr. Chair and members, we have distributed a document.

[*Translation*]

Twice a year, the analysts prepare an analysis of all the responses received from the departments that have met with us. In the previous Parliament, we made 346 recommendations in 70 reports.

[*English*]

The vast majority of responses to the committee's recommendations are answered adequately, but that's not always the case. Twice a year, we prepare a document for the committee's review that highlights problematic responses—responses that have not been adequate, in our opinion—to the committee's recommendations. A document has been circulated. It's quite a bit; it's 13 pages.

To give the departments the benefit of the doubt, though, I believe that in some cases there may have been confusion with regard to when Parliament dissolves and the committees don't exist. Some of those departments may not have known to whom to send their responses and were waiting for Parliament to reconvene. I'd like to give everyone the benefit of the doubt if I can on that, but there are quite a few.

Then, if it pleases the Chair, I suggest that members review this document, and we will have a meeting on March 10 in which we will discuss as a committee—typically in camera—how to proceed. Each panel shows the report in question, which can be clicked on and accessed in terms of the recommendation that was not addressed properly, the issue surrounding that recommendation and a suggested action.

Again, to clarify, these are the committee's recommendations, not the Auditor General's recommendations. There are a number now, unfortunately, but typically when we do our six-month review there are only about three or four.

One example is that the committee might write a letter to inquire about how a department is working to improve a completion rate for one of its planned implementations to address a recommendation.

There are about 13 pages, which is quite a few, and if the committee has a chance to review them, on March 10 we will discuss them and the committee will authorize the analysts to support the Chair in preparing correspondence to the departments, or in some cases inviting them back, which is the harsher of the options. As Mr. Kelly said, sometimes we have to let them know that the committee means business. It is important to convey that recommendations must be addressed adequately as part of good governance.

The Chair: Mr. Kelly.

Mr. Pat Kelly: Sorry, but I hope I won't end up causing your promise about a shorter meeting to.... I understood your reluctance to make it. If we have a 90-minute briefing from the Auditor General on Thursday and just 30 minutes for a work plan, that sounds like a lot of time, but it isn't, really.

If you don't mind I'll get into something now that I thought perhaps could go then, and that's outstanding committee business that the election more or less upset. There has been, for example, no answer to the committee, no response from the Department of Finance, to the letter that was sent by this committee over the Auditor General's budget.

• (1210)

Mr. Dillan Theckedath: That's right.

Mr. Pat Kelly: I would ask you to inquire and find out if they're just waiting for the committee to re-establish itself to send a response. I'd like to see that happen immediately. It goes right to the heart of our business here. We're going to immediately be asked to set our calendar over which reports to study, and the issue of having reports to study is tied up in the budget. I'll leave it at that.

Mr. Dillan Theckedath: In the last Parliament, one of the 70 reports that was presented in the House by the committee was a legacy document called "Do Service Well". I believe it has been circulated to the members. It has a number of recommendations and a summary at the end. One or two of the recommendations were around the issue of funding for the operations of the Office of the Auditor General.

Just to present the committee with the latest information, I had a chance to speak with senior officials in the OAG yesterday. For budget 2019, the Auditor General's office had requested additional funding of \$10.8 million to address various shortcomings. These included operational requirements, as well as some critical IT infrastructure elements that speak to IT security, operational efficiency, etc. After some back and forth, some intervention on behalf of this committee and the back and forth with Finance, that request for budget 2019 for the additional \$10.8 million was ultimately turned down.

What I understand is that on January 20, the OAG made a subsequent submission for budget 2020, in which they are asking for these additional funds again, to address some of these issues. It should also be pointed out that there is an additional request now to move up its work on the planned audit of infrastructure programs and the Infrastructure Bank. That is going to be moved up by this Parliament. The Auditor General's office will have to contend with that as well.

That's where we stand right now. As of January 20, the OAG has submitted its request for budget 2020, and they are waiting to hear back from Finance on how that's going to go.

On a related note, one of the recommendations of the past committee was that the government writ large consider alternate funding arrangements to allow for better long-term planning, stable long-term planning, that was outside of the parliamentary process, still involving the estimates and implementation acts but with more predictable and stable funding. Though nothing has been promised, the OAG has told me that those discussions have begun with the Privy Council Office.

That's where we stand right now, Mr. Kelly.

Mr. Pat Kelly: That's fantastic.

Perhaps, Dillan, you could maybe give us a little bit more on.... You mentioned the legacy document, and I'm glad you did. For any member who hasn't looked at it yet, if you're new to the committee, it spells out pretty clearly a lot of information about how we try to do things here.

There's the other outstanding issue. On the issue of funding, I'm glad the Privy Council is talking about perhaps moving in that direction. What about the Auditor General's appointment? We have an interim Auditor General right now who is on his second temporary appointment. I didn't even think it was permitted under the legislation to reappoint on an interim basis. Do we know what's going to happen that way and what the process is? Can the clerk comment on that?

Mr. Dillan Theckedath: I believe Michel might be able to comment on that.

The Clerk: Yes. It is almost one year now since Mr. Ricard was appointed as interim Auditor General. He started in March of last year. Last January, the government started the process of looking for a new Auditor General. Technically, the appointment of Mr. Ricard is ending at the end of March. My guess is that either he's going to be renewed for a short period because they're not done with the process that was started in January, or we should receive soon, in March, a certificate of nomination for the Auditor General, be it Mr. Ricard or someone else who was chosen through the process. I understand that PCO is managing the whole process right now.

When we get that certificate of nomination, it is going to be sent first to the committee. We will have a small number of days to call him, have him testify on his credentials and then make a report, with recommendations. It's not like it is in the American Senate. We don't reject nominations like that.

• (1215)

Mr. Pat Kelly: This really goes right to the heart of the issue of the relationship of how the office is funded and how the government appoints the individual. We had Mr. Ferguson, before his untimely death, who raised the issue of funding, both in terms of the inadequacy of his budget to actually do his job but also in the way that the Auditor General is in the uncomfortable position of having to be the person who goes hat in hand to a minister who controls his budget.

We really should, from a governance point of view, decouple a lot of these things. I don't know if that's perhaps beyond this committee, but we made some recommendations on that, which are contained in the legacy document.

The Chair: Mr. Longfield.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: I think Mr. Kelly is bringing up points that were also on my mind in terms of what's happened since the last Parliament. I'm hoping that when we get our briefing we'll be able to get that. If it isn't in the presentation we'll be able to ask some questions. A heads-up that those are the things we're looking for so when the Auditor General's staff prepare him to come here we'll be asking those kinds of questions.

The Chair: Those are all great points. I think one of the things we wanted to do is bring people in to help us get up to speed. As

you look at the agenda outline, if there's anything we're missing that we need to circle back on, let's make sure we do that. We'll make sure we have the AG here on Thursday. We'll do a quick meeting on committee business to make sure we're catching all the things we need to that have been talked about here. Then we can go from there.

Are there any other questions?

That was a great first meeting, everyone. I look forward to working with everybody.

The meeting is adjourned.

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