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Special Committee on Canada-China Relations

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Monday, January 20, 2020



Chair

Hon. Geoff Regan

Special Committee on Canada-China Relations

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• (1300)

[*English*]

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Christine Holke): Honourable members of the committee, I see a quorum.

I must inform members that the clerk of the committee can only receive motions for the election of the chair. The clerk cannot receive other types of motions, cannot entertain points of order nor participate in debate.

[*Translation*]

We can now proceed to the election of the Chair.

Pursuant to the motion adopted by the House of Commons on December 10, 2019, the Chair must be a member of the government party.

I am ready to receive motions for the Chair.

Ms. Zann, you have the floor.

Ms. Lenore Zann (Cumberland—Colchester, Lib.): Thank you.

[*English*]

I would like to suggest Geoff Regan.

[*Translation*]

The Clerk: It has been moved by Ms. Zann that Mr. Regan be elected as Chair of the committee.

Are there any further motions?

Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt the motion?

(The motion was adopted.)

The Clerk: I declare the motion carried and Mr. Regan duly elected Chair of the committee.

Some hon. members: Hear! Hear!

The Clerk: I invite Mr. Regan to take the chair.

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. Geoff Regan (Halifax West, Lib.)): Thank you very much, colleagues. I'm not accustomed to acclamations.

Mr. Doherty, just before I go to you, if the committee's in agreement, I invite the clerk to proceed with the election of the vice-chairs.

The Clerk: Pursuant to the motion adopted by the House of Commons on December 10, 2019, the committee has one vice-chair

from the official opposition, one vice-chair from the Bloc Québécois and one vice-chair from the New Democratic Party.

I am now prepared to receive motions for the vice-chair from the official opposition.

Madame Alleslev.

Ms. Leona Alleslev (Aurora—Oak Ridges—Richmond Hill, CPC): I would like to propose Chris Warkentin.

The Clerk: It has been moved by Ms. Alleslev that Mr. Warkentin be elected as vice-chair from the official opposition.

Are there any further motions?

Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt the motion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Clerk: I declare the motion carried and Mr. Warkentin duly elected vice-chair from the official opposition.

• (1305)

[*Translation*]

I am now prepared to receive motions for the Vice-Chair from the Bloc québécois.

Mr. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.): I am very pleased to move that Mr. Bergeron be elected Vice-Chair of the committee.

The Clerk: It has been moved by Mr. Oliphant that Mr. Bergeron be elected as Vice-Chair from the Bloc québécois.

Are there any further motions?

(The motion was adopted.)

The Clerk: I declare the motion carried and that Mr. Bergeron is duly elected Vice-Chair from the Bloc québécois.

[*English*]

I am now prepared to receive motions for the vice-chair from the New Democratic Party.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): I am so pleased to be here today, and I move that the vice-chair be held by Jack Harris.

The Clerk: It has been moved by Ms. Blaney that Mr. Harris be elected as vice-chair from the New Democratic Party.

Are there any other motions?

Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt the motion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Clerk: I declare the motion carried and Mr. Harris duly elected vice-chair from the New Democratic Party.

The Chair: Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and congratulations. I'll take this opportunity to say how much I look forward to working with colleagues across the way and certainly on this side of the table.

I understand, Mr. Chair, that there's been discussion among the parties to introduce routine motions. I want to take the opportunity to do that now.

The Chair: You can go ahead and do that.

Mr. Doherty.

Mr. Todd Doherty (Cariboo—Prince George, CPC): Before we do that, I would just say that there is considerable interest in this by Canadians from coast to coast to coast. Indeed, we have a full gaggle of media outside the doors.

I move that for the rest of this meeting, prior to the routine motions, we invite our friends in from the media and televise the rest of this meeting.

The Chair: Ms. Alleslev.

Ms. Leona Alleslev: I would like to move a motion as well, but I'm not clear. Do you want me to move that motion now?

The Chair: We have a motion before the committee. We don't debate the question of whether to televise or not. We simply vote on that.

Then we'll go on from there. I did recognize Mr. Fragiskatos first.

Mr. Robert Oliphant: Can I ask a question of the chair with respect to this?

My understanding was that there had been discussion among the whips of the parties and there was agreement just in the last hour or so that the meeting would be televised, that we would have the House of Commons television cameras. If the crew is available to do that camera work, that is usually the preference. I understand that if the House of Commons facilities for television are available, that is what is then allowed, and that is the standard procedure of committees.

I might want the chair to check that with the clerk, because I don't think it is in order to have a motion with respect to bringing in outside cameras when House of Commons cameras are available.

The Chair: I'm advised, as previously noted, that there is interest from a network to carry this. The House is ready to televise the committee in the usual way if there is agreement to do that, but Mr. Doherty's motion is properly before the committee.

As there was no chair, the clerk made arrangements to have that ready if that was the will of the committee.

Mr. Doherty, is that acceptable to you in relation to what you are seeking here today?

• (1310)

Mr. Todd Doherty: Yes, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Is it agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: We'll have to pause for a few seconds as preparations to televise are made.

• (1310)

(Pause)

• (1310)

The Chair: We're back in session.

We now need to deal with routine motions.

Mr. Fragiskatos, you have some that have been distributed, as I understand it.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: That's correct, Mr. Chair.

I'll just go through them one by one, if I may.

The first of these routine motions is as follows. It pertains to analysts:

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

(Motion agreed to)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: The next motion relates to the subcommittee on agenda and procedure:

That the Subcommittee on Agenda and Procedure be established and be composed of six (6) members: the Chair, three Vice-Chairs, the Parliamentary Secretary; and one other Member from the Government.

The Chair: Mr. Albas.

Mr. Dan Albas (Central Okanagan—Similkameen—Nicola, CPC): Thanks, Mr. Chair. Congratulations on your election. It's a pleasure to serve with everyone here.

I certainly believe that we need to have routine motions, but I would like to propose a small change. I propose the following amendment that, after the word "vice-chairs", the comma, the words "parliamentary secretary" and the semicolon be removed completely. If you find the motion in order, I would be happy to give a rationale for it.

I've also been told that one would have to change the number of committee members on the subcommittee, so it would change from "six" to "five".

• (1315)

The Chair: The motion to amend the motion is in order.

Is there debate on the motion to amend?

Mr. Dan Albas: Yes. I think that for the government, having both the chair and a member from the government side—they could choose a parliamentary secretary if they liked—would probably be sufficient, in order to have a majority vote when making a recommendation from the subcommittee back to this committee. With six members, you could end up with a split. This would still allow the government to have its member, and it could decide whether it's a parliamentary secretary or not. I don't believe there should be a six-member subcommittee. The amendment should remove the parliamentary secretary.

Mr. Robert Oliphant: I don't think we will argue this too strenuously, but we want to point out the arithmetic of this subcommittee. The intention is to mirror, as closely as we can, the makeup of the special committee in the subcommittee, which is already somewhat less proportionate on the government side than in the House of Commons, which the people of Canada elected.

When you look at the House of Commons as elected by the people of Canada, obviously there is a minority government. Obviously we understand that we want to keep that same balance on this committee, which all our committees, as they're struck, will maintain. However, we think the number six is actually quite fair and quite good.

The reality of the arithmetic is that when that committee meets there will be three members of the opposition and two members on the government side. It's three to two, with the chair obviously on the committee but not voting unless there is a tie. If there is a tie, that allows all members of the opposition to be engaged in this as opposed to just the official opposition. The other opposition parties are then able to express their desires as well and be equally accorded a position on this subcommittee.

We think it's very fair to ensure that we have representatives of all the parties with the weight that is important. We would argue that having two members of the government, three members of the opposition and a chair, who will not be able to sway the vote if all the opposition are on one side and the government is on the other side even if... A tie is not going to happen unless one of the opposition parties supports another party, so we think it's a fair representation of the results of the last election, as indicated by the House of Commons. We think it affords an opportunity for the smaller parties to be fairly represented on the subcommittee.

Mr. Dan Albas: I appreciate the member's remarks, but I want to say two things. First, let's put in perspective that the subcommittee really is there for scheduling, and any kind of decision from that body would have to be ratified by ours. At the end of the day, the committee members on this full committee are always going to get our way.

However, I would also point out, from speaking to people who have served in previous minority parliaments, that the practice for a subcommittee is to have five members, not six. We don't need to reinvent the wheel. We are going to be productive on this committee. We just don't believe that a parliamentary secretary needs to be named specifically to it. A parliamentary secretary can be named as a member of the government or someone else can be. It's the pleasure of the government to decide who will serve on that subcommittee.

I would just ask all members who believe that it should be five to vote in favour of that resolution and we can get on to the rest of the work of the committee.

The Chair: Seeing no one else wishing to speak, I'll call on Mr. Oliphant.

Mr. Robert Oliphant: I think a very important question is whether the official opposition will make a clear declaration that their intention is to work by consensus in this subcommittee as opposed to by voting. If we had an understanding that the opposition was in favour of all work at the subcommittee being done by consensus and reports made to the full committee being done by a consensus decision, then we would have no difficulty whatsoever with having five.

I have not heard from the opposition that they are actually willing to work it by consensus. If I could get a statement clearly recorded that this would be our working mandate for the subcommittee, then we would not have a problem with that.

• (1320)

The Chair: Mr. Albas.

Mr. Dan Albas: I don't mean to belabour this to committee, but, again, whatever the subcommittee decides must be ratified by this body. Whether there is consensus or not, if there's not a consensus at this committee, the full committee, it will not proceed.

I also would remind the member that if consensus could be had with two Liberals in addition to the chair, then you could get consensus with one. Just make sure that person is eloquent and reasonable.

The Chair: Mr. Oliphant.

Mr. Robert Oliphant: What I have asked for is a clear statement from the official opposition that they are prepared to work in consensus at the subcommittee. If I have a clear statement on the record that they are prepared to work in consensus, we will support the amendment.

The Chair: Mr. Albas.

Mr. Dan Albas: All I can say, without knowing the members, is that I'm not going to tie members' hands, whether they be official opposition members, other opposition members or government members. Democracy is how we get things done when people don't agree. I would just leave it to those members. I have faith that they'll be able to do it, especially if there are five.

[Translation]

The Chair: We will hear from Mr. Bergeron, then Mr. Oliphant.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron (Montarville, BQ): Mr. Chair, in response to our colleague Mr. Oliphant's request, I would say that each and every member of the committee can rest assured that, for our part, we will work in full cooperation with all political parties.

I do not believe, and I stress, I do not believe this committee is the appropriate place for partisan wrangling. I think the purpose of this committee is to explore avenues for improved relations between China and Canada. I think it's imperative that we work in the spirit of collaboration.

If that is what our colleague is asking, I assure him of my full cooperation.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Oliphant.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Robert Oliphant: Thank you very much.

We feel exactly the same way. We want a spirit of cooperation in all our business here. I feel we need to have something that is appropriate for all parties, in committee and at the subcommittee as well. I think cooperation is important, but I also think all parties need to have the opportunity to demonstrate the same commitment of which you spoke.

[*English*]

The Chair: Seeing no other speakers, we have before us the motion to amend.

I think the members are familiar with what the motion to amend says, so I will call for the vote.

Those in favour of the motion to amend, please raise your hands.

Those who are opposed to the motion, please raise your hands.

I didn't see the hand of Mr. Bergeron.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: I think I was talking when you called the vote. I would point out that, in the spirit of what Mr. Oliphant was explaining, I personally could live with either one or the other, as long as things are done in the spirit of collaboration. However, I see that I have the deciding vote. I will be siding with my colleagues in the opposition.

• (1325)

[*English*]

The Chair: The motion to amend is carried, so the motion is now amended.

(Amendment agreed to)

The Chair: Now we're back to the main motion as amended. Is there any further discussion on the motion as amended?

Mr. Oliphant.

Mr. Robert Oliphant: I would like to further amend the motion. I propose that the new period be changed to a comma, and it would say "and that the subcommittee on agenda and procedure will work in a process of consensus decision-making."

The Chair: Madam Alleslev.

Ms. Leona Alleslev: Can you give us an idea of what you mean by consensus?

The Chair: Mr. Oliphant.

Mr. Robert Oliphant: Consensus means that we will work as a committee in the best interests of the tasks at hand, the five mandates that have been given to this committee; that we will work to present a unified voice to this body, which will then vote on and agree or not agree; and that we will strike very early in this process a collaborative spirit and work by consensus to attempt to find our meeting schedules, meeting times, witness lists, and whether we choose to have or not to have a report or interim report. If we can work that out by consensus in the subcommittee, I think for the work of this committee, even if it comes to a vote that is overturned in this committee, that will establish a routine way of working. If we can get those five people to agree on something, we will do better work and Canadians will be better served.

The Chair: Ms. Alleslev.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Leona Alleslev: I would like to add a further point to the concerns of our opposition colleague.

We always work in the spirit of collaboration to have a unanimous voice and be respectful of all our fellow members. However, it would be inappropriate to pass a procedural and routine motion amendment that would keep us from presenting both sides of the coin when we come back to committee. It would not serve us well and is not within the mandate of a subcommittee or a committee.

We will discuss and try to reach a consensus, but if we cannot, for example, if the issue is too important or the situation too critical, we would like the opportunity to restate our arguments and present both sides of the argument before the entire committee.

Therefore, I cannot support the amendment to write this down in black and white in our procedures. Nevertheless, we will aim for consensus.

[*English*]

The Chair: Ms. Blaney.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair. Congratulations on being appointed to this very important role on this very important committee.

I appreciate the discussion that's happening right now. I understand we're in a minority government. I've never done this before, so I have a lot to learn and I'm excited to do so. I believe that at the end of the day, Canadians are sending us to this place to work together collaboratively to get things done, and I have a great appreciation for that. What I'm curious about, though, is whether this is the usual practice. I have never seen this brought forward in routine proceedings before. This is only my second term. Is this something that's happened before? Is this something that is more reflective of a minority government? I need a little more information before I make my decision.

The Chair: Mr. Albas.

Mr. Dan Albas: Thank you.

I also agree that Canadians want parliamentarians to work together, particularly on a committee that's supposed to be rather germane in terms of scheduling.

I personally don't believe we need to have it. In fact, the one committee that does operate by consensus in this place is the Standing Joint Committee for the Scrutiny of Regulations, which is for both the House of Commons and the Senate. Members work by consensus.

The problem is that if there is no consensus—and I've been in some of those meetings—you will go around for an hour on a simple “Should it be a comma or should it be a semicolon?” if there cannot be a reasonable way to decide how to move forward, and that's by democratic vote.

I suggest that if the Liberals are truly concerned about consensus-building at the subcommittee, they send someone who is reasonable, and who not only has reasonable decorum but also brings forward proposals that people can get around. That's how you get people to agree, by listening and by doing that. You don't need to put that on a piece of paper; you just need to do it.

I would suggest to this group that we carry on. Let's let the subcommittee form. Let's see how they do. If someone is not behaving, and not getting things done or being a block, you either have a vote or you come back to this committee and say, “We're not working well. Send us some new members”, and we'll do that.

• (1330)

The Chair: Mr. Fragiskatos.

[Translation]

Mr. Bergeron will then have the floor.

[English]

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: To Ms. Blaney's point and to what Mr. Albas just said, there is a precedent for what Mr. Oliphant has put forward, which I think is very reasonable. It's not as if it's seeking to establish a precedent for how subcommittees work.

A subcommittee of the foreign affairs committee is the international human rights committee, which has operated throughout its history by consensus, exactly along the lines Mr. Oliphant has described. I don't see why we can't take a path towards consensus in the way we've heard here. I think this is an opportunity to work collaboratively, in a way that Canadians would expect.

I go back and say that this exists. We have a subcommittee. I know Mr. Albas just talked about a committee of Parliament, but it's more apropos, to my mind, that we look at what precedent could exist on a subcommittee level in this Parliament, and that's the subcommittee on international human rights, which, as I say, has operated by consensus. I don't believe that principle has been broken for at least 10 years. My memory could be wrong on this, but it operates on consensus very well, and I think we could do the same here.

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Bergeron, you have the floor.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Mr. Chair, I would like to voice my concern.

This is the second routine motion and we are already struggling to agree. If we are serious about working collaboratively and in the spirit of consensus, we're going to have to make it easier to find ways to work together. Personally, I did not really have a problem

with the word “consensus” because consensus is not unanimity. For me, there is a very clear distinction between “consensus” and “unanimity”. When Mr. Oliphant said “consensus”, I took it to mean “in a spirit of collaboration”.

But I feel like we're in a situation where we are going to have to throw the baby out with the bathwater. I don't like that at all. I don't know if, in a spirit of collaboration, Mr. Oliphant would be open to the idea of replacing the word “consensus” with “spirit of collaboration”, so as not to lose everything in the end.

The Chair: We will now debate the subamendment Mr. Bergeron suggested.

Mr. Oliphant, you have the floor.

Mr. Robert Oliphant: I agree.

[English]

I think it is absolutely fine to have that there.

It is clear to me that there's a difference between unanimity and consensus. Consensus generally means I may not agree with it but I can live with it. That is what has been my history. My history comes from the United Church of Canada. We work on a consensus model and we've done that for the last 35 years. It means that we work towards something, we reach an opinion, we share an opinion and we hear each other. We may not agree with it but we can live with it, and we present it as such to the broader committee.

As to Ms. Blaney's comments, I worked on subcommittees for public safety, national security and citizenship and immigration. I was chair of those committees, and we did not take votes. We worked until we could reach an agreement, and I think that is something that is very good to do. However, I can also live with the sense of “in a spirit of collaboration”. That is also fine with me.

I would be supporting Mr. Bergeron's subamendment to change that from “consensus” to “in a spirit of collaboration”.

• (1335)

The Chair: Is there further debate on this subamendment question?

Ms. Leona Alleslev: I just want clarity on the wording.

Is it “in the spirit of collaboration”?

The Chair: What Mr. Bergeron proposed was to remove the words “consensus decision-making”. It would say, “the subcommittee will work in a spirit of collaboration”. That's the key change.

Mr. Albas.

Mr. Dan Albas: I would support that.

I would imagine anyone we send as a vice-chair or as a designate from the government would be looking to work with the others on our planning. I really don't think the juice is worth the squeeze here but I appreciate that my colleague has improved Mr. Oliphant's original intent.

I will be supporting the amendment.

The Chair: Is there further debate on the proposed subamendment?

(Subamendment agreed to)

The Chair: In the spirit of collaboration, the subamendment was passed unanimously.

Now we are now back to the main motion.

Is there any further debate on the main motion as amended?

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

The Chair: The motion is unanimously carried. We're off to a great start.

Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Mr. Chair, this routine motion relates to reduced quorum:

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.

The Chair: Is there any discussion of this motion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: On the questioning of witnesses:

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

[followed by the] Liberal Party

[followed by the] Bloc Québécois

[followed by the] New Democratic Party

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

Conservative Party, five (and that thereafter 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.

The Chair: Mr. Doherty.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Mr. Chair, I have a question regarding the number of witnesses in a meeting.

I know in other committees when we have been jammed up with witnesses and the availability of witnesses, it has not been preferred that we reduce the amount of time to seven minutes. Do we extend

the meeting, given that we may have a number of witnesses per meeting and that may jam up the entire meeting?

Do we want to deal with the number of witnesses per meeting that we'll be calling?

• (1340)

The Chair: That's a question you're asking the whole committee and that could conceivably be a separate motion or matter for the subcommittee.

Mr. Albas.

Mr. Dan Albas: Mr. Chair, obviously it's a new Parliament, so we should start with this. If there begins to be a big issue, then we can always move a motion at some later point to amend our routine proceedings, but I'm satisfied that we can try it out, and if it serves the committee well, then we'll go with that.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: All right.

Mr. Bergeron, we are listening.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: As one would say in the computer field, this is the default.

As we have just mentioned, we may find ourselves in situations where we have a little less time. There could also be other situations. For example, when the Prime Minister appears, I would be very uncomfortable limiting his time to 10 minutes if he wishes to take more.

How are we going to handle this between us? We should discuss it now to avoid a deadlock in case the situation requires a change in this basic rule.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Oliphant.

Mr. Robert Oliphant: My understanding is that, generally, on parliamentary committees if there is unanimous consent to move away from routine proceedings, it is done on a meeting-by-meeting, case-by-case situation. The chair would test whether or not the committee.... If there are two panels in the same meeting, instead of two 10-minute periods, the chair and the clerk may offer advice to the committee that they take seven minutes or seven and a half minutes. If there is only one person that the committee wants to hear from, they may suggest to the committee that they want 15 minutes.

I have never experienced that as a problem in committees. Generally it's at the discretion of the chair and the clerk and generally there is just nodding, or nodding off, of the committee members as they make that decision. I have never seen that as difficult.

In the routine motions, we set the rounds. We're attempting in this motion to say that the government party takes 33% of the time. The Conservative Party, the official opposition, gets 33% of the time, and the NDP and the Bloc each get 17% of the time.

The government is showing generosity in allowing more time for the opposition than for the government side and that is the routine proceeding. When we get into meeting by meeting, case by case, then we trust the chair and the clerk to advise our committee and we will agree or not agree, but that is at the discretion of the chair.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Bergeron, you have the floor.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: I feel I must go back.

I understand completely what Mr. Oliphant is saying, but I also recall situations where government parties were less cooperative when it came time, say, to question the Prime Minister.

I am of the opinion that 10 minutes for a Prime Minister might not be enough. I would suggest that, for the opposition parties, the time proposed here to question the Prime Minister may not be sufficient either. I would not want us to find ourselves in a situation where, having tabled a request to increase the speaking time, we would be denied by the government.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I hope we can get back to that word “consensus” here on the issue, but I think that it would be wise perhaps to send this matter to the subcommittee to examine. When it comes to witness time and this sort of thing, that's not unimportant. It's very important, but it's a matter specifically for the subcommittee to work out. At least, that's been my experience. Those matters are usually brought to the subcommittee's attention.

The Chair: Mr. Oliphant.

Mr. Robert Oliphant: I was going to say the same thing. In my experience on committees we use this as our standard, as our base, and then as it needs to change, we need to change. I think that if the subcommittee is working well... Often, this won't even go to the subcommittee. The chair and the clerk will advise us and we'll make a very quick decision at the beginning of a meeting.

We're expecting to have a significant number of witnesses. We'll have other meetings with lengthy briefings. We're going to have lots of work to do, so I would like to take this as a start. If the subcommittee on agenda is looking at various meetings they may recommend to the whole committee that we make specific changes for meetings, but I also think the chair's job is to manage our time to make it most effective.

(Motion agreed to)

• (1345)

The Chair: Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: On documents distribution:

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 the witnesses be advised accordingly.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: On working meals, so that we don't starve:

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)

The Chair: Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: On witnesses' expenses:

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.

The Chair: Mr. Albas.

Mr. Dan Albas: Just on this point, Mr. Chair, I would hope, though, simply because the work of this committee could have a very worldwide footprint, that we would try to use Skype and some of the technology that taxpayers have availed us of.

The Chair: Video conferencing, etc. Sure. Thank you very much.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: On staff at in camera meetings:

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)

The Chair: Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: On in camera meeting transcripts:

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)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Finally, on notice of motions:

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 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.

The Chair: Mr. Albas.

Mr. Dan Albas: As a British Columbian I am always keenly aware of Pacific Standard Time versus Eastern Standard Time. I'm assuming, just so that we have clarity, that the four o'clock cut-off is Eastern Standard Time.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Yes, that's my understanding, unless there's a different view on that.

Mr. Dan Albas: Perhaps, if the Chair wills it, it can just be done as a friendly amendment. I would love it to be Pacific Standard Time—

Some hon members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: That's fine. We'll consider it eastern time, the time here in Ottawa.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: It's a good compromise.

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

The Chair: Mr. Fragiskatos, that concludes your motions.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, or in Greek, *efcharistó poly*.

Mr. Doherty.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Mr. Chair, I have a motion I'd like to move forward with, "That all meetings other than those deemed in camera be televised."

The Chair: I'm told that, with your agreement, your motion might be advised to say "if possible", because only two meetings at a time can be televised. We can also do webcasting, so regardless of whether or not we could televise a meeting, we could certainly do a webcast.

What I'm proposing to you is that the motion read, "All meetings other than those deemed in camera be televised or webcast, when possible."

• (1350)

Mr. Todd Doherty: Yes, "or webcast" because we can have both.

The Chair: So that it says, "televised or webcast, when possible", right? My understanding is that, unless you've got a major problem with the Internet, it's always possible to webcast, but sometimes it's not possible to televise.

Madam Alleslev.

Ms. Leona Alleslev: Let's clarify that. Is it an either-or?

I don't know. Maybe we want it always webcast and always televised when possible.

The Chair: It should be one or the other, I'm told, in terms of the way the place works, and therefore the priority....

If you'll permit me, I think what you want to say is, "All meetings, other than those deemed in camera, will be televised or, if that is not possible, then webcast." Does that work?

Mr. Todd Doherty: Correct.

The Chair: Does that work for you?

Ms. Leona Alleslev: Yes.

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

The Chair: Does that conclude our routine motions? I think so.

Ms. Alleslev.

Ms. Leona Alleslev: If possible, Mr. Chair, I would like to put forward a motion that everyone should have received in advance, which states:

That the committee invite the Ambassador of Canada to the People's Republic of China, Mr. Dominic Barton to appear in person before the committee for a two-hour televised meeting on Monday, January 27th, 2020. That Mr. Barton be given 20 minutes to update the committee on the state of relations between Canada and the People's Republic of China and that the remaining time be allotted for questions and comments from Members of the committee.

The Chair: I'm going to ask that, in the future, members make sure to submit any notices of motion to the clerk. I understand this

was not submitted to the clerk, but I think members may be agreeable nevertheless to having this.

Mr. Oliphant.

Mr. Robert Oliphant: Ms. Alleslev, would you like to explain the motion or I can—

Ms. Leona Alleslev: To see if there's debate or do you want me to—

The Chair: It sounds like he would like you to make the case.

Mr. Robert Oliphant: You make the case and then I'll respond.

Ms. Leona Alleslev: Perfect.

In order for us to determine what exactly we want to study first and how we want this committee to prioritize the information that we want to study, I think we need to hear from Canada's representative, the diplomat and the person who is the point man on our relationship with China, as an opening story, so that we can understand the status of the relationship in all aspects and the government's direction to the ambassador on the government strategy toward China.

He is such a critical witness. This will help us, even before we get to our subcommittee meeting, to determine what precisely we want to study, to understand the status, the lay of the land from Canada's man on the ground, as they say, so that we can identify not only what the situation is at the moment in an informed and timely way, but also the government's direction to the ambassador, in terms of how our country is approaching China. We're advocating for him to be the first witness so that this can inform everything that we do and ask afterward. Because it is such a time-sensitive thing, we would like it to be as soon as possible, i.e., when the House resumes next Monday.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: We will hear from Mr. Oliphant and then Mr. Bergeron.

[*English*]

Mr. Robert Oliphant: Thank you very much for this.

I want to state the position on this side of the table very clearly. We are absolutely in favour of calling Dominic Barton, the Ambassador of Canada to the People's Republic of China, as an early witness. We think it is critical to hear from Mr. Barton and think that his insights will be helpful and important to the committee to hear at a very early stage in this study.

However, we also recognize that we do not all have the same level of experience or knowledge with respect to the issues we have been assigned to study by the House of Commons. We've been asked to look at, but not limit ourselves to, the consular, economic, legal, security and diplomatic relations we have with the People's Republic.

We think that to do that effectively and for us to ask the best questions—because asking good questions is part of our role as members of Parliament—it would be more helpful if, in the first one or two meetings, we had briefings from officials who could help lay the groundwork and bring everyone up to speed on the most recent issues we have been facing.

They could be officials from Global Affairs Canada, which also includes international trade. They could be officials from Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness. They could be anybody else we decide would help us understand these issues clearly and more effectively, so that we can ask better questions.

As the parliamentary secretary to the former minister and now to the current minister, I've had tremendous opportunities both to travel to China and to have briefings by our officials. I have found these briefings to be valuable and insightful. I won't say I have agreed with everything I ever heard in a briefing—that's my nature—but they have helped me to do my job better. I think we have one of the best public services in the world. Our public servants are effective and efficient, and I think this committee would be well served to have them for our first meetings, and then our first witness could be Mr. Barton. I am absolutely in agreement with the sentiment of the motion that he be the first witness we hear from. However, I think as Parliament resumes it is absolutely important for all of us to get on the same page, to have our various levels of knowledge equalized—and it's unfair that the government side could have more knowledge than the opposition side because we have access to briefings.

This would be the same as every parliamentary committee I have been engaged with that undertakes a study. When you undertake a study, you ask not only your Library of Parliament analyst to prepare briefing materials, but also officials to come to present the topic. I think every committee I've been on that has engaged in a significant study has done that kind of work.

Often then, the minister would come either at the beginning or end of the study. I think in this case it would be an excellent idea to have our ambassador come, but we would suggest that doing that on Monday, January 27 would be a week or two premature, being before we have had two or three meetings to do the kind of work I mentioned. Again, I think we should take this to the subcommittee on agenda and let it really wrestle with what kinds of briefings would be effective and important and helpful to the committee, and then go from there to bringing a recommendation on that to the committee at its next meeting and we would get going very quickly.

We recognize this is an important study. We also recognize that the motion, as presented by Mr. O'Toole, did not put an end date on when we're required to report. It was suggested by the NDP, by Mr. Harris, that we have an end date. Because we don't have an end date, I think we are not urgently rushed to get this work done in the first week. Let's take our time and do it well.

• (1355)

I am also very aware of the comments in Mr. Bergeron's speech with respect to this motion, where he was in agreement with the whole motion but was concerned about paragraph (k) of the motion. To make sure that we don't go down the path of having a political theatre moment at that first meeting, it would be in the spirit of what Mr. Bergeron said that we would actually hear from our officials first.

I would suggest to the subcommittee that we get an update on the general diplomatic relations so that we are all aware of what has transpired in recent months, what has transpired with respect to the consular cases, not only those of Mr. Spavor and Mr. Kovrig but also any other consular cases that might be of concern to the committee, to make sure that we do this carefully and are aware of the public security issues before we engage too much in our work. This is an extremely important national security matter, and the well-being of specific Canadians in detention in China needs to be considered alongside the well-being of Canadian businesses doing important agricultural and other business in China, and the people-to-people relationships that we enjoy between Canada and China.

We are in agreement with the motion. We think that the timeline of January 27 is not appropriate, and that we should have two or three briefings before we do that. All I'm suggesting is that we delay it a week or two to allow the committee to do its work well and carefully and for it to ask the best questions possible.

Thank you.

• (1400)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Bergeron, you have the floor.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Mr. Chair, allow me to commend Mr. Oliphant for the excellent interpretation of my thoughts he offered a few moments ago.

Having said that, I find that this is indeed an extremely relevant resolution, but it may not be appropriate at this time.

I do not in any way dispute the appropriateness of calling Canada's ambassador to China before this committee to present his version, his analysis of the situation. However, the fact is that—and it must be acknowledged—regardless of the Canadian ambassador to China's intrinsic qualities, the post was vacant for eight months. For eight months, during this lengthy crisis, the ambassador's position was left vacant by the Liberal government. Before we summon the incumbent, perhaps we need to know why the position was left unfilled for eight months.

I agree with Mr. Oliphant's proposal that we hear from foreign affairs officials, that the Library of Parliament conduct an analysis and, above all, that we have the opportunity to meet in subcommittee. We have just set up the subcommittee to determine the agenda items.

This proposal, as relevant as it is, seems a little premature to me, in that we need to organize the work of this committee before embarking headlong into a poorly prepared meeting with the Canadian ambassador in Beijing. It is important to meet with the Canadian ambassador in Beijing, but it is especially important to be extremely well prepared for the meeting we will have with the ambassador. I don't think we are going to be able to do a constructive job with a week's notice for this meeting with the Canadian ambassador to China.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

Ms. Alleslev.

Ms. Leona Alleslev: First and foremost, I would like to say that we on the official opposition side are highly sensitive to the individuals who are wrongfully imprisoned in China and to not doing anything that would in any way put their release in peril. That is not the goal of our wanting to have the ambassador come. We understand the incredible work that's being done there. We don't want to do anything to jeopardize that.

However, we do want to hear from the ambassador. He is an official of the Government of Canada, he is the most senior official, and he is Canada's voice, although he isn't elected, obviously, and is not a minister. He should be able to speak on all things. Regardless of the information we have, he should be able to give us the information that he gives around the world, certainly in China and to other people.

We are asking for a briefing from him so that he can give us an overview of all the consular, diplomatic, trade and security aspects that apply to his position. We want to have that sooner rather than later so it can inform us when we dive deeply into the other things. It is our intention to have the opportunity to study all of those areas and that we will hear from officials who will give us more information in each one of those areas. Without a clear overview of the government's strategy towards the relationship with China, which would come from the ambassador, as well as a current update on the status of that relationship—it's the responsibility of the ambassador to advise us on it—we won't be able to know which officials to call and what information there is to do a deep dive on later.

So yes, there is a sense of urgency. The relationship is deteriorating, and we as a committee would like to be able to do some homework and provide recommendations so that we can ensure the relationship doesn't deteriorate any more and we are able to protect national security interests, economic interests and diplomatic interests of Canada.

• (1405)

The Chair: Ms. Blaney.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for this very interesting conversation. I agree that it is incredibly important and very urgent. Having the point person here and talking to the committee is really key in moving forward.

I'm curious. With this sense of urgency, if there's a lot of briefing information that needs to be given, is there a reason why some of that work can't be done quickly, even this week, so that we can move forward? Again, urgency is key here. I don't think anybody

would have said, when this motion came to the House, that this is something that we can take a lot of time learning about. We need to get on point.

I'm very supportive of this motion. I think we need the ambassador here as the point person to update us. A lot of us would appreciate the briefing material as soon as possible so we can get up to speed.

The Chair: Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: No one around the table, certainly not on this side, is disagreeing with the need to bring in the ambassador so he can shed light on the situation and we can ask questions, but there is an obligation.... Granted, this point has been made, but I speak individually here as a member. I feel much more comfortable questioning the ambassador after a briefing so that the proper foundation can be established and we can then talk to our officials about what is going on and understand more about all of those issues.

To the point Ms. Blaney just raised, I think our officials also need time to adequately prepare as well. Yes, granted, they're working on the issue and have been for some time, but let's establish an order of operations here that makes sense. Immediately leading with the ambassador is just putting the cart before the horse, quite frankly.

The Chair: Mr. Doherty.

Mr. Todd Doherty: I want to start off by saying that I really appreciate Mr. Oliphant's comments. Having spent over a decade working in China, I know the nuances and the sensitivities around certain issues. Any time we were going in-country to do work with in China, we were briefed, as officials of Canada, by the most senior official on the ground.

I think it would behoove this committee to start with the most senior official on the ground who is the most familiar with all the geopolitical sensitivities we have and who informs the other officials. As we move forward throughout this committee, it is going to be very important that we have this information in advance of our questioning of other officials, so that we understand the sensitivities and the security issues that may arise from our line of questioning. That can only come from the ambassador.

I think it's very important that we start off this committee on the right foot, which would be to bring the most senior official here. It's no different from any other time we do business with China and are briefed by the most senior official on the ground so that we understand our work as we move forward.

To Mr. Bergeron's comments, this will then form our agenda as we move forward into a subcommittee. As was mentioned earlier, in the spirit of co-operation or consensus, we then can agree on the areas of concern and on those we want to bring before this committee.

• (1410)

The Chair: Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett (Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes, CPC): Thanks, Mr. Chair. I'm in violent agreement with my colleague, Mr. Doherty. However, I appreciate the comments of Mr. Oliphant, Mr. Bergeron and Ms. Blaney.

That being said, I do believe that Canadians expect to hear from that ambassador. That's why we've started laying the groundwork for televised meetings, the committee has been constituted and we're here before the House resumes after the Christmas break. I believe that we should hear from the ambassador next week.

To the points of my colleagues on having some briefings in advance, I think Ms. Blaney's point about having those briefings this week would satisfy all of the concerns that have been expressed, so that we act quickly and hear from our first witness, the ambassador, next week. In the meantime, by having the deputy minister of foreign affairs provide a briefing to the regular members of this committee this week and having the national security adviser provide a briefing to regular members of the committee this week, we would be well informed and would have the full suite of information that is available to those departments they represent.

The information they provide to the government would be available to the members of the committee. Then, when we hear from our top official on this file, our ambassador, we will have all of that information, and the concerns will have been satisfied. Members of Parliament are seized with this issue. They've been engaged. They have done work. I'm confident that, with the level of commitment colleagues here have given to this issue, they're prepared to do the work and to hear from those officials as soon as possible, so that we can get down to the work the House has instructed us to do. That's what Canadians expect.

I don't think it needs to be one or the other; I think we can do both. We can hear from those important officials—the deputy minister of foreign affairs and the national security adviser—this week provided they are in-country. I know that the ambassador has corresponded with Ms. Alleslev and has said that he is eager to appear, just as Canadians are eager to hear from him and just as the regular members of this committee would be eager to ask questions of him following his testimony.

The Chair: Mr. Albas.

Mr. Dan Albas: Mr. Barrett has struck a couple of different ideas with me.

First of all, I'd like to address Mr. Oliphant's key point, that some parliamentarians are disadvantaged because they don't have access to the government, such as government members or parliamentary secretaries. There is an imbalance. That being said, that's why parliamentary committees are separate from government. We have analysts, I'm sure, for members who miraculously cannot find the time after being named to this committee.

I've already taken out a few different books so that I can have an at least cursory understanding of all the different issues. I read many of the columns of the media who are here today that are informing of what the issues are. I think I can find enough questions. However, if members feel disadvantaged and don't feel that they'll have questions at the start of this committee's work, the Library of Parliament analysts will be able to supply them with good material that will help them to get a good sense of things.

Members opposite have not moved to amend. They agree that the ambassador is important and, from my understanding, the ambassador has actually shown interest in coming to the committee once

it's ratified by members, but it's the dates that are in question. As well, there is this information power imbalance, that Mr. Oliphant mentioned, which seems to be the issue.

Perhaps what we can do is to have a three-hour meeting next Monday. We'll do an hour with, as you mentioned, the national security adviser, the acting one, as well as the deputy minister of foreign affairs and trade. We'll start from there for the first hour, and then we'll have the ambassador. We also have to bear in mind that the ambassador may have something come up that he needs to respond to. It seems that he indicated that in late January he would be willing to come forward.

Let's start working on this. I'm fine to manage my workload and to engage the Library of Parliament so that I can be informed and can ask good questions of Mr. Barton.

If you look at the original motions presented to the House, which it agreed with, from time to time we may call upon certain officials. That means that, perhaps at another juncture, we may have more questions because of what we've heard from various experts within Canada or outside.

This is not going to be a one-time process. It doesn't necessarily have to be. My friend from the Bloc mentioned earlier that the process now is that the subcommittee is supposed to handle the agenda. I totally understand what he means, but we're the client, right? We've hired the subcommittee, like a contractor, to handle certain things, but if we want a meeting to start with, just to open up the conversation and then let the members from that point start planning witnesses and the order of things, we can do that. I don't find a flaw with what he said; I'm just pointing out that you can also look at it from another perspective. I'm hopeful that members will be amenable to it, and that perhaps a motion can be added so that we also have the acting national security adviser and the deputy minister on the 27th. To me, that would be a good way for us to get started.

I trust that members will do their homework, and I will do mine.

● (1415)

The Chair: Mr. Albas's comments remind me that before we finish today, we should try to deal with questions like the time of meetings, the usual meeting time and the frequency of meetings.

Mr. Oliphant.

Mr. Robert Oliphant: I just repeat that there is absolutely no disagreement on this side that the first external witness will be the ambassador of Canada to China.

My experience may be different from others. I travelled to three countries in Africa last week and immediately upon arrival in each of those countries I had very good briefings by the heads of mission in those countries. Absolutely, we trust our heads of mission—ambassadors, high commissioners, chargés d'affaires—to do the work of briefing us on the ground.

However, before I left I had extensive briefings from departmental officials, those with desks in Global Affairs Canada, who brought up issues of consular affairs, international trade, investment, the issues I would be encountering so that I could have an effective trip on behalf of the people of Canada. I think that is the normal process that we engage in. We get written materials and have briefings from officials and then we have the heads of our missions do that work.

In a moment I am going to be presenting an amendment to the motion, but before I do that I want to take us back to the 40th Parliament. This is not the first time we have had a special committee established by the House on an international issue. The last time, in the 40th Parliament, an international committee was established to look at our mission in Afghanistan.

With all due respect to Ms. Blaney, we don't have Jack Harris here. His experience on that special committee, which lasted almost three years and wrote a number of reports, would be invaluable to our agenda subcommittee. I think his experience on that committee—and I was serving with him on another committee at the same time—and his understanding of the briefings, the role of expert witnesses and the roles of others who have differing opinions would be very helpful for us to consider at the agenda subcommittee.

We've just established the agenda subcommittee. I think we should use it. It needs to make some recommendations with respect to the timing of our meetings and the number of meetings we have per week. Remember, this is not a standing committee that follows the normal slots of (a), (b), (c) and (d) committees. We have to request our officials to appear. We have an ambassador who is in China. We want him to be here as soon as possible and we want to make the most effective use of his time and our time. This is something that we need to settle in to.

Parliament is just resuming next week. Most of us have other committee responsibilities. We want to get all of that fed into the agenda subcommittee so that every member can find a way to be their most effective in this committee. A meeting time and our meeting frequency are practical ways of working that I think would be best dealt with at the subcommittee on agenda. I just think it is an easier place than doing it here in this room.

I am going to suggest an amendment to Ms. Alleslev's motion. The first two lines are the same. However, we would strike the words "on Monday, January 27, 2020", and add this at the end so that the motion will be reading as such: "That the committee invite the Ambassador of Canada to the People's Republic of China, Mr. Dominic Barton, to appear in person before the committee for a two-hour televised meeting; that Mr. Barton be given 20 minutes to update the committee on the state of relations between Canada and the People's Republic of China; and that the remaining time be allotted for questions and comments from members of the committee; and that this meeting happen as soon as possible after the subcommittee has met and the full committee has appropriately been briefed by officials as determined by the committee, and subject to the scheduling by the clerk of the committee."

If I can just speak to my amendment, I think we are keeping the spirit of Ms. Alleslev's motion to make sure we have as immediate a meeting with Mr. Barton as possible, that we do it subject obvi-

ously to scheduling but also subject to the work of the subcommittee getting together, determining and recommending to the committee what briefings would be appropriate, and that we do that within the next couple of weeks.

• (1420)

That's all. We are talking about a couple of weeks to make sure that we are organized. That's what I have to say.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Oliphant.

We are now discussing the proposed amendment.

Ms. Zann.

Ms. Lenore Zann: Thank you very much. It's a pleasure to be here and to meet everybody. As a new member of Parliament, I want to say one reason I'm happy to be on this committee is that, first and foremost in my mind and in the minds of many of my constituents is the safety of the two Canadians who are detained in China. I think we need to not let go of the reason we're here and the reason we're talking about these very important issues.

I want to hear from the ambassador. I also want to hear from experts. I'm perfectly willing to read as much information as anybody wants to send us, but I also want to see them in person and be able to ask questions in person.

I think that time is of the essence—I agree with everybody here on that—but over the last year or so having watched on television what can happen in these committees, I do not want to see this devolve into a partisan, empty-rhetoric fight among political parties over political points.

On that note, I would like to say that, yes, we need to see the ambassador. When that ambassador can come to see us is going to be up to all of us. It is a democracy, after all. However, I'm very concerned and I do not want to see this become a political free-for-all. I think that it's important that we keep the safety of those two Canadians first and foremost in our minds as we go about our deliberations.

Thank you.

• (1425)

The Chair: Ms. Alleslev, and then Mr. Albas is after Mr. Doherty.

Ms. Leona Alleslev: My fear is that this sounds like an opportunity to put it further into the future and to not, maybe, address the sense of urgency that we have been trying to achieve with the motion. I'm wondering how we might be able to ensure that there's a sense of urgency, rather than saying, "As soon as possible when the subcommittee meets, and we've met with other people, and, and, and, and..."", which could sound like sometime in the next century.

Obviously we want this to happen sooner rather than later. Obviously, we have somewhat of a disagreement on who should give us an overview first before taking a deep dive into each of the officials' areas of expertise. We understand the amendment you're putting forward, and we do want, obviously, the subcommittee to be able to do its work. How can we bound this so that it happens, I would say, in no more than a month, to ensure that we keep the sense of urgency on it? Perhaps there's another way of arriving at a point where we could do it even more quickly than that.

The Chair: Mr. Doherty.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Thank you, Mr. Chair—

Mr. Robert Oliphant: On a point of order, it seems to me there was a suggestion, but I didn't hear a subamendment. I'm just wondering whether there was a subamendment there or not. That may be a way for us to get out of this quickly. If there was a subamendment coming from the suggested date, I think that would be acceptable. I have said two weeks. You said up to a month. I just think we may be able to get out of this very quickly if there is a subamendment.

The Chair: Mr. Doherty, do you mind if I go back to Ms. Alleslev?

Mr. Todd Doherty: I have some information that might be pertinent to the committee, and perhaps a subamendment might come out of that. It is being reported that Ambassador Barton is indeed in Winnipeg at the cabinet retreat currently, with your colleagues, so he is in Canada.

We are here to work.

To Lenore, to your comment, first and foremost we must always be moving forward with that. The lives of Mr. Spavor and Mr. Kovrig.... Time is of the essence, which is why we put forward the motion that we speak to the most senior official who is informing our government, and to the rest of the officials, on the sensitivities and the situation analysis on the ground. If he is indeed in Canada—

Mr. Robert Oliphant: He's not. He went back to China this morning.

Mr. Todd Doherty: I think we should confirm that. We should move to try to get Ambassador Barton at the earliest convenience.

The Chair: Can I allow Ms. Alleslev to respond to Mr. Oliphant?

Or is it Mr. Albas?

Ms. Leona Alleslev: Mr. Albas can do two things at once here.

Mr. Dan Albas: Mr. Chair, I think I understand where members are coming from.

Perhaps a subamendment would be helpful in this case, and I hope that it is: "That the subcommittee meet no later than January 24 at the call of the chair."

The committee can meet this week; we could probably just put that into it. I think you could just canvass the members. As long as the subcommittee happens this week then we can issue a report and then see that the business of the committee starts as soon as possible.

I will say, again, Mr. Chair, that people expect us to work together, but that also means productively, so let's not get tangled up in knots. Let's get the steering committee to meet this week and have the ambassador no later than February 7.

To me that is a good way to have things presented.

• (1430)

Mr. Robert Oliphant: Mr. Chair, as a point or order, could I ask for a temporary suspension of the meeting so that we can discuss this subamendment to my amendment?

The Chair: The meeting is suspended.

• (1430)

(Pause)

• (1445)

The Chair: Order.

Colleagues, I think the public often doesn't understand—perhaps when the cameras are not on or when we're not in session—how members do operate in a collaborative fashion and work things out. It can't always be done, but sometimes it can.

In that spirit, Ms. Alleslev, over to you.

• (1450)

Ms. Leona Alleslev: Thank you very much and thank you to all colleagues. Sometimes having a logistics background is probably the most difficult part of doing some of these things.

Could I seek unanimous consent to withdraw the motion, the amendment to the motion and the subamendment to the motion so that I might present a new motion?

(Motion withdrawn [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

Ms. Leona Alleslev: The new motion would read: "That the subcommittee on agenda and procedure meet as soon as possible; and that the committee be briefed by officials prior to the appearance of the Ambassador of Canada to the People's Republic of China; and that the committee invite the Ambassador of Canada to the People's Republic of China, Mr. Dominic Barton, to appear in person before the committee for a two-hour televised meeting no later than February 7, 2020; and that Mr. Barton be given 20 minutes to update the committee on the state of relations between Canada and the People's Republic of China; and, that the remaining time be allotted for questions and comments from the members of the committee."

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

The Chair: Mr. Albas.

Mr. Dan Albas: Mr. Chair, I think it's very important to note that today there are three members from British Columbia who made this possible.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Is that because there aren't 250 centimetres of snow in Vancouver or...?

Mr. Dan Albas: That's just how we do things.

The Chair: We need to deal with the questions of the usual meeting time and the frequency of meetings.

As for the time, I am advised that a special committee has priority on rooms and on being televised. We can meet any time we want to, but we only have priority on these times: from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Mondays, from 8:45 a.m. to 10:45 on Fridays, and from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m., Monday to Thursday.

[*Translation*]

What would committee members prefer?

[*English*]

Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Mr. Chair, I know this is important because we want to know when we'll be working, but two of our vice-chairs are not here. Mr. Harris and Mr. Warkentin are not here. With that in mind, I think this issue is probably best left to the subcommittee, especially since we don't know the vice-chairs' schedules.

The Chair: Ms. Alleslev.

Ms. Leona Alleslev: I have two things. One, I think it's a good idea for the subcommittee to investigate this as well, but perhaps, just so we can all weigh in, because we do need all our committee members to weigh in on this.... On the official opposition side, we were thinking that maybe we would meet one day a week, but instead of for only two hours, perhaps we could consider three hours. Our thought was for Mondays from 10 a.m. until 1 p.m., if that's a possibility. Then we would be able to still have a sense of urgency, get a fair amount of work done, and get together and make some progress. That's what we were thinking, but perhaps we would put it to the subcommittee to investigate further.

• (1455)

The Chair: Perhaps we'll have Sunday brunches instead of Sunday suppers—at home, that is.

Ms. Blaney.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I agree that this should go to the subcommittee. I recognize that there are two vice-chairs who are not here, and that's an important part.

I think the only thing that would be helpful to add is that the three-hour meeting from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. would probably work for Mr. Harris, who will be representing the New Democrats. However, one of the questions I would have is around televised access for the three hours. I hope the subcommittee is given that important information.

The Chair: Maybe I could answer the question about the television before we go on to the next speaker.

I indicated previously that we have priority over rooms and television from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Mondays. I presume that if the committee were to decide to make that 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., there are no other committees meeting then, so it would not be a problem.

Mr. Oliphant.

Mr. Robert Oliphant: I believe there's been some discussion among the whips about this. I think it should go to the subcommittee.

We'll just signal that we are in agreement with Mondays from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. We think that's a good solution, but subject to the ap-

proval of the two vice-chairs. We're going to be meeting as soon as possible as a subcommittee anyway, so it will be good.

The Chair: Thank you. That's useful.

Mr. Barrett.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bergeron will then have the floor.

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Barrett: Mr. Chair, as we lay the markers down for when we're going to be having these meetings and the projected order of business for the committee, I think it's important to note that “as soon as possible” means different things to different people. We've rightly identified that the work of this committee is urgent because we have Canadians who are illegally jailed in China. It's very important that we understand that today's meeting was the last day that this committee was allowed to have its first meeting, as directed by the House. We give ourselves a timeline, time goes by quickly and we find that we've used it all up, and “as soon as possible” was actually the last possible allowable time to make it happen.

It's also important to note that we have farmers across Canada who have lost over a billion dollars because of the trade actions China has taken, specifically dealing with canola. I think it's really important that we're cognizant of that and mindful of all of the different areas—and there are many more—that this relationship between Canada and China has affected, and of why it's so important that the important work of this committee be done expeditiously and that we give ourselves time-bound guidelines in directing our work.

It is vital to so many parts of our federation and its citizens that we act quickly, so I ask all members to be mindful of that. When we say things like “as soon as possible”, the spirit or intent of that, I believe, is good, but I think it's important that we act on that and truly do it as soon as possible, because when we just do it at the last date that is allowable, we might not be fulfilling the spirit of the obligation that we have.

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Oliphant.

[*Translation*]

I'm sorry, Mr. Bergeron, it is your turn to speak.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Mr. Chair, I know that our colleague just went back to the motion we just passed, but I thought we were trying to determine the most appropriate times to meet.

I would just like to ask a question. Our colleague, in presenting the Conservatives' proposal to meet Mondays from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., told us that they felt it would be better to meet once than twice, and for three hours rather than two. It seems to me that twice for two hours is more than once for three hours. So I would like someone to explain to me why we prefer one three-hour meeting over two two-hour meetings.

My second question involves the expression “as soon as possible”. Let me share with you a past experience I had with Chinese representatives a few years ago during a previous term in the House of Commons. We were in contact with, among others, people representing Taiwan. They told us they planned to open an office in Montreal soon. A country that is several thousand years old has a different definition of the word “soon” than a country that is barely 400 years old. To my knowledge, the office has yet to be opened in Montreal. So that is something to consider.

When we say “as soon as possible”, it must be understood that there is a sense of urgency. Not only are the economic interests of Canada and Quebec at stake. The lives of at least two Canadian citizens are as well. We must therefore proceed with diligence. We have set a deadline for a meeting with the ambassador, which is February 7, and I believe the ambassador will arrive in North America on January 28. That means he could join us in the next few days, perhaps January 29 or January 30. Those dates do not, however, fall on a Monday between 10 a.m. and 1 p.m.

So I ask you again: why should we meet once for three hours instead of twice for two hours? Honestly, I prefer two two-hour meetings. I believe we stand to get more work done in two two-hour meetings than one three-hour meeting.

● (1500)

The Chair: I will now give the floor to Mr. Oliphant. If anyone wishes to answer Mr. Bergeron's questions, I will give you the opportunity to do so, but it is now Mr. Oliphant's turn.

[English]

Mr. Robert Oliphant: I think it would be very appropriate for us to take this discussion now to the subcommittee. Everybody will have the opportunity to talk about two twos, one three, three fives, two nines or I don't know what, but I think we can have that discussion there when people know their committee responsibilities and the other things that are on people's minds. I actually think it's not going to be productive for us to continue at this time.

We've signalled that we think it's a good option. I'm happy to listen to the other parties and, in the spirit of collaboration, to find times that work. I just think it would be most helpful if we now take that discussion into that venue to look at the calendar. The subcommittee should look at a working plan. Maybe we start with three-hour meetings and then move to five evenings in a row. I chaired the special committee on assisted dying. We had to meet every evening. We took every slot from 5:30 p.m. to 9 p.m. most days to get that work done.

I think that will be something we need to discuss.

With respect to “*bientôt*”, or the way we're working, on behalf of our side I just want to thank the clerk for putting this meeting together. The parties got you the names at the last minute. One party was late. We were pretty good, but parties got the names to you late. You had logistics to deal with. Putting a special committee together is unusual and I want to thank you. I also know the analysts have already been anticipating our motion and getting work done.

I also want to say two things. I think we should acknowledge, in this room, the people of Newfoundland and Labrador, particularly in Newfoundland and in St. John's and other parts on the eastern

side. Jack Harris is not with us today. That is a reality of life that we have to be sensitive to and he was very gracious. I talked to him about the possibility of our rescheduling and that it would take the House consent, but that is a reality.

The other extreme reality that many of us have faced in our own ridings is the death of 57 Canadians in Tehran. While this committee is important and our relationship with China is important, some of us have been very preoccupied with that. I have a high school mourning a death in my riding. I have families mourning in my riding. That has occupied many of us. We are working on this issue but we don't let the other issues go. Our world is complex, our world is difficult and people's lives are affected by these things. I think having this meeting is not late; it's timely. I think the House is managing us well and we'll do our part.

I think every member of this committee will help the clerk and the analysts do their work so they can help us do our work. We're getting the date done, so thank you very much.

● (1505)

The Chair: Mr. Oliphant, in respect of your comments in relation to the clerk and the analysts, and in relation to your concern regarding the people who were the victims of flight 752 and their families, I am sure all members would join in that view. I am seeing agreement on that.

Mr. Albas.

Mr. Dan Albas: I would like to focus on two things.

First of all, our member from the Bloc Québécois asked specifically about the subcommittee and whether or not it should be deciding on our times. I do think that discussion needs to be at the subcommittee. If we decide to go with the 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. slot—I'm not on the subcommittee, but I want to give my opinion—I think that will work. Being from British Columbia, I travel a long distance to be here. I will be here for those. I think it's a good step for the committee.

Second, though, if there are exceptional requirements for further meetings at further times, just due to the nature of some of the people we will be working with, in order to make sure we can accommodate—again, it's written in the motion—many of the public figures who may need to have different time slots, I'm prepared to work. Parliament, I think, is prepared to work. I'd like to see that.

I did note today, Mr. Chair, that we were able to come up with unanimous support for my colleague's motion. I think that's a good first step, but I will say this. Again, the member from Quebec has mentioned that the ambassador will be in North America—as I mentioned earlier, he will be in Houston on January 28—and if the ambassador can be making public comments in Houston or talking and doing his job in North America on the 28th, to me there's no reason why the ambassador cannot be here for a period of time either before or after.

I don't think that we should, as Mr. Barrett said earlier, wait until the very last date. There are a number of issues that are very pertinent and are time sensitive. I have interviewed the ambassador at committee and have found that he's very capable of dealing with parliamentarians. I don't believe he'll require a lot of time to be briefed up. I think he'll be able to come here and give us answers. I do want to push the government to try to make that sooner rather than later, for the good of this committee and for this Parliament's work.

The Chair: Mr. Doherty.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Mr. Chair, I am going to echo some comments along the lines of those of Mr. Albas and then bring up what Mr. Bergeron mentioned. If the ambassador is going to be back in North America, in Houston, there's no reason why he could not be appearing before this committee.

We have two Canadians who are being detained. To the comments of Lenore, our colleague across the floor, we should be moving forward, always, with them. We also have farmers who can't wait. They've suffered significant losses due to the trade action from this government. I think that as a committee we should be moving forward and trying to have the ambassador here at his earliest convenience.

The Chair: Ms. Alleslev.

• (1510)

Ms. Leona Alleslev: I want to echo what Mr. Oliphant said about those who so tragically lost their lives. Unfortunately, my riding was one of the ones that were quite significantly hit. It has really had a substantive impact. I want to send out, if I might—on behalf of all of us, I know—my condolences to everyone who has suffered as a result of this tragedy.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Alleslev.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bergeron, you have the floor.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Might I suggest that, once we have finished committee business, perhaps we should observe a minute of silence?

The Chair: We could observe a minute of silence now.

[*The committee observes a moment of silence.*]

[*English*]

Colleagues, I've asked the clerk to reach out to the members of the subcommittee to work out the time as soon as possible for its first meeting. I hope that can take place very soon.

Is there anything further?

Seeing nothing, I thank the committee for its work today.

This meeting is adjourned.

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