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Wednesday, January 29, 2020



Chair

The Honourable Wayne Easter

Standing Committee on Finance

Wednesday, January 29, 2020

• (1600)

[Translation]

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. David Gagnon): Honourable members of the committee, I see a quorum.

[English]

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, or entertain points of order or participate in debate.

We can now proceed to the election of the chair. Pursuant to Standing Order 106(2), the chair must be a member of the governing party. I am ready to receive motions for the chair.

[Translation]

Mr. McLeod, go ahead.

[English]

Mr. Michael McLeod (Northwest Territories, Lib.): I would like to nominate Wayne Easter for the chair.

The Clerk: Are there any further motions?

(Motion agreed to)

The Clerk: I declare the motion carried and Wayne Easter duly elected chair of the committee. I invite Mr. Easter to take the chair.

Voices: Hear, hear!

The Chair (Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.)): First of all, thank you for your support as chair. Somebody said it's like an election in P.E.I. No, that's not quite true. We get quite a mix in P.E.I. at the moment. Like Parliament, there's a minority government there, too. Anyway, thank you for your support. I look forward to all the parties working together in the House and at this committee. I think there's no reason we can't get a lot done over the next few years.

We'll turn to routine motions.

Peter, you wanted to move a motion. Please, go ahead.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, colleagues.

I've just handed the routine motions to the clerk for distribution. If it pleases you, Mr. Chair, I will go through these routine motions now.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: First, on analysts, I move:

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 in its work.

The Chair: A motion is on the floor. Is there any discussion?

(Motion agreed to)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Second, on a subcommittee on agenda and procedure—

The Chair: If I could just interrupt for a second, Peter, I would ask the analysts to come up. I believe we have seen these folks before in the previous Parliament.

Welcome, and thank you for all your efforts in the last Parliament. I think we're going to have a busy few weeks here, just so you know.

Go ahead, Peter.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: No problem.

I move that the subcommittee on agenda and procedure be established and be composed of five members—the Chair and one member from each party—and that the subcommittee work in the spirit of collaboration.

The Chair: Is there any discussion on that point?

(Motion agreed to [See Minutes of Proceedings])

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Regarding 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.

The Chair: Mr. Peter Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian (New Westminster—Burnaby, NDP): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

First I'd like to say welcome to everyone here. I've been on finance committee before. It looks like a very good group we'll be working with.

In terms of quorum, within the context of the minority Parliament I have no problem with the four members, but what I would suggest is that we make it to include at least two members from the government and at least two members of the opposition.

What that means, when we have four parties, is that there's a significant majority of the parties around the table. It's a small tweak, but I think, in a minority Parliament context, appropriate for this committee. I'm not suggesting changing the quorum minimum of four, just stating that it be two members of the government and two members of the opposition.

• (1605)

The Chair: You're basically saying there would be four members. The quorum would have to consist of four members: at least two from the opposition and two from the government.

Mr. Peter Julian: Yes.

The Chair: All right. You would have to move an amendment to that effect.

Mr. Peter Julian: Yes. I move that amendment.

The Chair: Okay. The amendment has been moved that there be four members: two from the opposition and two from the government. It's open for discussion.

Mr. Marty Morantz (Charleswood—St. James—Assiniboia—Headingley, CPC): Just to clarify, the same motion already calls for four, so that's not an amendment. The amendment is to have two from each side.

The Chair: Yes. That's a good point, Mr. Morantz.

Mr. McLeod.

Mr. Michael McLeod: Mr. Chairman, I just need further clarity.

Could you break it down again, Mr. Julian, as to how many from each party?

The Chair: Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Thanks for your question, Mr. McLeod.

On what that would mean, it's not in terms of party. Obviously the government is the Liberal Party, so it means there be at least two members from the Liberal Party for quorum. For the opposition, we now have three parties around the table so it would mean a minimum of two members of the opposition for that minimum quorum.

It just clarifies things in a minority Parliament. It makes it clear. We're still at the four-member threshold, but in a way that is more reflective of a minority Parliament.

The Chair: Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I ask for permission to suspend for a couple of minutes, Mr. Chair, just so we can have a chat.

The Chair: I have no problem with that. Go ahead.

• (1605)

_____ (Pause) _____

• (1605)

The Chair: We'll come back to order.

Do you want to lead off, Mr. Fragiskatos?

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: We're fine with the friendly amendment proposed by Mr. Julian.

The Chair: Okay. I'll read it so we're clear, Peter: "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 two members of the opposition and two members of the government, but when travelling outside the parliamentary precinct, that the meeting begin after fifteen (15) minutes, regardless of members present."

(Amendment agreed to)

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

The Chair: Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

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 minutes (and 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,

• (1610)

The Chair: That is so moved. We are open for discussion.

The clerk has mentioned this to me. I think the motion is fine but when we have witnesses here and we're dealing with six in an hour and a half, as we sometimes do, we try to hold them to five minutes to give us more time for questioning. We can still encourage them to do that. Sometimes they go a little over the time.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Next we have documents.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: 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.

The Chair: Is there any discussion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: 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.

It's a motion that's particularly important to Mr. McLeod.

The Chair: Is there any discussion? All those in favour?

(Motion agreed to)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: 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.

The Chair: Is there any discussion on that motion?

(Motion agreed to)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: On 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.

The Chair: Is there any discussion on the motion? Is it understood?

(Motion agreed to)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: On in camera meeting 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.

The Chair: Is there any discussion? That's standard procedure.

(Motion agreed to)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: On notice of motions, I move:

That 48 hours notice, interpreted as two 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. (EST) 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: Okay. It's on the floor. Is there any discussion?

(Motion agreed to)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Are there any other motions from the regular motions we've had before?

We had before—and it's on the list that the clerk distributed—the PBO and economic and fiscal outlook. We always have the Parliamentary Budget Officer in. They have written a letter to the clerk of the committee asking that the particular motion that we passed at previous finance meetings be changed somewhat to what is in the red, right?

Does somebody want to take a moment to look at that, at what we've had previously and what the Parliamentary Budget Officer is moving we adopt in this Parliament, and if so, could we have somebody move it?

Mr. Julian, it's in the long form and in the red. Okay, you haven't received that part. It's in the letter.

The clerk has the letter. I've seen it; you haven't. What we can do is set this aside and, at a future meeting after you receive a copy of

the letter, go to any other motions that may be required. This one deals with the Parliamentary Budget Officer, and by tradition we have the Bank of Canada and others in as well, so we could deal with that at a later date.

Is there anything else on the agenda?

There is nothing else on it, but could I just take a moment? The House, when it convened for this Parliament, tabled an order that pre-budget consultations would have to be completed by February 28. For new members of the committee, the finance committee is mandated by Parliament to hold pre-budget hearings prior to the tabling of a budget.

Normally it's a fairly extensive but reasonably simple procedure. The the committee clerk normally sends out a press release in May or June with a theme that we're proposing, asking that submissions from the public be in by a specific date, usually around the middle of August. We'll get anywhere up to 500 submissions, as a committee, during that time period.

Following that, when Parliament reconvenes, normally in September, the committee will hold some hearings in Ottawa and across the country as well. I think the last time we held hearings across the country we heard from roughly 300 witnesses in 10 cities, so there is a combination of hearings in Ottawa and across the country.

Then the analysts, from that, prepare a report after some discussion. The report comes back to us; we debate the report and we discuss recommendations. Each party puts forward its own recommendations and we table a finance committee pre-budget hearings report in December, as a rule, so it's available to the minister and the department for their consideration.

Each party, of course, based on its proportion in the House, is asked to put forward a list of witnesses. Based on priority usually the subcommittee determines those witnesses.

● (1615)

This time, because we're now into the end of January, and the second week of February is a break week, we are in a fairly tight time squeeze to hold at least decent hearings and hear what the public has to say and give the analysts time to draft a report, and give us to be able to table that report by February 28, which Parliament has already deemed has to be done.

In 2016 as a committee we basically wrote a letter and informed the minister of the topics we had heard testimony on, and sent copies of the minutes, I believe, with that letter. Following that, we drafted a report with recommendations as quickly as we could.

That's what we're up against. If we're to go down that road, there are a couple of things we need to do. We would have to hold extensive hearings next week: Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. The last time around, I think we heard roughly 24 witnesses a day for four days and running, and then concluded the witness segment. That gave the analysts time to go through that.

We already have 261 submissions that came in prior to August. They were put forward in anticipation of pre-budget hearings this fall, but this committee would have to move a motion to bring that evidence forward from the last Parliament as evidence for pre-budget hearings, if we are to consider it in this Parliament. If I could put it this way, if we're going to do pre-budget hearings directly, we would probably need a motion to bring forward those submissions to be considered by the committee. I think a number of members have received them.

We've already approached the department. They would be willing to come in for a meeting tomorrow. I know some members would have difficulty with that because of previous commitments they've made. Nonetheless, the department would be willing to come in tomorrow and brief us on where they're at.

Each party, if they could, would have to have their witness lists to us by Friday morning so that the clerk could invite those witnesses for next week. As well, we would have to have the Minister of Finance, I would think, for an hour next week.

The floor is open for discussion. That just gives you some background on what's before us in the immediate term. After getting that out of the way, we could then sit down as a committee and determine what we collectively believe we need to do as a committee going forward, and what studies we want to undertake.

Peter, I have you and then Sean. Mr. Julian, then Mr. Fraser.

• (1620)

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Chair, I think it's a no-brainer to move that we accept as evidence the briefs that were provided prior to the last election. I think that's obvious, and so I'll move that.

The Chair: Okay, it's moved that the evidence from the last Parliament and the briefs submitted be considered as evidence for the pre-budget consultation that we're undertaking now.

Is there any discussion on that point?

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

The Chair: Mr. Fraser.

Mr. Sean Fraser (Central Nova, Lib.): I was going to move an identical motion, but I do have a practical question for the analysts. With the February 28 deadline, if we're going to give you any breathing room to put together something meaningful, what's our stop date for hearing evidence from witnesses?

Mr. Michaël Lambert-Racine (Committee Researcher): Ideally, that would be Friday, February 7, which would give us following week to draft the report to send to translation. Translation would likely take a week. That means we would be able to send your report around February 21, which would leave committee members a few days to look at the report and consider it in time for February 28.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Just to build upon that, let's say we were to take an approach similar to the one the chair has just described, where we essentially send a summary of topics with a more fulsome report to follow. Could that summary of issues we've heard about be done in a short amount of time? It just seems that having one week of hearing witnesses, when we have 261 reports already in, is not feasible.

Mr. Michaël Lambert-Racine: That's what the report would be about. It would contain a summary of the topics we addressed. We would also include tables from witnesses about proposals they made and on what topics they made them. That would mainly be the content of the report, along with the recommendations.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Sorry; in the report you're describing, it's just the summary of what we've heard about, or if—

Mr. Michaël Lambert-Racine: Yes.

The Chair: It would be a summary, though, including the submissions.

• (1625)

Mr. Michaël Lambert-Racine: Typically, we include the submissions in an appendix to the report.

The Chair: Yes.

Is it clear, or do you want further clarification?

Mr. Sean Fraser: It's clear, but it feels like you may have undersold it when you said the time pressure challenges were immense. I think they border on the impossible.

The Chair: Mr. Ste-Marie.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie (Joliette, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is for Mr. Fraser, who represents the government.

I want to make sure the work we will do that will be presented to the Minister of Finance will be taken into consideration in the budgeting. On February 28, copies will not yet have been printed, but I want to know whether the work we will do in committee will have a real impact and whether it will actually be taken into account in the budgeting.

[*English*]

Mr. Sean Fraser: Sure. To be clear, I'm not here as a witness, but I think the whole purpose of this exercise is to ensure that the feedback of the committee can be properly factored into the deliberations of the minister before the budget is made public.

Mr. Chair, it might help if we took a two-minute breather to discuss things. I think the time challenge, with the amount of time the analysts require, is something that we might want to have a brief informal discussion about amongst members, if that's okay.

The Chair: If you want to, okay.

Let's suspend for a couple of minutes so that parties can talk amongst themselves.

I don't know if the clerk has factored out the number of witnesses each party would be able to have out of 100. If they could do that as well during this time frame, then we would know how many witnesses there would be for each party—just roughly. We have never been sticky at committee about sticking completely to the proportions based on the allocation of party seats in the House. If it's been an important witness, we've tried to hear them regardless of whose list they were on. So perhaps the clerk could give us some rough figures on that well.

We will suspend for five minutes.

• (1625) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1630)

The Chair: We will reconvene.

Mr. Fraser, the floor is yours.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I've just had a few informal conversations with some of our colleagues. I think, given the advice of the analysts on the time constraints that we're under, we're probably just going to have to sit longer days than normal, probably in the range of six-hour days, Monday through Thursday, and jam-pack in as many witnesses as we can, and also consider what written submissions may come in. We'll trust the analysts to do their best job to respect the appropriate proportion of witnesses from each party.

Obviously it's not ideal, but given the timing of the election, I don't really see another choice.

I don't know if that requires a formal motion, Mr. Chair. I'll take your advice on that point.

• (1635)

The Chair: I think we can go by agreement, if that's possible and agreeable.

Figuring out the numbers, I think, is a fair suggestion. Monday it might be difficult to get enough witnesses to go for the six hours because they're not going to have much notice. They're going to be called on Friday—although there are a lot of national organizations in the city and we do video conferencing as well.

The breakdown, just going by proportion, would be for the Liberals to propose 46 witnesses, the Conservatives 36, the Bloc 10 and the NDP eight. I would suggest that every party perhaps propose 10 more than what they've been allocated, because there will be a number who refuse or can't do it during the time frame.

As we establish lists of proposed witnesses, we'll find in some cases that all four parties will have the same witness, so we'll need at least 10 more than the number you have been allocated.

Could you forward those to the clerk? By Thursday night would be best, or by Friday morning if necessary, but put them in priority order. Who do you see as your first priority, second, and on down the line through your list? That makes it easier for the analysts and the clerk to work with.

As I said earlier, the department would be willing to come tomorrow, but I understand a number of people would have difficulty being here in our meeting tomorrow afternoon because of other plans.

What are your thoughts on that? We could go with the Finance officials as the first witnesses on Monday. It would be fair to everyone, maybe, but I am a little worried we might not get all the witnesses we want on Monday, anyway.

What time should we start on Monday? The House opens at 11. We could start at 11 and go for a couple of hours, and then from 3:30 to 6:30 in the afternoon would be normal.

Just give us your thoughts and we can come to some kind of an agreement.

The other thing Mr. Fraser mentioned was the submissions. Normally we don't reopen submissions. I know there are some out there. If we reopen submissions, we'll probably get 500 now that we're back in Parliament again. I know—and we always run into this—that some things change by the time the deadline comes in August. They submit submissions by August 15 and then by the time we get around to meeting them in September or October, some things have changed and they change their submissions. The ones that have already submitted will be given first priority in any event, so as witnesses they could tell us what differences they want to massage in their submission.

Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I may have missed what you recommended there, Mr. Chair. Did you propose 11 to two o'clock and then 3:30 to 6:30?

The Chair: I didn't. I was wondering where people might be at on Monday.

I understand that people have difficulties tomorrow, but will people be here by 11 o'clock on Monday? Some won't, I know. Could we go from 11 to two o'clock on Monday and from 3:30 till 6:30 on Monday if we have enough witnesses?

• (1640)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: That would be fine for me, and I think our side as well, if I can.... Yes.

The Chair: Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

In terms of travel plans, a number of us are from western Canada. I think it would be better to go from 3:30. We could prolong it past 6:30 to eight o'clock, if we wanted to, just to get that extra time later in the day in a concentrated period. I know it's tougher on folks, but this will be a tough week next week.

The Chair: You know, Peter, sometimes it takes me 12 hours to get to P.E.I., if you can believe that. They fly to Toronto and then go back.

Mr. Michael McLeod: That's nothing.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: McLeod says that's nothing.

No, we understand. I think we're easy. What's the most accommodating? If you want to go from 3:30 till eight o'clock, that's fine too. We're here to do a job, and we'll have to get it done next week.

Are people okay with, say, 3:30 till eight o'clock on Monday? Okay?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Then we'll leave it up to the clerk to find two slots of time on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, two slots of three hours each. It's nice to go three hours, have a break and go to QP.

On Monday we're proposing 3:30 in the afternoon until eight o'clock at night, and then Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday two slots of three hours. One would be 3:30 till 6:30.

We could start in the morning. What time do committees normally start in the morning?

The Clerk: At 8:45 or 11 o'clock. I have 11 until QP.

The Chair: Okay: 11 until QP is fine.

Is that okay?

Some people who are on QP who want to praise the government will want to leave for a while, no doubt, because they'll have questions—right, Pierre?

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Carleton, CPC): Hopefully, there will be answers.

The Chair: Mr. Morantz, did you have your hand up?

Mr. Marty Morantz: No.

The Chair: Okay.

So it will be 11 till two o'clock and 3:30 till 6:30 Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. Okay?

Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian: Did you say Tuesday, “Wednesday” and Thursday? Wednesday, of course, are caucus meetings in the morning.

The Chair: Oh, yes, that's right, Wednesday is caucus. So on Thursday we'll have to go a little later.

Mr. Peter Julian: Wednesday night we could go until eight o'clock again. That would be another possibility. It would be another 3:30 to eight. All of us love being at caucus meetings.

The Chair: Yes. We can't not be at caucus.

Sean.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Will that reduce each caucus's witness total that we're supposed to propose?

The Chair: We can slate most of them in. We try to stick to six per hour and a half, but if necessary we've squeezed seven in before. If we have to do it, we can. We'll try to get between 90 and 100 witnesses, if we can, during that time period.

Okay? There's consent. We've agreed to do that.

Is there anything else we need to consider before we adjourn? Are there any other thoughts?

Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Chair, the witness list is submitted by what time, noon on Friday?

The Chair: On the witness list, if parties could submit at least their first 10 by Thursday evening at six and the remainder of their witnesses by six o'clock on Friday, that would be fine. If we had 40 proposed witnesses by six o'clock on Thursday evening, it would be much easier for you, right?

A voice: Yes.

The Chair: Could we do it that way, and then have the remainder in to the clerk by six on Friday?

Where we are is to have suggested witnesses, 10 from each party, by six o'clock on Thursday, with the remainder by six o'clock on Friday. Liberals should be proposing in the range of 60 to 65, Conservatives roughly 50, the Bloc roughly 20 and the NDP 18, just to give some ease to the clerk.

We will meet on Monday from 3:30 until eight, and on Tuesday from 11 to two and 3:30 to 6:30, on Wednesday from 3:30 to eight, and on Thursday from 11 to two and 3:30 to 6:30.

The clerk will have to forward the submissions to members as soon as possible. They will go onto this committee's web page.

Mr. Julian, go ahead, and then we'll adjourn.

• (1645)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Peter Julian: Has the Library of Parliament analyzed the briefs submitted so far? I would personally prefer to read a summary rather than all those briefs to determine which ones are the most useful.

Has an analysis been done?

Mr. Michaël Lambert-Racine: No, we have not summarized all the briefs that have been sent for the simple reason that we did not know whether they would be reused or even whether prebudget consultations would take place this winter. As I was saying earlier, when we prepare the report, they will be part of an appendix and will be included in the report.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: When will the minister be available to testify?

The Chair: I'm not sure. We will request it today and—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Could you request that it be part of the week-long hearings?

The Chair: No, he'll have to come in next.... There's no question about that. He's going to have to come in next week. We have already kind of indicated that, because we're only going to have the week of hearings, so he'll have to find an hour in there somewhere.

Okay, with that, we shall see everybody on Monday.

Have a good, restful weekend because you'll need it for next week.

The meeting is adjourned.

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