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# Standing Committee on Health

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Chair: Mr. Ron McKinnon





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• (1305)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Ron McKinnon (Coquitlam—Port Coquitlam, Lib.)):** I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 37 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health. The committee is meeting as requested by four members of the committee pursuant to Standing Order 106(4), to discuss urgent matters as described in the letter dated Tuesday, May 11.

I would now invite Ms. Rempel Garner to speak if she wishes.

**Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC):** Thank you, Chair, to you and the clerk for getting the meeting together today.

Per the letter we sent to the committee, I move:

That the Committee hold a meeting to invite the Deputy Minister of Health Canada, the Deputy Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, the Deputy Minister of Public Services and Procurement, the President of the Public Health Agency of Canada, the Chief Public Health Officer of Canada, the Vice President of Logistics and Operations for the Public Health Agency of Canada, and the head of the National Advisory Committee on Immunization, to discuss recent COVID-19 developments including, but not limited to,

Timeline for full vaccination for all Canadians

Mixed vaccinations

Communications on vaccinations

Proof of vaccination status

Pandemic border control measures

Guidance for vaccinated individuals / Benchmarking

An update on the Johnson and Johnson vaccine,

That the meeting be at least three hours in length, that the relevant departments for which officials have been requested be invited and asked to prioritize their attendance but that the meeting not be delayed if they are unable to prioritize attendance at the meeting, that the total time allotted for opening statements be limited to 5 minutes by witnesses for no more than 20 minutes total to ensure adequate time for questions to be posed by committee members, and that this meeting be held on or before the end of day on Friday, May 21, 2021.

I'm moving this motion today because there have been so many questions that have arisen on many of these issues. I do think it is our role as parliamentarians to ask questions of the government on these matters. I think that our committee has been doing good work in pushing the government to act on some of these matters and I think that Canadians have many questions.

I will also note that per the committee timeline, we are in a constituency week next week, which means that normally our committee would not meet, but there are many outstanding questions that I

think are very timely. If we're waiting two weeks for another meeting, it's problematic.

That's the genesis of this. Chair, you'll note how we structured the motion this time. If the ministers can come, great. If not, we want to proceed with the meeting next week should this pass, so that we're not in a situation where we were in the past where the meeting did not occur. Certainly we would like the deputy ministers of the aforementioned departments to be able to answer questions.

The motion is moved in the spirit of asking technical questions of the government and to ensure that we are getting answers on some of these very important issues for Canadians.

Thank you, Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Rempel Garner.

I see Mr. Kelloway's hand is up.

Go ahead.

**Mr. Mike Kelloway (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll just take a few moments here to talk a little bit about the motion.

I want to start by saying that I'm always happy to hear from those leading the charge when it comes to our COVID-19 response, especially around vaccine strategy. I think that, as a standing committee on health, it's incumbent on us to receive these very important updates from our very capable public servants.

However, I want to raise that once again we find ourselves meeting today, forced by a 106(4) motion, which I understand and, as MP Rempel Garner said, is a useful tool when it comes to pulling together meetings around issues of urgency. I don't think anyone here is denying the fact that we're in the midst of a global pandemic and that we should be hearing from our officials.

To be honest, Mr. Chair, I am mostly frustrated with the fact that, before even asking members to request an update from officials in a collaborative way, the opposition continues to make this what seems to be political and partisan, in order to make it seem as though they are the only ones wanting to hear from the witnesses on the motion. I want to state quite frankly that this is absolutely not the case, and I really want to reiterate that we're happy to receive an update from officials on these very important issues.

Mr. Chair, I take some concern with the fact that we're finding ourselves in a situation where some are seeming to instill fear in Canadians around the vaccine strategy. Our Public Health Agency, quite frankly, is world-renowned. I think we would all agree with that. We have some of the leading experts in the world as our public servants, and we need to trust them.

COVID-19—and everyone knows this—knows no borders, and it knows no political party. COVID-19 is not a partisan issue and frankly, Mr. Chair, I know I'm not the only one who is getting a little tired of its being treated as one by some.

I think that despite the challenges, quite frankly, Canada has and will continue to carefully manage our vaccine supply chain, and I have full trust in our government's commitment to get the vaccines in the arms of Canadians as soon as possible.

Colleagues, we've received another two million doses of Moderna and Pfizer, and we're on track to receive more than 20 million vaccines by the end of June. As we've said before and as I think we would all agree, there needs to be more work done, and we won't stop until all Canadians who wish to be vaccinated get their vaccine. However, all parliamentarians, in my opinion, also have a responsibility to ensure that their constituents and all Canadians know that science and evidence show that our strategy is working.

I want to take my province, for example, in terms of proof that our strategy is working. While I have the floor, Mr. Chair, I'll just take a brief moment to commend the hard work of Nova Scotia public health on our vaccine rollout. Our provincial dashboard has regular updates on the number of vaccines administered to date. Yesterday, for example, Nova Scotia announced that the province had administered its 400,000th dose right here, in my riding of Cape Breton—Canso. As of today, close to 520,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccine have been administered.

Our province has doubled the number of vaccines in less than a month, after celebrating 200,000 doses on April 16, I believe it was, and this week, Mr. Chair, we'll be receiving over 50,000 doses of the mRNA vaccines. The province has reached the vaccine coverage rate of more than 80% of people aged 60 and older. This means that older Nova Scotians are protected against the spread of COVID-19, which is a key element in the Nova Scotia vaccine plan.

Today the province announced that adults between the ages of 35 and 39 are now eligible to book their appointments. This age demographic accounts for approximately 63,000 Nova Scotians.

Clearly, our rollout strategy is working. We know that it is the will of the provinces and territories to listen to the advice of NACI to better understand the best course of action for provincial rollout plans.

Obviously, all provinces and territories are unique and have unique COVID guidelines and strategies, but here in the Atlantic region, we've shown that the role of the federal government in supporting provinces in the rollout has been successful. It's been a true collaboration, in fact.

As I said before, I think it's important that we listen to officials. I think that having experts, professionals and scientists here to ex-

plain that our campaign is working is a great way to address the fearmongering and fake news that continues to be spread throughout the country by some. I am sure I can speak for my colleagues on the government side when I say that we welcome the opportunity to ask questions and get real facts on the record.

Again, there appears to be little desire to collaborate among some, but, and with respect to my colleagues here today, here is what I think we could have had. We could have had a collegial discussion on inviting the officials to discuss the topics in the motion. Again, we have no issues with that at all.

I think MP O'Connell was the one who said, at the last Standing Order 106(4) meeting, that we need to be working together on this committee. We need to ensure that any fear and hesitancy that Canadians have around vaccines is managed, and that all Canadians know that our world-class Public Health Agency knows the science and knows the facts, and those facts and science can be trusted. Over the course of many months I thought we were making some progress, but today I do have some doubts on that.

● (1310)

Just before I wrap up, Mr. Chair, I'll remind the committee that we find this 106(4) motion being put out just before the constituency week. I think it was MP Davies who raised this before, which is that, quite frankly, constituency weeks are an important part of our parliamentary responsibilities, as is our work in Ottawa—or at least virtual Ottawa for most of us.

Next week was in no way going to be a break for me or for my staff. With Nova Scotia in another lockdown, my plan was to check in with my constituents. I've been reaching out through my office just to see how they're coping. I have no doubt that we all—everyone here—had planned a busy week ahead. Again, I want to reiterate that I have no issue inviting the officials next week. I'm happy to hear from them.

Here is what we need to improve as a committee, and it's just my opinion. I would really appreciate if, moving forward, we could have some respect for the important work we do during constituency weeks, as well as our work on the Hill, and approach these types of meetings in a collaborative way.

Finally, I've gotten to know each and every one of you and I know that each one of you on the committee want to achieve collaboration, so I believe we can do that.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Kelloway.

We go now to Ms. O'Connell.

Go ahead, please.

**Ms. Jennifer O'Connell (Pickering—Uxbridge, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank my colleague, Mr. Kelloway, for his intervention.

I'll try not to repeat anything that he has said. I will, off the top though, say that inviting officials is absolutely not an issue, certainly for me and I think anybody on the government side. I won't speak for them.

I think what's frustrating and what I find frankly insulting as a parliamentarian is the treatment of our colleague, Mr. Davies. Long before even I was on this committee, the committee came to an agreement about the nature of studying for COVID. It came to an agreement about sectioning it off and each party would have a relative section or an area of study as their priority. That agreement has been fulfilled every step of the way. We were getting to Mr. Davies' and the NDP's area of focus and the rug was pulled out from under them.

Just as a parliamentarian, I'm sure there is going to be testimony that will be not always favourable for the government. That's the nature of committees. That's democracy. It's nothing we're afraid of. Hearing good information is good information, but it's like that bond and that agreement amongst committee members.... If you can't stand by your word what do you have?

What's frustrating is the fact that this motion, had there been any discussions.... Frankly you don't have to discuss with us. That's completely the committee members' prerogative to move a motion when they deem fit, but doing a 106(4) forces the chair, in the middle of our regularly scheduled meetings, to cancel the meeting for today and the witnesses that were scheduled to begin on the NDP's portion of the study. Frankly, we had witnesses from Switch Health that were on there. I know that's a critically important topic for our Quebec members in particular and I'm sure for all of our members.

I don't believe for one second that there was a misunderstanding of when that meeting would have to be scheduled, because it would have had to have been scheduled by the chair within five days. That would have meant a regularly scheduled meeting on Friday or on Sunday, which would have meant.... I don't have a problem working Sundays, but I think it's critically unfair to ask the clerk and the interpreters to come in. The suggestion that I'm sure the Conservatives will make is that we could have met any time throughout the week. Well, no, because other committees are meeting and we all are restrained by the meeting time. That's actually normal in normal parliamentary times when there are limited rooms, etc. You have to work within the House schedule that we oftentimes have.

To do it this way is incredibly frustrating. We could have spent this entire meeting hearing from witnesses. We could have heard from Switch Health. We could have heard from Dr. Morris, who is a professor on infectious diseases. We could have heard from James Maskalyk, who is a professor of emergency medicine. We could have heard from World Animal Protection. We could have heard from Dr. Knight, who is an associate professor in a faculty of law.

We actually could have spent this meeting hearing from witnesses on a study that was agreed to. At the end of that meeting, as is normal committee business, a motion could have been made on the floor to then have a meeting in the next constituency week or by the 17th or whatever date that committee members felt appropriate. By doing it this way, it has shown me the absolute disrespect for com-

mittee members and that agreed-upon study and that schedule. The disrespect of.... If the Conservatives aren't interested in the subject matter, they will disrupt the committee business.

• (1315)

I don't agree with all of the testimony that Conservative members' witnesses have brought forward, but it is their absolute right to propose those witnesses and to have that area of study. This committee agreed on this format. For Conservatives to be obstructionists when it is the NDP's turn to have that study for no reason other than to say that they don't care about the witnesses scheduled for today, they don't care about that area of study and they want to just do what they want to do is offensive to me as a parliamentarian.

I fully support the motion in terms of calling these technical witnesses, as Mr. Kelloway pointed out. He made the case in terms of hearing this information, but to do it in this way and to obstruct the NDP from getting to their area of study, I think is absolutely disrespectful to this committee. The motion could have been made after we heard from these witnesses. We could have had a fully productive day.

If it was such an emergency topic, there is absolutely no reason we couldn't have heard from witnesses today, gotten that testimony and had a full day of actually doing the committee's work. Instead, this was an obstructionist move simply to try to annoy us, I guess, in a constituency week. Again, I have absolutely no problem meeting.

The only thing the Conservatives achieved with this is breaking their bond and demonstrating to this committee that it's their way or no way. They don't care about the other areas of subjects or study. They just want to talk about what they want to talk about.

We're the minority in this, but I take great offence to the disrespect that I think has been shown here. If other members are okay putting their subject study aside, that's fine. It was a day during the pandemic when we actually could have heard testimony on the pandemic and then had a motion on the floor, which would have totally been in order. We would have had the same results, which is a meeting next week. The Conservatives don't like the subject matter and they're uninterested and just want to obstruct the committee from doing its work, and that's what I take great offence to.

I'm happy to have these meetings next week. I'm happy to have officials come, but I am deeply offended and sorry for Mr. Davies for not being able to actually use this meeting as a productive meeting. I don't know what the Conservatives thought they were gaining in this. We'll have the meeting. We'll hear the testimony and look forward to it. They have to live with how they conduct themselves as parliamentarians.

Thanks, Mr. Chair.

• (1320)

**The Chair:** Thanks, Ms. O'Connell.

We go now to Mr. Davies.

Go ahead, please.

**Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP):** It sounds like, from towards the end of the comments of my colleague Ms. O'Connell, that we're going to agree to this. Frankly, I'm looking forward to having a short meeting where we can just pass the motion and move on.

There are a few things I want to say. I haven't heard so many nice things said about me at one meeting in a long time, so I probably shouldn't say a word.

I think what I'm getting from this on all sides is that we need a better process for determining our agenda going forward. I think it does speak to the less than optimal functioning of our subcommittee. We do have a subcommittee on agenda, which I think, with great respect, falls under the authority of the chair to call. I'm going to put that bug in the chair's ear to maybe use that. All parties are represented on it, and I think that we should be meeting on some sort of regular basis to deal with issues.

I appreciate the concern for my study. I think today would have been the fourth meeting of the four meetings I'm entitled to. I must state for the record that I don't take any offence at the 106(4) application, nor would I from any party. It's open to any four members of this committee to request a 106(4) meeting. Frankly, it's open to any four Liberals. There are five Liberals on this committee who could sign one anytime they want as well.

Although I am tired, as I know we all are, and I don't have the resources—I think Luc and I are just single members on this committee and don't have the resources, perhaps, of the other parties—I have come to believe that it's probably a good practice for this committee to meet every week, even on break weeks and at least until Parliament ends, because we are in a pandemic and we are the health committee. Although we would like this pandemic to be over and everything to be fixed and cured, it seems that every week there are serious issues that have to be looked at.

I think it's also important to note that we all have to be a little bit more sanguine and sensitive about not finding partisan offence in what I think is just normal parliamentary and committee work. I don't actually see any partisan, aggressive or inappropriate motive in the motion put forward today. I think they're raising really important, current issues right now.

I was just doing that panel, as I was saying, before I came to committee, and one thing that's very clear right now is that 85% of flights in this country are operating between provinces. We have rules on international flights coming to Canada. We effectively have very few rules, if any, within Canada. That's a serious issue.

There's a study that showed that there's an average of 17 flights per day in the two-week period that was just done. It showed at least one person tested positive coming off of those flights. There is clearly data showing that there is transmission of the virus interprovincially. I think that's something we really need to look at right now. There are no quarantine or testing rules interprovincially. I

have a feeling that's a gap that all members of this committee might want to look at. I think it's listed in this motion.

I think we're all guilty of sometimes turning the partisan heat up. It's a good message from Mike, Jennifer and all of us to recognize that Canadians are expecting us at the committee to focus on the issues and get the best information that we can and to probe.

Having said that, I think we have to also not be so quick to find partisan offence in different perspectives. It's our job as opposition in the government to expose facts that the government may prefer not to see and to challenge narratives.

• (1325)

Let's face it, we all come to this committee as parliamentarians, but we all represent our parties as well. I don't think there's a person on this committee who hasn't, at one point or another, taken a partisan line on an issue. They shouldn't feel embarrassed about that. That's what we do and that's how our messy democracy works. We hammer away at issues, we challenge and we introduce different issues. There are some we want to look at and some we don't and we don't get consensus on these things.

Anyway, I don't want to prattle on. I support the motion. I think we should be meeting next week.

I want to say one thing as well. Interrupting meetings is a reality in this place. I want to state this for my Conservative colleagues. I don't view any attempt to disrespect on their part. I don't think that's the motive. I think they're motivated by a legitimate desire to see this issue studied and that's just what happens. Our committee agenda gets interrupted all the time. Estimates come forward and we have to delay our witnesses. Legislation comes before the committee and we have to delay our agenda. Luc has been waiting for the last two meetings of his PMPRB study for months.

I think we have to be aware if our colleagues are abusing the process to interfere with the agenda, but I don't sense that happening here. I don't sense that from any of my colleagues on this committee from any party. I think it's a good reminder for us to refocus on what's important and recognize that we're doing the work Canadians expect us to be working on, as the health committee, on their part and to be probing, exploring, questioning and challenging. Nobody should feel badly about that. That's what I think this motion will allow us to do next week.

Thanks very much everybody for listening. I'm going to vote in favour of this motion.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Davies.

I see no further hands raised. I guess we shall call the question, in that case.

Do we wish to pass this by unanimous consent? Is there any desire to have a recorded vote?

**Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner:** Sure, why not?

**The Chair:** Why not unanimous or why not recorded?

**Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner:** I just want to make sure it's clear that this is passing, that's all. Maybe we should have a recorded vote.

**The Chair:** Very well.

Mr. Clerk, please conduct the vote.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 11; nays 0)

**The Chair:** I think that one squeaked in.

Thank you, everyone. I think that brings our business to a close.

I would advise the committee that I am planning to do a subcommittee meeting following the end of Mr. Davies' portion of the study and just prior to the PMPRB last two meetings, so that we can plan what we're doing following those meetings and so we'll be able to bring witnesses in, should that be our intent.

Thank you all.

With that, we are now adjourned.

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