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—
Chair

Mr. Pat O'Brien

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• (1105)

[Translation]

The Clerk of the Committee: We are not going to proceed to elect a chairman.

[English]

I'm ready to receive nominations for the chair. Are there any nominations?

Mr. Rota.

Mr. Anthony Rota (Nipissing—Timiskaming, Lib.): I'd like to nominate Pat O'Brien.

The Clerk: Are there any other nominations?

(Motion agreed to)

Mr. Claude Bachand (Saint-Jean, BQ): I move a motion to applaud the new chair.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Clerk: Before Mr. O'Brien takes the chair, we should proceed to the election of the vice-chairs. Pursuant to the special order adopted on Tuesday, October 5, the first vice-chair shall be a member of the official opposition.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): I would like to nominate Rick Casson.

The Clerk: Are there any other nominations?

Hon. Bill Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): Does he know he's being railroaded into this?

An hon. member: He's well aware.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

(Motion agreed to)

The Clerk: Are there any nominations for the other opposition vice-chair?

[Translation]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ): I move that my colleague Claude Bachand do take the chair.

[English]

The Clerk: Are there any other nominations?

(Motion agreed to)

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Chair (Mr. Pat O'Brien (London—Fanshawe, Lib.)):

Colleagues, thank you very much. I appreciate the confidence you've shown in electing me chair of this committee. It will represent the third opportunity I've had in my 11 years on Parliament Hill to chair SCONDVA. I appreciate this opportunity very much. I won't make any great acceptance speech. I appreciate the applause.

I'm very happy to see Mr. Casson and Mr. Bachand elected as vice-chairs.

If you would permit me one editorial comment that I think is pretty much agreed to on this committee, this is by nature, and properly so, a partisan place. We represent various political parties. We have various perspectives to share on behalf of Canadians. That brings us into partisan conflict in the democratic sense, and that's as it should be. I have been impressed, in my time on this committee, that wherever possible at the committee level—and I think SCONDVA has been a leading example of this—we've been able to keep the partisanship to the necessary minimum.

I think members on both sides of the table from the various parties understand that we have some very important work to do in this committee. There is a consensus around here that we want to try to undertake an important defence review, for example. We want to rethink, on behalf of Canadians, exactly what we want our Canadian Forces to be, the jobs we want them to do, and the equipment they need to have.

I've been very impressed by the fact that we've been able to operate, as I say, on a cooperative basis, with the obvious partisanship that's going to be called for from time to time. I think that in comparison to some other standing committees we've been able to keep that in check for the most part, because it has served us to keep it in check. I thank all the returning members who have contributed to that kind of modus operandi for this committee. It's my hope, and I'm sure it's the hope of the other members, that we'll be able to proceed in that same spirit in the important work we do.

I thank you again for electing me chair. I very much look forward to the work we're going to do over the next weeks and months, who knows how many. But however many there are, we have important work to do, and I know we're all anxious to move into that work.

Before we begin to consider just where we want to go in terms of committee work, there are a couple of routine matters to be dealt with. Maybe we could clear those up first.

Also, I have a letter from Mr. Blaikie, which we'll deal with shortly.

Mr. Hill.

●(1110)

Mr. Jay Hill (Prince George—Peace River, CPC): Mr. Chairman, my understanding was that the primary function of the meeting today was to elect a chairman and vice-chairs. That's about all that's on the agenda.

I certainly have no problem with having a free-ranging discussion on the nature of the business of the committee in the coming days, weeks, and months.

But with regard to these routine motions, some of them might be problematic, given the new dynamics of the House and the committee structure. I would seek consent from the committee members to put these off until the next meeting in order to allow members from all parties to have a chance to review these so-called routine motions.

The Chair: Let me take it as a suggestion. I don't think we need it as a motion. You've heard Mr. Hill's idea. Is there any discussion about moving this to the next meeting so that the members will have a chance to review the various routine motions? Then we've agreed that we will make this the first item of business at the next meeting of this committee.

Thank you, Mr. Hill.

We'll now deal with Mr. Blaikie's letter. With your permission, I'll read it, Mr. Blaikie. It is addressed to Ms. Crandall, the clerk of our committee.

This letter is to inform you that at the coming meeting of the national defence committee, I will be introducing a motion to have the committee, as its first order of business, examine the Department of National Defence's purchase of four former Upholder-class submarines. Bill Blaikie, MP, Elmwood-Transcona.

We'll deal with this as a notice of motion. We've tabled the routine motions until the next meeting. This would require 48 hours' written notice. Why don't we treat this as the 48 hours' written notice from Mr. Blaikie, and we'll deal with it as the second order of business at the next committee meeting, following the routine motions.

Normally, this is quite a short meeting. I understand that some members may have to leave in order to attend to other duties. But I think we're quite at liberty to have a free-ranging discussion about where the committee wants to go.

Let me start with Mr. Blaikie.

Hon. Bill Blaikie: Mr. Chairman, I understand the procedural requirements, but at the same time, I think there is an expectation that the committee might make some determination, even today, as to whether or not it considers the sub purchase and all the issues attached to that as worthy of the attention of this committee.

When I initially drafted that letter, I wasn't sure where everybody was on this. But I sense a consensus on the committee that this is something the committee should look at, so I don't think it needs to be the subject of any particular wrangling. Perhaps we could agree today that this is something we want to study, and we could ask the steering committee or a working group to look at developing an initial program on how we might want to go about this. It's not perfectly clear exactly how we would go about this or what we would want to look into, and I don't pretend to know all that. But I think there is a will to look into it. So perhaps you would be willing

to seek the unanimous consent of the committee to do so. I haven't discussed this with anybody else, but it seems to me that would be a reasonable course of action.

●(1115)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Blaikie.

We'll hear from whoever wants to speak, and then we'll see how we dispose of this suggestion from Mr. Blaikie.

First is Mr. Hill, followed by Mr. Martin.

Mr. Jay Hill: I certainly support the intent of Mr. Blaikie's proposed motion. In light of his remarks, which further elaborated on where he sees this going, I think that's quite appropriate. I think we would want to get an indication from DND as to how any investigation by the committee could dovetail with the inquiries that have been announced by the navy so that we don't have duplication. Certainly I think our party would be supportive of that. As we learn more about the process and how we can augment any inquiry that's being conducted by the navy, I think it would be most appropriate.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hill. Maybe you can help us with that.

I want to recognize and congratulate my colleague Keith Martin for his appointment as parliamentary secretary to the Minister of National Defence. Congratulations, Keith, and the floor is yours.

Hon. Keith Martin (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I can certainly understand, Mr. Blaikie, where you want to go with this, and I'm not averse to this whatsoever. But I would suggest, along the lines of what Mr. Hill said, that perhaps if we wait until the board of inquiry finishes its job, then we'll know where we can go after that in order to springboard from there and ask—

Hon. Bill Blaikie: I don't think that's what Mr. Hill said. Mr. Hill did not say to wait until the board of inquiry finished its job. Don't put words in other people's mouths.

Hon. Keith Martin: All right; let me finish what I'm going to say.

Perhaps what we can do is wait until the board of inquiry finishes its job. Then the results of that inquiry will enable us to pursue a course of investigation that might be more relevant. The board of inquiry may answer the questions the committee wants to have answered or it may not, but I would suggest we wait until that happens so we're not duplicating what takes place.

I think what is perhaps more important and more relevant to the needs of the military is the defence review. I hope this committee doesn't get sidelined from what I think is far more important, because it deals with the larger issues of manpower, training, and equipment that I think must be dealt with. I would just suggest that we not occupy our time solely with the sub issue but that we ensure we're going to address the issues of the defence review, which deals with the larger scope of the needs of our forces.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Martin.

[Translation]

Mr. Bachand, please.

Mr. Claude Bachand: Thank you Mr. Chairman.

From the outset I want to say that I support what my colleague Bill of the NDP has proposed. I think that it is important that, as politicians—

[English]

The Chair: Does everyone else have translation? They've left the chairman without translation.

Sorry, Claude.

Mr. Claude Bachand: *C'est correct.* I'm just telling them you owe me five beers now.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Well, we will have to rectify that at some proper time.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand: I was saying that from the outset I support the motion put forward by my colleague Blaikie. You know our stand. The government decided to entrust the navy with the investigation while we were asking for an independent inquiry. Politicians, in their capacity as decision-makers, should certainly have a say in this matter. In my opinion it is important that we give a more political consideration to this issue. Now, should we put this matter immediately on the agenda? We will have to see. It is very likely that at the next meeting the Sub-Committee on Agenda and Procedure, which is a smaller committee will have to be established. I agree that this issue should be the first one to be considered, however there are certain things that we should not forget. Mr. Martin has raised the matter of defence policy. I think we are going to have to be involved in that policy. Further, we should not totally set aside the matter of cooperation between Canada and the United States. We worked at it for two or three years. If we were to forget about this matter, it would mean a loss of two or three years of work. I think that Canada-US cooperation could very well fit together in the policy review.

Therefore, I agree that as elected members, we should have a look at the submarine issue, and I also agree that the Sub-Committee on Agenda and Procedure should be the one to prioritize the discussions.

• (1120)

[English]

The Chair: Merci.

Mr. Blaikie.

Hon. Bill Blaikie: Mr. Chairman, I have a couple of things. First, all these other things that have been mentioned, with the possible exception of what Mr. Martin had to say, are not mutually exclusive. The committee is able to keep more than one ball in the air at the same time. We could hear some witnesses on the subs after we've had a discussion about what the board of inquiry is looking at and what it is not, because the board of inquiry's terms of reference can be quite narrow in terms of what it is they're to do.

The other thing of course is that a board of inquiry takes a long time. My experience with boards of inquiry is that they can take years, and I think Canadians would like some of these things to be looked at possibly before the next election or whatever. I think these things can happen in tandem or in parallel, not in duplication but in parallel, because there are things we can look at that the board of inquiry is not entitled to look at. The board of inquiry won't be looking at what the Canadian government knew or didn't know when it bought the subs or whether the government was in possession of the report by the U.K. Parliament, particularly on the HMS *Upholder*, which became the HMCS *Chicoutimi*. All these kinds of things are not the subject of the board of inquiry's mandate.

We're going to have the international policy review document, I'm told through the grapevine, sometime in November; perhaps it might even be referred to this committee. So we will have that kind of review work to continue doing in the Canada-U.S. study, but it wouldn't hurt for us to have one day a week or whatever devoted to hearing the witnesses we decide we want to hear on the submarines.

And while I'm at it, Mr. Chairman—I was going to do this on a point of order, but Mr. Martin has already made my point, it seems to me—I would like to object formally to the presence of the parliamentary secretary to the Minister of Defence on this committee. Now, you know I did that before, and we actually passed a motion expelling or requesting the removal of the parliamentary secretary from this committee. That was David Price, and he took the hint and never came back.

I think what you see here today is exactly what's wrong with this system. I've always objected, even going back twenty years to the McGrath committee, to the presence of parliamentary secretaries on committees. It's ironic to me, when we're trying to deal with the democratic deficit and giving committees more power, that now parliamentary secretaries are sworn in; they're part of the cabinet. They're even more bound to government policy than they were before.

Mr. Martin here is not a member of this committee. Mr. Martin is a kind of double agent. He's here to represent the government, and that's perfectly obvious from what he just said. He shouldn't be here.

It's nothing personal, Keith; it's just that you should not be here. You're here representing the government. You're here to give orders—or give hints if not orders—to the government backbenchers, and I find it offensive that you're in the room. You're the person I was questioning yesterday in the House of Commons who wouldn't give answers to questions we had, questions this committee presumably wants to ask, and now we have a person who's associated with the culture of no answers on our side, in the committee. Who are we trying to kid?

I think we need to deal with this as a committee, and I give notice now of a motion I will move at some point having to do with the presence of the parliamentary secretary.

The Chair: Fair enough.

Because we accepted Mr. Hill's suggestion that we deal with the routine motions at the next meeting, our status as I speak right now is that we're barely constituted. We can't conduct any business whatsoever.

We're now having a free-flowing discussion as colleagues about things such as the presence of a parliamentary secretary on a committee, which has come up at various committees. Let's face it, that's going to be hammered out by the whips and House leaders.

I will remind my colleagues on the committee and inform those who weren't here the last time that we did have a response from the chief government whip of the day, Mr. Bélanger, who refused to remove Mr. Price, the parliamentary secretary to the Minister of National Defence at that time. He cited various statutes, parliamentary precedents, and so on. Just to correct my friend, Mr. Price did in fact continue to come fairly regularly to meetings of SCONDVA. I'm not trying in any way to say what the committee should do. I'm just fleshing out what that experience was.

• (1125)

Hon. Bill Blaikie: He kept his own counsel.

The Chair: He acted more as an observer.

So that's to be determined.

What I'm telling you is that if we want to put the routine motions over to the next committee meeting, as Jay suggested, which is fine, then all we can do today is emote a bit and share some thoughts. The floor is open for comments or questions from any member about anything.

If not, then I suggest that we at least hire our researchers so that if we give them today some sense of where we might want to go, they can at least get going on it. Or do you want to continue to lay it all over? I'm in the hands of the committee. At this point we really can't do anything as a committee, other than share some ideas.

Mr. Hill, what's your thought?

Mr. Jay Hill: Are you suggesting that we adopt the first motion dealing with the Parliamentary Information and Research Service?

The Chair: I'm suggesting that we at least do that.

Mr. Jay Hill: I so move.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Mr. Bachand.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand: I would like to get confirmation that the National Defence and Veterans Affairs Committee meetings will take place on Mondays and Wednesdays afternoon.

[English]

The Chair: That's a good point. That's the information I was given this morning by our government whip. Formerly we had met on Tuesdays and Thursdays, as I recall. My information is that it's Mondays and Wednesdays at 3:30. There is a rotational system that all of the House leaders have worked out.

In this room, the war room, which is aptly named for our committee, a lot of the discussions of the Second World War with the military and political leaders of the day apparently took place. So it's aptly named.

Madam Clerk, do you have anything to add on routine motions?

The Clerk: If the committee wants to stand them over, it can do so. It's just that without the routine motions, we don't have a system for notices, rules for the witnesses—

Mr. Jay Hill: We're not calling any witnesses until the next meeting anyway.

The Clerk: No, but we don't have any way of paying them when we do.

Mr. Jay Hill: We'll make sure they can get paid before we call them.

The Chair: The next meeting of this committee will be next Monday at 3:30 in this room, at which time we will first look at routine motions.

With regard to your item, Bill, I can't even receive this formally today, unfortunately. But we all have a sense of where you want to go. I think there's a consensus that this committee is going to want to look at the issue of the submarine purchase. I don't want to speak for Mr. Martin, but what I heard him suggest was not that we not do that, but that—

Hon. Bill Blaikie: That's what he was trying to get away with.

The Chair: No. If I might, Bill—and I want to go to Keith to let him clarify it—I heard him raise the matter of a timeline.

Let me go to Mr. Martin for clarification.

Hon. Keith Martin: I'd like to clarify for Bill two points. First, I think mathematics is going to trump what you want to do anyway, but that's going to be left to the whips to deal with, not us here.

Second, I'm not suggesting at all that we don't look at the sub issue. There will be a preliminary report this year, not years from now, and hopefully the final report will come very soon after that. I'm just suggesting that this committee has a lot of important things to deal with. The review is something that deals with the armed forces at large.

There are a lot of challenges that all of us here know about and want to address with respect to our armed forces. I just hope that one issue, the subs, does not dominate that, and we do not duplicate work that is going to be done by the inquiry. I'm suggesting that we allow the inquiry to do its report, either the preliminary report...and look at that and say if there are gaps in here that the committee wants to pursue, then we will pursue them. I hope we don't do work that is unnecessary, which I'm sure you don't want to do. I'm sure you don't want to duplicate work that's going to be done by the inquiry.

I'm just saying that a more prudent and effective way for this committee to work, if it so chooses, is to do the review and then when the inquiry is finished on the subs, or the preliminary report comes out, to pursue the subs if it wants to.

• (1130)

The Chair: All right. Thank you.

Mr. Hill.

Mr. Jay Hill: With all due respect to my colleague across the way, what he said in his opening comment was “wait until the inquiry”. We’ve heard this type of nonsense over and over again in the House. When he sat on the other side of the House, he used to bristle at the government when its favourite line was “wait until the inquiry”. I remember that with the APEC inquiry, “wait until the inquiry does its work” was the slogan we heard constantly.

Given the remarks that we just heard again, I find myself in agreement with Mr. Blaikie, following his intervention concerning the ex-parliamentary secretary, Mr. Price. Mr. Price did conduct himself quite differently at committee, as I recall. For the parliamentary secretary to sit here and suggest what may or may not be prudent or effective for the committee is a real problem.

I think all of us on this side have already addressed Mr. Martin’s supposed concerns about potential duplication. We don’t want to see that, but as Mr. Blaikie stated—and I fully support him—this committee can look at things connected with the decision to first purchase the submarines. It can look at decisions that were potentially made about how the curtailment of adequate funding potentially resulted in safety hazards in how those submarines operated, which will be far beyond what the inquiry is going to look at.

The inquiry is going to have, to my understanding, a fairly narrow scope: looking at what caused the fire, how it was contained, how the tragedy resulted from that, and whether procedures could have been done differently. That’s not looking at the political decisions to buy the subs to begin with and whether or not the government was aware of the buyer-beware format that resulted from the purchase of the submarines themselves. All of that is open to this committee to pursue, and it has nothing to do with the military’s inquiry on the specific fire on the *Chicoutimi*.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

If I might, I’ll speak from the chair because I don’t have any other names. I’ve been in the position of parliamentary secretary, not for defence but for international trade, so I understand that role. It’s handled differently by different members, but I understand that role, and I understand the objection Mr. Blaikie has. Others would counter that and say no, the parliamentary secretary should be on the committee but shouldn’t try to steer the direction or whatever.

The reality is that we’re having a bit of a free-flowing discussion here today. We all know, as most of us are veteran parliamentarians, that essentially House committees have a fair bit of power in what they decide to do. The first time I chaired this committee, the then foreign minister of the day was Mr. Axworthy. He wasn’t very enamoured of this committee looking into what continues to be the controversial subject of missile defence. The committee went right ahead and held the only extensive hearings on the question of missile defence that have ever been held so far in the last 11 years.

Mr. Martin understands that, and I think the parliamentary secretaries all understand that the committee will seize itself of whatever it decides to seize itself of at the time it determines. No minister can stop that, and that’s the reality.

Now we’re in a new situation, one none of us have experienced. I don’t know if Mr. Blaikie...probably with his long experience he may

have been here during a minority government before; I can’t recall. I never have and I don’t think the rest of us have. As Keith mentioned, the numbers are different and the reality is there are more on that side of the table now than on this side.

My experience on this committee is that frankly it hasn’t mattered very much. I meant what I said, and I know you’ll agree, those who have been here, that we’ve pretty much operated through a very strong consensus on both sides of the table. As an example, there’s a consensus that we’ve shortchanged our armed forces over the last number of years.

That’s not just by Liberal governments, by the way, but by governments of other political stripes. We have cut too deeply and we’re paying the price, and we have to rethink where we’re going. We have to rethink the mandate we want our armed forces to follow, the equipment they need, the training they need, etc. That’s the way we’ll continue to proceed.

I feel we should take up the issue of the sub purchase, no doubt about it. I strongly feel this as a Canadian, as a member of Parliament, and as the chair of this committee. The question will be when and how soon this committee decides. When this committee decides it’s going to take it up, it’s going to take it up, and it’s going to move forward, but that’s for another day.

If I can, I’ll just say a couple of other things. The issue of the defence reviews has been mentioned. I agree with Mr. Martin on that; we all do. That’s a very important topic. We’ve been hanging fire on that, and Mr. Hill and a number of us expressed frustration before the last election. We knew this was coming down the pipe. We wanted to get into it but we didn’t know when something called “the election” would happen. Well, it’s happened, and now I agree with Mr. Martin; it’s also going to be very important for us to get into that.

Monsieur Bachand has mentioned the issue of Canadian-American relations in defence. We were well into that topic, but it needs to be folded into the wider defence review. Now, as happens in public life, here comes this issue of the submarines out of the blue. I agree with Mr. Blaikie. They all dovetail nicely, and we can walk and chew gum at the same time. Perhaps we’re going to decide we are going to ask the staff to do some preliminary work on an investigation of the subs while we possibly look at our timeline in taking up the defence review.

I want to ask Mr. Martin something on behalf of the committee. One of the things I did find as a PS, where a PS can be useful to a committee, is that you do have a kind of direct line to the minister, although we can go there directly. Maybe, Keith, we could ask you to determine the timeline for the committee on when we would be seized of this defence review. We are anxious, all of us on both sides, to get into the question of the defence review.

Those are my comments. I see some other hands and I'll take them, and I suggest we adjourn when members have raised the points they want.

We will reconvene on Monday afternoon. We will deal with routine motions and we'll make some decisions on where we're going to go, what order of business we're going to do, and when. This committee will determine what it's going to do, and let's be very clear about that. I think all members understand that.

Mrs. Gallant.

• (1135)

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Mr. Chairman, the defence policy supports the foreign affairs policy. Have the foreign affairs committee and department completed their review?

The Chair: I believe not, but I don't know.

Can somebody speak to that?

Hon. Bill Blaikie: It's all the same one, isn't it?

The Chair: Well, there's a foreign affairs review committee that's being seized of the foreign affairs review and the defence review. They're complementary but they're not exactly the same thing.

Angela.

The Clerk: Actually, my colleague is the clerk of the foreign affairs committee.

The Chair: So they have not proceeded on the foreign affairs review.

Mr. Martin.

Hon. Keith Martin: I can answer. Foreign Affairs, Defence, Trade, and Development are all having their reviews, Cheryl, but they're all taking place together and they're trying to integrate them. It's a good question. I don't know when they're going to release that, but that's something I'll endeavour to find out.

Hon. Bill Blaikie: It's all under the umbrella called "international policy".

The Chair: Right, but Cheryl, anything this committee wants to do by way of a review of defence is not contingent on us waiting for Foreign Affairs to do their work. We can proceed as soon as we're seized of it, but that's something that has to come from the minister, I assume, or from the House. I know the committee is anxious to get into that work, so I wanted to ask Mr. Martin to relay that to the minister, and as your chair now, I will also relay it to the minister.

Did you have other comments?

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: I just thought it would make more sense to have the foreign policy in place so we'd know what the requirements of the military were going to be prior to setting our review in motion.

• (1140)

The Chair: That's a valid opinion; we'll keep that in mind.

Mr. MacKenzie.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie (Oxford, CPC): As you know, Mr. Chair, I'm brand new to this, and you and I have had some conversation.

What I want to say is that I would hope this committee would do what's good for the military as much as we can in a non-partisan way. From Mr. Martin's comments today, it would certainly appear that his position is not non-partisan, and it will make it difficult, I believe, if we have some obstructionist positions taken by Mr. Martin. If in fact what we're going to do is what's good for the military, it has to be done more in a non-partisan way.

The Chair: I thank you for that.

Are there other comments?

Hon. Bill Blaikie: I move to adjourn.

The Chair: I have a motion to adjourn. We'll reconvene Monday afternoon at 3:30 in this room.

Thank you very much.

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