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—
Chair

Mr. Rick Casson

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• (1545)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Rick Casson (Lethbridge, CPC)): I'll call the meeting an open forum now to deal with the Bloc motion.

I'll turn it over to Mr. Bouchard for the first comment.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Bouchard (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, BQ): Would you like me to present the motion? I believe all members have received a copy of it. Correct? Should I read it, or is that unnecessary? What would you like me to do?

[English]

The Chair: We all have a copy here, so it will be fine if you just address your comments to the motion that is presented.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Bouchard: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Last week and again today, the Bloc Québécois has moved a motion calling on the committee to examine the specifics of Canada's mission in Afghanistan because, as I feel we must acknowledge, we do not have a great deal of information to go on. Before sending men and women off to war, the government has a duty to first inform parliamentarians of the specifics of their mission. It is unacceptable to us that as parliamentarians, we have been kept in the dark and that many of our questions have gone unanswered. I believe this is the first opportunity that we have had to debate this very important issue here in the National Defence Committee.

As I said earlier, we tabled the motion because many questions remain unanswered. We have a role to play in terms of educating and informing our fellow citizens. Every day, all of us hear comments and receive questions from constituents. Here's a brief sample of the questions we field. How long with the mission to Afghanistan last? How much will it cost? What is Canada's role in Afghanistan? Many Quebecers and Canadians are concerned about the lack of information and are not willing to support extending the mission without getting more facts and without seeing a genuine debate on the subject take place.

May I remind you that in November 2005, the current Minister of National Defence, while in opposition, stated that it was important for the objectives, success criteria and duration of the mission to be debated, along with the status of our personnel, before expanding the role of our military. The minister expressed concern at the time about whether withdrawing from the mission was a plausible option.

The Bloc Québécois totally agrees with the Minister's statement, hence our reason for introducing this motion today. In order to know if this mission can be successfully carried out, we need to have as much information as possible. Unfortunately, many of our questions have yet to be answered.

We need to have a debate and to find out more about this mission. In our opinion, we need to act responsibly and shed more light on the subject. I repeat, we need to educate and inform the public. We need to be open about our actions because lives are at stake. Before we make any life and death decisions, we need more information.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'll have more comments to make later, as will my colleague.

[English]

The Chair: Very good.

We have Mr. McGuire, Ms. Black, and Laurie Hawn.

Ms. Dawn Black (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): We had discussed at the planning committee stage that there would be a friendly amendment. Before we start to discuss the whole motion, I would like to put forward the amendment that was agreed upon by all four parties last time, if that's in order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Ms. Dawn Black: It was that the committee, as well as doing this examination, submit recommendations in a report to the House when we complete the examination. The discussion, for those of you who weren't at the meeting, was that it seems rather insider just to have us sit around the table and have this discussion without making some kind of report or recommendation at the end of that process.

I'm happy to second the motion that's been presented, with the amendment that's been circulated to everybody.

Thank you.

The Chair: I believe there was some discussion with regard to the timing of such a report and the inability to get it into the House before the summer break. The clerk has done some research on how to do a backdoor report. I'm not sure I even like the way that sounds, because I don't think that's exactly what we should be intending to do here.

The amendment has been brought forward and the motion has been brought forward, so we'll have to deal with the amendment first. You indicated that the mover of the motion indicated he was agreeable to this.

Ms. Dawn Black: Yes.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. McGuire, are you still on the list to speak? Okay, go ahead.

Hon. Joe McGuire (Egmont, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I believe this motion is timely, given that we're going to have a six-hour debate on this topic in the House tomorrow. Basically, we'll be debating a topic that we really don't know that much about. I know the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Prime Minister said we're in for the long haul, but we have no idea what the "long haul" means. In Afghanistan that could mean a heck of a long haul, but we don't know. We just know that the government says we're there for the long haul. I think our party agrees that we should be there and that we should be making our contribution to the effort.

I think we should have more intelligence on what is actually happening there. What is the state of troop recruitment? How is our equipment holding up? Is there a reason to have better equipped personnel? Is there the rollover of troops? Are there numbers available to actually carry out the mission in the long term? I don't think we can expect our soldiers, the same people, to stay there year after year, so there has to be a turnover. Do we have the people trained to do that?

It is a war situation, and it's unpredictable. That particular country has a pretty tough history as far as war is concerned, whether it's dealing with the English or the Russians or the Americans or the Canadians. So I think this committee should look into the situation in Afghanistan prior to having a parliamentary debate. I think there's a lot of information we have to have before we can have a proper debate in the House. For that reason, we're supporting the motion to have this committee look more in-depth at the situation before we have a parliamentary debate.

• (1550)

The Chair: Do you have any comments on the amendment?

Hon. Joe McGuire: If we're going to be looking at the situation in Afghanistan, I think there should be a report from the committee. I would like to see a unanimous report, given that our soldiers are there in the line of fire. I don't think there should be any reason that they would receive a lack of support from this committee or the Government of Canada or the Parliament of Canada. I think we should have a report, and we should look into it in more depth and have more information and intelligence on what's happening. Then members of this committee can debate it, and our fellow MPs can debate it more thoroughly in the House, from a position of knowledge rather than a position of guessing or emotion or whatever. We should have a cold, hard look at how we can support our troops and how we can bring some conclusion to the effort we're engaged in.

The Chair: We have a point of order.

Mr. Hiebert.

Mr. Russ Hiebert (South Surrey—White Rock—Cloverdale, CPC): I'm just wondering if the clerk could assist us in explaining how this committee could file a report with the House of Commons if the House was not in session? What are the backdoor methods you were considering or contemplating?

The Chair: Go ahead.

The Clerk of the Committee: It would normally be done as a result of an agreement among the House leaders, where they allow a motion to go forward during daily routine business. The motion would elaborate the details of when we're allowed to report, and perhaps it might limit it to the subject.

It's frequently done, and it's been done in the past. For instance, in December 2004, there was a blanket motion adopted, I believe, on or about December 10, 2004, that allowed any committee to deposit a report during the holiday recess.

The Chair: Mr. Hawn is next.

Mr. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): I have a question on the process, just to make sure I understand it.

We're talking about having a discussion here before debate in the House. It's being debated in the House tomorrow night. What are we really attempting to do here?

This list of the study on Afghanistan has suggested witnesses and topics. It's the kind of thing we do need to go through. We're obviously not going to go through that between now and tomorrow night, so what is the real intent of the timing of this?

• (1555)

The Chair: I think we'll get comment from the Bloc members who proposed it.

The issue of the Afghanistan debate came to light today, I believe, or yesterday. Tomorrow there will be a debate in the House on the whole issue in Afghanistan—the length of the session, I believe. I looked at the motion that was tabled, and it will be a thorough debate on what's happening. The whole issue of what the results are—I think that's part of what the motion states—all came to light since the Bloc brought this motion forward.

With Mr. Hawn's comments and mine, are we putting the cart before the horse here? Should we wait for the debate to happen tomorrow and then deal with this again? What are your thoughts?

Ms. Dawn Black: No.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Mario Laframboise (Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel, BQ): The Bloc Québécois had already decided to introduce a motion calling for a debate on Afghanistan. The motion calls on the committee to examine the following, and I quote:

[...] the state of the personnel and materiel, the relationship between the mission's combat operations and its efforts to help reconstruct the country [...] with a view to determining whether it is possible to complete the mission successfully while still meeting Canada's other international obligations.

Obviously, this motion did not take into account the fact that the government, as you so aptly pointed out, had opted for another course of action. That is the government's prerogative. However, we believe the committee should continue doing that which the government should always have been doing. If we want to extend this mission, then we must be in a position to give our fellow citizens a status report.

We're reaching out to all parties. Earlier, my Liberal colleague said he would like the committee to table a unanimous report. Certainly, that would be best, but we need to take the time to stop and reflect, every time a human life is in danger.

I do not want our children's blood on my hands. I want a real debate so that we can focus in on the public's questions. That was the reason behind the motion tabled by the Bloc last week, before the government announced its intentions.

I believe the committee needs to continue examining this question. Ultimately, we will table our report. I hope leaders manage to agree on a course of action and that the government will act accordingly. We'll have to await the outcome of the report.

However, the committee's responsibility is to continue doing its job, a good job, as it has always done. We have a unique opportunity here to thoroughly examine this matter, on behalf of Canadians. It is an opportunity that is not to be missed.

[*English*]

The Chair: Ms. Black is next, and then Ms. Gallant.

Ms. Dawn Black: It's true, as Mr. Hawn said, that we will be having a debate and a vote in the House tomorrow night on whether there will be a new or extended mission in Afghanistan at the completion of the mission in February of 2007, but I don't see that as in conflict with this motion. We can't predispose how that vote will go tomorrow night. We don't know that.

Also, Canadian Forces are in Afghanistan until 2007 at a minimum. They may be there, depending on how the vote goes tomorrow night, until 2009, so all of these concerns will be valid concerns along the length of whatever length the mission is. I think it is incumbent upon this committee to look seriously at all the issues raised in the motion before us today, regardless of what happens tomorrow night.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Gallant is next.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

All the speakers thus far have made valid points.

The best way to gather intelligence, as Mr. McGuire has said, is to gather it firsthand. Perhaps the best sequence of events would be to petition the Chief of the Defence Staff and the minister, and ask them if we could actually go to Kandahar when Parliament is not in session during the summer, to see firsthand what is going on and to speak to the soldiers one on one. After we've had a chance to experience this and find out for ourselves, we would be better armed to ask these questions.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Khan.

Mr. Wajid Khan (Mississauga—Streetsville, Lib.): That's a very good suggestion by my colleague across. But before you go to Kandahar, there's not a whole lot of people in this room, including myself, who are fully versed with the reality. There's a NATO mission, there's Enduring Freedom, the American mission that's sort of converting to ISAF in a few months. What are the mission objectives? Do the NATO countries have the will? Do they have the same debates? I think it would not be a partisan thing. It would be more of an informative session so we can acquaint ourselves better and obtain a better understanding of the subject.

I don't think this will have any impact on the support for the troops, etc., but more in support of the troops. I think that's the intent, if I understand you correctly.

● (1600)

The Chair: Mr. Hawn.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: I don't disagree with what's been said in terms of the desire for the information. Obviously, tomorrow night's vote will go ahead. Regardless of that, I agree with Ms. Black that this is the kind of information we should all have, and that's good.

Whether we will submit a report or we may submit a report, I think, will depend on what we've come to as a conclusion. Perhaps the amendment might be amended to say "may submit a report". That gives us the option of doing a formal report or not, depending on what conclusions the committee reaches between now and whenever we're done. Whether we go to Kandahar or do it here with witnesses, we don't know yet.

The Chair: Does anyone else want to comment?

Mr. Laurie Hawn: I'm sorry, I should have made that a formal motion.

The Chair: You're going to make it a—

Mr. Laurie Hawn: To amend—

The Chair: To amend the amendment?

Mr. Laurie Hawn: —the subamendment that he had spoken about.

The Chair: Okay, a subamendment to the amendment, and the subamendment would take out the word "will"—

Mr. Laurie Hawn: Change the word "will" to "may".

The Chair: "Will" to "may".

Mr. Laurie Hawn: Yes, it gives us a little more flexibility.

The Chair: Is everybody aware of what the amendment is?

Is there any comment on it?

Ms. Black, do you want to comment on it?

Ms. Dawn Black: I think we should commit ourselves to a report, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: All right. Is there anything else from anybody else?

Ms. Gallant.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: I have a question. When we do reports there is a cost involved. Have you gone through the budget, and is everything in line with what our budget is?

The Chair: The issue is to put the issue forward, then work the budget, and then bring the budget back for approval at that time, so we have an idea what it would cost.

I will call the vote on the subamendment proposed by Mr. Hawn, which would change the amendment to read:

The committee may submit recommendations and report to the House based upon its examination.

All those in favour of that?

(Subamendment negated)

The Chair: We're going to vote on the amendment, as presented by Ms. Black, and you're all aware of it.

(Amendment agreed to)

The Chair: On the amended motion, we'll add to the end of the motion that's before you:

That the committee will submit its recommendations in a report to the House based upon its examination.

Is there any further discussion on the amended motion?

Mr. Hawn.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: I do have a question. The last sentence, or part of it, says:....determining whether it's possible to complete the mission successfully while still meeting Canada's other international obligations.

That's a very open-ended statement. What other international obligations? Are they something we know about or is there something we think might come up?

The Chair: Okay, we'll get a submission back from the Bloc members on what they intend there.

[Translation]

Mr. Mario Laframboise: If we're going to discuss the state of the personnel and materiel, we should discuss Canada's other international obligations as well.

An hon. member: Why?

Mr. Mario Laframboise: Because Canada has such obligations and we will have to make some decisions down the road. We need to know how many soldiers are available, how many will be deployed on the Afghan mission and how many will be available for other missions abroad. That's the gist here of the reference to discussions about the state of the personnel.

• (1605)

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Hawn.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: My question is, which other international obligations are you thinking about specifically? We don't have any large international obligations at the moment, other than Afghanistan. At the end of the day, we'll have the Afghanistan commitment. Then a logical question is, what do we have left over to do whatever? There are no other identified international obligations here.

The Chair: I think the point Mr. Hawn is trying to make here is the fact that our obligations could change next week. Something else could happen in the world, so how do we quantify in exact terms exactly what those other obligations are? If we have 2,000 or 3,000 troops deployed in Afghanistan and another situation arises where we're called upon for a large engagement, maybe we will not be able to meet that. But if it's a small technical type of thing, we possibly can. I think he is seeking clarification on exactly what that part of the motion means.

[Translation]

Mr. Mario Laframboise: You're providing a partial clarification right now, Mr. Chairman. You're saying that we're not involved in any other mission. We have troops in Haiti and we've discussed other possible deployments. We have peacekeeping forces, UN forces and

so forth. We'll discuss all of these matters at the same time in order to ascertain our troop availability.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Khan.

Mr. Wajid Khan: I think what Mr. Hawn is saying is correct and valid here as well, but when we discuss the outstretch of the mission, of the rotation in general, that would cover most of the concern, because, as you say, there's no specific mission right now. What are we going to need, 200 troops? Do we need a battalion? Do we need a battle group? We have really no idea, but through the discussions I'm sure it will come up, the rotation of how many troops we have, what is available as a general rule or generality, such as Darfur. If we want to send troops there, what can we send? Can we adjust internally, as it was believed and we were told they could possibly do something?

I don't think we'll ever get a specific number. It will vary from mission to mission and when and how the commitments are at that time. That's a very difficult situation to comment upon, but we'll have a general idea as to what will happen down the road.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: I was going to ask a couple of questions about the capacity.

Mr. Wajid Khan: About the capacity, yes.

The Chair: Mr. Calkins, I believe I had you on the list here.

Mr. Blaine Calkins (Wetaskiwin, CPC): Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

It seems to me that in the context of this committee we're obviously going to be discussing military operations, but Canada has many international obligations. For the sake of clarification, perhaps we should be saying "Canada's other international military obligations", just for that clarification.

From a realistic point of view, I think anything that we could potentially engage in, whether it's a military obligation, whether there is a peacekeeping role in Haiti, whether there is a role for us in Darfur, is going to come into the context of the discussion as it comes up anyway. So I'm not so sure we need to actually spell this out in the motion. If it's an issue of the day that involves the military of the Canadian Armed Forces, it will be brought to the table, whether we're discussing Afghanistan or anything else at the same time.

For me, the last line probably doesn't need to be part of the motion; it goes without saying.

The Chair: Ms. Gallant.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Based on what Mr. Khan has said, it might be useful for the committee, as it usually does at the beginning of a parliamentary session, to consider going to NDHQ. What they will do there is give us a briefing on what our troop commitments are, what the missions are, and it would be very informative.

The Chair: That would be an overall briefing of what's—

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: It would be an overall briefing, and it would better prepare us for this debate as well as the motion.

The Chair: We can try to do that.

Hon. Joe McGuire: Mr. Chair, I'm assuming that's part of what we'll be doing. One of the first things we'll be doing is calling people from the department to inform us about what we're engaged in, how many troops are available for the future, or whatever.

I'm not sure if we need to quantify down to the last soldier what Canada might or might not need. As part of the debate—and I think the past and present governments have committed to additional troops—are those additional troops sufficient, given the rotation, present obligations, or possible future obligations, whether it's Darfur or whatever? That has to be part of the discussion. Do we have the military personnel and equipment, and how many personnel and how much equipment do we need to take on additional missions?

•(1610)

The Chair: Was there anyone else?

We're dealing with the amended motion, and we're going to vote on that. If there's no further discussion, we'll get on with that.

(Motion as amended agreed to)

The Chair: So we've dealt with your motion.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Mario Laframboise: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[*English*]

The Chair: You're welcome.

We'll go back into a committee of the whole to deal with the rest of the agenda, so I'll adjourn this portion of the meeting.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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