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Chair

Mr. Gary Goodyear



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● (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Gary Goodyear (Cambridge, CPC)): Colleagues, good morning, and thank you all for coming. I apologize for waiting a bit to start the meeting this morning. I was certainly hoping we would have a couple of our whips around the table, as I think this would be of more interest to them. I will remind members before we get started that this meeting is being held in public.

If members recall, we did receive a letter from the chair of the liaison committee regarding travel within the national capital region. The committee invited Mr. Allison, who is the chair of that committee, to appear before this committee, and he has graciously accepted. Members will also remember that we did request that Ms. Bonnie Brown, the former chair of the liaison committee, be invited as well. Indeed, she was invited, but unfortunately she was unable to accept for this morning.

Mr. Allison, thank you very much for coming. I appreciate your taking the time out of your busy schedule. If you'd be kind enough to introduce your colleague this morning, then we'll open the table for discussion.

Ms. Marie-Andrée Lajoie (Clerk of the Committee, Liaison Committee): Mr. Chair, I'm Marie-Andrée Lajoie. I'm the clerk assistant in charge of the committees directorate for the House of Commons. I'm the clerk of the liaison committee as well.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Allison, I'll invite you to provide an opening statement. The committee is wanting some information around this request, perhaps how it came about and exactly what it means. Then we'll open for a round of questions.

Mr. Allison, please.

Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs for hearing me. I think I'd rather be asking the questions than be the witness, but we'll go ahead with the process here.

As chair of the liaison committee, I've been requested to have a look at how we travel within the national capital region and how we receive authorization from the House. We understand that certainly when it comes to whips, we don't want to change any of the approvals. Our whips still need to make that happen. This is more of a procedural request that we're looking for today. We want to seek your advice, and possibly get an agreement from the whips. That would help us as we manage our committee activities.

I think it's important to distinguish that the liaison committee approves funds—some of you may know or be aware of that—whereas the House is the one that actually authorizes the travel and empowers the committee to be able to do that. There is certainly a consensus among members of the liaison committee that having to get authorization from the House to travel within the national capital region is sometimes a bit more cumbersome than it needs to be. I would say that certainly some of the things we're talking about in the national capital region are site visits, conferences that are close by. Sometimes, for some of that travel, we're given little notice and not much time to plan. Getting House authorization sometimes takes too much time and ties up the House.

So one of the things we're proposing today is that when the committee is going to travel in the national capital region, they'll still need to request permission from the liaison committee in terms of funds; that still needs to happen. But what we'd like to suggest is that anyone who is going to do site visits or travel within the national capital region just be able to talk to the whips—all approvals still need to happen from the whips—and cut out the procedural step of trying to get the House approval.

So once again, I think when we are in Ottawa, the request is not for holding witnesses or hearing witnesses. It is not a question of hearing testimony. We're not talking about that. That would still require all the same types of requirements. What we're suggesting is that if there are site visits or conferences that are within the national capital region, the whips must still approve the process, but we'd be able to cut out the process of having that motion appear before the House.

The liaison committee will still approve the funds; the whips will still approve the travel. The process we're asking to cut out would be the one where you would actually have to put a motion before the House, because that is what is suggested right now.

The liaison committee will approve the funds. The clerk of the committee would then be required to get all the signatures from all the whips to make it happen. This would avoid tying up some of the time in the House, but also it would not need to be brought to the House and floor.

I would also suggest that, as I mentioned before, if any expenditures still need to be approved, they will still be done in the manner that we've set out.

That's the proposal we have. I have a dozen or so examples of trips that have been in the national capital region, whether it's been to the Congress Centre, RCMP site visits, any of these kinds of things. Once again, we're just trying to look at how we could possibly streamline the process a bit more at the liaison committee.

That's really all I have to say, and I'd certainly be open for questions right now.

● (1110)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Allison.

We're open for a round of questions. Mr. Proulx is first, Mr. Lukiwski, and then Monsieur Guimond.

Mr. Marcel Proulx (Hull-Aylmer, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses for appearing this morning.

I am completely in accord with the idea of travelling within the national capital region, especially since a lot of these trips will be in my riding. It's very good for restaurants, bus companies, and so on.

Seriously, I'm not sure why we are taking the time of the committee to listen to this. What are the disadvantages of accepting your recommendation, or are there any disadvantages? I know there are a lot of advantages; it simplifies the system. But what will be the disadvantages?

Maybe I should ask my question to our researcher.

The Chair: If I could just interject, I know there was a question around the process of the whips. Mr. Allison has made that very clear in his opening statement.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: He's answered that, yes.

The Chair: That was the concern the committee had. That's why we sent him a letter and asked if he would try to explain some of the processes. I do remember that being one of them.

Mr. Allison, if you can think of any disadvantages to this process, perhaps you could comment.

Mr. Dean Allison: Once again, this is really a procedural versus a logistical consideration.

Marleau and Montpetit state that any meetings outside the precinct of Parliament need to be moved by a motion in the House. We're just trying to streamline how we deal with things, but also realizing that the whips need to understand where the members are at all times.

Most travel, as I'm sure you are aware, happens between 3:30 and 5:30. I know that even this committee has done some travel locally.

We are really just trying to streamline a process and obviously to free up time that's valuable in the House of Commons.

The Chair: To answer your question, there don't appear to be any obvious disadvantages at this point in time.

Are you good now? Thank you very much.

Mr. Lukiwski, please.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Regina—Lumsden—Lake Centre, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Allison, for appearing.

I don't have a whole bunch of questions. Perhaps the whips do. That's primarily why you were asked to speak with the whips.

Do you really feel it's cumbersome under the current situation? You mentioned, for example, tying up House time. I really don't see too much time being tied up. The motions are introduced and we've already pre-arranged that there is agreement by all whips. So normally it's a quick motion that takes probably no more than 30 seconds to deliver on the floor of the House. Everyone agrees and it's done.

While I'm not saying I'm against what you're suggesting, Mr. Allison, I don't see where this is really taking up valuable House time.

I would ask you to comment on that.

• (1115)

Mr. Dean Allison: Sure. Thank you, Mr. Lukiwski.

It is really just being able to organize the logistics behind getting that motion ready and out there. A lot of times it's last minute—this is where we want to travel within the capital—so it's getting the motion on the docket at the proper time. I realize it will probably help some of the people behind the scenes more. It won't obviously change a lot of our lives at all.

I think it's important to try to be a little more efficient.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: The only follow-up question I have is this. I'm not sure, Mr. Allison, if you or anyone else would be able to answer this. Does that require any changes to the Standing Orders or anything else?

The Chair: Do you have an answer, Marie-Andrée?

Ms. Marie-Andrée Lajoie: I don't think at this point we will need changes to the Standing Orders. This is something we will have to look at in more detail. At first glance, the committee is not holding hearings outside of the precinct; this is really to go on visits. But we will have to look into that more carefully.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: I have nothing further, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Monsieur Guimond.

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, BQ): For the first time, Mr. Chair, I shall give my position as a whip.

First of all, we need to look beyond the routine, simple request. If a committee travels with the House's authorization, this becomes a legal extension of Parliament's work. It is not for pleasure. The Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs went to look at the security system in the Wellington Building. We joked about this, asking if a Voyageur bus or one of the green buses could guarantee our transport from the Centre Block to the other side of the street. However, the issue goes much further than this. We have just received confirmation that it is an official Parliament activity. For this reason, an official Parliament activity is the subject of a motion before the House.

I want to point out that I fully agree with what Mr. Lukiwski said and, with due respect, I am telling Mr. Allison that I disagree with his letter. In the letter, you state: "[...] this request unnecessarily burdens the process, causes delays, and takes up valuable House time. "

The four whips are in agreement. Mr. Lukiwski was generous when he said that this was taking up 30 seconds of the House's time, but I imagine that by talking quickly it could be done in under 30 seconds. If you would like some suggestions on how not to take up the House's valuable time, I would recommend that you do not stand up like a group of performing seals to applaud your ministers each time they respond to a question. You will see that this will save the House's valuable time. I will look to see where you are sitting and I will watch if you respect the House's valuable time. I will keep an eye on you to see if you stand up each time that one of your ministers responds to a question. I will send you a little note with details indicating the amount of the House's precious time that you have taken.

Finally, until further notice, you should submit your question for the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs to the management committee responsible for the whips. I am very envious of this prerogative. Everything takes place thus: the Liaison Committee presents the travel requests to the Government Whip; the Government Whip consults with us informally, or when the House leaders meet on Tuesday and we come to an agreement at that time. We come to a decision by consensus. The four parties must be in agreement. If, sometimes, we have reservations as to the usefulness or relevance of the travel request, whether to Wellington Street, Sparks Street, Afghanistan or Kuwait, we can use our right to veto and say that this does not make any sense, even if the Liaison Committee or the relevant committee were in agreement. The process is pretty quick. The Government Whip is very efficient and prompt when it comes to dealing with other whips; everything runs very smoothly in the decision-making process.

Let me tell you, Mr. Allison and fellow colleagues, that I am totally against the Liaison Committee's request.

(1120)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Guimond.

We'll go to Madam Redman, please.

Hon. Karen Redman (Kitchener Centre, Lib.): Thank you.

I have to apologize to both witnesses for being late.

In the main, I agree fully with what my colleague, Mr. Guimond, has outlined. I wasn't here for your presentation, so I need to ask for clarification. What is in the current process that impedes the desire of committees to travel in the national capital region? I have yet to see an example of when this has stopped a committee from travelling, so if I missed that part of your presentation, I guess I would ask you to repeat it.

Mr. Dean Allison: Thank you, Ms. Redman.

No, it hasn't impeded any travel as such.

The committee charged me with asking if all whips were unanimous in their support when it comes to site visits or conferences within the national capital region. Once again, the liaison committee would commit the funds, if there were any funds. If there were not, and it was just a site visit, then it would be a question of talking to the whips.

The only thing that would be cut out would be requesting that the motion be put before Parliament for visits to local sites or sites in the national capital region. Everything else would remain as is.

Hon. Karen Redman: I appreciate that, and I appreciate the fact that if that's a concern under the surface, you brought it here. I appreciate the fact that we're playing out this process.

But I have to tell you that I think it does matter what happens in the House of Commons and it does matter what happens in the House leaders' meetings. The way we have operated I think works very well. In my view, this is a lot more than just deciding we'll do a field trip on a one-off, and because it's local, it's under the radar screen and doesn't necessarily have to go through the proper channels.

I think committees are extensions of the House, and as such should have some kind of formal process, as the one that's currently in place is followed, whether that is in the national capital region or further afield. I think the system is not broken enough. It doesn't need fixing and I'm not in support of this at all, and for a lot of the same reasons Monsieur Guimond has already outlined.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Redman.

Are there any further questions from the committee?

Mr. Hill.

Hon. Jay Hill (Prince George—Peace River, CPC): To reiterate the comments of my colleagues, I understand and appreciate the initiative that has been taken by the liaison committee in this regard, trying to look at taking out an extra step or something.

However, I think there is a valid reason to have that step in there as a safeguard. Sometimes there is miscommunication. I think I'm quick to apologize when that emanates from me or my staff with my whip colleagues from the three opposition parties.

But sometimes there is miscommunication, and I think having that extra step, having to come to the House, although it might appear to be relatively inconvenient and perhaps even silly, does provide another safeguard, so everybody is aware of what's going on and where their members are. If it weren't there and there was a bit of miscommunication, either between the whips or within one of the whip's offices, and on a given day when there happened to be an unscheduled vote, and we weren't aware that members were not within a half-hour of the Hill, you'd be wondering where these people were.

I think it makes sense to leave it the way it is. I haven't heard any great complaints about it from my members, and as I said, while I appreciate the initiative the liaison committee has shown in this regard, I don't think it's necessary.

• (1125)

The Chair: Are there any other questions?

Just for clarity, I'll ask my own questions. We're not sure if it requires a Standing Order change. We don't think so, because hearings would not be included in this request. Thank you.

If there were approval for this format—though I'm getting a feeling of consensus that there won't be—the whips would approve the travel. Would that be by way of a signature, and where would that be kept?

Mr. Dean Allison: It would be kept-

Ms. Marie-Andrée Lajoie: The procedure we had envisaged, if this were to go ahead, would be that the clerk of the committee would have the responsibility. Once the committee had decided to undertake the visit or the conference, and the funds had been given to the committee, the clerk of the committee would have to go around and get the signatures from the whips through a letter.

The Chair: Thank you.

If I can just reiterate what I am sensing from the committee, it is that there is not a consensus to move forward on this. The committee's desire is to leave things the way they are now.

Is that the correct sense? I'm looking around the room. I'm seeing heads nodding. Is that the sense, to just leave it the way it is? I need a few more nods to make me feel really good.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Okay, thank you.

Thank you very much for coming this morning. I think you have understood the opinion of the committee, and we extend our gratitude once again to you for coming out and helping to explain this matter.

Thank you very much, and you're welcome to dismiss yourselves.

Colleagues, there is no further business on the agenda for the main committee today. It's been a short meeting.

Is there anything anyone wants to bring up at this time?

Mr. Reid, please.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

This is simply my way of taking advantage of the fact that all the members of the subcommittee are here, other than Mr. Godin. And I apologize; I didn't anticipate that when I raised this regarding the ethics code. But this is just to say that we'd planned a meeting on Monday at 3:30, and it turns out that I have a conflict at that time and I can't meet then.

Lucile and my office have been e-mailing back and forth, looking for another time. She suggested 11, but it turns out that I have to be in the House at 11 on Monday. I guess I'm saying that I just want to let people know that I have to try a different time. I'm throwing it back to you, Lucile, to try to see if you can piece something together, with my sincere apologies to everybody here.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Reid.

Colleagues, on Tuesday, February 20, we will be meeting with the new Chief Electoral Officer candidate. He is the candidate, and we obviously have to interview this gentleman. I just want to remind you that this will be a televised meeting. That will be held in room 253-D, because of the television aspect of that meeting. Notices have been sent, but keep your eyes open for that.

As well, on Thursday, February 22, Mr. Jean-Pierre Kingsley, the outgoing Chief Electoral Officer, will be before the committee.

I want to remind subcommittee members that Lucile will be trying to arrange a meeting regarding the disclosure forms. We'll be trying to do that, as we have been trying to do.

Is there any further business of the committee?

Seeing none, the meeting is adjourned. Thank you, colleagues.

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