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Chair

Mr. David Tilson

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• (0955)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. David Tilson (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC)): Order, please.

Mr. Dykstra, you have the floor.

Mr. Rick Dykstra (St. Catharines, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll be brief, as we don't have a whole lot of time.

I suggested to the committee that I would be putting forward this motion. I move it as a notice of motion, so the motion that is in front of us is that the committee express its grave concerns occasioned by the remarks of the member for Scarborough—Agincourt made before officials of the Department of Citizenship and Immigration during the committee's proceedings of Thursday, October 29, 2009, and that these concerns be reported to the House to give the House an opportunity to reflect on these matters.

The clerk has had the opportunity to review it, and I understand this motion is in order. It is very straightforward, very simple, based on the comments made by the member. It is not only confirmed that he made them himself, confirmed obviously by the record of the evidence at this meeting, and they are of such a nature that.... I'm not going to speak to his apology and what he put on his Liberal website; that's his decision. Certainly, he can do so and is allowed to do so, but the fact is the comments were made. The comments remain in the evidence; they are not removed. In fact, based on the seriousness of his statement, it should indeed be reported to the House to give the House the opportunity to reflect on the comments he made.

The Chair: Mr. Karygiannis.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I think I used the wrong word at the time that I spoke. I should have used to word "African". Maybe I should have made my remarks not toward the officials but toward the government of the day. I did apologize.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: It's on the record...[Inaudible—Editor]

The Chair: Mr. Dykstra, I am trying to keep this....

Mr. Karygiannis, go ahead, sir.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: I did offer an apology during the meeting, when I took time from my colleague. I have communicated with the assistant deputy minister and also with Heidi Smith on this issue, and I have offered my apologies to them.

The Chair: I'm sorry, I didn't hear the last part of what you said.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: I have communicated with both the assistant deputy minister and with Mrs. Heidi Smith on this issue, and I offered my apologies to them in writing.

The frustration, however, does stay. I know where my colleague is going, in trying to deviate, but the length of time it takes to reunite families is the frustration we hear. Reuniting spouses from parts of Africa has risen as much as 92.3% since 2006. From the Caribbean it's risen as much as 75%. To reunite children from Africa has gone up as much as 73.68% since 2006, and from the Caribbean as much as 114.28%. The frustration we face on an everyday basis sometimes takes the best of us. I think it took the best of me, and I made a wrong comment. For that I apologized in this committee, as well as in writing, to the two members and the clerk.

• (1000)

The Chair: Monsieur St-Cyr.

[Translation]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr (Jeanne-Le Ber, BQ): Mr. Chair, since the committee is now sitting in public, let me explain why I am going to vote against this motion. It is not because I support the statements made by Mr. Karygiannis—in fact, I often disagree with him and with his attitude—but I do not think that we have to censure members and start sending motions of censure to each other any time we disagree. The committee has already wasted enough time on this.

The motion suggests referring the matter to the House. That, I assume, will take the form of a report to the House, and we are going to waste another three hours. That seems to be out of all proportion and I do not think that it is a good practice. So I am going to vote against the motion.

[English]

The Chair: Further debate.

Ms. Chow.

Ms. Olivia Chow (Trinity—Spadina, NDP): Mr. Chair, you know that I have long disagreed with Mr. Karygiannis on the way he has approached some of our witnesses and the way he's expressed himself. However, it is true that we have problems in Nairobi. It is true that the targets set for African countries are very low. It is true that the resourcing given to the Nairobi visa office is low, and there is an unacceptably long wait of five to eight years. People are waiting in refugee camps in squalor. Families are separated for years. Even underaged children have to wait in refugee camps. The situation is desperate.

I understand Mr. Karygiannis' passion; unfortunately, the way he expressed it was offensive. I'm happy that he apologized, and I certainly hope he doesn't continue. When there are witnesses here, whether they're staff or people we invite, I hope he tempers his passion and directs it to the rationale, to the government, and doesn't insult people.

When Ms. Wong felt insulted that time, I'm glad Mr. Karygiannis apologized. I just hope it doesn't happen again. We may disagree with each other's beliefs, but let's treat each other with respect. I think that's really important.

As to the issue in Nairobi, with Africans taking a long time to come, is it the country? Are there economic reasons? Is it race? I don't know.

Given that there is a letter of apology to the assistant deputy minister and her staff, I do not want to see the House of Commons spend three hours discussing this issue, because there are many other issues that are critically important, whether it's ghost consultants or temporary foreign workers—all the issues we're studying right now.

As long as I have reassurance from Mr. Karygiannis.... Please do not push your point in a personal way. Push your point on the issues, but not the people. In that case, I would not support this motion.

I was tempted, because as you know, in the past I've sometimes felt that this committee has descended to personal insult, and it wasn't positive for the work of this committee. It's happening less under your chair than in the last round, I have to admit. I hope we can maintain peace in our midst.

But I don't think it's necessary to escalate this in the House for a three-hour debate.

• (1005)

The Chair: Mr. Young.

Mr. Terence Young (Oakville, CPC): Mr. Chair, I haven't been on this committee for a very long time, but immediately when I came on the committee I saw a pattern of behaviour with witnesses before this committee that shocked me. I have appeared before a committee, prior to running for Parliament. I have to tell you, people take a whole day out of their lives, they often fly a great distance, and they come here to inform Parliament, through this committee, with expert advice that we need in order to govern.

I've seen witnesses before this committee intimidated by Mr. Karygiannis, cut off, berated, lectured to, and interrupted. I've seen them sitting before us speechless in some cases, not knowing if they were asked a question of if they're supposed to comment or what. It's an ungovernable mess when that happens.

So I'm pleased to support the motion, and I'm hoping we can move forward in the committee in a more orderly fashion and treat the people who come before us with courtesy.

The Chair: All those in favour of Mr. Dykstra's motion?

(Motion negatived)

The Chair: Before we conclude the meeting, I'm going to comment.

I'm interpreting this motion that just failed as committee members' obviously being concerned about how we treat witnesses. Maybe I've been too lenient. In the future I will ask the committee's support, because I will no longer be lenient. I've noticed this on all sides, quite frankly. It's not just Mr. Karygiannis. Sometimes the government does it. All four parties have done it—berated witnesses. I'm taking this as direction to be tougher.

Mr. Karygiannis.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Chair, can you also send a signal to the government, and especially the parliamentary secretary, that besides making sure that staff from the ministry are here, when they're here through his office and through the minister's office, they're reflecting on what we need and what's on the agenda and not trying to sideline what information we need? Certainly, the parliamentary secretary should take some responsibility—

The Chair: That's another topic. We're talking about how we treat witnesses, and that's where I'm going to end my discussion. You can take that up with Mr. Dykstra yourself.

Ms. Chow.

Ms. Olivia Chow: Mr. Chair, you have my full support to be as tough, as straight.... Any time that any one of us—it could be me—behaves unacceptably, please put us in order.

The Chair: Monsieur St-Cyr.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: Mr. Chair, I agree with what Ms. Chow just said. But I would add one clarification. I expect members to retain control of their time. Cutting off a witness to ask another question should not be seen as a hostile act. It is normal to do so, because witnesses can often take all our time when we want to ask more questions. We have to be firm, but we have no justification for hostility. I want members to keep control over their own time and to be able to cut off a witness if they find that the witness is going on too long.

[*English*]

The Chair: I do appreciate that, because I have a tendency to cut people off when you're at seven and a half minutes, or eight minutes in some cases. I just cut them off. I don't know how else to handle that, but you've made an observation.

Mr. Clerk, you have a budget you want us to approve. Do we have copies of that? Is there debate?

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

The Chair: We will have a subcommittee meeting following that. I guess each subcommittee member's staff is going to be present.

This meeting is adjourned.

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