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Standing Committee on National Defence

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Tuesday, October 26, 2010

Chair

The Honourable Maxime Bernier

Standing Committee on National Defence

Tuesday, October 26, 2010

● (1630)

[Translation]

The Chair (Hon. Maxime Bernier): We will now begin the public portion of this meeting, during which we will be studying the government's response to the committee's report on Arctic sovereignty.

All the committee members should have before them the report we received on October 15, 2010.

[English]

If you have any comments, the floor is open.

Laurie.

Hon. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Mr. Chair, we love it

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Okay. It's a comment? I don't know, but....

Mr. Wilfert, you wanted to add something.

Hon. Bryon Wilfert (Richmond Hill, Lib.): Mr. Chairman, having been on both sides of the aisle, I understand the comment of the parliamentary secretary.

By the way, through you to the parliamentary secretary, when legislation was to come to a committee, it was always my priority, because I wanted to get it through so the minister would then be off my back.

This is sort of a general comment before I go into a few specifics. For these reports, we spend a lot of time with witnesses. We do these reports. We send them off. Then we get back the response of the government, and sometimes just nothing ever happens. I could actually show you reports that have been done and then, five years later, we're talking about practically the same thing.

I guess I'm always concerned that when you spend that amount of time and money on a report, you'd like to know there are some action items and what's happened. And if something can't be done, we want really good explanations as to why it can't be done. As parliamentarians, we need to hold the government accountable, whatever side of the aisle we're on.

The government response to recommendation one says that the creation of a cabinet committee on Arctic affairs—which we spent some time on—is not required. They said the existing committee structure works, etc., with cross-cutting lines and so on.

We can comment on that, on whether we think that's...but ultimately all we're doing, I presume, is giving responses back that will go to the government, to which the government can say, "Well, you know, that's very nice...."

I'd just like there to be a way for us, as well as government, to be more accountable when it comes to these reports, because if they just sit on the shelf, they're not of much value.

Recommendation two was that a cabinet committee on Arctic affairs engage other stakeholders in developing policies. The government said they disagreed with creating it in the first place. They said other cabinet committees do it. There really wasn't much supporting evidence as to why in terms of that position.

Take recommendation six, that the Arctic Council consider interests of other stakeholders. It actually says that the government should "encourage the Arctic Council to consider the interests", etc. We didn't think it was inclusive enough, and they actually cut the number of groups, but again, there was not really a clear explanation as to why.

I could go on. There's a whole slew of recommendations here. I don't know whether somebody—maybe Wolf—can refresh my memory as to what has generally been the response. Once these are done and after the mandatory timeframe....

Mr. Wolfgang Koerner (Committee Researcher): I would say that generally very little has been done over the years, as we all know. The one time we did have an effective response was back on the big study we did on quality of life. We asked that the government come back once a year and give us an update on what they had been doing, and they did that consistently, quite honestly, for about five years. Then they asked if we needed more, and we said, no, that was fine.

Those were very specific recommendations with respect to pay, housing, and a whole variety of issues that were there. The recommendations were written so that the government would have to respond specifically.

What one can do with this is that in a year from now we can bring some of the officials back and say, okay, this was your response and now we have these questions. You know, we can check it out with the stakeholders first and then ask the officials what progress has been made on it.

That's about the only option one really has. You have to structure the report and the recommendations ahead of time, to kind of push the government, but that means also knowing what's going on in places where we should know what's going on. I won't go into the history of the other report, but that's the best way of doing it, I would say, to bring them back.

● (1635)

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: Through you, Mr. Chairman, I think it's important to be able to flag ahead of time how we would then proceed. At the same time, I think we have a responsibility as parliamentarians to the stakeholders who have come to us asking whatever happened to what they'd said.

Obviously there are things I disagree with in here, which is my right, but I was just trying to figure out how we'd get a better structure in place so that we'd be able to have more accountability and oversight.

You're suggesting a year, but we'd structure it in such a way that when we're doing the report, members would keep that in mind, to allow us that kind of assurance and also some flexibility.

Mr. Wolfgang Koerner: Well, there what to do, along with the recommendations, I think, is to say to the government that we want a response in such and such a time to see what the progress is—if it's the kind of recommendation where you're expecting certain progress. Shipbuilding is a classic example: where are you at now, and what's happening?

For the future, I think that's a very good idea. We should do that again.

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: One other comment is that the post-traumatic stress disorder report was an example of where I think we had set some very clear priorities as a committee. We could call the appropriate individuals back in a year to ask what they did in terms of the number of x, or....

To me, it just seems a shame that we do all this work and then we get the report back and it's "Have a nice day". I'd really like to see more accountability, whatever side of the aisle we're on.

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Harris.

Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP): I would just say to Mr. Wilfert, welcome to the opposition.

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: I've been here too long, maybe.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Jack Harris: You know, we said there should be a cabinet committee; they said, no, we're not going to do it. We said they should appoint an Arctic ambassador; they said, no, we have a senior Arctic officer. We make recommendations; they say no.

I mean, they are the government. If we don't like it and we want to be particularly obstreperous, we can then make another comment on it, I suppose, and pass a motion that these folks will vote against and we can vote for, if we're particularly angry about one thing.

Frankly, I'm very disappointed that the government response on the issue of aboriginal people is so weak and unresponsive to the kind of information that we heard here during this committee from the aboriginal leaders. They talked about the failure to adhere to the agreement signed in 1993, the land claims agreement, and the desperate problem with the lack of funding for education and lack of control over education. That was the information they gave to us and passionately spoke about.

Now, they do make what I would call lip service to greater governance. Progress is being made—I'm not suggesting it's not—and money for housing in the north is a positive thing. But there doesn't seem to be any substantive response to the failure of the government, and not just this government, to adhere to the 1993 land claims agreement, which is holding back the Inuit from making progress and having some control over their environment, having jobs for their people, avoiding the horrors that happen with drug addiction, and all of that. That seems to be substantially ignored.

If we were going to do something, making a statement about that would be something that I'd want us to do. It may fall on deaf ears, but it's the role of the committee, the role of the opposition, to point out that we did make these recommendations, that these were brought to the government's attention, and that the government has failed to substantively respond.

I'd be in favour of making a motion to that effect, if it's something that would get the support of the committee.

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Hawn.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: I think it's reasonable that any of these reports get followed up on at some point down the road. Bryon's points are valid; regardless of....

I suspect this hasn't changed much in the last 50 years; I have no idea.

An hon. member: It isn't just this government.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: No, no.

I think there should be a mechanism to bring it back up, a year from now or whenever, call somebody in, remind them of whatever the government said they would do, and say, "Okay, have you done it? Where are we?"

I think that's a perfectly valid process.

• (1640)

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Bachand.

Mr. Claude Bachand (Saint-Jean, BQ): Mr. Chair, before I came to the Standing Committee on National Defence, I was on the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development. Some of you may not know that there is a huge repository in Ottawa where reports go to die. If we receive the government's response and it is not discussed, the report ends up on a shelf somewhere in Parliament or in the Library of Parliament. It is inscribed with the phrase "In memory of the committee", the date is added, and unfortunately that is the end of the line. I would be in favour of holding the government more accountable in terms of its responses.

This may be a procedural matter, but do we have to adopt the government's response? We do not have to. We could say that we are not satisfied and that we want the government to re-examine certain parts of the report.

I am not satisfied with this report. I spent two hours reading it yesterday. Key issues are addressed, particularly the six or seven villages in northern Quebec that, I would remind you, are not included in the northern policy. There is another such town in Jack Harris's riding. That is unacceptable. Under these circumstances, the committee can say that it finds the government's response unsatisfactory and wants the government to re-examine the issue. We cannot simply ask for a follow-up the next year. That would involve resurrecting the report and keeping it alive for years, which would be hard to do.

I think the motion could state that the committee finds the government's response inadequate and insufficient, and that the committee wants the government to give the report more consideration and to provide a different type of response. As you said, the committee is the master of its own destiny.

I would like to know what my colleagues think and whether they feel I am going too far here. The report covers many important areas. We are being told that certain parts are good because they are in line with the policy and that other parts are not and therefore will not be implemented. To my mind, that response is a bit too quick and easy. We can tell the government that we do not accept its response.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Hawn.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: This process hasn't changed in however many decades. If you want to ask the same question, don't be surprised when you get the same answer.

Now, if the committee or anybody disagrees with it strongly enough, I guess you can.... The committee can do whatever it wants. But just to go back and say, "We don't like your answers, give us new answers", well, guess what? You're going to get the same answers back.

So I'm not sure what you're suggesting.

The Chair: Wolfgang.

Mr. Wolfgang Koerner: I was going to say that the times when committee reports have worked, there's been a commonality of interest, to a certain degree, between the departments and the committee; they weren't working at cross purposes. Too many committee reports are done just for the sake of doing committee

reports, I think, quite frankly. The quality of life report was one for which there was a commonality of interest.

There was a study done a few years back, too, on breast cancer, by the status of women subcommittee. That report got a lot of attention, because what happened was that a whole variety of groups coalesced around the issue and lobbied the government, and the government ended up putting money into it. That may have caught the government by surprise, to a certain extent, but that was an issue that hadn't really been looked at by a parliamentary committee.

To make these things really effective in the kind of system we have is not all that easy. I would rather go the route of making friends with the bureaucracy than always trying to beat them over the head with a baseball bat. Now, sometimes they need that, but not all the time.

The Chair: Okay. We'll go to Mrs. Gallant, and after that Mr. Wilfert.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): I too was going to refer to the quality of life report. It is incumbent upon our committee to go back and go to the list of recommendations and follow up and see how many of the recommendations have been enacted. They did it with quality of life, and we could be doing it with our post-traumatic stress disorder study, seeing how many of the recommendations....

The government isn't going to tell us what to do. We are the masters of our own committee, so we should initiate this process.

On the part that Jack mentioned, we had some wonderful witnesses from the northern community. It was interesting to listen to the grievances, but in terms of how they relate to the defence committee.... I couldn't see how it dovetailed with the aspect of defence and northern sovereignty.

So I'm not sure what it is Jack is hoping to see, from a defence standpoint, on the report from the government.

● (1645)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Wilfert.

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: Very briefly, Mr. Chairman, what I was trying to raise here is that the value of members of Parliament is often obviously underrated and in fact often devalued by some quarters. I think that if we are going to spend the time to do a report of this nature, we have a very good suggestion from Wolf about how we keep that in mind as we structure further reports in the future for those kinds of mechanisms.

I agree with Ms. Gallant that we should have a mechanism to establish whether the committee will say, okay, in six months, we want to know where you are. There are 17 recommendations here. I might suggest that there are one or two in particular that I think maybe we should go back to the government on, but beyond that, on the others, let's see where we are. What's the progress? What's the update on this? To ensure that we are accountable—we are accountable to those witnesses, we are accountable to the public—regardless of whether we're on that side or this side, we want to be able to say, yes, we accomplished something. We can look at it, as in the quality of life. I was around many years ago when that was done, and yes, we can look at that and say we did something. The only way to keep government accountable is obviously to have those kinds of mechanisms.

So I'd like to see that—not a make-work program—and at the same time.... You know, I'm not going to disagree with everything in here. I don't disagree with everything in here. But there are maybe one or two things where maybe either we weren't clear enough or we need to provide more information or the government needs to provide more clarification. So we could do that, but also for the future, that's what I'd like. That way I think it will make us all better at what we do.

The Chair: Mr. Boughen.

Mr. Ray Boughen (Palliser, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

If the report is going to be meaningful and have any chance of being implemented, I think we have to ask our writers to put a timeframe around it and devise an action plan. For example, on recommendation 12, it says:

The Committee recommends that the Government provide proper infrastructure such as shore facilities, mapping and mandatory ice-experienced pilots etc, in order to ensure the safe passage of transiting vessels through Canada's Arctic waters.

Well, a lot of that is already under control through the coast guard. I think that needs to be said.

The people who wrote the report also wrote a response to the recommendations, and a lot of the responses are pretty straightforward. It seems to me that if we're going to implement the report, then we need a timeframe and we need an action plan on the report. Some of the implementation may simply be, as a committee, that we agree with the recommendation, because the recommendation, for all practical purposes, is already in place. That way, I think we ensure that the report then gets a little further involvement with people rather than just at the committee stage. It actually gets to be a working document.

The Chair: Mr. Harris.
Mr. Jack Harris: Thank you.

I would like to respond just briefly to Ms. Gallant's point, which I think is a fair question. I guess she's asking, "What's that got to do with the defence of the Arctic?"

We were doing a study on Arctic sovereignty, and the suggestion was made by the Inuit people that sovereignty is about the communities that are present in the Arctic and the best way to exercise your sovereignty is to have vibrant, self-sustaining, and engaged communities. It was in that context that the witnesses talked about the failure of the Canadian government to do the other half of the deal that was made in 1993: when we passed over our sovereignty that we had earned through our occupation from time immemorial, we gave that to the Government of Canada as part of this deal; the other part of the deal was that you were going to meet your obligations under the....

So it's all about sovereignty in the Arctic in making those commitments to those people. While it may not be defence à la guns and equipment, it's defence in the sense of sovereignty and how we achieve that. That's why it's important.

There were other important recommendations that we made that seem to be kind of ignored. We talked about an increased role for the coast guard and having mandatory ice-experienced pilots, so that we can have a presence in terms of managing the Northwest Passage. We had good evidence on that from witnesses.

All that stuff was essentially ignored by the government, who just said, well, here's what the coast guard is doing. That's nice, but that's not what we were talking about. We were talking about enhancing the services so that we could exercise sovereignty over the Northwest Passage. There are a number of areas where the government has failed to respond at all to those suggestions.

I'd be supportive of at least a general motion by the committee. I think there's not time to do it today and I didn't come prepared for that, but we've had this discussion, and if there's any interest by members of the committee to debate such a motion, perhaps we could have a generalized motion saying what our reaction to the government's response is, for the record. Whether it will make any difference or not....

I agree with Laurie; asking the same question, you're going to get the same answer. We can say we're not happy about the fact that they're not going to appoint an ambassador, and we'll get, "Well, we don't think we should". That's not going to get us anywhere in terms of a response from the government. But as a committee, if the committee feels strongly that this response is not adequate to the evidence and the force of the report, then there's nothing wrong with this committee saying so in a type of omnibus motion, a motion that's crafted to include our critique of the response, or what's adequate or inadequate with it.

There are a lot of good things in this response, don't get me wrong. I'm not trying to just play opposition politics here. I'm just saying that there are several areas where I'm frankly disappointed that the government didn't take up the suggestions that were made with a lot of thought gone into them, and a lot of very professional and well-spoken individuals appearing before the committee.

That's all I can say.

(1650)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Hawn.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: I don't disagree with the philosophy expressed, but the simple fact is that all those people, as good and well-meaning and sincere and so on as they are, don't have to deal with some of the realities that the government has to deal with. Some of that is reflected back in this report, which any government would do.

The committee is obviously free to disagree. That's what committees can do. The form it takes obviously is up to the committee. But I think a year down the road or whatever, for the things that are in here, it would make sense to go back and call whoever in to say, "Okay, what have we done; have we made progress here, here, and here, and if not, why not?"

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Bachand.

Mr. Claude Bachand: In terms of the progress, I would like to know what my colleagues think. In my view, if the government tells us there will be no Cabinet Committee on Arctic Affairs, even if I follow up in a month or two to inquire where things stand, I will be told that the government already gave its response: no. That is what will happen. I can of course do the rest, but I do not have any control over the contentious issues. As you said, yourself, you will say no once again.

There are other extremely significant issues. Earlier, I mentioned the strategy focusing on those who live north of the 60th parallel. The residents of Nunatsiavut and those living in northern Nunavik were politely excluded. I disagree with that. We asked that the position of Arctic ambassador be re-established, and there again, the answer was no. Of course, the government agrees to recommendations that affect minor issues, issues that are not far-reaching. But when it comes to issues we consider fundamental, the government says no. To my mind, a key recommendation was "That the government, in order to strengthen the [Arctic] Council, encourage it to broaden its mandate and make matters of security part of that mandate." The government balked at the recommendation, responding that "When the Arctic Council was created in 1996, Arctic states explicitly stated that the mandate of the Arctic Council should not include matters of military security."

The government can go ahead and use a treaty that dates back to 1867 to justify its response, but just because a decision was made in 1996, when the Arctic Council was created, that does not mean it is still valid. I do not know what the committee is going to do, but I intend to stand up publicly against certain points. That is my right. If the opposition had presented a united front, we would have been well-positioned to challenge the government. We could have told the government that it did not do its job on some of the key issues.

● (1655)

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Hawn.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Everybody's free to write and say whatever they want, so largely it doesn't matter. Fundamentally the government makes decisions, and these decisions are all the purview of the government. If the government changes, if you take us down or whatever, fine, we have an election and somebody else is the government and they make their decisions, and we'll probably disagree with them, or whatever. That's part of the process:

government is empowered to make decisions. This government has made decisions. Not everybody agrees with them. That's politics. That's fine. People can say and do whatever they like, but recognize the fact that government is empowered to respond to this and to make decisions, and that's what government has done.

This is not meant to be provocative, but ultimately the opposition will bring down this government and we'll have an election and folks will decide. That's fine. I don't think this is an issue you'd bring us down over, frankly, but fill your boots. I think you'd pick other ones, but.... I'm not making any suggestions.

The Chair: Mr. Wilfert.

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: I think our primary responsibility as parliamentarians is to ensure we have a process, since we are masters of our own fate in terms of committee, that we establish regardless of what anybody else does, that empowers the members, that holds government accountable, that does have a mechanism in place for follow-up, and also provides rationale as to what we are doing. If stakeholders come back and ask what happened, why the recommendation was....

I've been on the other side. I agree with Laurie that, yes, governments do have to make decisions. But at some point we also, as the opposition, may say, "Here is the recommendation we think is really important, it came across unclear, and we want to highlight it". As to how you highlight it, I guess you can do it any way you like. But I think we need to particularly look, as we go forward, to deal with the kinds of discussions in which we frame it so that we ourselves get better value out of this in the end.

If some of us got together and said "Here's a recommendation that we think...." You can't say everything is bad. We'd say, "This is really critical, and we think we may want to highlight it in a different way". And that's fine; you may even agree with us, presumably, because you're all part of this study. At the end of the day, I don't drive my car looking in the rear-view mirror all the time either, but I do like to think that we can maybe get some suggestions written out; maybe if Wolf could come back and say, well, here, this would be helpful...and also helpful to you in terms of how we frame it in the future, because we're going to do more of these, presumably.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: There should be some general method of-

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: Yes, a methodology that will help us.

The Chair: Mr. Harris.

Mr. Jack Harris: I just have a few comments on the general discussion. May I suggest a road map? There is a road map, by the way. You simply report something to the House and then we have a concurrence debate on that report. If there's something that is particularly vital that we need to have debate on in the House, there are easy mechanisms to do that.

I'm just a little puzzled by our discussion here. What we're kind of saying is the government won't do what the committee asked them to do.

So I'm agreeing with you, Bryon; if there's something that we're really concerned about, if someone wants to move a motion that we report something to the House and we have a debate on it, as Mr. Hawn says, fill your boots. There are ways within Parliament to do it. If there are better ways, let me know. A motion by this committee that puts something on the record is fine, and a debate in the House of Commons is another way of doing it.

The Chair: Mr. Hawn.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: You can do what you like. I mean, the report is the report. You can have a concurrence motion or whatever you want. There are mechanisms to do that. But beyond that, to Bryon's point, I think we should have a general process that allows some follow-up to whatever committee reports we do and whatever reports come back from the government. That's maybe a different thing.

Anyway, I think we're done.

(1700)

The Chair: Wolf, do you want to add something?

Mr. Wolfgang Koerner: No, no.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Wolfgang Koerner: We'll give it a better shot next time and see where we go.

The Chair: Mr. Harris.

Mr. Jack Harris: I just want to make a final comment. As far as the stakeholders go, our responsibility to the stakeholders was to hear them and make the report. If something is not done by the government, well, my answer is pretty easy: you blame it on the government.

But as far as what we do here as a committee is concerned, I think if we're not going to talk further about the report, perhaps we can just leave it with members. If they want to bring forth a motion on this report, then we'll do the usual process and have the committee deal with it.

Is that acceptable?

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: I agree; a concurrence motion is—

Mr. Jack Harris: That's another way of following through on that, absolutely.

An hon. member: That's a mechanism you can use.

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: I'm also thinking of the future.

Mr. Wolfgang Koerner: On a concurrence motion? I have no idea what that means.

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: I'll tell you afterwards.

The Chair: My understanding is that we have a consensus that our analyst will come with...[*Technical difficulty—Editor*]

Laurie.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: We're done with that?

Can we go back to the Lockheed trip, just briefly?

The Chair: Yes.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Was that a concurrence motion for the House?

Hon. Laurie Hawn: No, no, we're just saying that's an option.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Okay. Very good.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: To go back to the Lockheed thing for a second, the president of Lockheed is available on the 29th or 30th of November, which is a Monday or a Tuesday. It would be either fly down Sunday, do it Monday, come back Tuesday, or fly down Monday, do it Tuesday, come back Wednesday.

Do you want the Sunday to Tuesday and hit caucus, or do you want the Monday to Wednesday and miss caucus?

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: Miss caucus.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: It wouldn't ruin my life.

Oh, this is not in camera, eh?

Voices: Oh, oh!

Ms. Cheryl Gallant: It's public.

An hon. member: Let the record show.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: So Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday?

An hon. member: Yes.

The Chair: We have a consensus?

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Does that work for you, Claude?

Mr. Claude Bachand: The 29th, 30th, and...?

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Leave here Monday the 29th, do whatever it

is the 30th, and come back the 1st.

Mr. Claude Bachand: Yes, I agree with that.

The Chair: Okay.

Jean-François, everything's all right for this trip?

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Jean-François Lafleur): Yes.

The Chair: Okay.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: If we come back on December 1, does that violate the trip having to take place in November?

The Clerk: I will verify, but at first glance—

Hon. Laurie Hawn: If we said 31 days in November, it's good.

The Clerk: If we leave in November it should be fine, but I will make sure.

The Chair: What is your next question, Jean-François?

The Clerk: Since we have booked for Fort Worth now, we still have Mr. Harris' wish to visit the Maritimes. Are there any preferences in terms of when we would go?

The Chair: My understanding is that the trip on search and rescue wouldn't be in November. It would more likely be in December.

[Translation]

That concludes the 29th meeting of the Standing Committee on National Defence.

Thank you all, and have a good day.

Meeting adjourned.



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