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Tuesday, September 30, 2014

—
Chair

Mr. Randy Hoback

Standing Committee on International Trade

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• (1530)

[English]

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Christine Holke David): Honourable members of the committee, I see a quorum.

I must inform members that the clerk of the committee can only receive motions for the election of the chair. The clerk cannot receive other types of motions, cannot entertain points of order, nor participate in debate.

We can now proceed to the election of the chair. Pursuant to Standing Order 106(2), the chair must be a member of the government party.

I am ready to receive motions for the chair.

Mr. O'Toole.

Mr. Erin O'Toole (Durham, CPC): Under Standing Order 106 (2), I move that Randy Hoback be elected chair of the standing committee.

The Clerk: It has been moved by Mr. O'Toole that Mr. Hoback be elected as chair of the committee.

Are there any further motions?

Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt this motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to)

The Clerk: I declare the motion carried and Mr. Hoback duly elected chair of this committee.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Clerk: I now invite Mr. Hoback to take the chair.

The Chair (Mr. Randy Hoback (Prince Albert, CPC)): Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for your confidence in me as a chair. I'll do everything I can to make sure this committee functions in an appropriate manner with proper decorum, and everybody gets a chance to get their opinions and voices heard, for sure.

On our next order of business, we're dealing with the Canada-Korea free trade bill to seek unanimous consent for this committee to go into the next part, where we bring the actual department forward to start the debate and review of that piece of legislation.

Do I see unanimous consent to move forward on that?

Mr. Pacetti.

Mr. Massimo Pacetti (Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel, Lib.):

Mr. Chair, I have a question. I was just told, literally five minutes ago, that we would have the officials here. I understand my time is limited already in this committee, so I think a lot of times I can wing it, but I think that for something as important as this I have to at least be prepared. I think the government officials came prepared; I would think I should be prepared. I don't have my briefing notes here from the Library of Parliament. I don't know if the Library of Parliament prepared briefing notes; I didn't see them. I think it's unfair to me and other members of Parliament. I know other members of Parliament are much brighter than I am, but I do rely on those Library of Parliament notes.

I'm not sure how long you plan on having the witnesses, but I also have a meeting set for four o'clock that I can't reschedule, because I was only told five minutes ago.

There are other reasons. The Conservatives seem to think that we don't have a critic present. I have to speak to the critic as well. The critic may want to come because we are dealing with legislation.

For those reasons, and there are other reasons, but I don't want to take up the committee's time because I didn't think we were going to devote any time to other matters, I will not be giving my consent.

• (1535)

The Chair: Mr. O'Toole.

Mr. Erin O'Toole: Mr. Chair, welcome to your role. I know you'll provide good leadership for this committee.

As parliamentary secretary, I would have liked to provide more courtesy to my colleague. I certainly did talk to both critics about our proceeding quickly with Korea.

I think some of the confusion relates to our need, the resignation of our chair and our meetings being a bit delayed. I did hear the member's speech on the bill in the House when he spoke at length and answered questions. Certainly, the bill was also tabled before the House rose for the summer, so there has been plenty of time for research, and certainly speech writing.

I normally would have provided more courtesy, and I apologize for that. Perhaps we can adjourn and set a new meeting for today to use the officials who are in the room in the way we should, to proceed with that official briefing that will be based on the bill that was tabled months ago in the House.

The Chair: Mr. Davies.

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): First of all, Mr. Chairman, I'd like to congratulate you on behalf of the official opposition. We look forward to an experienced, judicious, and fair hand on the gavel, which I have every expectation you will have.

Mr. Chairman, I had planned on making this statement at some point so I'll make it here. First of all, I want to make clear that I cast no aspersions on my honourable colleague Mr. O'Toole on this, but the facts are the facts, and the facts are that Mr. O'Toole informed me last night at seven that we would be commencing the South Korea study today and that we'd have officials here from DFATD to open the study.

It was always my preference that we wait for the legislation to be introduced in the House, to be voted on at second reading, and then come here before this committee as part of the committee's normal procedure to study the bill, because there's a difference between having a study of South Korea and having the committee examination of the legislation after second reading. I would have preferred that, and then witnesses who are appearing would have the benefit of at least having the legislation in front of them, and we could direct their minds to specific pieces of legislation.

My concern, however, is about the procedure of this committee and the lack of notice we've had about today. There was no real chance to prepare for the DFATD officials. When I was informed at seven o'clock last night, my staff had gone home. I didn't have a chance to communicate with my colleagues until this morning. As Mr. Pacetti pointed out, we have no analysts' report. My understanding is the analysts weren't aware that the DFATD officials were appearing today, so we don't have the benefit of the normal analysts' questions and explanations of issues that I think are helpful.

The agreement was tabled in June and we have had it over the summer and the bill was just introduced, but that's not a substitute for having the analysts' support for the committee, and it's not a substitute for not having notice.

In my view, again, completely from an institutional point of view and nothing at all about Mr. O'Toole, I just think it's inappropriate to have the parliamentary secretary in effect determine this committee's agenda in advance and without telling anybody so that we, as committee members on all sides, show up here today and then find out that the parliamentary secretary has made arrangements for witnesses to appear. It is the committee or the subcommittee on agenda that should be guiding the agenda of this committee. As much as I have respect for the position of parliamentary secretary, it is not within the parliamentary secretary's power to schedule this meeting; it is this committee's power to do that.

As well, this committee has been very slow to get started this session. I appreciate Mr. O'Toole's comment that it's because of the resignation of Mr. Merrifield. I understand you were travelling, Mr. Chair, but certainly there was an opportunity to serve notice to Mr. Pacetti and our side earlier than last night at seven. I would dare say the DFATD officials were told probably before 7 p.m. that they were expected to be here today to answer questions on South Korea. In fact, I would imagine that would have been arranged at least last week, so it would have been a very easy thing for Mr. O'Toole to notify us that he intended to get the South Korea study started today. Simple notice on Friday would have sufficed for my purposes.

I see what Mr. O'Toole is trying to do. He is trying to rehabilitate his effort to unilaterally determine this committee's procedure today by a procedural mechanism of having this meeting adjourned and then calling for a meeting in 15 minutes. That may do the job from a procedural point of view, but it doesn't fix the substantive problems that I see with this, which are questions of fundamental fairness and proper committee procedure. Essentially, all committee members on the government side and on all sides should know what the agenda is going to be when we walk into a meeting, and we shouldn't be surprised to find that we have witnesses here when we're not prepared to question them properly.

• (1540)

Finally, I would say that this agreement is important for all sides of the House. I've listened to the speeches as well. We all recognize that this is an important agreement for Canada and for Canada's exporters and producers, and it deserves fair scrutiny. It deserves good testimony and perceptive questions to the DFATD officials, if this committee is going to do its job properly.

Having said that, I know Mr. O'Toole has indicated he'd like to have this move relatively effectively and efficiently through the House, and we're prepared, as the official opposition, to cooperate in that regard. I'm sure Mr. Pacetti is as well, although I can't speak for him.

My suggestion is this. Mr. O'Toole and I have talked about having four meetings. I think Mr. O'Toole has indicated he'd like the evidence to be heard today and Thursday, and then next Tuesday and Thursday. By that time we expect the legislation to be tabled, and it could come before this committee for two days of clause-by-clause study, and we can move on this agreement.

Speaking for the official opposition, we are certainly committed to that timeline, but I would suggest that the way we can reconcile all these interests is to begin this study on Thursday. Mr. O'Toole has indicated that he would be willing to look at an extra meeting next week, which we would have to move our schedules to accommodate. Perhaps we'll meet Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday of next week, or something like that.

To use the procedural tool of being able to adjourn this meeting and then just have it start again in 10 or 15 minutes really is not becoming of this committee, and it's certainly not respectful of the true function of this committee. I wanted to have that on the record, Mr. Chairman. That's our submission.

The Chair: Mr. Pacetti, and then I'm going to go back to you, Mr. O'Toole.

Mr. Massimo Pacetti: Mr. Chair, I'm not going to repeat anything that Mr. Davies just said; I agree with most of it. I don't think I've impeded this committee from functioning at all. I think I've been quite cooperative. My only suggestion from day one has been that we show balanced testimony from witnesses, whether they believe in free trade or not. I think there is no reason for this committee to rush things. I think everybody has demonstrated that in the past. I agree with what Mr. Davies just said.

I had a conversation with Mr. O'Toole two weeks ago, and I think we're ready to make this thing work, if we need to have extra meetings. I used to chair the finance committee and we used to have six hours a day of meetings, so I'm not scared to have meetings. Having said that, I'm not prepared today. I could be prepared tomorrow and I can sit until whenever you want.

From a personal point of view, Don was notified at seven yesterday and I was notified at 3:27 p.m. today, so my feelings are hurt because of that, but I'm not holding that against anybody.

Mr. Hoback, I knew you were going to be the chair before I knew we were going to have the officials, so I took that for granted. For the record, congratulations.

The Chair: Mr. O'Toole, please finish quickly.

Mr. Erin O'Toole: Yes, thanks for the indulgence, Mr. Chair.

I certainly appreciate the collaboration that the vice-chairs show on this committee, and in my unique role as parliamentary secretary, a lot of courtesy is extended.

I do have to put on the record that in the case of Mr. Pacetti, we had a talk two weeks ago about how many appearances there would be. I asked if Ms. Freeland might be coming. He was travelling last week, as you were, Mr. Chair.

In the number of days of committee time, I said part of those would be witnesses and clause-by-clause study, and we always start off with department officials. I had the same discussion last week with Mr. Davies. I understand that the role of the opposition is to feign outrage at every lack of procedural precision, but everyone knew the first witnesses sometime this week would be department officials on an agreement that was tabled in June. In the following days, there were some very eloquent speeches on this subject by Mr. Davies, and this morning by Mr. Pacetti.

I don't feel we are surprising our group. Usually I like to extend a little more courtesy, and I apologize for that, but let's also look at this in perspective. There was discussion about department officials being some of our witnesses. We've talked about the number of days for the last week or two weeks.

While my preference would be unanimous consent so that we can take advantage of some of the incredible officials who have been involved in negotiating this deal, which, by the way, we all agree with, if we have to use a procedural move to make sure we're using senior civil servants' time wisely, we will do that.

To you, the clerk and analysts, we apologize as well for the rather hastily arranged first meeting. Now that we have a strong chair in place and an agreement that all parties for the first time will agree on, I think we can move past these choppy waters at the start and be sailing smoothly soon.

• (1545)

The Chair: Mr. Davies, if you have something to add, I'll give you one minute.

Mr. Don Davies: Mr. Chairman, as a small point, I want to emphasize to Mr. O'Toole that the issue here is on when we were

going to start the hearings. These things always start with DFATD officials, and we knew that. We're looking at four days of hearings and two days of clause-by-clause study. The key thing we were not informed of was that we would begin today. That's the issue here, and I want to be clear about that.

Again, had he told us on Friday that we were going to start today, we could have had a chance to be prepared. I just want to make that clear.

The Chair: First of all, it's very clear there's not unanimous consent to continue on with this meeting.

It's not the way that I wanted to see the chair position start the day and the meeting. I'm glad I have a good experienced clerk beside me giving me all sorts of good advice, which I appreciate. I do thank all of you for your best wishes, but I wonder in an hour or so whether you will be saying the same thing.

Regardless, we have a room full of people from the department. We are taking up a lot of their time, and I know the amount of time it would take them to try to reschedule and come back. That would be wasting a lot of taxpayers' money. I also know you guys know the file like the back of your hands, so as far as the argument about being prepared or not prepared, I think most of you could wing it fairly quickly.

I'd move to adjourn and reconvene the meeting at 4:15, and then we would go to 4:45 or 4:50. At that point we'll talk about getting our witnesses submitted for Thursday, and then continue on a normal schedule next week.

I will adjourn now and then we'll reconvene at 4:15.

Mr. Don Davies: Mr. Chairman, I have a quick question.

Would you have the witnesses testify from 4:15 to 4:45, and—

The Chair: I would give the witnesses 10 minutes to testify and then we'd do the first round. Then, if you want them to come back, I would entertain that option.

• (1550)

Mr. Don Davies: I see. Your proposal is that we'll just do one round of questions.

The Chair: Yes. I think we should utilize our time as much as we can today.

Mr. Don Davies: Why wouldn't we go until 5:30 then?

The Chair: If the committee would like to go longer, we can. I have no problem with that if you want to continue sitting.

I guess the normal sitting time is 5:30.

Mr. Massimo Pacetti: Could we start at 4:30?

The Chair: In the sense of compromise, 4:30 would work, because the clerk does need time to get everything established.

We will reconvene at 4:30, and then we'll proceed with our witnesses.

The meeting is adjourned.

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