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Chair

The Honourable Peter Kent

Standing Committee on National Defence

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● (0850)

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. Peter Kent (Thornhill, CPC)): I call the meeting to order.

Good morning, colleagues.

Yes, Mr. Harris?

Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP): Chair, thank you for acknowledging me. I have two things.

This is the first public meeting since we've had the election of officers—and Cheryl and I have discussed this. A series of resolutions were passed at the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, which we both attended recently in Croatia, regarding a series of issues involving NATO and its allies in world affairs. We have agreed to jointly table them to this committee in both official languages.

I don't have the final copies here today, but I wanted to let the committee know that we had talked about doing that. We will make them available to the chair, and I guess the chair can make them available to all committee members. I don't know if that counts as tabling them at this point, but—

The Chair: Anticipation.

Mr. Jack Harris: —I just wanted to give notice that this was something we thought we should share with the committee, being the parliamentary committee, and of course I wanted to mention it today because we're looking at our report.

Chair, the second thing I want to do while I'm on my feet is move:

> That in the Standing Committee on National Defence, the Chair may receive a motion to move in camera only for the purpose of discussing:
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> (a) wages, salaries and other employee benefits;
>
> (b) contracts and contract negotiations;
>
> (c) labour relations and personnel matters;
>
> (d) a draft agenda or draft report; and
>
> (e) documents or matters requiring confidentiality, such as national security.
>
> And that furthermore, all votes taken in camera be recorded in the minutes, including which member voted which way when recorded votes are requested.

I have copies of that, sir, in both official languages, and I will give them to the clerk for distribution. If this is not in order, sir, although I know we're discussing rules later in the report from the committee, then I would ask it to be considered as notice.

The Chair: Comment or discussion?

Mr. Bezan.

Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake, CPC): Can we see the motion first?

The Chair: Sure.

Mr. Harris, you do realize that procedure does allow for decisions on in camera proceedings to be taken on the day of any consideration of in camera or not. But we'll certainly take a look at your proposal.

Mr. James Bezan: Are you giving notice of motion or giving the motion?

Mr. Jack Harris: The motion.

The Chair: I'll give everybody a chance to read the motion.

Colleagues, the clerk has advised that this motion is appropriate at this time, although as I noted earlier, Mr. Harris, the committee does have the ability to decide on in camera on the day when issues may require it; the committee may decide to go in or out of camera.

The clerk advises that the motion is certainly in order, but....

I think your term was that it is somewhat “problematic”. Clerk, could you speak to that?

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Leif-Erik Aune): Yes. The issue that other procedural clerks and the Table considered was the effect of having an in camera meeting and requiring that recorded votes appear in the minutes. One of the provisions of in camera meetings traditionally is that recorded votes don't appear in the minutes.

But that being said, I recognize that the committee and you as members are fully within your right to manage your own affairs. So I don't have any advice to the members as to the procedural inadmissibility of the motion—just recognizing that the workability of it would not be the usual practice.

The Chair: Mr. Bezan.

Mr. James Bezan: Speaking to this motion, I think it's overly prescriptive. I think we've always managed our affairs reasonably at this committee, and I think the committee deserves the opportunity to decide on a case-by-case basis what parts of meetings, or which meetings, are going in camera.

I really take offence to the idea or the suggestion that votes that happen in camera, which are all supposed to be confidential, will be recorded and reported.

The Chair: Ms. Gallant.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): One of the items missing from this, Mr. Chairman, is the committee business. It's not listed as one of the items that should be here. The practice, as long as I have been a member of Parliament, is that committee business is discussed in camera.

Now, while it may not have occurred in this committee, I have been in committees where we would have brought in witnesses, at a cost to taxpayers of tens of thousands of dollars, coming across Canada, and the witnesses themselves, heads of companies, who were there really giving of their time—so it's a cost to their business as well—only to have these witnesses begin their testimony and an opposition member bring forth a motion that really is committee business. The entire schedule of work that we had all agreed to is then hijacked, and at a huge cost to taxpayers.

So I will not be supporting this motion.

● (0855)

The Chair: Mr. Harris.

Mr. Jack Harris: If someone wishes to amend the motion, of course that would be in order too.

In reference to the clerk's comments, and I know the clerk is not engaging in any debate on this issue, obviously the motion here would change the so-called tradition or the usual practice. That's the purpose of the motion.

Our party has presented similar motions in most committees—as perhaps the clerk is aware and as are other members, perhaps, who sit on other committees—where we have seen the Standing Orders or the in camera rule being used to avoid anything that has political controversy.

We're trying to seek transparency in this committee and in other committees. This motion is here for that purpose. We don't want people to be hiding behind in camera meetings and fail to face up to matters that they really should be taking a position on in public.

That's the purpose of the motion, and we stand behind it.

The Chair: Is there any further discussion? Are we ready to vote?

Yes, Ms. Murray.

Ms. Joyce Murray (Vancouver Quadra, Lib.): Mr. Chair, in looking at this, it occurs to me that there may be other occasions when the committee members would like to move in camera that have not been foreseen here.

One amendment that could address this would be to add a paragraph (f), indicating that other matters for which there's unanimous agreement could also be moved in camera.

The Chair: Are you proposing a sub-motion?

Ms. Joyce Murray: Yes. I'm proposing a friendly amendment or a sub-motion. I'm not sure of the technical term.

The Chair: Could you repeat it just for the record, please, Ms. Murray?

Ms. Joyce Murray: Sure. Paragraph (f) would be: “any other matter for which there is unanimous consent of the committee members”.

Mr. Jack Harris: Do you need me to second it?

The Chair: No.

Are we prepared to vote on the amendment to the motion?

An hon. member: Can we have a recorded vote, sir?

The Chair: Yes.

(Amendment negatived: nays 6; yeas 5)

The Chair: Are we prepared to vote on the main motion?

Mr. Jack Harris: Could we have a recorded vote?

The Chair: It will be a recorded vote, Clerk.

(Motion negatived: nays 6; yeas 5)

The Chair: Moving on with this morning's business, colleagues, you've received the first report of the subcommittee on agenda and procedure. It is proposed that on December 5 we have a one-day trip to Canadian Forces Base Petawawa for the purpose of studying the ill and injured. It is estimated we would be on the ground that day for approximately four working hours. The trip would be by bus from Ottawa, returning to Ottawa in time for those who would be travelling that evening.

The second trip would be in the new year, and it's proposed that we travel to Canadian Forces Base Shilo. It would be a day-and-a-half trip. The precise dates and days would be decided by this committee. Again, it will be for the purposes of studying the care of the ill and injured.

Are there comments or discussion?

Mr. Harris.

● (0900)

Mr. Jack Harris: I want to speak in favour of that. We discussed it in the subcommittee. Both of these trips to these bases would be useful, and having one before Christmas would be good.

Was there an expectation that we would check with whips before that on the Friday? I didn't do that for December 5. Does anyone know if the whips have been consulted?

Mr. James Bezan: Is that a Friday or a Thursday?

The Chair: It's a Thursday.

Mr. Jack Harris: It's only a question of not being around for question period on that day.

I haven't consulted my whip, so I just want to put that on the table.

The Chair: The committee will consider it first, and we'll then consult whips.

Mr. Jack Harris: Anyway, I want to speak in favour of both trips. Shilo would be a worthwhile visit and it could dovetail with our other stuff.

The Chair: Mr. Bezan.

Mr. James Bezan: You mentioned that the report on the consideration of the subcommittee was circulated. I never saw it.

The Chair: Ms. Gallant.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Further to Jack's question about the whips allowing us to go, his concern is with question period on Thursday. Mine is whether all whips will let our members go. Really we're not getting as much done as we can over the course of time, even before we do our report, if we lose members, so the more members of the committee who can travel, the better.

With that in mind, I'm wondering if the clerk has considered.... Before we even go that far, if we have consensus among our members, perhaps we could try for the Shilo trip on a Monday. So when we're coming into town, instead of stopping in Ottawa on Sunday night, we'd go directly to Shilo and spend the day there. Very rarely is there a vote on a Monday, and the whips will much more likely enable committee members to travel if we schedule it that way. That would take time out of your Sunday, so I would want some agreement among the members that they would be willing to do so before proposing that to the clerk.

The Chair: Are there comments or discussion?

Mr. Bezan.

Mr. James Bezan: Of course, we're looking forward to having everybody in sunny Manitoba to experience our hospitality at first hand. Winter is always a great time to be in Manitoba, especially on the prairie.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. James Bezan: WestJet does fly into Brandon, but getting from Brandon to Winnipeg would have to be by bus. We could do WestJet in; there's definitely the in and out from Regina. From the west, it's easy to get into Brandon. It's a little more problematic coming from the east.

We can look at logistics that way, but if we do come in on Sunday night, we can spend the whole day in Shilo, and then probably the next morning at 1 Air Command in Winnipeg. Then we can fly back and we'll be back in time for votes on Tuesday night. That's my suggestion.

● (0905)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Colleagues, for your attention, the first report, if you'll look down at the bottom, referred to a double visit, a visit to both Winnipeg and Shilo. But the clerk, in working the logistics, saw that it would be a minimum three-day trip, which I think, given the conditions and the consideration of whip permission, is not likely to occur, so our proposal is to limit it to the day and a half and make it a Shilo only visit.

Mr. Harris.

Mr. Jack Harris: The clerk can deal with that, but is it possible...? I'm the one coming the farthest, I guess, to Manitoba, although it's supposed to be the centre of the country, isn't it?

The Chair: Ms. Murray has some distance to come.

Mr. Jack Harris: I'll let Joyce speak for herself, but if part of the logistics is getting there, and if it is actually possible to get to Brandon on Sunday, that would be one day of the three days, perhaps. I'm willing to travel on Sunday to get to Brandon that night. It might involve leaving early in the morning to get there at night, but I'm prepared to do it. If that's one of the days, then we possibly could do Shilo and Winnipeg in the same trip. I don't know if the clerk can...?

The Chair: I think another day would be necessary, simply given the travel to Brandon and back and then to spend meaningful time on the ground in the two locations.

Mr. Bezan.

Mr. James Bezan: It's a two-and-a half-hour drive from Winnipeg to Shilo. If we have to travel via Winnipeg, then we should take the opportunity to go to 1 Air Command at 17 Wing, right at the international airport. We're going to be right by it.

One time before this we had committed to going to 1 Air Command, and I would hope that we could still fit that in. I've been through there. It would only take a few hours, especially after most of us have been down to NORAD in Colorado Springs. This is their regional headquarters for Canada, as well as for other logistical support that's run out of 1 Air Command. It would be worth our while to see it as part of our defence of North America study.

The Chair: With Sunday travel, Clerk, would that be possible? With a Monday late-night return?

The Clerk: If the committee wanted to see Shilo only, then flying in to Winnipeg on Monday night, driving up to Shilo the next morning, spending the day in Shilo, and then coming back and taking a flight out would get everyone back to Ottawa by Monday evening.

I took note of Mr. Bezan's suggestion of visiting 1 CAD. If I understood it correctly, that would entail flying out on Sunday night, going to Shilo the next morning, spending the day in Shilo, coming back to Winnipeg on Monday night, staying over in Winnipeg Monday night, visiting 1 CAD in the morning, and then catching a flight during the day on Tuesday to be back in Ottawa before the end of QP. I'll take that to the logistics officer, but off the top of my head, I think that proposal is also possible.

The Chair: Mr. Harris.

Mr. Jack Harris: I thought Mr. Bezan's suggestion was that we somehow get to Brandon on the Sunday night, and that we could do Brandon on Monday and do 17 Wing on Tuesday morning. The idea is to get here not necessarily by QP, but certainly by the votes.

So that would be half a day in Winnipeg on the Tuesday, a full day or a day in travel to get back from Shilo on Monday, and then be back here Tuesday afternoon.... Is that what we're looking at now? If we're going all the way to Manitoba on the Sunday, we may as well get ourselves to Brandon if we can fly WestJet from Winnipeg. Is it Winnipeg to Brandon on WestJet...?

● (0910)

Mr. James Bezan: They come in from the west to Brandon. They might come from Toronto into Brandon. I don't know if there's a Winnipeg-Brandon connection.

Mr. Jack Harris: But you can get into Brandon on another—

The Chair: If the committee is willing to sacrifice a Sunday for travel, and if we can make the two-fer work, then I sense there's agreement.

If the committee agrees to that travel schedule, we will circulate a budget and itinerary. Agreed?

An hon. member: Agreed.

The Chair: We don't have the dates for the second. The first trip should work and give us four meaningful hours on the ground in Petawawa, weather notwithstanding, on the day.

Regarding acceptance of the first report of the subcommittee on agenda and procedure, those in favour?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: We'll now suspend, colleagues, and go in camera for the next portion of the meeting.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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