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Chair

Mr. Bryan May

Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

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● (1540)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Bryan May (Cambridge, Lib.)): We are missing two members of the committee, but we have a quorum. I would like to suggest that in the interests of time we move forward.

By way of a quick update, we have sent out invitations to the three ministers who report to this committee. We know that those invitations have been received. Word is that we're working diligently to get dates when the ministers are available. I have kind of an update but not the one we want. As soon as we have a date, we will update our schedule and make sure that we adjust it in light of having the ministers here to speak.

We have a bit of housekeeping. We have, myself included, some people on this committee who are new to Ottawa. I have some procedural notes, as I said, a bit of housekeeping. As a friendly reminder to all members, please direct comments to the chair rather than to one another. Members should wait to be recognized by the chair before speaking. During debate or questions and comments, the clerk will add the names of the members who would like to speak to a list which will be to my immediate right. If I don't see you, usually my fantastic clerk will. Members can speak in the language of their choice since, of course, we have simultaneous interpretation. My thanks to the folks who provide this great service.

I expect today's meeting is going to go fairly quickly. We had a very good subcommittee meeting on Monday. I was pleased with the end result. We had a good debate with regard to the motions presented at that committee. Although many of us in the room were surprised at the outcome, I think it was the best outcome we could have seen. It really does show that we are doing our best to be not just cordial but inclusive and to make sure that everybody's voice matters.

I would ask the clerk to distribute copies of the report.

I'm going to back up for a second. I just received an update. We have confirmation on a date, and that will be April 11. We have confirmation from all three ministers that they will be present on that date to speak to their mandate letters as they pertain to this committee.

I think it's good news that we have that confirmation.

Mr. Warawa.

Mr. Mark Warawa (Langley—Aldergrove, CPC): For clarification, Chair, you said April 11.

The Chair: April 11, yes.

Mr. Mark Warawa: And you said all three ministers.

The Chair: Correct.

Mr. Mark Warawa: When we discussed the invitation, we discussed the normal format, which was that the minister would be here for an hour, followed by an hour for department officials to answer any additional questions. My understanding, then, was that we would be dealing with three different dates for three different ministers.

Is there a reason that the ministers cannot come on different dates? Is there overlap? Are there efficiencies, lack of availability? Why are they all coming on the same day?

The Chair: To be honest, that's the date that....

I don't think the invitation—we can pull it up here—specified that type of layout. That was maybe an issue with the invitation, but the invitation that went out didn't specifically identify them coming on different days.

I'm not going to suggest that I speak for their rationale or why they coordinated to do it on the same day, but that's the response that I have.

Mr. Mark Warawa: Thank you. That's fine.

The Chair: Just taking my chair hat off for a moment, if I can, we do have an incredibly busy agenda that we're about to embark on. I personally think that this makes a little more sense for what you were saying in terms of the efficiency aspect of it.

Mr. Mark Warawa: Thank you.

If I could speak to that, I appreciate all members and ministers making themselves available, and if the committee thought there was a specific minister that we needed to invite back, we have that option. However, as a first go-round to provide an overview, I think this will do fine.

Thank you.

The Chair: Fantastic.

Ms. Ashton.

Ms. Niki Ashton (Churchill—Keewatinook Aski, NDP): Chair, I actually want to express concern about that arrangement. I mean, we're talking about three ministers. Two in particular are in charge of significant departments, significant budgets, and their mandate letters do not overlap.

I've never heard of ministers coming in to do a briefing at the beginning of the session en masse. I've certainly heard of that in the case of legislation, but as an opening, a beginning to a relationship as well, I personally find it problematic.

I certainly echo the idea put forward by my colleague. I mean, we'd like to hear them, but I don't find that's a reflection of the scope of their work and our work as a committee.

I certainly hope that we're not getting off on a rocky start, where we will actually.... What it essentially means is a very limited opportunity to get into what exactly these ministers' plans are beyond the mandate letter.

Whether it's EI or housing or disabilities, whatever it might be, the list of the issues that these ministers cover is so extensive that I feel we're seeing a dangerous precedent being set here.

● (1545)

The Chair: I would like comment on that. The invitation that was sent specifically asked the ministers to speak to their mandate letters.

Again, I'm not speaking for the ministers in any way, shape, or form. However, to your comment about speaking beyond their mandate letters, I would agree that a longer session would be needed, but that's not what was asked of them in this invitation.

Mr. Zimmer.

Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River—Northern Rockies, CPC): I concur with our colleagues, and that is just from being here before. The typical way it's done is that the minister has an hour. We have an hour to question the minister directly, and then there's an hour for department officials following that hour. If there are any questions left unanswered, hopefully they can fill in some gaps.

The question I would have is whether it's for the entire two hours that all three ministers are speaking, or is it just three ministers for one hour.

The Chair: I literally was just given a notice saying April 11 is the day, because I brought it up. I don't have any of those details at this time. We can find that out.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Is there a way to find out and get some clarity from whomever gave you what you have today? I just would say that if all three ministers are going to speak in that same one hour, that's going to be more than insufficient time. This department handles a third of the budget, right? I would suggest that we have them for longer, but again I'm seeking clarity on this. Is it for two hours?

Mr. Dan Ruimy (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, Lib.): We just found out ourselves that the minister was coming, so this is actually news to us as well. I would like to also say that during the invitation, there was not a process that was laid out, to my knowledge. I don't recall.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Can I speak to that?

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Just to be clear, if you check, if there were minutes taken, there was discussion about the way ministers present to committee. There was a discussion of an hour to present and an hour for officials. That will be in the minutes; I know it was there. I guess maybe that old word “assume” comes and bites us you know where; we assumed that this would have been taken forward as the standard and the norm.

The Chair: I can speak for the invitation itself, and that was not in the invitation. In terms of the minutes, we can look it up, but in terms of the invitation itself, it wasn't there.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: I have a suggestion, short of having clarity. I would like to make a request that we have them each for their own day, for an hour to present, and then have another hour for the officials to present, in lieu of having a clearer picture of what the plan actually is.

The Chair: Sure, okay.

Ms. Ashton.

Ms. Niki Ashton: I support that proposal. I'm looking at other committees. I don't know of any other committees that have the scope that we have and have more than one minister coming for one hour. I think we've discussed the need to set the right tone here, and that involves giving each minister the opportunity to speak to us in full and having the support of their officials. That is usually what has taken place, so I certainly hope this is the case here.

● (1550)

The Chair: Mr. Warawa.

Mr. Mark Warawa: I agree. We don't want to assume anything. The norm in this place—and I've been here for 12 years—is that you would have one minister come for an hour. I don't think it's really relevant if they were asked separately or all at the same time. Rather than going into great detail and asking about the exact wording of the request, we have to move on. I think it's our first choice that we have each minister here for an hour, followed by an hour.

A second choice, I would say, is if all three ministers are coming on the 11th, the same day, that we have them stay for the two hours. The last choice would be their being here only for an hour. The reason I say that is just the simple math. If we have them here for one hour, the first round, each minister gets 10 minutes, that's 30 minutes. That's followed by the first round of questioning, seven minutes each, and that's another half hour. That would mean the ministers would only get four questions. It's just really not a genuine opportunity to ask them. Just in the simple math, I think we have to go for option one, which is that we have them each on a different day. Option two would be if they all want to come the same day, then we ask that they stay here for the full two hours.

Thank you.

The Chair: I'm going to Mr. Sangha, first.

Mr. Ramesh Sangha (Brampton Centre, Lib.): We are new here and I understand that we have to decide together among all of us. If we feel that it's not possible to deal with three ministers all on one day, we can, first of all, resend the messages and give them the situation.

Second, if it is possible, can three be accommodated on one day or not? That's the question.

The Chair: Mr. Ruimy.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: My understanding is that the ministers will be here for the full two hours. So if....

The Chair: Okay, we'll get clarification that April 11 was the date we were given. I'd like to remind all committee members that we can't compel the ministers to be here, but this is the date we've been given. If two hours is what's being suggested, I think it makes a little more sense with regard to the timing and the breakdown, but we'll get that clarified.

Mr. Cuzner.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): I'd like some clarification. Apparently the wording of the request was that all three ministers would appear. They made it a priority, booked it out, and are willing to come for the two hours. I think it was to talk about their mandate. Having been on this committee before during estimates, I know that two ministers would often appear at the same time. You would have both of them for one hour. Both would be at the table for one hour only. With the estimates it's wide open; you can ask anything at all.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Zimmer.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: We've had two at different times on agriculture, because it covered a topic that involved both.

It was worded as having all three. I distinctly remember that you suggested having all three ministers come. It was Mr. Long's request, and we agreed to it. To get us on common ground, I would suggest that the ministers appear for the full two hours. I would suggest a follow-up meeting the next day, in which any remaining questions could be asked of the officials. Mr. Cuzner knows that there's often a certain block of time. The ministers have only so much time, but they have their officials who can fill in a lot of gaps for us. These are huge files, so if we're going to go two hours for all three ministers, I would ask that we have a follow-up meeting with officials for another two hours.

● (1555)

Mr. Mark Warawa: We could have it on April 13.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: I would make a request for that date. I know how hard it is to schedule three ministers together, so I want to work with that. Let's take it, but let's get the officials here for another couple of hours the next day. That's all I would suggest. Then it suits us both ways.

The Chair: Mr. Ruimy.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: I'm not opposed to that. But I don't believe we can compel them to come. Their schedules may not even conform to the following meeting. I'm not sure how you'd like to address that.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: I'd like to clarify who we're talking about here.

The Chair: Okay, sorry.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: It's rare in my experience that a committee's request for the presence of departmental officials is denied.

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: It's one thing for the ministers not to be available, but it's another thing for officials not to make themselves available. I have never seen that happen myself.

The Chair: We're not talking about the ministers.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Sorry.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: I think we should have the ministers for two hours, and the officials the next day for two hours. That's what I'm asking.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: That's assuming the officials are needed.

The Chair: Yes, I better change that.

Mr. Long.

Mr. Wayne Long (Saint John—Rothesay, Lib.): Yes, I agree. That sounds very reasonable to me.

The Chair: Mr. Zimmer, is this a motion that you're bringing forward?

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Yes. I'd like to officially make the motion. I want to make it short so that you can sift out the chaff. I would move that, considering that the ministers are going to be here for the full two hours on April 11, the committee request their officials be here for our following meeting for a full two hours.

The Chair: Which would be on April 13.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Perfect.

The Chair: Do we simply vote, or do we have to reread?

A voice: No.

The Chair: No? Okay.

Are there any questions or comments to the motion?

Mr. Mark Warawa: Mr. Chair, I was just looking at the date that we have to report back to the House if we want to bring up anything on main estimates. Are we talking about mandate when they come or are we talking main estimates at the same time?

Mr. Bob Zimmer: It's their mandate letters.

The Chair: Yes, I believe they're going to talk about their mandate letters.

Mr. Mark Warawa: Just the mandate.... So are we going to invite the ministers back for that at another date?

The Chair: I think we can have that conversation. I think this specific invitation is asking them to refer to their mandate letters as they pertain to this committee.

Mr. Mark Warawa: Right. So, if we're going to be restricted to that, then we'd have to invite them back. We have a deadline of May 31 to report back; otherwise, the estimates are deemed accepted.

I think, just for efficiency, we either invite them back or we open it up so we can deal.... We have them for two hours, so we could also deal with the main estimates while they're here, their mandate and estimates, if that's okay with members.

The Chair: Mr. Long.

Mr. Wayne Long: Why don't we just deal with the 6th and the 13th first? We'll have the three of them here for two hours on the 6th. We'll put the request out for their—

Mr. Mark Warawa: The 11th.

Mr. Wayne Long: The 11th, sorry. Then we'll put the request out for the next meeting for their officials.

Mr. Mark Warawa: That's fine.

Mr. Wayne Long: Then let's just see what we get from that.

Mr. Mark Warawa: Very good.

The Chair: Mr. Robillard.

Mr. Yves Robillard (Marc-Aurèle-Fortin, Lib.): I second the motion.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Moving on, let's move back to the report of the subcommittee. You all have this in front of you, and I'll just read through it quickly here:

> Your Subcommittee met on Monday, February 22, 2016, to consider the business of the Committee and agreed to make the following recommendations:
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> 1. That the Committee conduct, as its first priority, a study of the impact of recent reforms to the Employment Insurance Program and to Employment Insurance appeals; that the study include an examination of the current low rates of access to Employment Insurance and their causes; and that the Government provide an answer to the recommendations made by the Committee.
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> 2. That, concerning the study of the impact of recent reforms to the Employment Insurance Program and to Employment Insurance appeals, the Committee hold a total of five (5) meetings which are to be divided as follows: One (1) meeting to receive a briefing from department officials; Three (3) meetings to hear from witnesses; and One (1) meeting for the consideration of a draft report.
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> 3. That, concerning the study of the impact of recent reforms to the Employment Insurance Program and to Employment Insurance appeals, the total number of witnesses be divided among the recognized parties according to their standings in the House of Commons and that each party send a prioritized list of witnesses including their contact information to the Clerk of the Committee no later than Monday, February 29, 2016, at 4:00 p.m.
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> 4. That the Committee conduct, as its second priority, a study of poverty reduction strategies currently in place across Canada; that the study focus on improving the delivery of federal resources and services for the Canadian Poverty Reduction Strategy; that the study be based on four main areas of implementation: Neighbourhoods (eg. affordable housing and homeless shelters), Workforce (eg. skills training), Education, and Health; that special focus be put on improving services for our most vulnerable citizens: children, the disabled, people experiencing mental illness, and seniors living in poverty; that the Committee receive witnesses for sixteen (16) meetings; and that the Government provide an answer to the recommendations made by the Committee.

● (1600)

On the report from the subcommittee, are there any questions or comments?

There are a couple of comments from the clerk. It's just to note that meeting five regarding the consideration of the draft report, which is referred to in recommendation two, will not be right after meeting four since the analysts will need time to actually write that report. In recommendation three, in terms of the witness breakdown, there's a total of 24 witnesses, 14 from the Liberals, 7 from the Conservatives and 3 from the New Democratic Party.

Are there any questions or comments?

Mr. Zimmer.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Does this happen until April 11? I'm thinking it's not going to. To me, there's probably some gap time. Does it happen to coordinate with that date of April 11?

The Chair: That's a great question.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: It must come close.

● (1605)

The Chair: It just about perfectly aligns with the minister's visit. It's very close.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: It's four actually because we have.... We're sitting again on March 7. That would be two meetings, March 7 and 9. The next two would be March 21 and 23. That would be four. The minister's visit is the 11th. It's like we actually planned it this way.

The Chair: Fantastic. Don't you like it when things work out?

Mr. Bob Zimmer: There we go. There's our gap time. We don't need to worry about it.

The Chair: Excellent.

Is there a mover to adopt the report? Mr. Long.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: I think that worked out really well. I was very pleased with the end results.

Everybody would have received an email from the office of the clerk with these bullet points regarding the Centennial Flame Research Award for Persons with Disabilities.

I'm seeing some heads nod and some heads shaking. I spoke to this in subcommittee and I'll speak to it here briefly. This is a really cool kind of a subcommittee project, theoretically, that we could be working on. The money that is thrown into the Centennial Flame is collected and is actually distributed as a scholastic award.

I'll just read the finer points here:

> According to the Centennial Flame Research Award Act, this monetary award is offered each year to a person with a disability to enable him or her to conduct research and prepare a report on the contributions of one or more Canadians with disabilities to the public life of Canada or the activities of Parliament.

There is a responsibility for us. The administration of the Centennial Flame Research Award is delegated to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. The award is comprised of money, as I said, collected from the fountain plus any private and corporate donations made to the Centennial Flame Research Award Fund. The amount for the 2014 award was $5,500, so this is a significant award.

In April 2016, the clerk of the committee will issue a news release inviting people with disabilities to apply for the award and providing information on how to apply. In December 2016, members of the committee will select the recipient of the 2016 award.

Given the incredible amount of work that is going to be coming to this committee, I'm just throwing this out there. Is there something that we want to create or can we create a special committee to oversee this on behalf of this committee? Is that something that may have been done before, Mr. Zimmer?

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Mr. Chair, Rodger Cuzner could fill us in on how it worked before.

It would take up one possible meeting just to vet the names. We get the names beforehand and by the time we come to committee, we're ready to vote. I'm open to that, but we might want to do it in camera, so people don't know who gets selected before we release it.

The Chair: Mr. Cuzner, would you mind commenting on how it's been done in the past?

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: In the past, staff put together a short list of applicants and circulated it to committee members. Then we came back, there was discussion, a meeting, and it was voted upon. We leave it to the staff to narrow it down to the final three to five candidates.

The Chair: Is everybody fine with continuing with that process? Excellent.

There are a couple of points on the other side of this fantastic page that I failed to report on. Recipients normally have one calendar year from the date of the presentation to submit their report to the clerk of the committee. The 2014 award recipient, Selma Kouidri, whose research explored the legacy of Maria Barile, a woman who lived with a disability and who was a pioneer in the disability movement, should be sending her report to the clerk shortly, so we'll be looking forward to that.

Moving on, and not seeing any questions or comments, the supplementary estimates were tabled in the House on Friday, February 19. Each committee may consider and report, or be deemed to have reported, the votes on the supplementary estimates no later than three sitting days before the final sitting of the supply period ending March 26. Monday, March 21, is that day.

The main estimates were sent via email to everybody just prior to this meeting, so your staff have access to that now.

Finally, the next meeting of the standing committee will be held on Monday, March 7, at 3:30 p.m. We are on the second floor on Monday, just so you're aware.

Are there any further comments or questions?

Mr. Ruimy.

● (1610)

Mr. Dan Ruimy: What will our agenda be? Are we going to have witnesses?

The Chair: The first meeting is actually a briefing from the department officials. Now that this motion has been adopted by this committee, the clerk will make that invitation to the department, so they can give this committee an update.

The meeting is adjourned.