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—
Chair

The Honourable Kevin Sorenson

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• (1530)

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès (Brossard—Saint-Lambert, Lib.)): Good afternoon everyone.

It's the 47th meeting of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts.

[English]

We are going to start our meeting, but I'd like to make a statement before we go further.

Thank you all for being here from the department and from the Office of the Auditor General. I have to say we are extremely disappointed that the deputy minister couldn't attend. This has been an issue for us. We know that sometimes, yes, there are difficulties in getting schedules to work together.

[Translation]

As you probably know, the legislation states that the deputy minister must be present. We're very disappointed that he isn't here.

Mr. Christopherson, you have the floor.

[English]

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I very much appreciate your raising the issue right off the top. This is a serious matter, and it's not the first time we've had this issue with this department, and with other departments too. At the risk of it looking like we're having some kind of bureaucratic power play, where there has to be a protocol followed and we just don't do business unless we have high enough figures here, to speak to your issue, the law says that the deputy minister is the accounting officer.

I was here before that was in place, and some of you have heard me go on and on about it. I can do that again if you wish, but I don't think it's necessary. We know the importance and we know the difference between having that law in place and not. However, it only works when the accounting officer is actually here.

As much as the last thing we want to do is to waste any time or be any less efficient than possible, we cannot do our job the way Parliament expects us to do it if we don't have deputy ministers here in their lawful capacity to be responsible for the department and to speak for the department when we ask questions about the Auditor General's report.

I am going to move that this meeting be adjourned, that we reschedule, that the meeting happen before Easter, and that the deputy minister be present.

I'm quite prepared to debate it if necessary, but the reason is understood. You, in your capacity as chair, did the right thing in raising this right off the top. I, as one member here, and the longest serving member, feel that we need to bring this to a halt. It's starting to get a little bit loose. These things happen, but it's our responsibility to rein it back in and make sure, when there is a commitment made for the deputy minister to be here, that the deputy minister actually shows up.

I move that we adjourn, that we reschedule the meeting to a date when the deputy minister can and will be here, and that the meeting happen before we rise for the Easter break.

The Vice-Chair (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Thank you, Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. McColeman.

Mr. Phil McColeman (Brantford—Brant, CPC): If you require a seconder, I'll be happy to second the motion.

Just to underscore what Mr. Christopherson said, our experience so far is no reflection on who is here today, and I want to thank the witnesses for being here and for making themselves available. This really comes down to a point of principle for this committee to do its work effectively, which, as Mr. Christopherson so accurately says, is expected of us.

I won't belabour it any further. I'm in full agreement with the motion and I hope all committee members are.

The Vice-Chair (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Madam Shanahan.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan (Châteauguay—Lacolle, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I have to say, particularly in light of having done our preparation for today, we have many questions we wanted to ask and they need to be asked to the deputy minister. I understand that is in the legislation, and it's entirely within our right to do so.

I also agree with the motion as it stands.

The Vice-Chair (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Are there any other comments on the motion?

Mr. Arya.

Mr. Chandra Arya (Nepean, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I completely agree with what Mr. Christopherson and my other colleagues have said. I also concur with this.

• (1535)

The Vice-Chair (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): I am presuming it's unanimous and that we do not need a vote.

With apologies, and I really am sorry that we have to do this, but it's been, as Mr. Christopherson said, something that we want to stop from happening in the committee. We'd like to ask our clerk to negotiate with your department a possible future date before Easter for the deputy minister to come.

Again, this doesn't take anything from the fact that we know you have the knowledge and you could provide the answers. It's a question of accountability. That is why we have come to this.

Madam Borges.

Ms. Helena Borges (Associate Deputy Minister, Department of Transport): Can I offer one explanation?

I am a deputy minister. I am the associate deputy minister for Transport Canada. My colleague and I, Mr. Keenan, who is the deputy minister, operate as two in a box. I have as much responsibility for the department as he does. We manage the department together. I take responsibility for certain files. This one is under my level of responsibility. I don't disagree with you that the FAA has specified there is only one accounting officer and it is he, but if he is not present in the building, if he is not available, then I carry out those responsibilities for him. I would offer that as a consideration. I am a deputy minister.

Mr. David Christopherson: Chair, at the risk of getting into the weeds, the process around here—

Mr. T.J. Harvey (Tobique—Mactaquac, Lib.): They should both be here.

Mr. David Christopherson: Yes. That's where I was going to go, that they should both be here.

Given the fact that...I mean, fine, we can get into it if you want, but this meeting has been postponed twice now and the purpose was to have the deputy. I don't know whether it was for you or for the other. I am assuming it's the other. I've never run into this before where there are two deputies. There is either an associate deputy minister... I have to say that's new to me, and I've been a minister provincially.

It still speaks to the amount of trouble we've had to get your colleague here. We went through all that hoop jumping in order to get someone here that now you're telling us maybe didn't need to be here. It still speaks to a lot of confusion about who is going to be here, who should be here, and who is legally accountable.

Ms. Helena Borges: I understand that and we share your frustration because the first time we were asked to appear at this committee, the notice from the clerk of the committee asked for an official.

We go to many parliamentary committees when there is a request. If they say officials are invited to appear before the committee, then we send an assistant deputy minister, a director general, usually, or a deputy minister. Deputy ministers do not go to all the committees, so

there was clearly some level of confusion between the request from the clerk and then the request from the committee itself. We apologize for that confusion.

I have made myself available for the last several weeks. I was ready to come. Unfortunately my colleague was not because he was with the minister. I am here today, ready and willing to answer your questions. I'd be happy to do so. If you choose to defer until before Easter, then we'll try to find a schedule that will work for him.

Mr. David Christopherson: I appreciate that and I hear what's being said.

I am still not clear on how this works. I would still prefer... I mean, how can we not be clear on who the deputy minister is? I mean usually there's one minister, one deputy minister, and then a series of ADMs. Now we have an associate deputy minister. Personally, I'd still like to have a clarification as to exactly what that role is. Is it 100% the same? Is there a legal technicality in terms of who is the actual accounting officer? My understanding is that there can only be one at a time. Maybe we have a hybrid here. I am listening to what's being said, and I'm trying to process it the same as everyone else.

I'll go this far. I would still feel better if we adjourned this meeting, and if you, Chair, with the assistance of us vice-chairs if you wish it, sit down with them to clarify what an associate deputy minister is, whether that meets our satisfaction as being the accounting officer, and then schedule this forward. It may be that we need both, or one, or either, but I don't know. I think I need to know who's legally accountable, which is the whole point of the motion.

My motion stands, Chair, and if we need to get clarification on *qu'est-ce que c'est* an associate deputy minister, let's do that too.

• (1540)

The Vice-Chair (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): If I rely on both what the clerk and the analyst have told us for the past two meetings, it is, according to the FAA, the deputy minister, which is why it became such an important issue for us. Because we are trying to avoid... It's not that you don't have the capacity, but in terms of titles, this is the way it works as far as we know. It is the deputy minister who is the accounting officer.

If there are no further comments on the question, and I thank you for submitting that, are we ready to adopt the motion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Vice-Chair (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): We will adjourn the meeting, but before we adjourn completely, we have another motion we'd like to bring forward, the motion that Ms. Shanahan introduced at our last meeting.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Can we do that?

Mr. David Christopherson: It's up to you whether you want it raised now or not. You don't have to.

The Vice-Chair (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): However, I will thank our guests. I apologize again for this but this really is important to us.

Ms. Shanahan, would you like to read the motion again? We're in public.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Thank you, Madam Chair.

My motion reads as follows:

That the Committee, at the next opportunity, undertake an assessment of the Government's Responses to the Committee's recommendations.

The Vice-Chair (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Thank you, Ms. Shanahan.

Mr. David Christopherson: If I may, just quickly, I want to thank Ms. Shanahan for raising this.

In my experience, more and more it's becoming clear to me that it's that follow-up work that is the important part of what we do. Again, for the one and done—where people come in, they have a hearing, they say the right things, they make promises, and they leave—if we have no means to hold them to account, and they know that we have no means to hold them to account, they know that time is their friend and as time goes on it will all get forgotten. I know this for a fact because that's the way it was when I first got here before we actually got serious about going after the follow-up.

Internationally, this puts us on the cutting edge. We were recently in London—you, Madam Chair, and Mr. McColeman. One of the first things we talked about when we talked about our action plan was how we do these sorts of things, which is the basis of the info,

and they asked, “What's that? What's that about?” They were interested in doing it.

A lot of this follow-up is the new era of doing this job correctly and we're on the cutting edge of that. Ms. Shanahan is putting herself and her thoughts right at the front edge of our work too. I just can't underscore enough the importance of this. It's boring. It doesn't get a lot of attention but if we don't have the means to follow up on the commitments that are made, this whole process just falls apart and we are only a fraction as effective as we need to be as the premier oversight committee of Parliament.

The Vice-Chair (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): I'm gathering you support the motion.

Mr. David Christopherson: I support it a bit. Yes, I can be persuaded.

The Vice-Chair (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Mr. McColeman.

Mr. Phil McColeman: I'm in support.

The Vice-Chair (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Perfect.

(Motion agreed to)

The Vice-Chair (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Thank you very much.

Now we will adjourn the meeting. Thank you.

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