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Chair: Mr. Tom Kmiec



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• (1115)

[English]

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Angela Crandall): Good morning, everyone.

I must inform members that the clerk of the committee is ready to receive motions for the election of chair, but that is all I can do. We cannot receive any motions or entertain any debate at this point.

We can now proceed to the election of the chair.

Pursuant to Standing Order 106(2), the chair must be a member of the official opposition.

I am ready to receive motions.

Mr. Michael Cooper (St. Albert—Edmonton, CPC): I move to nominate Tom Kmiec for chair.

Mr. Richard Bragdon (Tobique—Mactaquac, CPC): I will second the motion.

The Clerk: It has been moved by Mr. Cooper that Mr. Kmiec be elected as chair of the Committee.

Are there any other motions of nomination?

None being seen, is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Clerk: Does that go for everyone on Zoom as well?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Clerk: Good. I declare the motion carried and Mr. Tom Kmiec duly elected chair of the committee.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. Tom Kmiec (Calgary Shepard, CPC)): Colleagues, thank you for your confidence in me.

[English]

Colleagues, thank you for letting me be the chair. I chaired the national Conservative caucus in the last Parliament, so going from 150 of them to the few of you will be delightful and, hopefully, much easier, so I thank you for that.

We have to elect vice-chairs now that we have a chair.

This is the first meeting of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts. Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format pursuant to the House order of November 25,, so members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

Regarding the speaking list, the committee clerk and I will do our very best to maintain a consolidated order of speaking for all members whether they are participating virtually or in person, so I'll try to catch everybody's attention.

I see that Mr. Fragiskatos has his hand up.

If you give me just one moment to read through this, I will recognize you.

I will take this opportunity to also remind all participants in this meeting that you can't take screen shots. You can't take photos or video during the meeting. Those are part of the members' privileges that are protected. The proceedings are available via the House of Commons website, so you can take screen caps there, and your staff can as well. You can do it there.

Given the ongoing pandemic situation and in light of the recommendations from public health authorities as well as the directive of the Board of Internal Economy of October 19 to remain healthy and safe, the following is recommended for all those attending meetings in person. Anyone with symptoms should participate by Zoom and not attend meetings in person. Everyone must maintain two metres of physical distancing whether seated or standing. Everyone must wear a non-medical mask when circulating in the room. It is recommended in the strongest possible terms that members wear their masks at all times, including when they are seated. Non-medical masks, which provide better clarity than cloth masks, are available in the room. Then we have all the proper hygiene that we all expect. We are all expected to wash our hands. For those who have children, you have probably told them a million times to wash their hands. I tell my kids to wash their hands. Please do that.

As chair, I'll be enforcing these measures for the duration of the meeting, and I thank you all for your cooperation.

We have some routine motions after the election of the vice-chairs.

I didn't forget, Madam Clerk.

Mr. Fragiskatos, you had your hand up before. Do you want to say something now?

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Yes, Mr. Chair. I didn't mean to interrupt your notes to the committee. I was just so eager to congratulate you that I raised my hand.

In the spirit of what you just said, I'd like to nominate our vice-chair. I nominate Jean Yip to play that role.

The Chair: Are there any other nominations?

None being seen, Madam Yip, you are elected vice-chair of the public accounts committee. Congratulations.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jean Yip): Thank you very much. I look forward to working with all of you.

A special welcome to the new members of the committee and, of course, to some of the old members.

An hon. member: What are you saying?

The Vice-Chair: Seasoned, how about that?

An hon. member: That's better.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: We need a second vice-chair for this committee. Normally, that is a member from a party recognized by the House of Commons. So I need a nomination for the position of second vice-chair.

Mrs. Shanahan, go ahead.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan (Châteauguay—Lacolle, Lib.): First off, I congratulate you and Ms. Yip.

I would like to nominate Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné for the position of second vice-chair.

The Chair: Are there any further motions?

(Motion adopted)

The Chair: I declare the motion carried and Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné duly elected second vice-chair of the committee.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné (Terrebonne, BQ): Thank you very much.

[*English*]

The Chair: Colleagues, we have routine motions that were distributed to all of you. Your chair is not allowed to move motions; therefore, I give it to the committee.

Ms. Bradford, please go ahead.

Ms. Valerie Bradford (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Congratulations, Mr. Chair, on your election, and to the vice-chairs as well. I look forward to working with all of you.

I'll proceed to read the motions.

The first motion is with respect to analyst services:

That the committee retain, as needed and at the discretion of the Chair, the services of one or more analysts from the Library of Parliament to assist it in its work.

• (1120)

The Chair: Is there any debate on the motion?

Is the committee agreed?

(Motion agreed to)

Ms. Valerie Bradford: The next motion deals with the Subcommittee on Agenda and Procedure:

That the Subcommittee on Agenda and Procedure be established and be composed of five members; the Chair, one member from each recognized party; and that the subcommittee work in a spirit of collaboration.

The Chair: Is there any debate on this motion?

Seeing none, are we all agreed?

(Motion agreed to)

Ms. Valerie Bradford: The next motion deals with meeting without a quorum:

That the Chair be authorized to hold meetings to receive evidence and to have that evidence published when a quorum is not present, provided that at least four members are present, including two members of the opposition parties and two members of the government party, but when travelling outside the Parliamentary Precinct, that the meeting begin after 15 minutes, regardless of members present.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Are there any debates?

[*English*]

(Motion agreed to)

Ms. Valerie Bradford: The next motion is with respect to time for opening remarks and questioning of witnesses:

That witnesses be given five minutes for their opening statement; that whenever possible, witnesses provide the committee with their opening statement 72 hours in advance; that at the discretion of the Chair, during the questioning of witnesses, there be allocated six minutes for the first questioner of each party as follows for the first round: Conservative Party, Liberal Party, Bloc Québécois, and New Democratic Party. For the second and subsequent rounds, the order and time for questioning be as follows: Conservative Party, five minutes; Liberal Party, five minutes; Bloc Québécois, two and a half minutes; New Democratic Party, two and a half minutes; Conservative Party, five minutes; Liberal Party, five minutes.

The Chair: Is there any debate on this motion?

Are we agreed?

(Motion agreed to)

Ms. Valerie Bradford: The next motion deals with document distribution:

That only the clerk of the committee be authorized to distribute documents to members of the Committee provided the documents are in both official languages, and that the witnesses be advised accordingly.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Are there any comments?

(Motion adopted)

[*English*]

Ms. Valerie Bradford: The next motion deals with working meals:

That the clerk of the committee, at the discretion of the Chair, be authorized to make the necessary arrangements to provide working meals for the committee and its subcommittees.

The Chair: Is there any debate?

(Motion agreed to)

Ms. Valerie Bradford: The next motion deals with travel, accommodation and the living expenses of witnesses:

That, if requested, reasonable travel, accommodation and living expenses be reimbursed to witnesses not exceeding two representatives per organization; and that in exceptional circumstances, payment for more representatives be made at the discretion of the Chair.

The Chair: I don't see any debate. Are we all agreed?

(Motion agreed to)

Ms. Valerie Bradford: The next motion deals with access to in camera meetings:

That, unless otherwise ordered, each committee member be allowed to be accompanied by one staff member at in camera meetings and that one additional person from each House officer's office be allowed to be present.

The Chair: Is there any debate? Are we agreed?

(Motion agreed to)

Ms. Valerie Bradford: The next motion deals with transcripts of in camera meetings:

That one copy of the transcript of each in camera meeting be kept in the committee clerk's office for consultation by members of the committee or by their staff; and that the analysts assigned to the committee also have access to the in camera transcripts.

The Chair: Is there any debate? Are we all agreed?

(Motion agreed to)

Ms. Valerie Bradford: The next motion deals with notices of motions:

That a 48-hour notice, interpreted as two nights, be required for any substantive motion to be moved in committee, unless the substantive motion relates directly to business then under consideration, provided that: (a) the notice be filed with the clerk of the committee no later than 4:00 pm from Monday to Friday; (b) the motion be distributed to Members and the offices of the whips of each recognized party in both official languages by the clerk on the same day the said notice was transmitted if it was received no later than the deadline hour; (c) notices received after the deadline hour or on non-business days be deemed to have been received during the next business day; and that when the committee is holding meetings outside the Parliamentary Precinct, no substantive motion may be moved.

• (1125)

The Chair: Is there any debate? Are we agreed?

(Motion agreed to)

Ms. Valerie Bradford: The next motion reads:

That in relation to orders of reference from the House respecting Bills,

(a) The clerk of the committee shall, upon the committee receiving such an order of reference, write to each member who is not a member of a caucus represented on the committee to invite those members to file with the clerk of the committee, in both official languages, any amendments to the bill, which is the subject of the said Order, which they would suggest that the committee consider;

(b) Suggested amendments filed, pursuant to paragraph (a), at least 48 hours prior to the start of clause-by-clause consideration of the bill to which the amendments relate shall be deemed to be proposed during the said consideration, provided that the committee may, by motion, vary this deadline in respect of a given bill; and

(c) During the clause-by-clause consideration of a bill, the Chair shall allow a member who filed suggested amendments, pursuant to paragraph (a), an opportunity to make brief representations in support of them.

The Chair: Is there any debate? Are we agreed?

(Motion agreed to)

Ms. Valerie Bradford: The next motion deals with technical tests for witnesses:

That the clerk inform each witness who is to appear before the committee that the House administration support team must conduct technical tests to check the connectivity and the equipment used to ensure the best possible sound quality; and that the Chair advise the committee, at the start of each meeting, of any witness who did not perform the required technical tests.

The Chair: Is there any debate? Are we agreed?

(Motion agreed to)

Ms. Valerie Bradford: The next motion deals with linguistic review:

That all documents submitted for committee business that do not come from a federal department, members' offices, or that have not been translated by the Translation Bureau be sent for prior linguistic review by the Translation Bureau before being distributed to members.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Are there any debates?

(Motion adopted)

[*English*]

I have been told by the clerk that there are two more routine motions that this committee usually passes, and they were distributed.

Again, as your chair, I can't move motions. These deal with committee chair and staff authorization and detailed action plans to address recommendations. If there are members who wish to move these motions, hopefully you've read them and might consider moving them. If it's the will of the committee, we don't have to.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Would you mind reading out the two additional motions?

The Chair: Well, I can't move a motion.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Oh, you can't, no, so we're getting them. Is that what's happening?

The Chair: You are.

They were distributed to you by the clerk of the committee.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Okay, very good.

Valerie can continue.

The Chair: Madam Bradford, absolutely, you can, yes.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: This is a new motion recommended by the former committee to future PACP committees. It deals with the deadline for responses to questions:

That, when undertakings are given by witnesses at committee meetings to provide further answers to questions or follow up information, the witnesses be given three weeks to provide the committee with a written response, if a response is not received within the specified time that the committee invite the appropriate accounting officer to appear before the committee to explain why the information has not been provided in the time requested.

The Chair: Is there any debate on this motion?

(Motion agreed to)

Ms. Valerie Bradford: This one deals with follow-up responses:

That, pursuant to Standing Orders 108(1)(a) and 108(3)(g), with regard to any request for information or response contained in any report of the committee, the department or agency tasked with providing the request for information or response be obliged to provide it by no later than the deadline contained in the same report.

The Chair: Is there any debate? Are we agreed?

(Motion agreed to)

• (1130)

Ms. Valerie Bradford: The next one deals with committee chair and staff authorization:

That the committee Chair and staff be authorized to review government responses to recommendations made by the committee during the 43rd Parliament; acknowledge by letter, on the committee's behalf, receipt of government responses where they respond clearly and completely to recommendations or request further information or clarification, as required; monitor the implementation of government commitments made in response to committee recommendations, and request further information as required; and report to the committee on these activities in a timely fashion.

The Chair: Do we agree on this motion?

(Motion agreed to)

Ms. Valerie Bradford: The next is detailed action plans to address recommendations:

That all organizations that have been subject to a performance audit or a special examination by the Office of the Auditor General of Canada provide a detailed action plan to address the audit recommendations which have been agreed to—including specific actions, timelines for their completion and responsible individuals—to the committee and the Office of the Auditor General of Canada within six months of the audit being tabled in the House of Commons;

That organizations that are invited to appear before the committee to discuss the findings of an audit should provide an action plan to the committee no later than 48 hours prior to the hearing;

That action plans and progress reports received by the committee be published on the committee's website.

The Chair: Is there any debate?

Go ahead, Madam Shanahan.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: I'm very pleased that this motion is here, because it follows on work that we did in 42nd Parliament specifically addressing action plans that needed to be submitted to this committee following our studies. I'm very proud to see that it is here. Thank you very much. I certainly support it.

The Chair: Is there anyone else who would like to speak to the motion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: That was the last routine motion.

Madame Bradford, thank you. It's trial by fire at your first committee meeting, so thank you for taking care of that business.

Typically at these first meetings we move on to new business so I'm just going to ask, is there any new business from any member?

Mr. Desjarlais.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais (Edmonton Griesbach, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. As a new member too, I can sympathize. Thanks for your great service, Madam Bradford.

I do have a motion here that I hope was distributed, which I'd like to table for consideration. It's being distributed now.

Should I just read it out while it's being distributed?

I move:

That the committee may meet in camera only for the following purposes: (a) to consider a draft report; (b) to attend briefings concerning national security; (c) to consider lists of witnesses; (d) for any other reason, with the unanimous consent of the committee;

That all votes taken in camera, with the exception of votes regarding the consideration of draft reports, be recorded in the Minutes of Proceedings, including how each member voted when recorded votes are requested.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Typically, I would proceed to debate on the motion, but before I do that I'm getting advice from the clerk, which I will relay to you. Then I'll recognize Madam Shanahan first and go around to see if there are others who want to speak to the motion.

Colleagues, I got some procedural advice. I'm going to rule the motion in order because this committee is a master of its own domain. It can determine best how it wants to proceed. Mr. Desjarlais has read the motion. You have the wording of it in both official languages as well, so I encourage you, if you want, to debate.

Madam Shanahan, you were first and then I'll recognize Mr. Dong. If you want to catch my attention, please raise your hand so I can see you.

Go ahead.

• (1135)

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to hear Mr. Desjarlais' rationale behind this motion because, at first glance, I'm failing to understand why we are putting a witness....

Let me just back up here. I've served on other committee, including the ethics committee, and it was a disturbing trend to me to see that witnesses were being subjected.... These were witnesses who are ordinary, private citizens for the most part, and yet they must appear in front of any committee. They must. Normally we ask them to appear and it's only failing that when the committee decides that it needs to go further and subpoena a witness to cause them to appear.

There were a number of occasions, including a study where we were dealing with sexual aggression, online cyber sexual sensitive material and so on, where indeed some witnesses wanted to present to us and others did not. I would be very uncomfortable that we could not make that decision as a group on a what has normally been done in this committee—Chair, you'll agree with me here—namely, by using a consensus-type of decision-making process in which we would respect the desire of a witness to appear privately. If there were a member here who for some reason of their own was going to insist that a witness testify publicly on information that we could just as well obtain in camera.... Doing so in camera would not hamper our work in any way whatsoever. We could obtain the same information and we'd be able to use it. We have very responsible procedures in place to get the information that we need as parliamentarians, but at the same time respect the witness.

I have great difficulty with this motion and I cannot support it.

The Chair: Mr. Dong, you were next.

Mr. Han Dong (Don Valley North, Lib.): What I'm going to say is pretty short.

Madam Clerk, would it be possible for you to send a copy of the motion to members joining virtually? I didn't get anything in my P9 account. It would be very helpful if I could get a copy of this motion.

The Chair: Sorry, Mr. Dong. Absolutely, we will make sure that's part of the process now. Everyone will get a bilingual copy emailed to them.

The next speaker I have is Mr. Lawrence.

Mr. Philip Lawrence (Northumberland—Peterborough South, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I certainly salute the thought behind this motion. The more public we can be, the better, generally. There is definite truth to sunlight being the best disinfectant.

Unfortunately, as Ms. Shanahan pointed out, there can be occasions where this would be overly prescriptive. One could think of many different scenarios. As Ms. Shanahan also said, we generally work by consensus at this committee. I believe it will generally be the direction of this committee and of the members to have everything where we can be in public, in public. I trust that will happen.

For those reasons, we will have to decline to support this, although I definitely salute the intent behind it. We should definitely strive to be as public and as open as we can.

The Chair: Blake, go ahead.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the honourable members for considering this motion and the certain aspects of it that would increase our ability to have proper oversight in these committees. I think it was pointed out by Madam Shanahan that consensus is often the procedural tool that we use to make decisions. I want to point members to consider aspect (d), referring to all other reasons, with the unanimous consent of the committee, in that such a power would still be vested within the committee. We could still make consensus decisions on how we go in camera.

The purpose is to ensure that Canadians have the proper oversight of all committees. This is their institution. It's their House. We have to find ways to increase the ability of transparency. That's what the intent of the motion is.

There were times in previous Parliaments where the government tried to move committee meetings in camera to force difficult issues and votes behind closed doors to avoid public scrutiny. For the sake of Canadians and the ability to have proper oversight, I believe that these three aspects cover the concerns raised by the members and provide Canadians with the ability to have confidence in this committee and our institutions that this oversight has been proper.

The decisions made in camera are for legitimate reasons. That's the reason I bring this motion forward.

I just want to thank members again for their consideration. Again, I point to (d) for any matters of consensus. We can still go in camera, which has been the predominant concern.

• (1140)

The Chair: Go ahead, Madam Shanahan.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: I believe Mr. Fragiskatos had his hand up first.

The Chair: Mr. Fragiskatos, did you have your hand up? I missed it if you did.

Did you want to speak to this?

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: It would be a close call, Mr. Chair. I'm not sure who had their hand up first, but since I'm speaking, I'll just agree with what Ms. Shanahan said. I will agree with what Mr. Lawrence said.

This is with all due respect to our our new colleague. Congratulations to him on his election. I'm looking forward to working with him.

However, these are sound points that have been raised in opposition to the motion. I would request a vote on division.

The Chair: Madam Shanahan, did you want to...?

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: I agree that we pass to the vote.

The Chair: I have a procedural matter to settle with the clerk. Give me one second.

Colleagues, is there anyone else who wishes to speak to this matter?

Go ahead, Mr. Lawrence.

Mr. Philip Lawrence: I am just wondering if Mr. Desjarlais wants to have this on the record, for whatever reason. I wouldn't like the first vote of the public accounts committee necessarily to be on division. I would like it to be unanimous.

If there is any way, Mr. Desjarlais, we could convince you to withdraw your motion, that would be fantastic. It would be a great note for the committee going forward. However, it is completely your right to head to a vote, if that is your desire.

The Chair: Mr. Desjarlais, go ahead.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: I want to thank the member for that suggestion. Of course, our job would be much easier if we could all agree on all things, and I think we would be representing different groups. But I think Canadians of all stripes and patterns deserve to have a voice in this House, and I think this is something that Canadians have asked us to present in committees. I would like to go to a vote on this and a recorded division. I think it's important for Canadians who would like to see the members of this House and members of this committee who are in favour of ensuring that there are set parameters for in camera use. I think it's a better mode of governance but I think we'll test that in the vote.

Thank you very much, but I will not withdraw the motion.

The Chair: That is your right, Mr. Desjarlais.

[Translation]

I will ask one last time. Would any other members like to speak to this motion?

[English]

Are we ready to proceed to the vote then? Members are you in agreement? Do you agree with the motion?

Order. You can tell I've had to chair meetings of national caucus, which are much longer. I'm just looking at everybody debating. I want to make sure that you vote the way you intend to and not the way you think it should go in your mind.

Madam Clerk, please proceed with the recorded division.

The Clerk: The vote is on the motion by Mr. Desjarlais concerning going in camera

(Motion negatived: nays 9; yeas 1)

The Chair: Is there any other new business that any member would like to bring forward?

Mr. Dong.

• (1145)

Mr. Han Dong: On a point of order, Chair, just want to say hello to my new colleague Mr. Desjarlais. I am very much in favour of Mr. Lawrence's point. I would love to see the vote be a consensus vote, but I would also like to point out that there are rules currently about what can go in camera. There are procedures for that. I just want to assure you that this doesn't mean that it's going to hinder any transparency of this committee. I look forward to fruitful discussions with my colleagues, but don't be discouraged by the vote.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: May I respond?

The Chair: Absolutely, Mr. Desjarlais. Go ahead.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you very much, to my honourable colleague on Zoom. Hopefully when this is a little easier and the COVID-19 variant is not out of control as it is, we will have a chance to meet in person. I want to thank you for your kind words. I do believe that even against difficult decisions we can have proper, cordial and even consensus-based decisions, and I really look forward to doing the work we will do in this committee with each and every one of you. I will just add that I am an indigenous person, and so I am used to this. So don't worry about that. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Is there any other business that members would like to consider?

Madam Yip.

Ms. Jean Yip: I would like to suggest a training presentation by the Canadian Audit and Accountability Foundation. Since we have so many new members here, I think it would be good to be comfortable knowing what we do in public accounts.

The Chair: Is that a suggestion or a motion or...?

Ms. Jean Yip: I will make it a motion.

The Chair: You can make it into a motion.

Ms. Jean Yip: Let's make it into a motion, and that way it's more formal.

The Chair: Okay. I'll accept that.

Is there any debate?

Madam Yip, do you want to add anything to that before I take a round of speakers? No.

I am looking to the room to see if anybody would like to speak on this matter.

Mr. Bragdon.

Mr. Richard Bragdon: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I think that's a good idea, but I would limit that to probably one session of training. Several of us have been on other committees, but for the benefit of maybe a new person, one training session would be good, although I wouldn't want to see it prolonged over an extended period of time. Limiting it to one session would be fine.

The Chair: Madame Yip, would you consider that a friendly amendment, just to move on, if we have training for one meeting? Yes?

Ms. Jean Yip: Yes.

The Chair: Okay. I'll consider that a friendly amendment, that we all agree to hold one meeting for training by the organization you mentioned.

Is there anybody else who would like to debate this motion? Are we all in agreement?

(Motion agreed to [See Minutes of Proceedings])

The Chair: Madame Yip, we'll do one day of training. I'll work with the clerk to set that up as well.

Is there any other new business that members would like to consider, please?

I see none. Thank you. We're good to go.

Colleagues, if you don't have a copy of the Public Accounts of Canada, there's a big stack here and the clerk can provide you with them. They come in both official languages, so you can take two, as Ms. Shanahan has. They're really important documents. There are also digital versions of the documents that you can look things up much more easily in than in the paper versions, but some of us prefer paper.

Again, thank you all for making the time to be here. I look forward to working with all of you on this committee.

The meeting is adjourned.

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