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Thursday, March 5, 2009

The Joint Chair

Mr. Peter Goldring

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• (1310)

[*Translation*]

The Joint Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Denis Robert): Honourable senators, members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen, [*English*]

as joint clerk of the committee it is my duty to preside over the election of the joint chair from the Senate. My colleague from the House of Commons, Carmen DePape, will be presiding over the election of the joint chair from the House of Commons.

I am ready to receive a motion for the election of the joint chair from the Senate.

Senator Stratton.

Senator Terrance Stratton: Yes, I would like to nominate Senator Sharon Carstairs.

The Joint Clerk (Mr. Denis Robert): Are there any other nominations?

Seeing none, it is moved by Senator Stratton that the Honourable Sharon Carstairs be elected joint chair of this committee.

(Motion agreed to)

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Joint Clerk (Mr. Denis Robert): Unfortunately, we have been informed that Sharon Carstairs is unable to be here today, so my colleague will proceed with the election of the joint chair from the House.

The Joint Clerk of the Committee (Mrs. Carmen DePape): We can now proceed to the election of the joint chair for the House of Commons. I'm ready to receive motions to that effect.

Dr. Bennett.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (St. Paul's, Lib.): I would move that Peter Goldring be the joint chair, as the House of Commons representative.

The Joint Clerk (Mrs. Carmen DePape): It has been moved by Dr. Carolyn Bennett that Mr. Peter Goldring be elected as joint chair of the committee.

Are there any further motions?

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

(Motion agreed to)

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Joint Clerk (Mrs. Carmen DePape): Before Mr. Goldring takes the chair, I will now proceed to the election of a vice-chair, as was done in the past.

I am now ready to receive motions to that effect.

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusking, NDP): I would like to nominate Carolyn Bennett.

The Joint Clerk (Mrs. Carmen DePape): It has been moved by....

Excuse me?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I should decline, since I am a critic in the House.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gérard Asselin (Manicouagan, BQ): I would like to nominate my colleague Mr. Louis Plamondon.

The Joint Clerk (Mrs. Carmen DePape): Mr. Asselin moves that Mr. Plamondon be elected vice-chair of the committee.

Are there any other motions?

Mr. Gérard Asselin: Mr. Plamondon is the dean of the House of Commons.

The Joint Clerk (Mrs. Carmen DePape): Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt the motion?

Mr. Bélanger.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger (Ottawa—Vanier, Lib.): The member raised her hand to propose another name.

[*English*]

Did you have another nomination?

An hon. member: No.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I nominate Mauril Bélanger.

The Joint Clerk (Mrs. Carmen DePape): It has been moved by Dr. Bennett that Monsieur Bélanger be elected as joint vice-chair of the committee.

Are there further nominations?

Since more than one candidate has been nominated....

Monsieur Plamondon, on a point of order.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Louis Plamondon (Bas-Richelieu—Nicolet—Bécancour, BQ): I withdraw my name.

[English]

The Joint Clerk (Mrs. Carmen DePape): It has been moved by Dr. Bennett that Monsieur Bélanger be elected as joint vice-chair of the committee.

Are there further motions?

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

(Motion agreed to)

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Joint Chair (Mr. Peter Goldring (Edmonton East, CPC)): Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen. After a hard-fought election campaigning period, I'm pleased to assume the position.

We have some committee business in front of us to approve, on routine motions. As soon as they're passed around, could you take a quick look at them, please?

Mr. Louis Plamondon: Mr. Chair, after that I have a motion to table.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Peter Goldring): Very good.

Does everybody have a copy of the routine motions? I'll start with the first motion: that the committee retain, as needed and at the discretion of the joint chairs, the services of one or more analysts from the Library of Parliament to assist it in its work.

An hon. member: So moved.

(Motion agreed to)

• (1315)

The Joint Chair (Mr. Peter Goldring): The second motion is that the joint clerks of the committee be authorized to distribute to the members of the committee only documents that are available in both official languages.

An hon. member: So moved.

(Motion agreed to)

The Joint Chair (Mr. Peter Goldring): Thank you.

The third one is that the joint clerks of the committee be authorized to make the necessary arrangements to provide working meals for the committee and its subcommittees.

An hon. member: So moved.

(Motion agreed to)

The Joint Chair (Mr. Peter Goldring): Thank you very much.

You should have in your package a motion that reads as follows: "That the following budget application in the amount of \$2,145 (Senate portion) be approved and submitted to the Senate Standing Committee on Internal Economy, Budgets and Administration".

Is there a mover for this motion?

An hon. member: So moved.

(Motion agreed to)

The Joint Chair (Mr. Peter Goldring): Thank you very much.

Now in your package you should have a document on the report of the Senate and the House of Commons. Do you have a copy of that?

Would there be a mover of that report?

An hon. member: So moved.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Peter Goldring): Is there general agreement on the report?

[Translation]

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Is it possible to take the time to read it, Mr. Chair?

[English]

The Joint Chair (Mr. Peter Goldring): Very good.

Is there general acceptance of the report?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Peter Goldring): Thank you very much.

On the referral of the main estimates to the committee, is there acceptance on it? Is there a wish from the committee to have witnesses appear on the main estimates of the committee or to proceed? Perhaps let us know what witnesses you may have in mind to appear.

Ms. Bennett.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Yes. Do you want those?

The Joint Chair (Mr. Peter Goldring): Yes, forward them afterwards, or now, if you have them immediately in mind.

Mr. Bélanger.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: I would imagine that at the very least the chief librarian may want to appear for the estimates.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Peter Goldring): Okay, very good.

Yes, Senator.

Senator Terrance Stratton: Do you have the list? I'll give it to you; it will be simpler.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Peter Goldring): If it pleases the committee to have a discussion on the suggested list when we reach item five, which is a letter signed by the speakers of the Senate and the House concerning a particular matter, I believe this list is being proposed as a suggestion of people to bring forward on that matter.

Yes, Monsieur Plamondon.

• (1320)

[Translation]

Mr. Louis Plamondon: I think that I should table my motion when you have finished with the routine motions, before we discuss committee business. I want to be clear that, in my motion, I am asking that individuals be invited here, to Parliament. I wanted to advise you of this immediately. You will let me know when it's time to table my motion, and I have 25 copies in both official languages.

[English]

The Joint Chair (Mr. Peter Goldring): Yes, thank you.

There is the question of the supplementary estimates as well. A suggestion is to tie those two estimates together and treat them as one, and if you have witnesses in mind, to forward their names through here to be added to the list of other witnesses.

Then we have the fifth item, which is a letter signed by the speakers of the Senate and the House concerning a request by the Parliamentary Librarian. With that is the list of suggested witnesses to be brought forward for that discussion, and it looks to be fairly extensive, 10, 12 names on this sheet.

It's a proposed witness list for a study of the mandate of the parliamentary budget officer. It's only in one language, so I will read the list.

Yes, Ms. Bennett.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Referring to the letter of the Parliamentary Librarian of February 20 that's in our package, I notice the librarian has suggested it would be possible to convene an expert panel of former parliamentarians to do the initial detective work and research on this and to report back to this committee with their findings.

If the committee decided to do that, then I think it would be important that we have a consensus on the members of that expert panel, as opposed to going through the.... It's my view, when there seems to be such a difference of opinion, the he-said-she-said isn't going to be all that helpful. Maybe we could have a group of former parliamentarians do a piece of work first, and then come to this committee with its opinion.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Peter Goldring): Unfortunately, this is only in one language, but my understanding is that this list.... I'll just read from this list to give committee members an idea of what had been proposed on this matter. Of course, it can be amended or added to, altered. This was a proposed list, and it was going in that direction because there are many former parliamentarians on this list.

Mr. Royal Galipeau (Ottawa—Orléans, CPC): Mr. Chair, which language do you not have there?

The Joint Chair (Mr. Peter Goldring): I do not have the French language.

A voice: I have it.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Peter Goldring): The copies just arrived, so we'll now be passing them around in the two languages.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Louis Plamondon: Have we finished adopting the routine motions? Should we not move on to other motions by committee members, and then to committee business?

At present, I presume that this letter could be read and it will be up to the committee to invite these individuals. But first, we must deal with motions.

• (1325)

[*English*]

The Joint Chair (Mr. Peter Goldring): I have no difficulty with that. I was not aware that you had a motion when this agenda was struck. But by all means, Mr. Plamondon, we'll listen to your motion now.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Louis Plamondon: Mr. Chair, there are no routine motions before this committee. That is why I did not give any notice, especially since the committee didn't yet exist. If I am moving this motion, it's because the Standing Committee on Finance refused to consider the issue saying that it was the role and mandate of the Joint Standing Committee on the Library of Parliament.

So, I will read my motion, which I have given out to all members of the committee. I am asking:

That the Joint Committee on the Library of Parliament invite the Minister of Finance, the President of the Treasury Board, the Parliamentary Librarian and the Parliamentary Budget Officer to appear before us to discuss the decision to reduce funding for the Parliamentary Budget Officer by 30% as well as the impact of this reduction on the Parliamentary Budget Officer's ability to carry out his mandate appropriately, and that at least two meetings be set aside for these proceedings.

I want to speak a little bit to my motion. You know the importance of giving the Parliamentary Budget Officer the resources to deal with each of the parties in the House of Commons and even the Senate, so that each of these parties can remain continuously apprised of the state of finances. A 30% budget cut significantly handicaps his efforts. In the current context of the financial crisis, the Parliamentary Budget Officer plays an extremely important role with regard to providing information to parliamentarians both in the Senate and in the House.

This motion seeks to invite these individuals here in order to understand why there has been a 30% cut in the budget, and to try to convince them that this is a bad decision, since the Library of Parliament is the only place where there have been cuts.

[*English*]

The Joint Chair (Mr. Peter Goldring): Is there a seconder of the motion? Thank you very much.

Is there any discussion?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Did you second that motion?

The Joint Chair (Mr. Peter Goldring): Ms. Bennett, did you have a comment to make?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: He wasn't seconding the motion.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Louis Plamondon: In committee, the motion does not need to have a seconder, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Joint Chair (Mr. Peter Goldring): Okay, fine.

Do we have discussion?

Yes, sir.

Mr. Peter Braid (Kitchener—Waterloo, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I just wonder if I could seek some clarification. We seem to have jumped right into this step of proposing witnesses. I wonder if we could just step back so I can understand the process somewhat.

What is the process for this committee in terms of proposing, confirming, and then ultimately agreeing to what witnesses will appear?

The Joint Chair (Mr. Peter Goldring): The process would be at the committee's will. If the committee wishes to call witnesses, the committee is able to call for what it wants by consensus.

Yes, Ms. Bennett.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Are we calling witnesses on the estimates or on the piece of work the speakers have asked us to do?

The Joint Chair (Mr. Peter Goldring): We have in front of us a motion by Mr. Plamondon whereby he would like to have witnesses called forward on his motion, and that's what we're discussing at this time.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: My view is that we should do the piece of work on the estimates first, and then I think we should seriously consider the suggestion of the Parliamentary Librarian that we strike a committee. Even in the motion there is some debate as to whether the PBO office was reduced by 30% or whether it was an anticipated increase he was counting on that didn't happen, just as happened to the whole of the Library of Parliament. I think diving into this thing before we have all the facts would be premature.

I will vote against this motion, because I would rather see a committee of former parliamentarians struck to first get to the facts and present them. Then we would look at the relevant statutory provisions, along with the panel's findings, so we could make the resolutions, as opposed to our hearing the debate here before we have all the facts.

Obviously, we need to hear from the Parliamentary Librarian on the estimates, for sure, as the first piece of work of this committee. I think that if we, as a committee, could decide, almost by consensus, how we're going to proceed on this very important debate, which can seriously affect the institution of Parliament, in a collaborative way, I would very much like us to do that, even without motions, if we could.

• (1330)

The Joint Chair (Mr. Peter Goldring): Very good.

Go ahead, Mr. Lapointe.

[*Translation*]

Senator Jean Lapointe: Mr. Chair, honourable colleagues, first, I have questions about the specific mandate of this committee. I would like to get a clear answer. Nowhere have I been able to find a description of this committee's mandate. I don't need to have one today. You could send it to me in writing at my office.

Second, what about the official parliamentary poet? Does that position still exist?

[*English*]

The Joint Chair (Mr. Peter Goldring): Those are good questions. We will attempt to satisfy that answer. I will see what information there is available that defines the mandate for you.

Yes.

[*Translation*]

Senator Jean Lapointe: What about the official parliamentary poet? Does that position still exist?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Yes.

Senator Jean Lapointe: I think that this position should be abolished. Since Mr. Bowering, none of the parliamentary poets have done much of anything, in my opinion. With a \$10,000 annual budget, Mr. Bowering wrote about schools and launched competitions. He did a wonderful job, but since then, no one has been his equal.

[*English*]

The Joint Chair (Mr. Peter Goldring): Well, it's an important point, but on a point of order here, we are discussing Monsieur Plamondon's motion, and I'd like to proceed with that.

Monsieur Bélanger.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Mr. Chair, first, I don't know whether the rules of procedure should be the same or not within the joint committee, but, normally, in all other committees of which I have been a member, a 48-hour notice of motion is needed before a motion can be made. Perhaps we should look at whether this committee wants to adopt such a procedural rule.

Second, I understand what Mr. Plamondon's motion is seeking to do, in other words invite individuals. In fact, we have already agreed to invite one individual, the Parliamentary Librarian. Perhaps we could invite other individuals regarding the main estimates, but in this study on the main estimates, we would be including the issue raised by Mr. Plamondon concerning the representative in question.

My colleague is proposing to ask someone—and we will have to determine who—to get to the bottom of this. It would be useful, before addressing the issue that the speakers of the Senate and the House are going to ask us to consider.

Personally, I would like to have a document providing some legal background and indicating the figures regarding the service in question. This could be useful before we even respond to Mr. Plamondon's proposal.

So, I find myself in a somewhat embarrassing situation. I don't necessarily want to defeat the motion, but I think it is a bit hasty. I would like you to go on, Mr. Chair, in the sense of creating a group. I don't know whether this would be a subcommittee, or a group of former parliamentarians, or a group of committee officials, it doesn't matter, but I think that if we are to really examine this issue—clearly, we must—in as objective a manner as possible, we must set out the facts as they are, without necessarily trying to get at the issue through the main estimates. That is my opinion.

I wish you good luck and courage as chair of our committee, but I think that we have gotten off topic.

• (1335)

[*English*]

The Joint Chair (Mr. Peter Goldring): I tend to agree with you on this, that because of the nature of the motion it would be encompassed in later works that we'll be doing anyway.

Mr. Plamondon, did you have a further comment to make?

[Translation]

Mr. Louis Plamondon: Mr. Chair, I have no objections to an analysis of the budget before moving on with the appearance of witnesses. We could spend one meeting looking at the overall budget, as Mr. Bélanger and the member suggested. We don't need 50 experts, we could ask people to come and explain the budget to us, and we could question them. Following that, we could call upon individuals whom I named earlier, because this would have an impact on the work of all members of the House of Commons and all senators, at least those who are interested in the public purse.

We decided to create a Parliamentary Budget Officer position and, at present, his budget is being cut by 30%. There's something wrong here, and that's exactly what I'm trying to clarify with some individuals. We wanted to do it at the Standing Committee on Finance, but this falls under the Standing Joint Committee on the Library of Parliament. So, we could study the budget and then call those individuals regarding the 30% budget cut. One does not prevent the other. So, we could adopt the motion as soon as possible, as I indicated in my motion, and hold a meeting on the budget and then call those individuals to appear.

[English]

The Joint Chair (Mr. Peter Goldring): Am I to interpret that you're satisfied this motion would eventually be covered in the witnesses brought forward on the estimates? Do you want to withdraw this motion for now, or what is your wish on this?

[Translation]

Mr. Louis Plamondon: I would like the motion to be adopted today, but that it be understood that I agree to holding a prior meeting on the state of the budget, as suggested by Ms. Bennett.

[English]

The Joint Chair (Mr. Peter Goldring): Okay, but for consideration after the discussion on the main estimates.

Senator Stratton.

Senator Terrance Stratton: Thank you.

I would like to support Madam Bennett's proposal with respect to item five of committee business concerning the review at the request of the speakers of the Senate and the House. I think we should form a small group of former parliamentarians to study that issue, and then they would bring their recommendations forward to this committee.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Peter Goldring): Thank you.

[Translation]

Senator Jean Lapointe: I have been sitting on this committee for the last seven or eight years. I asked that the Senate strike a joint committee whose co-chair would be compensated. During my time on this committee, we have held an average of two meetings per year. I believe that this is largely insufficient considering what a treasure our Library represents. I will make a recommendation, and introduce a motion in the Senate to that effect. Even if it is not adopted, it remains necessary.

Thank you, Mr. Chair. I must leave as the Senate is now in session.

• (1340)

[English]

The Joint Chair (Mr. Peter Goldring): Mr. Malhi.

Hon. Gurbax Malhi (Bramalea—Gore—Malton, Lib.): I have two questions.

First, you mentioned earlier that you have some names of witnesses. Could you read the names of those witnesses you mentioned earlier? I don't have the list here.

[Translation]

Mr. Louis Plamondon: Could we not address my motion first?

[English]

The Joint Chair (Mr. Peter Goldring): Yes, but we're still dealing with this motion.

Hon. Gurbax Malhi: I think, instead of those witnesses, we should appoint the former parliamentarians, as Carolyn has discussed.

But on the 30% reduction in the budget, I think we should first invite the budget officer to clarify if this is really a 30% reduction or not.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Peter Goldring): Well, that's an opinion.

I would like to complete the discussion on this particular motion here so that we can remove it from the desk, if we could.

Mr. Braid.

Mr. Peter Braid: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to perhaps echo the comments of Monsieur Bélanger. I still wonder if we're putting the cart before the horse somewhat. If I could just take a step back, perhaps we could build the foundation first. I just want to understand some basics here.

First of all, we know we're sitting until mid-June. How many meetings might we have in that period of time?

Second, I wonder if we could have some discussion and perhaps some consensus around the business of this committee, the issues that we will discuss and tackle. Again, I think we're getting a little too far ahead of ourselves here, and I wonder if that discussion should come first.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Peter Goldring): We certainly have one major issue that has come before us from the speakers of the Senate and the House, the conducting of affairs of that particular office. So that would be certainly the main discussion.

I would like to have it open to other ideas and areas that we should be looking at and looking into, so it would be open to any member to put forward suggestions and ideas.

But the first issue we have here today is on this particular motion, so if we could, we'll continue on the motion to move it forward.

Ms. Bennett.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Just to clarify, I believe there are assumptions in this motion that we, as committee members, don't know to be the facts. This is an assertion by one person that is now embodied in a motion that we're to vote on. I don't think this motion is even in order, Mr. Chair, in that it presumes a set of facts that we can't substantiate.

Mr. Braid's point is very well taken. This is a large committee, full of a lot of new members who should have some orientation as we go forward. Calling the Parliamentary Librarian in to give a bit of background of some of the work of the committee would be very important—including the poet laureate, and the various little jobettes that this committee has been given.

It's important to know the mandate of the committee and have a bit of an orientation session in terms of what our job is, as well as to have the estimates referred to us.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Peter Goldring): Yes, certainly. But in the meantime we have this motion. I tend to agree that it's putting the cart before the horse. However, it is on the table and has to be dealt with, and whether it is tabled for another date or whatever, that would be up to Mr. Plamondon.

[Translation]

Mr. Louis Plamondon: I think we can put the motion to a vote today, considering that we will be holding a meeting before reviewing the Library's budget. Therefore, we shall look at the Library's budget during one meeting, as requested by Ms. Bennett, and we will then summon witnesses to talk about the 30% cutbacks made to the budget of the Parliamentary Budget Officer.

Shall we vote?

• (1345)

[English]

The Joint Chair (Mr. Peter Goldring): Mr. Holder.

Mr. Ed Holder (London West, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I hope in decorum at this committee that if there is an order of speakers that we can respect the order of speakers. That is important, and I would look to the chair and the clerk to ensure that is enforced, please. I say that with great respect.

What I would ask is this. I hope that we focus on the motion and deal with this one way or another. It would be my first hope that Monsieur Plamondon would withdraw the motion so that we can get on with the order of the day. If he doesn't, and that is his privilege,

then I would tell you at this stage that I will vote against this motion. It's not that it does not have merit. It may well have, but it feels premature to me.

I respectfully agree with the comments of Madam Bennett, Senator Stratton, Mr. Bélanger, and Mr. Braid. There is a sense of wanting to do the right thing but in the right order. We can just keep to the focus of the motion and ask the honourable gentleman to withdraw the motion if he is so inclined. If not, then let's put it to a vote. This is not to suggest that he can't reintroduce it at another time. It just feels early to me as we go forward.

I hope we can keep that focus that way. I'm respectful of the motion. It just feels that it is the wrong order. Ironically, Mr. Chair, we have not even put the final point on the table yet, which is the request from the chief librarian to address a certain issue, and yet we are debating all around it. I would like to think we can get order and focus to this so we can vote on this motion or have it withdrawn.

Thank you.

Senator Terrance Stratton: On a point of order, I don't think you may be aware of it, and that's why I haven't pushed it, but when the Senate is sitting, the committees of the Senate cannot sit, including this one. So I would ask that we bring this meeting to a conclusion quickly, and I would ask that we schedule future meetings for lunch time or 12 o'clock so that we will not have this conflict. Right now we should not be proceeding.

I would therefore ask that we conclude the critical element we're dealing with, which is the motion put forward. If we can't arrive at a conclusion, then I would agree that we have a vote to deal with it.

The Joint Chair (Mr. Peter Goldring): Very good. Then we will adjourn the proceeding and adjourn the discussion of the debate on the motion until the next sitting.

Thank you very much.

[Translation]

Mr. Louis Plamondon: By what authority are you calling for adjournment? Consent from the committee is required to adjourn a meeting.

I was about to say that I agree to adjourn if at the next meeting, we debate my motion.

[English]

The Joint Chair (Mr. Peter Goldring): The meeting is adjourned.

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