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Chair

The Honourable Denis Paradis

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•(1110)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Hon. Denis Paradis (Brome—Missisquoi, Lib.)): Welcome back, everyone. I wish you a great 2017.

First, I would like to welcome Sean Casey, the new Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Canadian Heritage who looks after our committee.

Welcome aboard. You will see that it's a very dynamic committee.

Today, we'll focus on committee business. This is a public session, but, as I discussed with the clerk earlier, we may wish to go in camera to plan the committee business. Sometimes, that may prevent many people from calling her to ask why they were rejected as witnesses. I recommend that we move in camera for that part of the meeting dealing with the committee business.

Any comments?

Ms. Linda Lapointe (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, Lib.): Yes, before we move in camera, would it be possible to introduce a motion to thank Parliamentary Secretary Randy Boissonnault who was with us last year?

The Chair: That's great.

Mr. Choquette, you have the floor.

Mr. François Choquette (Drummond, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Happy new year, everyone. I am very pleased to be back here with you. It is a pleasure to be working with you on official languages.

Before we go in camera, we could take some time to address certain motions that should be discussed publicly. Of course, when it is time to discuss the details of planning our business and meetings, we should go in camera.

Mr. Chair, you have always been very open and transparent about our discussions. It would be to your great credit if the first general discussions are open to the public. We could move in camera afterwards to discuss the specifics.

I'm not sure what my colleagues think.

The Chair: Any comments?

Mrs. Boucher, the floor is yours.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher (Beauport—Côte-de-Beaupré—Île d'Orléans—Charlevoix, CPC): We should start in camera to talk about

the committee business and keep 15 or 20 minutes at the end of the meeting to discuss the proposed motions.

The Chair: Let me turn to Ms. Lapointe's motion. Does everyone agree?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: I see it's unanimous.

Many thanks to Randy Boissonnault, who served as parliamentary secretary with us last year. We will write him something to share the committee's unanimous motion.

I will suspend the meeting for a few minutes to go in camera, where we will be discussing committee business.

Thank you.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

•(1250)

The Chair: We resume the public session.

I have two notices of motion, which we will not debate, given that they are just notices. We will see where to fit them in the schedule.

The first notice of motion is from John Nater and reads as follows:

That the Committee request that the Prime Minister issue a written response to the Committee within 30 calendar days explaining and justifying his use of the majority language in a minority language context.

The second notice of motion is from Sylvie Boucher and reads as follows:

That the Committee request that the parliamentary secretary to the Minister of Canadian Heritage, Mr. Sean Casey, communicates with Canadians in both official languages while in Ottawa as well as on social media.

We can talk about them, but neither of the notices can be debated today.

As chair, I question whether John Nater's motion is in order. What is our role as the Standing Committee on Official Languages in terms of the Official Languages Act? Is the committee's mandate so extensive as to determine whether the Prime Minister should provide answers in French or in English, particularly to journalists? Everyone knows what happened. This is a notice of motion, but I would first like to hear your comments on whether the notice is in order.

Mr. Choquette, go ahead.

•(1255)

Mr. François Choquette: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

If Mr. Nater agreed, his motion could just be amended to ask the Privy Council Office to comment on the consultations and services in both official languages. I think the Privy Council Office is responsible for the Prime Minister's actions, unless it's the Treasury Board, but I doubt it. So it's not the Prime Minister himself, but rather the office responsible for him that has to respond to that. If I'm not mistaken, it's the Privy Council Office.

As you know, a number of complaints were submitted to the commissioner about the shortcomings, if I may say so, in terms of official languages that occurred during the tour across Ontario and Quebec. I think that's what Mr. Nater's motion is about.

I think if an amendment made it possible to address the agency responsible for the Prime Minister rather than the Prime Minister himself, the motion would be in order.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Choquette.

You mentioned the complaints submitted to the Commissioner of Official Languages. We will let him decide whether the complaints are in order. It is not up to us to do so.

Mr. Arseneault.

Mr. René Arseneault (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.): We are not debating it today, but here are my thoughts. This is neither a debate nor an argument, but just a comment.

To go back to what Mrs. Boucher was saying earlier and the chair's idea, I must say that we are in a political world. There are interactions and, despite excellent co-operation, we sometimes have to play politics.

As a member of the Standing Committee on Official Languages, I am wondering what gives us the right to demand something like that. Let's forget for a moment that it's the Prime Minister and suppose that he's an MP using one language. We all know perfectly well that he's bilingual. The situation received extensive media coverage. When we think about it, we have to ask ourselves to what extent it is about the Prime Minister only. Opposition leaders are also responsible for representing the government. The government includes them all. Say, there's an emerging star who's not bilingual and who will eventually have to address Canadians in only one language because he's not able to speak the other language. That's hypothetical. Let me take the Conservatives as an example. The Conservatives have potential candidates who could become opposition leaders, but who cannot speak both languages.

Does our committee have to receive the complaints every time a representative of the government in Parliament, be it the Prime Minister, the leader of the opposition, a minister or an MP from one political party or another, addresses Canadians in only one language? Is that our role?

I'm not making arguments. I'm just sharing my thoughts. Prime Minister Trudeau, who we all know is perfectly bilingual, chose to answer in French to a question asked in English. I think that's the debate in Quebec, but I can give you as example many other debates

involving equally important people. I'm talking about elected members, who are among the 388 MPs and who respond in only one language to questions asked in the other language.

Is this event going to snowball? Is it purely political? I don't know, but I don't think our committee should be receiving this type of motion.

● (1300)

The Chair: We have two more interventions, and that will be all for today, given that it's almost the end of the meeting.

I will give the floor to Mr. Lefebvre and Mrs. Boucher.

Mr. Paul Lefebvre (Sudbury, Lib.): I agree with Mr. Arseneault. To what extent does this committee have the mandate to check on what ministers do? I feel that the answer is "to no extent".

The Prime Minister of Canada, who is also a member of Parliament, decides on the language in which he will speak. The choice is his.

Since this committee started, there has been some fine cohesion in our group; we are united in saying that our role is to champion the francophonie and the anglophones in minority situations in Quebec.

Now this is brought to us. We know that we have to play politics at times. I feel that this is a pity; this is not the place, and we are wasting our time by debating this motion. We have much more pressing topics to deal with.

The Chair: Mrs. Boucher, the floor is yours.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: I would like to go back to what my Liberal colleagues have said. When someone is considered bilingual and knows both official languages, he has a duty to reply in the language in which he has been asked a question. If not, in my opinion, it shows a lack of respect for the communities.

It does not matter whether it is the Prime Minister or the ministers. When my party was in power, each time someone did not answer in French, you were the first to point it out to us.

In this situation, complaints have been made. There is a motion, whether you support it or not. You have the right not to support it, but my feeling is that it is a message that we have to be sending now.

As for the Conservative Party's leadership race, I will be the first to ask people to speak both official languages.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Boucher.

I repeat that these are notices of motion. We will come back to them soon. Until then, I hope you have a good day.

We will be in touch to tell you whether next Thursday is a go for hearing from the Treasury Board officials. If not, there will be no meeting that day.

Thank you very much.

The meeting is adjourned.

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