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Monday, November 29, 2010

—
Chair

Mr. Bruce Stanton

Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development

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• (1710)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton (Simcoe North, CPC)): Order.

We have a motion that has been circulated in both official languages. Certainly, the motion is admissible and has met the notice requirements under the Standing Orders.

[Translation]

Mr. Lévesque, did you want to present your motion?

Mr. Yvon Lévesque (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am presenting this motion in conjunction with the possible implementation of the Nutrition North Program, because the majority of our witnesses, regardless of whether or not they agreed with the proposed program, stated that they had absolutely no idea how this program, if indeed it is retained, was to be implemented.

We are aware of the infrastructure problems in the northern regions, making it difficult to meet the needs of this new program, if it is put into place. In order to enable them to meet future requirements, I am asking the minister to suspend his decision for one year in order to give the communities enough time to get the proper structures into place.

This one-year period would be calculated from the planned start date of the program, namely April 1. We would be asking the minister to suspend his decision for one year. If something should occur in the meantime, and so as not to have these people inherit a program...

We do not yet know how the program is to be implemented. If we proceed and the program results in exorbitant and unacceptable costs for the regions, we wouldn't have the opportunity to halt it and correct any shortcomings, if necessary.

[English]

The Chair: *Merci.*

Discussion?

Mr. Payne and Mr. Bagnell. Go ahead, Mr. Payne.

Mr. LaVar Payne (Medicine Hat, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I think the motion is too late. We're already in a transition process. I can't see how we can go back. Canada Post is already transitioning out. We have an advisory committee set up. We have all the items already on the website. The subsidized items will be posted in a couple of days. We're too far down the road to change this and stop it

in mid track. I don't think Canada Post would be ready to go backwards. For all of the organizations who have already started ordering their goods by Sealift.... A lot of those things have already been done. For some of the smaller organizations, maybe not. But certainly I think we're way too far down the road on this thing to actually stop it and go backwards.

Thank you.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Bagnell, and then Ms. Glover.

Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.): I actually hold the exact opposite view. I totally disagree. I think we're too early. I agree totally with the preamble of the motion. Obviously, the witness provided all sorts of very serious problems. All sorts of them, as he said, didn't know what the programs involved. The Sealift only occurs once a year. You need a year's advance planning.

I would maybe ask the mover of the motion.... I find it a little strange, timing-wise, when we are the midst of a report. We've heard a whole bunch of witnesses. We're going to come up with what I hope are very serious recommendations, because there were a lot of problems, so why would we do a one-off recommendation before the report is produced?

I'm curious. Maybe the member could answer why—we are going to have a report, probably in the next couple of weeks, I assume—we would make only one recommendation independent of the report.

The Chair: Mr. Bagnell has posed a question to Monsieur Lévesque. I think if you could keep....

Perhaps we'll take your response to that now, Mr. Lévesque, and then we'll go Ms. Glover, followed by Mr. Bevington.

[Translation]

Mr. Yvon Lévesque: I have done this because, at the outset, you will certainly recall that the final version of the program was to be tabled in early autumn. Winter starts in two weeks and the final version has yet to be tabled, and it is not clear that this will happen shortly. We will then have the break period until the month of February.

We are so close to the deadline when the program is to be implemented... The devil lies primarily in the way that the program is to be implemented. If we are too close to the scheduled implementation date, will we have the time we need to hear from the witnesses a second time in order to make any necessary adjustments? Is this too soon? I do not believe so, because we indicate that the suspension will come into effect from the planned start date of the program. If the suspension is not implemented and the program remains... We're referring to the Nutrition North Program. If the minister were to decide that he would continue providing the Food Mail Program in its current form, rather than the Nutrition North Program, because of the ensuing costs and all that, the program would correspond exactly to the intent of the suspension.

• (1715)

[English]

The Chair: Just to be clear before we continue, are you proposing that we freeze the program the way it is now? It was partially implemented in October, you'll recall, just a month or so ago. So that has been implemented already. It's not to go back to that point; it's to keep things as they are and not implement the April 1, 2011, implementation date for the subsidy on the perishable foods. Is that correct?

An hon. member: Yes.

The Chair: Okay. That's just so I understand.

Let's go to Ms. Glover, and she'll be followed by Mr. Bevington.

Mrs. Shelly Glover (Saint Boniface, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I too agree with Mr. Bagnell. It seems odd to be throwing a recommendation out when we're in the middle of everything, but my biggest concern here—I have a question and then I have a further comment—is how this actually benefits northern consumers. This motion, as far as I can read it, doesn't benefit any of our northern consumers, and they're the people we're really trying to help. So that would be my question for Monsieur Lévesque.

[Translation]

How will that help consumers in the north? Because, unless I am mistaken, if you want to help those who provide the products, if you want to help those in the points of entry... I do not see how this is going to help consumers in the north.

[English]

Further to that, if Monsieur Lévesque could answer that question first, with regard to this motion to go back to the food mail program, we heard an awful lot of witnesses who said very clearly that the food mail program did not work. We had a lot who actually liked the Nutrition North program. Many of the ones that some of the members here are bringing up didn't understand it. It was clear to me that an education portion needs to be done. That's why I'm very glad that the advisory committee is now in place, because they have a role to play in the education. Almost every single witness we heard from said this old program absolutely needed to be fixed, and not a single one of them suggested that we keep the points of entry.

Again I would ask Monsieur Lévesque to convince me that this is going to help consumers in the north. Right now they are being

helped, because for those large organizations that did order the stuff early, there is a reduction in price. So if we go back to what you're suggesting, those consumers are now going to pay more. If what the chair said is right and you don't want to reopen points of entry and all that kind of thing, then okay—I get that—but the food mail program is not going to be brought back. We're too far along.

I would like to see us make a number of recommendations. We have subsidy rates that are coming out soon, and we're going to revisit this. There's going to be a whole lot more information coming forward.

So could you answer that question for me: how is this going to benefit northerners? This is going to hurt our northern consumers, as far as I'm concerned. You convince me otherwise and I'll consider it.

[Translation]

The Chair: I would invite Mr. Lévesque to respond and, then, I will move to Mr. Bevington.

Mr. Yvon Lévesque: Mr. Chairman, I understand that an example is never perfect. Witnesses have come before the committee to tell us that it would cost them \$2 million just for a warehouse to be able to participate in the new program.

Under this new program, which has not yet been introduced and which we do not have all the information about, is it fair for communities with 300, 400 or 500 residents to have to assume this \$2 million cost as well as the maintenance of these buildings? Will the actual cost of the food, once you factor in the cost of building and maintaining the infrastructure, really be less than under the Food Mail Program?

Moreover, given the Prime Minister's propensity for proroguing the House fairly regularly, who knows but that there might not be a prorogation in January or an election in February? Then we would not be able to discuss the costs of this new program, which may be exorbitant.

So I am asking for the possibility of a one-year delay based on the expected implementation date for the program. If the minister decides to approve the Nutrition North Program, this will give the communities some time to prepare.

We would be able to debate implementation of the final program once the final version has been presented and try to make some changes to actually achieve some savings for people in the north, instead of their having to pay additional costs.

Right now, we can't debate the program because it has not yet been presented.

• (1720)

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Bevington.

Mr. Dennis Bevington (Western Arctic, NDP): Well, I'm in consultation with Ms. Crowder, who has attended most of these meetings. We feel there's a real need to bring back the officials in the department to go through this with us again. We find there's too much inconsistency and not enough understanding of what is actually happening and how it's going to play out.

If Monsieur Lévesque's motion could be held in abeyance until we bring the officials back to get these questions answered, I think that would be a better time to deal with it. He does have a point. If this is not well set up, it's going to cause all kinds of difficulties around the north.

Rather than hurrying, let's bring the officials back as soon as possible to again present to us exactly what their plans are. I have noticed that the plans they have for this food mail program are a moving target. It's been moving since April. We've seen changes all along, so let's hear what they have to say. Then I think we would be making a decision on Monsieur Lévesque's motion based on a clear understanding of what is actually happening.

The Chair: Before I go to the next two speakers—I have Mr. Russell and Ms. Glover—we have two meetings scheduled for Nutrition North, on the 13th and 15th. We could, at the front end of that meeting on the 13th, bring officials back to answer some of these questions before we go into consideration of the draft report. Or, if the committee so authorizes, we could even have them present while we do the consideration of the report. That might be unusual, but it's not unprecedented.

We go now to Mr. Russell and then Ms. Glover.

Mr. Todd Russell (Labrador, Lib.): Thank you. I think the last suggestion was a good one.

Besides the very powerful arguments made by Mr. Lévesque about prorogation and not getting a lot of things done, that aside, which I totally and fundamentally agree with, I believe he could—

The Chair: Could we find yet another opportunity to—

Mr. Todd Russell: Well, when a door is open, you walk through it, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: That's what you do.

Mr. Todd Russell: Anyway, I think the best thing to do is to hold this in abeyance, because he raised some very fundamental questions about implementation that have not been answered. I think the middle ground to this would be to hold it in abeyance, but honouring where we are as a committee, that this motion will be dealt with before we break for Christmas in one way, shape, or form, whether it comes to a vote or not.

So let's honour what Mr. Lévesque is bringing to the table, because he is very sincere about it. At the same time, I think the suggestion of either having the officials in the first hour of the first meeting on the draft report and then going to the draft report, or having them in while we're going through the draft report—either one would help me, to be quite honest.

James can probably answer this, but we are in contact with officials as we're going through the draft report to try to get more information and to make things maybe a little clearer for us on questions that have been raised.

So my feeling is, if it's okay with Mr. Lévesque, that we wait until the 13th, and at that time we could have more information from officials, we could have a draft report, and then if things aren't satisfactory, we can consider the motion. That's what I think would be a good common ground.

● (1725)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvon Lévesque: Personally, I have no problem with that, Mr. Chairman. Do I have the floor?

The Chair: Yes. Go ahead.

Mr. Yvon Lévesque: If that means I do not need unanimous support for the date to be changed, I have no problem with that. I simply wanted to be sure that the program would not be implemented to the detriment of the people concerned. So if everyone agrees to discuss this issue on December 13, I am happy with that. Then we will be able to shake hands before the Christmas vacation.

[*English*]

The Chair: Just to be clear, what's complicating this some is that on October 3 the Nutrition North Canada program did commence being implemented. So we're partway into a program. We need to understand what the implications of that are to make a decision on this motion. So it bears some further investigation.

Ms. Glover.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Lemay (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, BQ): I have a point of order, Mr. Chairman.

[*English*]

Mrs. Shelly Glover: No, we have three minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Lemay: It is a simple point of order. There is nothing preventing us from amending the motion.

[*English*]

Mrs. Shelly Glover: Every time he wants to say something he uses a point of order—every time.

The Chair: Of course, it can be amended. If there is consensus, we would not.... The proposal is not to make a decision on this motion today, but it will remain tabled before the committee, with a commitment to bring it before the committee again on December 13 or December 15.

Ms. Glover.

Mrs. Shelly Glover: I'd like your ruling on the point of order, sir. Is it a point of order?

The Chair: The point of order...it has to do with the scheduling of our work, so it's borderline.

Mrs. Shelly Glover: I just have to say, for the record, that every time Monsieur Lemay wants to speak he says it's a point of order, and it's starting to get a little irritating, particularly when we have two minutes left and we're on the list.

I would just hope that in the future, Mr. Chair, we use the points of order more appropriately, because not everyone here wants to interrupt.

The Chair: The difficulty is that when someone raises a point of order, in order to make a determination if it is a point of order, you have to listen to what the speaker says. So we have to wait for them to finish, much like in the House. It's the same thing.

And as you have probably observed, most points of order are in fact not. Again, this one was somewhat borderline in terms of any problems with the Standing Orders.

But you have the floor and I think you've made the point, so carry on.

Mrs. Shelly Glover: Okay. I have a minute left, and I'm probably going to use more than a minute, so we're probably not going to get to the end of this.

I really am disappointed that we turned this into a partisan issue. This is about northern consumers. This is about people who are not able to eat, which we heard very clearly from some of the witnesses. We heard very clearly that they absolutely need to find a way to afford nutritious food in the north.

I asked a very simple question. How is this motion going to help us to address that concern of the northern consumers? I still don't have an answer to that.

I believe we are dismissing an awful lot of testimony by witnesses who were in agreement with this program moving forward. I'm disappointed, because this committee works so well together, that we would be reduced to comments like "prorogation may happen, so we may not get to address this again". It's ridiculous. I'm pretty confident that my colleagues on the other side.... Mr. Russell may see the door open, but you don't always have to kick it in.

It's important that we address the concerns of northern consumers, people who are not able to feed their children, people who are going to give Coca-Cola to their children over milk, because they can't get it quickly enough.

This is a serious matter. We're going to continue to discuss it. But I would really hate to see this committee digress into a partisan committee, because we're not going to get very far if that continues.

What I would like is to—

• (1730)

Hon. Marlene Jennings (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, Lib.): Mr. Chair, on a point of order, what time is it?

The Chair: Well, it's 5:30, but we don't adjourn the committee except with the consent of the committee, so Ms. Glover has the floor and we'll continue.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: Mr. Chair, you need the consent of the committee to go past 5:30.

The Chair: No, that's actually not right. The notice is published as a guideline, but the chair cannot adjourn the committee unilaterally. One can adjourn the meeting only when we have the consent of the committee to adjourn.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: I have a point of order, Chair.

Unless this committee has adopted that as a specific rule, that the chair can adjourn only with the consent of the committee.... On every other committee I've sat on for 13 years—I'm now in my 14th year—the rule has been interpreted the other way, which is that to go past 5:30 requires the consent of the committee.

The Chair: That's not my understanding of it. In fact, the chair can adjourn the meeting only with the presumed consent of the committee, regardless of the time.

That's my ruling on it.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: I challenge the chair.

The Chair: If you wish, of course, at any time members can move to adjourn the meeting.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: I've just challenged your ruling.

The Chair: You've challenged the ruling, but I can then ask for members to sustain the ruling of the chair.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: Exactly.

The Chair: I'd ask for the motion. Can I see consent to sustain the ruling of the chair?

(Ruling of the chair sustained)

The Chair: The chair's ruling is sustained, so that's the rule we'll use.

Ms. Glover has the floor.

Go ahead, Ms. Glover.

Mrs. Shelly Glover: I was just going to finish by saying I agree with what Mr. Bevington has suggested. It was similar to what Mr. Bagnell said earlier. We are going to listen to more witnesses, but I would hope that members of this committee use this committee to do what's right.

Thank you.

The Chair: Okay.

Thank you.

There has been no decision taken on the motion. It will remain in abeyance until a future meeting of the committee.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Lemay: It will be deferred to December 13.

[*English*]

Hon. Marlene Jennings: That was the agreement. You stipulated that several times.

The Chair: Okay. You are moving that the motion be deferred to December 13.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Lemay: That resolves the problem.

[*English*]

The Chair: Is there concurrence on the motion by Mr. Lévesque?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: So ordered.

Thank you very much, everybody, for your attention this afternoon. It was good work.

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