



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates

OGGO • NUMBER 052 • 1st SESSION • 42nd PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Wednesday, October 26, 2016

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Chair

Mr. Tom Lukiwski

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Moose Jaw—Lake Centre—Lanigan, CPC)): This is the 52nd meeting of the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates.

The first item on our agenda is a continuation of our discussion on the estimates process which Minister Brison briefed us on, on Monday of this week. As we discussed on Monday, the question raised primarily by the government is, what process needs to be followed if a standing order is to be changed? I assured the government and all committee members that I would give you a briefing, rather than bring somebody in from procedure and House affairs, as I was the parliamentary secretary to that committee for nine years and intimately involved in standing order changes.

A few things could be done.

Number one, the procedure and House affairs committee, which I'll refer to as PROC from here on in, is responsible for the Standing Orders. Primarily, they're under their jurisdiction. If any standing orders were to be changed, the change should come as a result of a report tabled in Parliament by PROC.

We can do a couple of different things. This committee could instruct me as chair to write to PROC saying that we wish them to deal with this, and if we have agreement on any changes to a standing order, we could put that in the instructions to PROC. They would then table it in Parliament. If the government sought unanimous consent and received it, the Clerk would be instructed to change the standing order immediately. If there was no unanimous consent, then the government would have to put a motion on the order paper to adopt the report from PROC. That would come back to the House for a three-hour debate and then a vote. If passed, the Clerk would change the standing order.

However, this committee could, to begin with, as an option, refer the entire question of changing the Standing Orders based on the minister's presentation to PROC, and they would deal with the entire situation: debate it, discuss it, probably invite the minister in, and deal with it at that level.

My only point, and I reiterate this and I said this at our last meeting, is it has been the custom that when any changes to the Standing Orders take place, unanimous consent has been sought, and on almost all occasions has been granted. Once again, I will refer to the last time we had any meaningful debate on changes to the Standing Orders.

I chaired an all-party committee on standing order changes, and frankly it was a suggestion that I made and was endorsed and accepted by all recognized parties that any changes we would recommend would have to be approved unanimously by all parties. There were a number of examples, which I don't have to give today, but I will if you ask, where various parties would bring a proposed change to our meeting on these proposed changes. The NDP, I recall, at one time had proposed one or two changes to the Standing Orders. One of the three parties said they didn't agree, end of discussion. Conversely, the Liberals on one or two occasions brought forward a standing order they would like to see changed, and one of the other two parties said they didn't agree, end of discussion.

I recall from our side, the government side at that time, I know I had been spoken to by—and I'm going to give you a specific example here because I want you to understand how I approach this, and I think it was the right approach. A number of our members suggested we make a change to the standing order that now talks about standing five members. We all know if there's a voice vote, and there are yeas and nays, someone has to stand five to force a recorded vote. I know this is public, and I'm going to have to choose my words carefully because I'm going over factual information. On a few occasions, the independents voted to stand five to block a unanimous adoption of a motion or an initiative by the government.

Some members asked—there were only seven of them—why we didn't change the Standing Orders to make it 10 rather than five, because back in the 1970s and 1980s when there were only 230 or 240 members, that's when you stood five. Now, because there are 300-and-some members, it would be easily defensible to say that we want to change the limit from five to 10 because there are more members. I wouldn't take that to the committee because I said, in my estimation, that looks as if the government is trying to use the Standing Orders for its own political gain.

That's simply not what the Standing Orders are all about. They are supposed to benefit all parliamentarians. They are our rules, our guidebook, and they are there for a reason. So they shouldn't be played with by any government, whether by a majority situation or not, to try to benefit politically. So, literally, I just refused to bring that to the table.

That committee worked very well. There wasn't a whole bunch of changes to the Standing Orders and, frankly, that's probably a good thing. But there were a few that we all agreed on, mainly housekeeping and housecleaning types of issues, and it worked very well.

I raise that here because Minister Brison is talking about a change to the Standing Orders. I'm not sure what the government's view on that is, but I can just tell you, historically, that's how things have worked here. There has to be unanimity.

It doesn't have to be that way. Clearly, if this committee or PROC wanted to bring this issue forward, even if there wasn't unanimity, the government, if it could force a vote, could almost force PROC to table a report in Parliament and it could enact changes that way. I just caution you that it's maybe a very slippery slope and you might want to consider before going down that road.

In any event, that's the procedure. That's what could happen.

Again, to recap, you could either refer the entire issue to PROC, let the minister deal with PROC directly, and it could go from there, or this committee could decide we want to discuss the issue and ultimately make a decision. If the decision was to refer this to PROC, then I would write the letter and it would deal with it. But that's the cleanest way.

Go ahead, Madam Ratansi.

• (1535)

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi (Don Valley East, Lib.): We had the minister before us. We had some discussions on Monday...I'm trying to figure what was the last meeting we had. I understood from people's acknowledgement that they found that if we aligned the two dates, it would be better, would be more transparent and would help us, as parliamentarians, understand if they give us enough time to study it.

Would it be advisable if we, as members of this committee, were to ask you, as the chair, to write to PROC? Do they have to study it, or do we move a motion here saying that we would like the chair of this committee to send a letter to PROC to amend or change the Standing Orders? What's the right way to do it?

The Chair: Well, as I've said, it's really up to the will of the committee how members wish to proceed. If this committee wants me to write to PROC referring this whole issue to it, I can certainly do that. If this committee wants to discuss the change and the relative benefits, if there are any, of such a change, this committee can do that.

With respect to your initial comments, my understanding—and we can ask for commentary from the rest of the committee—is that everyone on the committee thought that the better alignment was a good idea. There were, however, questions about changing the date in the Standing Orders to May 1. Mr. McCauley raised a couple of concerns, and I think there may be others. I think everyone is on the same page as to what the minister wants to do as an end result; it's just how to get there, and whether changing the date to May 1 is the proper way to do it or not.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: What were the dates that were being suggested? If May 1 is the budget or if there is a fixed budget and the fixed budget is probably May 1—I'm just speculating—then what would help the committee, because we would like to see unanimous consent. It's beneficial to all of us. We do not want the majority to rule, but we would like unanimous consent. I'd like to hear views as to what it is that would stop you from giving unanimous consent. I have no idea.

The Chair: Yes, and we don't have the regular seven-minute, five-minute kind of rotation. We just have a speakers list, so everyone who wants to speak to that just raises their hand and I'll put them on the speakers list.

Mr. McCauley is first.

Mr. Kelly McCauley (Edmonton West, CPC): To start with, on the referral—I mean I have nothing against our friends at PROC—I think this committee was going to study the estimates. It seems almost counterproductive to pass it off to them. Concerning the dates, as I brought up a couple of days ago with the minister—it wasn't Mr. Pagan, but the other person with him—our concerns are a cut in the time to study the estimates.

Right now we have three months to call ministers and study the estimates. If we go to May 1, that gives us 30 days. We're not sitting one week in May so it only gives us, effectively, 15 days to interrogate ministers, for lack of a better word—I mean bring ministers in, invite them. They are not always available, so that cuts down the time. As I mentioned before, we lose out on our ability to decide which two ministries or departments we're going to call for our committee of the whole, as well. To me, reducing the amount of time defeats the whole purpose of why we're here, which is to oversee spending, taxation, etc. Anything that reduces the amount of time is counterintuitive to what we're trying to do.

The Chair: Thank you.

Erin, did you have anything to say? I don't know if I saw your hand or not.

Mr. Erin Weir (Regina—Lewvan, NDP): No, sorry.

The Chair: Okay.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: To address the issues, number one, it is my understanding that the estimates process—I don't know where you got it from—and review will be ours. PROC only deals with changing the Standing Orders.

Number one, at the moment—

• (1540)

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Referring to the decision on changing the Standing Orders.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: Well, that's procedure and House affairs, and that's normal, I think.

My only concern is that, at the moment, the estimates make no sense when the budget comes. If we think that we are making some decisions, we're really not, because we are making decisions based on figures that don't make any sense, yet we assume that we know what we are talking about. The budget is where the actual expenditure comes, so if the main estimates and the budgets were to align, then we would have some reasonable way of seeing real expenditure, and then question the ministers accordingly.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: We believe in the alignment.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: Yes.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: We've all said we believe in the importance of aligning it 100%. We do not believe that reducing the scrutiny is a good answer.

As we suggested a couple of days ago, setting a fixed budget date in February would be preferable. It would allow enough time between the budget and the current estimates date. It's March 1. We could move it to March 31, as suggested by the OGGO report, which would allow us proper time, but reducing the amount of scrutiny and oversight is not the answer. We do not wish to get to a point where we only have 15 sitting days to scrutinize everything.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: Is it making sense to any of you?

The Chair: If you want to weigh in, just raise your hand so we can put you on the speakers list.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alupa Clarke (Beauport—Limoilou, CPC): I raised my hand a few minutes ago.

This proposal gives rise to a political context that marks a key turning point, one we cannot take lightly. As my colleague said, that is the view of Her Majesty's official opposition at this time.

The desire to align the main estimates and the government's budget is indeed commendable. We are noticing, however, that the approach has some flaws. For that reason, we have serious concerns, not about the intentions behind the proposal, which are entirely commendable, but about its potential consequences.

One of the cornerstones of our parliamentary system, rooted in the Westminster tradition and going back a thousand years, going back, in fact, to 1215 and the Magna Carta treaty—

Mr. Ramez Ayoub (Thérèse-De Blainville, Lib.): Did you say 1915?

Mr. Alupa Clarke: No, the Magna Carta dates back to 1215. Our system goes back to 1867, even before that, because united Canada had parliaments. It's important to hold the government accountable not just for election promises, but also for budget appropriation votes, which represent tens of thousands of dollars in spending.

Remember that every political party has the potential to wind up in the opposition at some point or another. We know that well, and it will probably happen to you in three years' time, if not later—heaven only knows. You should not consider what we are telling you today strictly through the government lens, but also through the lens of every parliamentary participant.

There is a reason Australia brought in the reform. Its supplementary estimates are now released the same day as the budget. That prevents a waste of two very important months by all parliamentarians, including elected members of the government party who are not in cabinet. I would point out that they, too, have a mandate to protect ministerial responsibility and to hold the government accountable for its actions and decisions, particularly in budget matters, the focus of our discussion today.

By moving forward with such a major reform of our parliamentary system, which is rooted in the Westminster tradition, in other words, by allowing the supplementary estimates to be tabled on May 1, we would lose nearly two months that could have been spent conducting studies and holding ministers to account before our committees and the committee of the whole in the House of Commons, as well as during question period. With this reform, we would lose two months

that could have been used to study and scrutinize the numbers, time that even ministers could have used to prepare their responses.

I was taken aback when the minister was here and told the committee that he wanted to push the date to May 1, because, in our context, it requires adjustments and a certain degree of flexibility over two or three years in order to eventually table the budget and estimates on the same day. I asked him what would be wrong with including a provision in the legislation stipulating that, in three years' time, the two documents would be tabled on the same day. He couldn't answer me. Even without such a provision, however, Australia managed, in its first year, to present both documents on the same day, without the need for adjustments or flexibility.

I'll stop there so as not to bore you, but I would like to carry on with this discussion.

• (1545)

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Whalen, we have you next.

Mr. Nick Whalen (St. John's East, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I'd like to welcome Mr. Clarke to this discussion on the estimates. This is only the second meeting on it, but it looks like he is trying to read up and get well apprised of the issues. Clearly, he understands, first of all, that when we get the documents as they are currently coming to us before March 1, they don't contain any new budgetary measures, so we are not scrutinizing what's important, which is exactly the reason Treasury Board has asked us to do a study into these things.

I appreciate there are a lot of nuances here. When we talk about May 1, we are actually talking about that as a last possible date. Under the current rules and structure, this really is the time it happens, and the reason is that people wait to get all the various feed-ins—not from the budgetary process but from departmental processes—in order to say, “This is what we would spend next year if no changes were made”, and all departments feed into that. We are talking about realigning the process so that people really get an opportunity to vet what is worth vetting.

The document Mr. Clarke is concerned about having the opportunity to vet, as we've seen in many of the presentations, will be called the interim supply bill, and it will come with all the same information of what we will spend—not for the whole year but for the next three months—should there be no budget. You'll have the same opportunity to re-scrutinize budget spending based on the previous year's budget, which in some years will align closely, but it will be more transparent to people as to what is actually being discussed.

When we look at something that's called main estimates, it should really be the main estimates of the budget for that year. What we have now is not.

Just to bring it full circle, Mr. Clarke, I believe that, rather than asking ourselves to pull on this string of all the various changes to the Standing Orders that might make sense to make it work, we can say that what we think is more appropriate, what the department officials have told us is more appropriate, is that we change this date to May 1. It will allow them, next year, to provide the necessary documents for us to pilot this project, and then over time they can gradually bring it back earlier in the calendar. Who knows, they may be able to table it earlier in the calendar in the coming year.

At the same time, you will still get the exact same information you want to receive, but instead of it being called main estimates, it will be called interim supply. There will be the same opportunity you are looking for to scrutinize government spending on the basis of the current budget plans that the government has in place. The government has been able to implement many of the changes it promised to make during the election campaign. It will already be something where you'll have an opportunity to say, "Yes, this is what you did last year. This is what it looks like for three months." We won't lose that opportunity, but if we don't make these changes now—if we don't put ourselves, now, in a position where Parliament is better able to hold the government to account—it will only get more and more difficult to make these changes as our government gets older.

We all realize there is political pressure on people over time to have these discussions. Right now is the time, early in a mandate, to make changes to hold the government to account, when everyone's interests are aligned in doing that, so I would ask you to seriously consider allowing us to unanimously propose that PROC consider the exact mechanism, the exact date on which these things could happen. They may decide to put in some measures to provide the protections Mr. Clarke is looking for to particularize interim supply. That is not open to us. We are not masters of PROC. We are not masters of the Standing Orders, but we do know the estimates, and we do understand—we've heard lots of testimony—the problems with the estimates.

This is a very simple and quick way to allow us not to miss the runway, to land something important, a fundamental change in our system that will really help governance in Canada. I ask you to reconsider your position on this, and hopefully we can move this forward in a meaningful way, as quickly as possible.

• (1550)

The Chair: Just for clarification for my own sake, Mr. Whalen, are you suggesting that we endorse the May 1 change and then refer it to PROC with that endorsement?

Mr. Nick Whalen: What I would ask is that maybe the committee instruct the chair to write a letter to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs that endorses an amendment to Standing Order 81(4), changing the deadline by which the main estimates are referred to standing committees from "on or before March 1" to "on or before May 1", and request that the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs provide a report to the House of Commons, which recommends amendment to the Standing Orders, pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(a)(iii), in order to enable the realignment of the budget and main estimates so that the main estimates of a given year may more appropriately reflect that year's budget.

The Chair: Okay, thank you. Thanks for the clarification.

Monsieur Drouin.

Mr. Francis Drouin (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, Lib.): I would raise the same concerns as my colleagues on the opposite side if from May 1 up to June this committee was busy doing the supplementary estimates (A) all the time, but we're not. Just go back to previous agendas, where we've had a lot of time to look at supplementary estimates (A), and including the main estimates, between May 1 until mid-June.

The other thing I want to mention is that—

The Chair: Mr. Drouin, if I could interject just for your benefit, it is required that May 31 be the deadline. If the committees have not had a minister before them by May 31, it's deemed reported back. It's not mid-June; it's May 31.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Okay, so May 31. But, again, the fact still stands that if I go back I can probably count four or five meetings that we've spent on estimates the last time here. I would buy the argument if all we were doing was that, but I remember studying shared services plenty of times before we did the estimates. I understand that there might be some concerns here, but I think it's a legitimate proposal for you to send a letter. At the same time, we're sort of embarking on the same cycle as Ontario as well, which was introduced by Mike Harris previously, but anyway we won't mention that.

The Chair: Madam Ratansi.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: How much time did we spend last time on estimates, Chair? Do you know how many meetings—

The Chair: I don't. We could—

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: —we had on the main estimates?

The Chair: We could probably find that out, but I can't recall.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: Okay.

There is something from an accounting perspective and I can't seem to understand what you guys are saying, and I need some clarification. If you clarify it for me, maybe it will help me.

I get the main estimates and I spend time on them. Then the budget comes along and everything that I voted for goes out the door, and I'm sitting there thinking, what on God's earth did you take me on a ride for? I have listened to it. I've done it. Then the supplementary estimates are the ones that have the whole budget. Where is the transparency? Where is the accountability? Who are you going to question? If we're all being non-partisan and logical, the question we need to ask ourselves about is... Here are the figures; I voted on them, and they mean nothing, and so I've been taken for a ride. Why isn't there the alignment that would indicate, for example, what the government is really going to spend on infrastructure, or whatever, and then we can challenge the minister? At the moment we're challenging the minister with figures that don't make sense.

If somebody could help me, I'd be willing to listen. It's debits and credits.

The Chair: Perhaps, but we have Mr. Weir first, and then Mr. McCauley and Mr. Clarke after him.

Mr. Erin Weir: I certainly don't want to rush to any conclusions, but my reading of the room is that we do have a shared objective to align the estimates and the budget. On the other hand, I don't think we have consensus about the specific May 1 proposal. I think we recognize that the Standing Orders are properly the domain of PROC. My suggestion, which I'm happy to make as a motion, would be that we do refer to PROC this question of whether or not to amend the standing order—it could be by way of a letter—but in doing that, we don't necessarily endorse or reject the May 1 proposal.

As I say, I think we should refer the question to PROC in a neutral way. I guess the only difference between what I'm suggesting and what Nick suggested is I'm saying that we would not actually endorse the Brison proposal, we would just refer the question over to PROC.

I don't know if it's in order to move that as a motion, but I think that's what I'd like to do.

•(1555)

The Chair: You will be able to because it's dealing with the committee business before us, but my suggestion would be let's hear the speakers first.

Mr. Erin Weir: Sure. Fair enough.

The Chair: Mr. Clarke.

[Translation]

Mr. Alupa Clarke: In response to the remarks made by Mr. Whalen and Ms. Ratansi, I would say that the current process is very positive.

I think that Canadian society has enjoyed a fine democracy since 1867 because the Liberal Party or the Conservative Party has always been in power. I'm aware of that fact, and I recognize it.

The Liberals, however, have a tendency to pursue any reform with great haste, which can sometimes be a very good thing. It has led to legislation that has improved our democracy.

The Conservatives are politically inclined to be more cautious and adopt a more gradual approach in their analysis of proposed reforms. That, too, has been extremely beneficial to Canada's democracy, preventing the adoption of certain reforms that would have hurt the political freedom not just of Canadians, but also of members.

Mr. Whalen, you said the purpose of the reform was to make sure members do a better job of holding the government to account by having access to figures that are more accurate than those provided for under the current process. You may be right, except that the change would shorten that accountability period, which Mr. McCauley and I believe is fundamental, as I'm sure you do. The proposed reform would shorten that absolutely crucial period.

All House of Commons committees have to scrutinize the main estimates. Ms. Ratansi said it would be useful to see how much time we had spent studying the main estimates last year, but we would need to start by knowing how much time all House of Commons

committees had spent studying those estimates. If we are to proceed logically and rationally, we would need to determine how much time all House of Commons committees had spent studying the estimates since 1867. We can't consider only the amount of time spent last year before concluding that, at the end of the day, it had taken less time than previously thought.

There's something else I'd like to talk about, the third pillar, which deals with vote structure. Again, I was taken aback by the senior official's response when he appeared before the committee, and I say that with all due respect. He said that, right now, in Ontario and Quebec, the provincial government can transfer money from one program to another. That gives rise to transparency issues and opens the door to one program serving as a front for another.

To fix that problem, Ontario and Quebec capped the proportion of funding that a ministry can transfer from one program to another at 10%. I asked the official whether the proposed reform would establish a limit on the maximum amount of funding that could be transferred from one program to another. He said no. Therefore, the third pillar, vote structure, is another concern of ours.

Rather than continue talking, I will turn the floor over to you so you can respond to what I just said.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. McCauley.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I just want to follow up.

Mr. Drouin, welcome back. We missed you on Canada Post. No one is laughing at that.

My colleague mentioned that it is not just us who have to review estimates, there are quite a few other committees. It's not just us who have to corral all the ministers over a 15-day period.

Ms. Ratansi, I'm sure it was not your intent, but it's almost as if you were implying that we were not in favour of aligning. Maybe I misunderstood you. We, and I think Mr. Weir as well, are fully in agreement that it is in the interests of all Canadians, and all governments now and future, that we do align the budget with the estimates. However, we still strongly believe that we must have enough time for the oversight and time to look at it. No one is arguing against aligning the budget.

There's a very simple issue immediately, which is, again, to move up the budget process to February. The Aussies, who we use as a role model on this issue, despite turning over the government many times over even a two-year period, have managed to do it 21 of the last 22 years, and I think something like 90 years before that they were able to do it at the same month year after year.

I realize it's extra work, but I have great faith in our Finance department and the other departments within our government that we can get it done at a previous time. We fully support aligning the budget with the estimates, short interim estimates and then the mains afterwards. Oversight, transparency, and the ability of this and future opposition parties to hold the government to account are not served, nor is the public served, by minimizing the amount of time that we have.

•(1600)

The Chair: Mr. Whalen, and then Mr. Ayoub.

Mr. Nick Whalen: Mr. Chair, I hear Mr. McCauley's and Mr. Clarke's comments. I think they are valid in some ways, but they get into the weeds of something I was talking about before: what the purview of PROC is regarding trying to unravel the sweater with a single thread, and why our committee is not best situated to discuss the fine nuances. It also points to what Mr. Weir talked about—being a little more flexible in what we recommend that PROC actually do.

The Chair: To put a cap on this, we can't recommend or request PROC to do anything. We can invite them—

Mr. Nick Whalen: Yes.

The Chair: —or suggest, but we certainly can't make a recommendation to them.

Mr. Nick Whalen: We're not trying to effect anything other than aligning the budget and the estimates process. The rules by which ministers are called before various committees to defend their departmental spending are currently based on the provision of the document currently called the main estimates, which is really what is going to turn into interim supply.

It would be open to PROC, understanding maybe from another line in our directional request to them, to make sure that they consider other aspects of the rules that don't limit the time for people to call ministers before them, by saying that we'll just trigger it based on the provision of interim supply, or we'll trigger it based on May 1, whether interim supply is tabled or not, or on whatever the appropriate rule is. Again, it's not our purview.

Concerning other transitional provisions that might be put in place, such as Mr. Weir's and also Messrs. McCauley and Clarke's concern that May 1 is too late, too far in the future, it might be okay for the next couple of years, because that's what the department has said is possible, and much of politics is the art of the possible, but we need to see a movement forward of that idea. I don't think even anyone on our side ultimately wants to see the main estimates only be delivered on May 1 of every year. We want to see government function. We want to have an opportunity to appropriately debate spending on all sides of the House.

Indeed, it was the commitment from Treasury Board that they would try to bring it forward. Maybe an agreement could be reached in PROC about what an appropriate pull forward would be. PROC might determine that it be May 1 for the next two years and April 1 after that. That might be something that PROC could reach unanimity on. But again, I'm only speculating.

I like Mr. Weir's idea that we say there be something among the orders such as “or such other changes as PROC sees fit”, to ensure that our members of Parliament have the opportunity to scrutinize and question ministers and see an ultimate advance in the time by which the main estimates and the budget are presented before the House.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Whalen.

My only commentary to that is that once you make a change to the Standing Orders, it's permanent. You wouldn't, in my view—I think I'm on pretty solid ground here—be able to put in a standing order

which says that for the next two years it will be May 1, and subsequently, after that, it's either May 1 or it's not.

Frankly, I have no intention of impugning the intentions of the minister. I think he's pure in his intentions. He wants to do this well before May 1. I think the difficulty arising from it is what I hear from the opposition, that once it's May 1, future governments are not bound to anything this minister may want to do. If a future government wanted to delay it to May 1 for whatever reasons, they could do so.

These are some of the problems I think we're experiencing here.

•(1605)

Mr. Nick Whalen: Mr. Chair, I guess the real point I was trying to make is that we don't need to trigger the ability to call forward the ministers based on the tabling of interim supply. We can still recommend to PROC that they continue to make it based on interim supply and then have that opportunity. Thus we don't close the window over which—

The Chair: —we invite PROC to consider...

Mr. Nick Whalen: —we invite PROC to consider it. Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Ayoub.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Ramez Ayoub: I understand my colleagues' concerns, but in life, it's all about timing. We are looking at making changes at the beginning of the mandate, rather than in the middle or at the end. It's always a good thing when the opposition questions and challenges the decisions and positions of the government party. It's good for all Canadians and the government alike because it allows for a certain degree of flexibility.

If the date is set in stone, we would have to see what you would propose. I think we need to work together. Unanimous agreement would be ideal. We want to meet the needs of both the government and the two opposition parties. We would have to see why a unanimous decision couldn't be reached in terms of the next budget, allowing us to move forward while remaining flexible on both sides.

[*English*]

The Chair: Madam Shanahan.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan (Châteauguay—Lacolle, Lib.): Chair, I'm sorry that I missed the meeting on Monday, but I know that we have had these discussions in previous sessions, both here at OGGO and also in public accounts, how essential it is to be aligning the estimates with the budget. It's incredible to think how we've gone all this time without doing so.

It seems to me that's the essential message we want to be getting out to PROC.

[*Translation*]

Is there unanimous agreement?

[English]

If there's unanimity in that instruction, invitation, statement, or declaration we want to make, that's what needs to get to PROC. It's going to be PROC that will decide, ultimately, on the date. Certainly, we could suggest the date that was suggested to us. There seems to be a logic in the May 1 date.

The Chair: Madam Ratansi, go ahead.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: I'm just following through with what Madam Shanahan asked. I need to understand the process.

You said we cannot instruct, but we can invite. If there were a broader motion that said we invite PROC to study changing the standing order to enable the alignment of the budget and the estimates, and leave the dates out, would that help? What pressure would it put on PROC? I have no idea.

The Chair: I can't speak for PROC. I don't know the pressures.

Clearly, we as a committee can invite PROC to examine anything. It will be their determination whether or not they wish to take up our invitation. I suspect they probably would.

Yes, we could leave the date open-ended. We can, as a committee, do whatever we wish.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: If we have some concerns about timing and the ability for us to study, then perhaps we could have the minister back, or the department officials back, or just ask PROC if they would help us. It's a hurdle. We seem to be circling the wagons without knowing what we're doing.

The Chair: I would suspect that if there were a reference letter to PROC inviting them to examine the possibility of changing the Standing Orders, they would need to be briefed thoroughly by the minister and Treasury Board officials. Otherwise, how could they make an informed and intelligent decision?

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: Absolutely.

The Chair: That's why I mentioned at the outset it could be this committee that examines it and invites PROC. We come up with a, hopefully, unanimous decision, and then invite PROC to deal with changing the date, if that is what this committee determines.

If, however, you just wish PROC to deal with the whole issue, they're going to have to get into a thorough examination, probably from square one. I'm not suggesting one is better than the other. I do know that, procedurally, it will almost undoubtedly have to be a report coming from procedure and House affairs to change any standing orders.

•(1610)

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: We're not relinquishing our control. However, what would be the best way to get that understanding? Finally, it will go to PROC anyway to change the Standing Orders.

The Chair: Correct. I don't think one way is better than another. Quite frankly, if you want to speed up the process, it could be something as simple as the minister speaking with the chair of PROC saying, "Look, if a letter comes over inviting you to examine this, I would encourage you to do so." I just say that, from a protocol and procedural standpoint, they're the ones who have to deal with this.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: What would be appropriate? Would a motion saying we leave the dates open be acceptable and then let PROC study it?

We are all in agreement. We want that alignment. We have been voting on things that don't make sense. We've been voting on things that make a mockery out of us. If we want that alignment, what is it that we wish? I don't know what the hurdle is, but if somebody can explain how difficult it is for them to digest it, I might be able to understand it.

The Chair: Mr. Weir, go ahead.

Mr. Erin Weir: I hate to be a broken record on this, but my sense is that we don't have consensus on this issue of May 1. Ultimately, the decision on the standing order would have to be made by PROC. The sense I get from my colleague on PROC is that, if it were referred to them, they'd want to hear from the minister and go back through the whole study anyway, which I think is probably prudent and appropriate. It strikes me that the most our committee can really do on this is to refer to PROC this question of whether or not to change the standing order. Again, I'd be happy to make that motion. It seems to me the straightforward thing we can do today is just pass it over to PROC in a neutral way.

The Chair: Monsieur Drouin.

Mr. Francis Drouin: I just want to enlighten my colleagues on the other side.

Mr. Clarke raised a good point in terms of how much time it takes for other committees to look at the main estimates. The good thing about www.parl.gc.ca is that you get access to quick information like this.

Last year all committees took one meeting, two at the most, but the majority took one meeting. In Transport, for example, the main estimates were done March 1, and by March 9, they already had them in front of the committee. They had eight days to scrutinize them. During Mr. Harper's time, on March 20, 2013, the Canadian Heritage department was in front of the committee to do main estimates.

Again, I understand the concern, but if we look back at history, they've been pretty quick to look at those. I think May 1—and May 1, I hope, is not the goal; I would rather have it sooner—will leave plenty of time for all of the committees to scrutinize the main estimates.

Thanks.

The Chair: Mr. Clarke

[Translation]

Mr. Alupa Clarke: Thank you, Mr. Drouin, for your insight. It's much appreciated.

Not only are you looking at a single year, but you are also focusing on just standing committees and not committees of the whole. More importantly, you didn't mention Canadians. They may not be here in this room, but there are Canadians—and it may be hard to believe even if they aren't university professors or members of interest groups—who review the main estimates themselves. Some of them may very well want to send a letter or write an email to their MP to ask about what is going on. That, too, has to be taken into account.

Ms. Ratansi, it is true—and the chair, himself, mentioned it—that the main estimates are somewhat hard to make sense of given that they are examined prior to the budget. I understand the problem, but I'm having a lot of trouble wrapping my head around the argument that it doesn't work. We have been doing it this way for 150 years. Canada is an incredible country with the seventh largest economy in the world. The government does work fairly well, then. There's no need for urgency, no reason to panic. We are talking about a major reform.

Ms. Ratansi, you said we shouldn't be circling the wagon, but that may be what your minister is doing. That brings me to Mr. Whalen's comment that it might not be appropriate for this committee to study the process for considering the main estimates. In 2012, however, the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates did, in fact, study the process for considering the estimates and supply. The committee addressed the alignment of the budget and the estimates in recommendation 6 of its report, which reads as follows:

That, to the extent possible, the budget items for a given year are reflected in the main estimates for that same year; and therefore that the government present its budget in the House of Commons no later than February 1 of each year; that the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs pursue amendments to the Standing Orders, procedure and practice of the House of Commons in order to move the date on which the main estimates are presented to the House back to a later date in March; and that the Committee report to the House on its study by March 31, 2013.

Therefore, Ms. Ratansi, if you don't want us to keep circling the wagon, perhaps your minister should have taken into account that recommendation, which was issued by this very same committee, but with a different membership, in 2012. We aren't going in circles: concerns were raised and published four years ago, in 2012. Supposedly, we are drawing on Australia's model, but I can't see why we don't simply follow Australia's model. It has an identical parliamentary system to ours, and its government determined that the budget and main estimates should be presented on the same day. I don't feel that we are going in circles. Quite the contrary, actually—we are discussing an extremely important matter.

Thank you.

• (1615)

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Whalen.

Mr. Nick Whalen: Mr. Chair, what I'm hearing from Mr. Weir, Mr. Clarke, and Mr. McCauley is that, notwithstanding a couple of other changes that we could have made that would still keep our recommendation to PROC specific, that would not be amenable to them. My own sense is that, if we can't get some type of a consensus at this table, I can't imagine it will be any better at PROC, who have not been focusing as intently on this time frame issue as we have.

Maybe we should continue our study on this to make sure that when we make a specific recommendation to PROC on what needs to be done, they take these other concerns that have been brought forward into account, and that all the committee members at least have a sense that we've done our due diligence.

It's unfortunate. I was hoping we could move forward on pillar one. Mr. Clarke is relating it to pillar two in terms of the changes. He has his concerns. All these concerns need to be addressed. I thought we had done so based on the testimony earlier in the week.

I caution that if we don't take advantage of these opportunities when they come, the appetite to make these changes will wane. I know it's something we all want to see happen, but in an appropriate way. If we can't get the motion forward in the slight ways I propose to change it, then I don't think we can do it. We're just not going to get a chance to do that before Christmas. It will mean that next year's estimates won't be in a form that...unless Minister Brison is able to do it himself in some other fashion.

The Chair: Thank you.

Before I go to our next speaker, Mr. Ayoub, I should clarify something about the Standing Orders. When I mentioned before that the Standing Orders are permanent, and if May 1, for example, was placed in the Standing Orders, that would be permanent, that is true. There is also an option to present and to approve provisional standing orders, which can be done for a limited period of time. There are also sessional orders, which can be done just for the length of one Parliament. These provisional standing orders could be done for a finite period of time: one year, two years, three years, after which they could be discharged, made permanent, or amended.

The reason I'm pointing that out is you have to be very careful with your choice of words if this was ever referred to PROC. If you're inviting to change a standing order, it would have to be described as you're inviting them to perhaps enact a provisional standing order and follow that with the reasons.

Anyway, Monsieur Ayoub, it's your turn, please.

[Translation]

Mr. Ramez Ayoub: Thank you.

Precisely to keep from going in circles and to make some headway, we would do well to identify exactly which points you want changed. My sense is that there is a desire to change something but that there may still be a desire to make further changes. It's not clear to me.

The timing is such that we need to make a decision, assuming a unanimous decision is what we want. We are talking about the date. If for no other reason, we make a decision and come to some conclusion, we can move forward on it or move on to something else. The objective is to make progress and to get a clear idea of what we are going to do as regards the committee, the government, and the minister.

•(1620)

[English]

The Chair: Before we go to our next speaker, who will be Madam Ratansi, I should have mentioned at the outset of the meeting that I would like to have about 15 minutes at the end of this meeting to go in camera for committee business on the study of Canada Post, primarily to deal with a couple of issues we've talked about: the redacted reports, unredacted reports, that sort of thing.

Can we agree that at 5:15 we adjourn this meeting and go into committee business? I'm seeing some nods.

Madam Ratansi.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: I just want to clarify something. Just because a system is working, or people have been lulled into this false sense of security that they have the ability to understand estimates and vote on them, does not mean that the system functions. When I say "functions", as parliamentarians, we do not have clarity on things. If I were to vote on the main estimates without knowing what the budget is all about, I would definitely want the system aligned. I remember being the chair of OGGO, and we did have to get people to understand how the estimates function and then what the budget did.

To clarify what you were telling me, if the system is not broken, why are you fixing it? It has worked for so many years. We want engaged and educated members of Parliament so they can hold the government responsible, whether it's this government, the next government, whatever. That's the only reason we want this aligned. When people talk about timing, we haven't studied timing, as Mr. Drouin pointed out. We take one or two meetings to study it, and we get ministers before us, and we have managed that timing. If alignment comes, dates come in, it would help our process. That's all we're saying. The committee can work on whether it's April 1 or May 1, or we can have Minister Brison come forth, because only pillar one will change the Standing Orders, nothing else.

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Clarke and then Mr. Weir.

[Translation]

Mr. Alupa Clarke: If our position was misunderstood, I apologize. I am going to try to bring clarity to it all right now.

On our side, we believe it is absolutely essential to align the budget and the main estimates, not to mention commendable. What we don't want, however, is to see the democratic accountability mechanisms provided for under the Westminster tradition diminished.

Mr. Ayoub, you asked what we wanted to change, but that's not the right question. What matters to us is what we don't want to see changed. As I just said, it is that three-month period, which is crucial. In Australia, it wasn't necessary to shorten it. It stayed the same.

Mr. Whalen, you talked about timing. In fact, we are talking about a window of opportunity, a much-loved concept in the political science world. I, myself have often used it in my work. A window of opportunity, yes, but you also talked about an appetite. I wonder

what that appetite is and where it's coming from. I've never heard Canadians talk about this problem, which is clearly an internal one.

Even though the problem is internal, it still involves a very serious reform of our parliamentary democracy. It is just as important as electoral reform, if not more. To my mind, both issues are on the same level. If I recall correctly, electoral reform was part of the Liberal Party's election platform. Conversely, the reform we are talking about, a very significant change that would affect the mechanisms of the Westminster system, was not part of that platform.

Where, then, Mr. Whalen, is the appetite you speak of coming from?

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Weir.

Mr. Erin Weir: Mr. Ayoub made the point that we need some specific suggestions or alternatives to just having the May 1 deadline. I think one specific point that came from both opposition parties at our last meeting was the need to have some kind of set date or deadline, or range of dates, for the budget. Mr. Whalen, I think, was suggesting that, because we don't have consensus, we should just keep studying the estimates process. I'm fine with that as an outcome, but I would just reiterate that I think it would be possible for our committee to agree to refer this question about the standing order to PROC, as long as we did it in a neutral way, without recommending a specific change. That would result in PROC doing a study, which I think is how it would respond to the request anyway. I don't think that any lack of consensus by this committee needs to delay things. If we want to refer this question to PROC today, we can do that.

•(1625)

The Chair: Mr. Whalen.

Mr. Nick Whalen: Yes, Mr. Clarke, just in response to your question to me, the appetite comes from our commitments. I think we made 300-odd commitments during the election, and as we travel through this mandate, we find that only so many changes can be implemented at one time because there are opposition parties that want to make sure we do it in an appropriate fashion.

Particularly with the budget, because the budget cycle operates a couple of years in advance, really, in terms of the preparation, the timing, and the policy development, as we get closer to the next election from a budgetary cycle change standpoint, it's much closer than it appears. We need to get through a couple of cycles of a change in our processes to make sure that they work and they can be advanced forward. If we try to do these in the midst of an election, I would feel less comfortable about them.

That's my appetite, but it's not necessarily the appetite of Canadians. I can't speak for the appetite of Canadians on this point. It certainly wasn't something I heard about at the doors. This type of estimates reform is something that comes in this chamber. People don't talk about it to me on the street.

Mr. Weir, if we want to be involved in the process, PROC is perfectly able to make its own decisions based on a recommendation from the minister if he chooses to go before PROC to ask them to do their own study. When he was here earlier in the week, the minister asked us to do this. If we found that it would be worthwhile to make a specific recommendation about the timing that was capable of being achieved, based on the study we've done, we could make some type of an informed and specific suggestion to PROC so that they had some comfort that we weren't completely at odds with it, that we at least had some sense that this was achievable. It would ultimately achieve the long-term aims of having the alignment of the budgets in the estimates process.

Mr. McCauley and Mr. Clarke, my proposal on making sure that ministers would be held to account is that we could add a line saying that in respect of invitations to ministers before committees for review, that those rules apply to the interim supply. That way there would be no lost time on having ministers come before various committees in respect of the information that's already been received. Currently the main estimates are a pseudo interim supply bill with anything that the government might know the costing of before the budget is tabled. It's very haphazard. It's very difficult to follow. It ends up wasting parliamentarians' time in terms of the type of review they do. That's why we're engaged.

I proposed something specific that I thought would alleviate your concerns. I get the sense that it hasn't. If I'm wrong about that, I would love to hear it, in which case I'd be very happy to continue forward with a specific motion that we recommend that PROC, on some basis, choose May 1 as the date, and also at the same time make sure that ministers are available on interim supply from the current date, which I understand to be March 1.

The Chair: Perhaps I could make some commentary since I don't see other names on the list.

Mr. McCauley, let me make a couple of observations first and then see if I can put a ring fence around this.

I'm hearing a couple of things. Obviously, we don't have unanimity on this issue, which is fine. We have a couple of options as I see it.

One, as has been suggested by a couple of our committee members, we can continue with this study, book a couple more meetings—should we find room for them, and I think we can make room for them—and bring in additional witnesses to speak to specific concerns that some members may have, to find out what might be the art of the possible. Obviously, the minister would have to come back with TB officials to answer some of the questions.

We could, as suggested by both Mr. Whalen and Mr. Weir, refer this right over to PROC and let them deal with. They would probably have to go back to square one and start the whole examination themselves.

I have a sense, and maybe I'm wrong, that we're not going to get any unanimity on this today. I'm not trying to short-circuit the discussion because I think it's valuable, but I think we're reaching a bit of an impasse and I'm looking at some way to resolve that impasse.

My suggestion, if I would have any, would be that we do either one of two things: continue with the study of this very issue, bringing in witnesses rather than just having a general conversation, or make a determination today that we want to punt this over to PROC and let them deal with it.

• (1630)

Mr. Nick Whalen: Your last suggestion makes perfect sense to me. I believe that once we have our report before the analysts and the translators, there might be time to squeeze in some meetings on this and still get a recommendation before the end of November, as requested by the minister.

The Chair: I think the other thing is, frankly, not that I'm speaking on behalf of the minister, obviously, but my sense from him from what he testified to us is that I don't even think it's at the end of November. I think it would be closer to the middle of November. I think the minister just wants finality. Obviously, his wish would be to try to change the date so he has some time and move along as per his request, but if not, then I think he'd rather know that now. If there's going to be no movement forward, I think he'd like to know it quickly.

What is the will of the committee?

Mr. Clarke and Mr. McCauley, do you think referring this to PROC would be amenable to you, or do you want to continue the discussion here?

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I think our preference is to continue the study here.

The Chair: All right, a study here. Do you want to speak to that, Mr. McCauley? I have you down on my list anyway.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: No, I was going to address a couple of other things.

The Chair: Okay. We have Mr. McCauley suggesting that we continue the study here at this committee. Are you fine with that?

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: Yes.

The Chair: I don't know if it would be served by continuing this discussion today unless you have something to add to the benefit of this discussion, Mr. McCauley.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Mr. Whalen always speaks very well, and brings some measured tone to the committee, and I appreciate that. You did mention that you thought all the issues were addressed, and I was chatting with the minister earlier, and it doesn't look like our concerns have been addressed, but I think by bringing him back to the committee, we can get finality on that.

I also want to stress that we do believe aligning the estimates with the budget is the best way forward. My colleague from the NDP does. I think it's a real disservice when we get continued messaging that it's not our intent. We are very much committed to aligning the budget with the estimates, and it does a disservice to this committee to hear a narrative spun that it's not our intent. I just wanted to make that very clear, and I look forward to continuing on with it.

The Chair: If I may suggest, then, we can do a couple of things. We could go in camera for committee business now, and the first point of business would be to find out how many witnesses we want and set some meetings aside about the estimates process. The second part of that in camera discussion would be on some of the points that I have on the Canada Post study. Are we all agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: We will suspend to go in camera.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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