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—
Chair

The Honourable Larry Bagnell

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•(1105)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.)): We'll get started.

I'd like to welcome Mr. Schmale, now a permanent member, to the committee. I think you'll enjoy it. We've been working well together.

Mr. Dusseault is here for Mr. Christopherson today. Welcome to the committee.

The Clerk's time is very valuable.

Thank you very much. I know you're a very busy man. You have a huge department to administer, so we really appreciate your being here today. In a family-friendly Parliament, recommendations have a lot of ramifications and technical consequences, and you know better than any of us what they might be, so we're really looking forward to getting your advice and technical advice on the ramifications of things we're considering.

Mr. Marc Bosc (Acting Clerk, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee. I'm glad to be here this morning. I have a short statement, and then I'll be happy to take your questions.

It's a pleasure for me to be here to provide you with assistance as you consider parliamentary reform initiatives that strive to create a more inclusive and family-friendly environment for members.

[Translation]

Today, I will have a few remarks to make at the outset, and then I will be happy to answer any questions you may have and to come back if you wish.

My remarks will focus on general principles and concepts, and will contain a few references to the historical evolution of the Standing Orders relevant to the subject before you. I will also highlight areas for reform the committee may wish to consider in this study.

[English]

Before I begin, I wish to convey the good wishes of the Speaker as you carry out your important work. He has asked me to let you know that he looks forward with interest to what the committee will bring forward as recommendations, not only those in the area of family friendliness but also, in due course, any recommendations about improving question period, decorum in general including applause,

and making the work of members even more meaningful in the House and in committee.

Time is the most precious commodity any of us has. This is especially true for members of the House of Commons, whose lives are extremely busy with countless commitments and pressures. As all members know, a key factor that adds to stress is unpredictability, which makes planning infinitely more difficult.

[Translation]

Time and its availability, or scarcity, as well as the predictability of how it is used, are critical for individual members. This also holds true for parties and caucuses and their roles and responsibilities in the House, and for the executive, given its obligation to bring before the House the program it has committed to advance.

Historically, the House has shown itself to be responsive to changes in the needs of members. The rules and conventions by which the House of Commons has chosen to govern itself have been in constant evolution since 1867. As such, while the fundamental business of Parliament has remained largely unchanged, the context in which members carry out their parliamentary responsibilities and how they fulfill them has led to regular adaptations. Standing orders and practices have changed in ways that are at times subtle and at times more obvious, often with a view to increased efficiency and the needs of members.

[English]

Such changes were brought about in different ways. In some cases, the House adopted committee reports recommending certain changes. In others, the House considered a government motion inspired by committee recommendations, and in yet others, changes were made on the initiative of individual members, or the government, acting alone. In all cases a simple majority of the House is what is required to make a change to the Standing Orders.

[Translation]

In the 1960s, changes in the Standing Orders at last brought a measure of certainty to the supply process, such that the total unpredictability of when the House would adjourn for the summer was greatly diminished. Clearly this was a family-friendly change.

•(1110)

[English]

In 1982 the House adopted two key measures to make the House more family friendly. It eliminated evening sittings and it adopted a parliamentary calendar setting out sitting and non-sitting periods that allowed members to plan constituency work more effectively.

Additional changes in the 1990s further refined the times of House sittings to closely approximate what they are today.

[Translation]

The possibility of having votes at 3 p.m. was codified in the Standing Orders in 2001. More recently, the use of autopilot mechanisms has been resorted to in order to bring a greater measure of predictability to the work of the House.

Co-operation between House leaders has long been beneficial as a vehicle for coordinating the day-to-day business of the House. By meeting regularly to consult on the sequence and timing of certain aspects of parliamentary business, a greater degree of predictability of the business of the House becomes possible.

Advances in technology have also been used wisely by members to help relieve some of the pressure to be here at all times. The e-notice system, a portal for electronic filing of notices of motions and written questions, is the perfect example as it provides members with an alternative to being present in order to file paper copies with original signatures at the journals branch. With this technology, they can submit notices wherever Internet access is available.

[English]

Today's desire to look at ways to adapt is no different. Advances in technology, an increasingly high demand on members' time, the need for a work-life balance, and the heavy stresses of frequent and long-distance travel all contribute to the impetus for an examination and modification of the work day, week, and life of members of the House. Your invitation to me today is an indication that we may be at a point where there is a will to further refine the schedule and procedures of the House.

Rather than immediately get into the details of particular standing order changes, today I will set out three thematic areas that the committee may wish to explore as it pursues its review. Having read the transcript of the government House leader's appearance, I realize that some of this has already been touched upon, so forgive me if some points seem repetitive.

[Translation]

First are votes.

Here the committee could look at the timing of votes, the way in which they are taken, including electronic voting, the duration of the bells, the way votes may be scheduled or deferred, and so on.

[English]

Second, the committee may want to give consideration to the days and times of sittings. Factors to consider here would include: days of sittings, specifically the impact on parliamentary business of not sitting on Fridays, for example; the number of hours per sitting day; the start and end times of sittings on particular days; the possibility of two sittings on the same day; the total sitting hours in a week; and, of course, the calendar as a whole and how many weeks should be sitting weeks in a given year.

Third, and again with a view to alleviating some of the time pressures we are talking about, the committee may wish to examine the usefulness of a parallel chamber, a practice followed in Britain and in Australia, and perhaps elsewhere. Here, the committee could

look at whether it would want to recommend such an alternate venue and if so, how it could function, when it could be convened to have its sittings, what limitations could be placed on what it could and could not do, and so on. In other words, would it exist for debate purposes only or for more?

In its consideration of these thematic areas, the committee will want to be mindful of consequences as varied as the impact on the progress of legislation, supply proceedings, private members' business, statements by members, question period, notice periods and requirements, committees and caucuses, parliamentary publications, special debates, and so on. It is a long but not insurmountable list.

As can readily be seen, each of these thematic areas carries with it numerous and complicated implications and consequences. Indeed, experience has shown that unintended consequences are probably likely.

Regardless of what changes may be adopted, a certain degree of unpredictability in House proceedings is likely to persist. There may be valid reasons from an opposition or government perspective for votes to occur unexpectedly, or at times, outside the norm, or for the House to sit longer than originally expected. This is likely to continue to be a reality of the parliamentary environment.

That said, changes can be made, and we will of course bring to bear whatever knowledge and resources the committee requires to thoroughly flesh out whatever proposals it chooses to make. Our role is to help the committee, and ultimately the House, to accomplish what it wishes to accomplish.

I'm happy to take your questions.

•(1115)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Clerk.

The first round of questioning will be seven minutes: Liberal, Conservative, New Democrat, Liberal.

We'll start with Ms. Vandenberg.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Thank you very much for taking the time to appear before this committee.

I have not come across what you mentioned here about a parallel chamber. I don't think it's something that has come up in the discussions before. I'd be very interested to know what that actually means. You noted that it's done in Britain and Australia. Is this a chamber that would be similar to committees, where it would be given references from the main House of Commons? Presumably there would be votes in only one of the chambers.

Could you elaborate a little bit on that?

Mr. Marc Bosc: As I understand it, it's primarily a debating chamber in the jurisdictions that employ that method. It's not too dissimilar from a committee of the whole, for those members who are familiar with that forum.

We could certainly do more research for the committee on that point, but my understanding is that it's primarily for debate. It's a mechanism by which more members of the House are able to get on the record their views and opinions.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Would they be televised?

Mr. Marc Bosc: I don't believe they're televised in Britain or Australia, but we can check on that.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Okay.

I'm also interested in what you said about technology. I know that for things like notices of motions, we're already using technology, but of course we have the capacity with modern technology to be able to do much more with that.

I'd be particularly interested in the idea of whether or not votes could be done using technology, which would allow members to be present for votes even if they're not physically in the chamber, and whether there might be unexpected consequences or implications that you, in your experience, might be able to think of that we may not.

Mr. Marc Bosc: We can tackle electronic voting in two ways. First, assuming that members are present and we have electronic voting, there are many examples of how that can be done. Many jurisdictions employ it. None is perfect, but if you're talking about saving time, it can permit the taking of votes during the bells, essentially. You can vote as soon as you get to the chamber. Once you've done that, you carry on your business and pursue other activities, as opposed to the bells ringing, everyone showing up, and everyone voting at the same time. It sort of defeats the purpose. That's assuming that everyone is present.

The next part of your question has to do with members not being present but still voting. It's certainly something that can be examined. There are certain fairly deep philosophical issues surrounding that. I wouldn't want to get into it today without doing much more research on them. Parliamentary privilege comes into play. There are a lot of factors to consider with such a proposition.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Do you know if there are other jurisdictions doing that?

Mr. Marc Bosc: I'm not familiar with any at this time, no.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Okay.

Thank you.

The Chair: You still have three minutes left.

• (1120)

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: I'll share my time.

The Chair: Ms. Sahota.

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): Thank you.

I'm not aware of whether there's a certain number of sitting days that Parliament has to sit, or what two sittings in one day would actually look like. How would that function? How would that work?

Mr. Marc Bosc: The parliamentary calendar provides for a set number of sitting days per calendar year if the House is in session. For 2016, that number is 127. In previous years the number was around 135. This year we have essentially one fewer sitting week than normal.

With regard to two sittings in a day, again it is entirely up to the committee how it wants to approach this if it wants to pursue that idea. On the longer days, Tuesdays and Thursdays, it would be possible, I believe, to split the day in half and have one sitting in the

morning and one sitting in the afternoon. This idea comes, obviously, from the elimination of another sitting day, Friday. It's not necessary to do that if you keep Friday, but if you take one day out of the equation, there obviously would be serious consequences to the progress of legislation, to private members' business, and so on as a result. So you need to give that some consideration. It is certainly possible to have two sittings in a day, and that could be structured however the House wants to structure it.

What I'd like to stress about procedure is that it's very flexible. The House can decide to structure its proceedings any way it wants. There are really very few impediments to what the House can decide to do. It just has to keep track and be mindful of the consequences of whatever it decides. That's where people on the Procedural Services team, who I am offering to the committee today to help with this process, are able to provide that minute expertise on the standing order implications and on whatever else has to change if you make a certain change. That's what we are there for. We are certainly happy to help the committee in any of its work.

The Chair: Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): Thank you for being here today. We had the chance in the last Parliament to have you before our committee, and we always appreciate the thoughtful and considered advice that you provide to us in our deliberations here.

In your opening remarks, you certainly laid out very well some of the things that could be considered in making changes to the Standing Orders and also some of the things that have to be really thought through with regard to, as you mentioned, ensuring that we don't come out with any unintended consequences. I'd like to explore a couple of those areas a little further in the time we have.

The first is that one of the areas you mentioned was looking at consideration of the days and times of sittings. You mentioned specifically the impact of not sitting on Fridays and what that would mean for parliamentary business in some of the areas that you identified. You talked about the number of sitting hours per day, the start and end times of sitting days, and a number of other factors.

What I'd like to focus on first is that question period is a very important part of the day in Parliament. It provides the opposition with a very important opportunity to hold the government to account on behalf of Canadians; so question period and the impacts on it are key parts of anything we would want to consider. If we were to talk about eliminating Friday sittings, that certainly would or could have some impact on the amount of time in question period that the opposition would have to hold the government to account on behalf of Canadians.

I'm wondering if you could give us a bit more information on how that would be affected if Friday sittings were eliminated, and whether you have suggestions on how we could ensure that there wouldn't be less time provided for that very important function in Parliament.

Mr. Marc Bosc: Obviously, if you take a day out of the five-day sitting week—on Fridays the House sits for 4.5 hours from 10 to 2:30—that lost time, if you want to put it that way, could be made up on the four other days.

Historically, when the House has adjusted its sitting hours, it has tried to make sure that the number of sitting hours per week either increased or at least didn't go down. That's what was done previously. You could conceivably add the time lost for the various items at different times in the week.

• (1125)

Mr. Blake Richards: I'm sorry to interrupt. Specifically on question period, though, obviously of that four and a half hours that we sit on a Friday, between the S.O. 31s and the questions, it's about an hour approximately, or maybe it's exactly an hour.

Mr. Marc Bosc: Yes.

Mr. Blake Richards: Obviously, of that four and a half hours, one of those hours would have to be for a very specific function, which I think is something that is a very key part of the opposition being able to hold the government to account. It's a key part of the day. It's one of the parts of the day where the opposition obviously has an opportunity to set the agenda or to at least ask the government, on behalf of Canadians, the questions they feel are important. Specifically on that, do you have thoughts on how it could be dealt with so we wouldn't lose some of that time?

Mr. Marc Bosc: If you look at it from a purely mathematical standpoint, if you're losing 15 statements, or 16 statements, you could add them to each of the four other days. You could split them in four and add them in that way. Similarly, for questions, you could make a calculation and say that of the 45 minutes or 50 minutes of question period, let's apportion it, divide by four, and add it to the other days. That would be one way of doing it.

Mr. Blake Richards: Yes, purely in terms of enough time, that would certainly do it. Obviously, there are other considerations that we'd have to look at as well.

You mention a number of other areas when we talk about the elimination of Friday sittings and also in looking at all of the areas. You mention things like the impact there would be on the progress of legislation, on supply, on private members' business, and statements. We already talked about question period, but there are notice period requirements and the impact this would have on committees and caucuses. Those are a number of the things you mentioned.

Would you be able to elaborate on what you see specifically in regard to the elimination of Friday sittings? We'll focus on that. Could you give us some indication about some of the things you see being potentially problematic, or things that we would have to at least find ways to deal with? Could you elaborate on some of those points?

Mr. Marc Bosc: Sure. If you take something as simple as the number of supply days per period, by taking one day out of the five-day week, you've reduced the number of days the House sits by 20%. The number of supply days per period is set down in the Standing Orders, and it's fixed. That increases proportionally the number of supply days in each period relative to government business. That's one example.

For private members' business, you would lose an hour of private members' business. If you didn't make it up somewhere else, you'd lose that. For bills and notices, a bill can only be read once in a given day, so if you lose a day in a week, that delays the options. It reduces the options for the government.

For notice periods, if you take a day out, what do you do with that day? Do you allow it to continue to be a day that's valid for notice purposes or not? That's something to consider. This is where two sittings in a day kind of compensates for that. If you still have five sittings in a week, you could still accomplish a measure of what you would have accomplished or could have accomplished in a five-day week. Those are some examples, and there are of course many others.

Mr. Blake Richards: In order to be able to compensate for that lost day, I can certainly see that especially for things like private members' business and for the progress of all legislation, including government legislation, having that there would be important. But in order to ensure there are those two sitting days in one day.... You talked earlier when talking about question period about adding some of that time to each day. How would that work crossed over with the idea of two sitting days in one day? Would you not almost need to put all those hours into one specific day in order for that to work without having other unintended consequences, or do you not think that would be an issue?

• (1130)

Mr. Marc Bosc: There are bound to be unintended consequences, as I said, particularly when we're combining several different changes to the Standing Orders.

Let's start with making up the time. It would be quite easy to add an hour of private members' business, the one lost on the Friday, either at the end of the day on Thursday or at the beginning of the day on Monday, let's say, or at the end of any other day for that matter. The government time lost, which is essentially two and a half hours, or a little less maybe because of routine proceedings, could be added on over several different days. You could sit a little bit later. That's just to maintain the number of hours in total.

The consequences for the sitting duration per se, say, on a Tuesday or a Thursday, the longest days now, would certainly exceed what it would have been on Friday for government business. If you're only having two and a half hours on a Friday, then sitting from, say, 9:30 or 10 o'clock on a Tuesday morning until near 2 p.m., you have a four-hour block there, or thereabouts. It's longer than a Friday would have been in that sense.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Taylor.

Ms. Ginette Petitpas Taylor (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe, Lib.): I'm going to share my time with David.

[*Translation*]

I'd like to begin by thanking you for your presentation this morning, Mr. Bosc. I quite appreciate the briefing notes you provided for us.

[English]

I have a quick question. Are you aware if the provincial or territorial legislatures in the country all sit five days a week, or if it's a minimum schedule that they have when they're sitting?

Mr. Marc Bosc: I haven't done a full survey of all the provinces, but I don't believe that very many of them sit five days a week. A few do, but they don't all, that's for sure.

Ms. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: So the majority of them don't sit—

Mr. Marc Bosc: Again, I hesitate to state that firmly because I haven't checked, but just from past knowledge, most of them do not.

Ms. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham (Laurentides—Labelle, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Bosc, for being here.

We talked a lot about sitting days, but maybe it would be more complicated to write and simpler to implement if we changed the entire language to “sitting hours” instead of “sitting days”.

Is that a possibility or something we could look at? What would be the consequences of that?

Mr. Marc Bosc: It would require a lot of thinking; let me put it that way.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Fair enough.

Mr. Marc Bosc: So many Standing Orders are predicated on either “sitting day” or “sitting”. It would be a significant rethink of the way the Standing Orders are structured.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I think that's why we're here: to redraw things as we need to, instead of being stuck in the past.

I have a number of other simple questions that are probably more difficult to answer.

Do you have any idea historically why we have an academic calendar for when we sit, why we rise in June and don't come back until the end of September? Would it make more sense—or maybe it doesn't make any sense at all—to sit, say, two weeks on and two weeks off year-round, as an example, instead of having seasons?

Is there any impact that you can think of?

Mr. Marc Bosc: You know, that's entirely up to the House. History has shown us that people in Canada like to benefit from the summer months, their short summer season. I would say that at the outset, but certainly there's nothing stopping the House from amending the parliamentary calendar and sitting more weeks in the year. That's entirely possible.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Different weeks, right?

What would the consequences be if, let's say, we started sitting at 8 or 9 in the morning instead of 10 in the morning? That's just for the sake of argument; I'm not saying I want to do that. I don't particularly want to do that.

What would the impact on us be of starting our days earlier and ending them later in terms of the business of the House and the way it operates around here?

●(1135)

Mr. Marc Bosc: With starting earlier, you're getting into more party-driven impacts. A lot of parties will be planning their day at certain early hours ahead of the opening of the House. Regional caucuses might be meeting and other groups of members might be meeting at that time. That would have to be taken into consideration.

With any change to a schedule, you have to look at what other stuff is scheduled in the time you want to use up as an alternative. I'm not familiar with all the things that members are doing earlier in the day, but certainly any start time the House wants to implement is doable. There would be impacts obviously on staff who would have to be here in advance of the opening of the House. If you were talking about an 8 o'clock start for the House, that obviously would have quite serious impacts on everything from collective agreements, to overtime, to whatever. It could be an important change.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Those are very good points.

How about for votes? I don't know if it's the case right now, but is it possible to say that votes cannot under any circumstance take place on a Friday but we can have a sitting on a Friday? This would change the mathematics on the numbers of who would have to be here on Fridays.

Mr. Marc Bosc: I'm not sure I understand the question.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Would it be possible to say, for example, that under no circumstance can a vote be held on Fridays, but we'll sit on Fridays anyway?

Mr. Marc Bosc: Right now we're almost there. It's very rare to have a vote on a Friday. The votes that do take place typically are what I would call procedural votes, where parties try to use dilatory tactics. Other than that, votes on legislation and so on don't generally take place on Fridays. There already is a reduced duty schedule, if I could put it that way. All parties approach Fridays in that way and reduce their presence to a degree.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Okay.

This is my final question. Again, I'm doing a lot of creative thinking here. We have the e-notice system which uses these wonderful secure IDs so we can do things from the office, from home, or from anywhere. Could that be used, or is there a good reason not to use that for votes in the House? We could vote from the riding, for example, using our secure IDs.

Mr. Marc Bosc: Again, I think this gets into a whole other area of discussion surrounding the role of members and what it is to be a deliberative assembly. It's a much bigger question than a practical one, if I could put it that way. That would almost require a separate examination. That would be a very significant change. I'm not saying it's impossible. I haven't really looked into it very much, but it is definitely significant.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I think we haven't really defined the boundaries of what we're studying yet, and I want to see what those boundaries are.

Thank you very much for that.

The Chair: Mr. Dusseault, I'm sorry. You were supposed to be before that round, but you're on now.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault (Sherbrooke, NDP): All right. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Bosc, thank you for your presentation and the possible solutions you provided for our consideration. Indeed, I think that, in 2016, we should be having this conversation—and a good one at that—about making our procedures more flexible.

I want to start by drawing to everyone's attention the following question. What are the current rules governing maternity and paternity leave for members?

Mr. Marc Bosc: Members don't have any. That leave isn't available to members.

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: That confirms my information. Some of my colleagues in the NDP welcomed new babies into their families, and they had to deal with a number of challenges. The same thing could happen to other members of this Parliament in the future.

You presented a few options that allow members to do work without having to be on the Hill. You talked about the ability to file notices of motions electronically and all the measures that have already been taken to improve the situation, making it possible to perform a number of tasks from one's riding, without having to be here in person. What are your thoughts on increasing that flexibility so that members could perform more tasks remotely?

Take, for example, someone who has just had a baby and is at home or in their riding but wishes to express their concerns or make suggestions regarding a certain bill, by having a speech published in the record of proceedings, without reading it in the House. At first glance, does that idea strike you as problematic?

• (1140)

Mr. Marc Bosc: That isn't a House practice. But, as I said at the beginning of my presentation, the House is free to change its practices however it likes.

As far as I know, the only example of a situation where such a practice is allowed is upon returning from the Senate, following a Speech from the Throne; in that instance, the Speaker is allowed to have the throne speech published in the record of proceedings as if it had been read. In theory, then, it is possible.

Would the House want to provide for such a practice? It's possible, but I don't know.

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: Very well. That's interesting.

Now I'd like to discuss the taking of votes, a routine practice here, in Ottawa. We could opt to group votes together at specific times, such as after question period. I think that's an idea worthy of some serious analysis.

On a few occasions during the last Parliament, the House leaders jointly saw to it that votes were grouped together at the same times. That made things a bit easier in terms of the necessity to be present in the House for oral questions and, then, votes immediately after.

No votes are held in the evening, which means that we don't have to come back. However, that can result in more votes being taken at the same time. And that gives rise to another question, the possibility of breaking up long voting periods.

Under the current procedure, does the Speaker have the authority to interrupt voting for a 5- or 10-minute break between votes, when 10 or 12 votes are scheduled after question period?

Mr. Marc Bosc: Currently, the Speaker doesn't have that authority, but there is nothing preventing the House from giving the Speaker that power.

As for the holding of votes at 3 p.m., you're right; that practice was adopted a few times. It works well insofar as the bells are generally not rung. I would point out, however, that a party wanting the ringing of the bells can always demand it. In order to ensure that voting can take place without the bells being rung, the possibility would have to be included in the Standing Orders.

That said, as you pointed out, when a large number of votes are taking place, the time required for that is added to the end of the day, as is the practice. That's another consideration to take into account.

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: Indeed.

You may be able to enlighten us as to the procedure we should follow in order to make changes to the Standing Orders. I'm not sure whether you're able to comment on this, but I was wondering whether the best way to proceed might be to adopt a committee report here, in the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, laying out certain changes. The House could then adopt the report in order to implement the proposed changes.

Do you think that would be the best way for the committee to proceed?

Mr. Marc Bosc: Frankly, I don't have an opinion on the best approach to take since changes have been made to the Standing Orders in a variety of ways, including the one you just described.

I see that Mr. Reid is in the room. Just recently, he successfully had the Standing Orders changed by way of a private member's motion. Any method is acceptable. Of course, changes to the Standing Orders are more likely to work well when a consensus has been reached, but historically, changes to the Standing Orders have been made in a variety of ways, and not always that way.

• (1145)

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: Thank you.

My concern about eliminating Friday as a sitting day has mainly to do with the two hours, or just over, used for activities that could disappear if the decision was made to simply divvy up the 4.5 hours over the first 4 sitting days of the week. I worry about those hours being allocated exclusively to debate on government bills.

On the one hand, we would lose the time for routine proceedings, possibly making things more difficult for the government, which has, in fact, managed to accomplish a lot during that period. On the other hand, we would lose the time allocated to oral questions, members' statements and, above all, private members' business.

Say Friday as a sitting day is eliminated. Do you think we should maintain that 2-hour-and-15-minute period that includes routine proceedings, to ensure the activities I mentioned are retained in the first four sitting days?

Mr. Marc Bosc: It will be up to the committee to decide how to recommend those kinds of changes. If it wishes to keep the fifth hour of private members' business, it can do so. If it wishes to maintain a fifth period for routine proceedings, it can do that as well.

Essentially, the committee has total freedom to recommend a structure that would accommodate the objectives you're describing.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you. That's time.

Mr. Schmale, you have five minutes.

Mr. Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Bosc, for your comments so far.

We've talked a lot about some of the proposed ideas. We've talked about some of the pros and cons. I want to continue and maybe pick your brain a bit more about some of the consequences of changing the sitting days and times.

Do you think it will, I don't want to say “overwhelm”, but is it at all a possibility that it will really pack in the parliamentary calendar so that the proper examination isn't being done?

Mr. Marc Bosc: Offhand, no, I don't think it would change all that much. Bear in mind that on a typical Friday, the House does not sit very many hours, or the same number. If those hours are taken up earlier in the other four days, then no time is lost for debate or for any other proceeding that the House may be taking up at that time, so I don't really see an impact in that sense.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Okay.

We talked a bit about the electronic tabling of bills, maybe doing it from our ridings and that kind of thing. Do you see any consequences from doing that, from being away from this place? Obviously a certain amount of work can be done here and only here. Do you see that as being an issue at all?

Mr. Marc Bosc: As I said earlier, I think that gets the committee into a completely different realm of consideration. Distance legislation, legislating at a distance, voting at a distance, these are all fairly fundamental issues for any deliberative assembly, which would really require a lot of study and thought. I myself would want to read up on it and reflect on it before I gave an opinion one way or another.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: That would be a pretty significant change, I think.

Mr. Marc Bosc: It would be a very significant change.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Based on what we know and obviously much research, if we were to make a change, do you think you could give us a timeline—it doesn't have to be exact—on when that could possibly come into effect? It would include such changes as tabling bills electronically, that kind of thing. I'm kind of looking for a timeline, just to see....

• (1150)

Mr. Marc Bosc: It's very hard for me to answer that question without knowing precisely what is being asked; I really can't. There may be technological implications that I'm not aware of. There may be requirements where we would have to build a system or devise other procedures internally to make that possible. I don't know at this stage. It would really depend on exactly what's being proposed.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Absolutely. I have noticed that a lot of the work we can do now is work that we can only do here, which I'm sure would be quite the hurdle to get over.

Mr. Marc Bosc: Yes, and if I may, it probably carries a fairly hefty price tag, in all likelihood.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: I can imagine, yes.

In your notes you mentioned the parallel chamber. That's a very interesting comment.

Again, we've mentioned time and cost, and we're building a chamber now in West Block to accommodate the chamber when we do move. Obviously time and cost would come into that, and possibly the whole process in terms of setting up.

I'm guessing that's years away.

Mr. Marc Bosc: Well, it just depends. Probably the informatics people and the Journals people are having kittens hearing me say this, but it really depends on how complicated the committee wants to make it and the House wants to make it. It could be as simple as setting up what is essentially a large committee room. We do that all the time. Obviously, there would be implications for publications, if there is an expectation that there be an actual *Hansard* published. That would have to be considered, as would other factors, such as the televising of it and on which channel. All of those questions would have to be considered, but in terms of a physical set-up, it certainly is doable.

The Chair: I'm sorry, it's over now.

Mr. Chan.

Mr. Arnold Chan (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Bosc, for joining us today. I know how busy you are.

I'm going to split my time with Mr. Lamoureux. I'm just going to ask a couple of very quick questions.

I want to follow up on a point that Mr. Graham made, which is not so much about changing the number of sitting days as about sitting hours. Under Standing Order 43, members are allowed to speak for up to 20 minutes on a particular item. Is there any particular reason or convention that it is that particular period of time? Do you have any thoughts on, for example, if we were to reduce that amount of time to compress the calendar on a particular day a little bit?

I'm already noticing that a lot of members on the 20-minute speaking order are often splitting their time. Do you observe many members actually using up the full 20 minutes?

Mr. Marc Bosc: It can happen. The length of speeches over time has been on a downward trend. There used to be no limit on the time members could speak. Then it went to, I think, 40 minutes—no, even longer than that initially, and then down to 40 minutes, and then down to 20 minutes, and then it was splittable, and so on. Again, it's entirely up to the committee to decide what is an appropriate length of time for a speech.

The only thing I would say is if you go too low, then you put at risk questions and comments. Let's say you said the maximum speech length would be five minutes. Well then, how long are questions and comments going to be? That's a problem.

The other thing I would say is I'd probably disabuse you of the illusion that reducing the length of speeches will reduce the number of members who actually get up to speak. With 338 members, more members will come forward to fill that time. That's what will happen.

An hon. member: That's a good thing.

Mr. Marc Bosc: And as Mr. Lamoureux just said, that's a good thing because it gives more members an opportunity to take the floor, but if you're thinking it will reduce the time the House sits, I doubt it.

The Chair: Mr. Lamoureux.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Bosc, I always appreciate your thoughts on these types of issues.

I think of it in terms of members of Parliament wanting to better serve their constituents both here in Ottawa and in their constituencies, and we factor in the importance of families at the same time. There is validity to looking at Fridays, as other provincial legislatures have done, yet provincial legislatures are more local than Ottawa is for the vast majority of ridings, so I think it is a responsible thing for us to be at least looking into it.

I learned something when you talked about this whole parallel chamber. I had never heard of that before.

Let me throw a thought that just started to evolve as I was listening to others speak. You say that you can divide up the questions. You can divide up the S.O. 31s and you can put them in that Monday-through-Thursday slot. The concern is with the debates and to a certain degree private members' hour. Technically we could have a double, and we often have two private members' hours in one day. That currently happens quite a bit, so we could actually designate a day, say Tuesday, as the day for a double private members' hour.

I don't know anything about this parallel chamber, but maybe you could have the parallel chamber sit on Fridays. You indicate that typically there are no votes and that it's just more of a debate day where you debate government business, which allows for ongoing supply motions, opposition days, private members' hour, everything that is done during the week. Then you could start off at 9 in the

morning and go until 3 in the afternoon. In fact, we could have it increased by a half-hour or an hour to accommodate debates.

The votes seem to be of critical importance. If this were to prevent votes from occurring after, let's say, 4 o'clock on Thursdays, then every vote would be suspended until the following Monday.

On something of this nature—both aspects that I just finished talking about—can you give a personal opinion? Are you comfortable giving a personal opinion on something of that nature, as I qualified it at the beginning?

I'd be interested in your thoughts on that.

●(1155)

Mr. Marc Bosc: I hesitate to give personal opinions because that's all they are: personal opinions.

What I will say is this. With regard to votes, as I said in my opening remarks, we're still in a situation where we're dealing with parliamentary reality. There will be times when, whether on the opposition side or the government side, there are valid reasons for wanting to pursue things at times not otherwise typical for that kind of proceeding. It could be a procedural vote. It could be closure on a government motion or a bill. Who can predict? Who can predict where we would be on a Thursday and how important the measure would be to whoever is proposing it?

I hesitate to say that you could lay down some kind of rule for no votes after a certain hour. We have done it for Fridays, so by that logic you could do it. It's certainly doable, but consideration will have to be given to those other imperatives.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): Mr. Chair, I'm going to start by saying that I don't think it's in the spirit of what the government proposed initially that parliamentary secretaries, who are not supposed to be members of committees and not have votes on committees, are nevertheless taking up question and answer time on committees. I'll be raising that with the House leaders when we have our meeting later today. That seems to me to be a violation of that intent, and I'm disappointed to see it happening here.

Turning to Mr. Bosc, thank you for being here. It's always a pleasure to have you at our committee; you are so well informed.

We've had a lot of interest in the subject of this parallel chamber, as it's being described. As a former resident of Australia who used to spend time in Canberra, I get the impression that they actually had quite a large purpose-built room for this, which was where this kind of debate would go on. Some kind of consideration was given to things like ease of access from that chamber to the chamber of the House of Representatives so that one could go back and forth.

In other words, if we were to do something like this here, I think having it at One Wellington Street would be less than ideal. Once all the renovations are done, having it over in the room that the Commons is going to be shifted into might be very much ideal, or in some other space that people can get to without having to brave the Ottawa winter. That's a thought I throw out.

In the absence of such, because all of this isn't going to happen until after a few years have gone by, had you thought at all about the issue of where we would put a room like this? I think it has to be a purpose-built dedicated room, with all the permanent simultaneous translation booths and so on, and assigned staff as well, I guess.

• (1200)

Mr. Marc Bosc: Having been to Canberra and having seen the room, I will say that it has a bit of a makeshift look even though it was purpose-built, because things were added after the fact. It's not a very large room. Now, the Australian House is smaller than ours, so that may account for that.

I think the concept of a parallel chamber really depends on how you conceive of it. If you conceive of it as a vehicle for members wishing to get a speech on the record, let's say, on a particular bill or a motion, it wouldn't necessarily involve huge attendance. It might have a different quorum requirement. There are a lot of things that can be tailor-made.

Mr. Scott Reid: Does it have a quorum requirement at all, or does it have no quorum requirement?

Mr. Marc Bosc: I don't know that there is. I'd have to check on that.

In the case of Australia, I think it sits three times a week, on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays. If I can put it this way, it's a safety valve for overflow House business. It's not a decision chamber per se. It's a debating chamber, so it allows more members to participate.

Mr. Scott Reid: The debates are obviously recorded. They become part of the record in some form or another. Is it a record of some kind of committee of the whole or are they appended to the main *Hansard*?

Mr. Marc Bosc: I don't know the answer to that question. We can certainly check.

Again, it would really be up to the House committee to decide how it would want to handle that if it went in that direction.

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay.

I have another question, and you probably don't know the answer to this either, but it seems relevant to consider.

In Australia or Britain in the actual House of Commons, do they have an equivalent to our S.O. 31s, the one-minute member statements or some other similar type of vehicle, or is that sort of thing what effectively got moved over to the second chamber?

Mr. Marc Bosc: Again, I'd have to check. I don't know precisely the answer to that question. I'm not sure.

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Welcome, Angelo Iacono.

Are there any Liberals who want the five-minute slot? If not, we'll go to the NDP in the next round. Okay.

Mr. Dusseault.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm very glad to have the opportunity to ask a few more questions.

There's something I didn't have time to bring up earlier. A parallel chamber is indeed worthy of some consideration. My understanding is that it is used at the Palace of Westminster, in Great Britain. Through the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, I was fortunate enough to take part in a week of procedural study there. I really enjoyed learning how things could be done; the experience gave me a lot of food for thought when I returned to Canada.

In Great Britain, they have what they call the Backbench Business Committee, which is made up solely of backbenchers, or members with no official title in the House of Commons. The committee decides on subjects for debate in the Palace of Westminster. If a backbencher wishes to raise an issue, they can apply to the Backbench Business Committee, which then decides on the agenda for the Palace of Westminster. The subjects are often raised on a member's personal initiative and can be quite specific. I think the committee meets once a week, on Friday, I believe. We could look into that further.

I wanted to know how such a parallel chamber might improve a member's family life. Would it mean more sitting time because there wouldn't be any votes or procedural activities? Is that why you suggested it as a way to create a more family-friendly environment for members?

• (1205)

Mr. Marc Bosc: I mentioned it solely to point out that the committee and the House have a number of options at their disposal to change the Standing Orders so as to establish a schedule that better accommodates the family needs of members. That's the only reason I brought it up. I have no preference for any one solution. I simply wanted to present the committee with a few possibilities and thematic areas it could consider.

As I said earlier, if it wasn't a parallel chamber or decision-making body where votes and such could take place, it would free up a lot of time for members wanting to return to their ridings rather than attending the sitting.

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: Indeed. Say, for example, it was decided that the parallel chamber was going to be held on Fridays. Members preferring not to attend or not having an interest in the debate in hand wouldn't have to worry about the taking of a vote or the use of a procedural tactic in the House, because that wouldn't be possible in the second chamber.

Mr. Marc Bosc: It would be up to the House to determine how to structure that second chamber.

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: It would be a significant change to the Standing Orders if, for instance, we were to follow the British model and create our own Backbench Business Committee. It would be a new standing committee, and it would also be necessary to provide for a parallel chamber in the Standing Orders. Those would be major changes to our current Standing Orders.

Mr. Marc Bosc: Should the Backbench Business Committee be a standing committee of the House or an ad hoc committee of parliamentarians from all parties? That decision would be up to the House and the committee.

As for the creation of a parallel or second chamber, again, I believe it would be necessary to change the Standing Orders to allow such a chamber or, at the very least, to have the House adopt a motion to that effect.

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: It could be done informally. For instance, members could decide to gather in a room, could they not?

Mr. Marc Bosc: I wouldn't go that far.

Previously, when the House wanted to try out a new or different procedure, it would do so by way of a motion authorizing a departure from the standard practice, even if the change was coming into effect permanently at a later time, say a year or two down the road. That's what is known as a sessional order, or a basic motion adopted by the House making it possible to change its practice. It's not necessarily included in the Standing Orders permanently.

A number of standing order changes have been made that way. That's something to consider.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Clerk, for coming. We appreciate your expertise. I'm sure we will probably have to call on it later. Did you want to make any closing comments?

Mr. Marc Bosc: I would just say, Mr. Chairman, that it should be obvious now that the kinds of changes the committee is examining carry with them quite a few consequences and implications. I want to reiterate my offer to make available to the committee whatever staff the committee may require to further examine and ultimately prepare recommendations on these subjects.

The Chair: Thank you very much. We really appreciate your help.

I just want to make sure we have our agenda set for the next meeting or two so we know what we're going to do.

One other piece of information that's available to us is that apparently, last year an all-party women's committee did a report on a family-friendly, inclusive parliament, which we could look at in one of our meetings to see what they were recommending.

As it stands, for Thursday we're going to get your report on other parliaments. We would ask that they include some of the questions you've been asking, on things like the Australian House and the parallel parliament, in which there seems to be quite a bit of interest here. Then we had scheduled to do committee business after that. Mr. Christopherson may or may not want to call his motion.

During this time, just as a reminder to anyone who's new here, the members here were going to go back to their whips and caucuses and

House leaders to get any input from their caucuses by the end of the first week back, to give people time to get through two caucus meetings.

Under those circumstances, what would the committee like to do on the first Tuesday back after the break?

Mr. Richards.

• (1210)

Mr. Blake Richards: Probably what we'll hear on Thursday might help to inform a little bit what we might want to do to further this particular study. I think we're going to need to do a lot of examination. As we heard today from the Acting Clerk, there certainly is a lot of potential for unintended consequences here. We want to make sure we've fully considered all of those before we proceed.

Obviously, we will want to see what our analyst has for us on Thursday, and we can maybe have some discussion about that then.

While I have the floor, though, I would like to raise a matter. Something had been sent around by the clerk yesterday or the day before in regard to these order-in-council appointments made by the so-called independent advisory board for Senate appointments. Certainly it's within the purview of the committee to call the nominees to appear before the committee. I strongly believe, as this is a new process that's being instituted here, that it would be advisable and very important for us as a committee to call those nominees before committee sometime in the very near future to discuss the appointment and the process they're engaged in.

The Chair: Should we discuss that at the subcommittee of agenda items as to when and what we would do about that?

Mr. Blake Richards: As long as it's agreeable that we would be having them come in to appear, yes. We could certainly discuss the timing of that at the subcommittee, but I think we should get an indication that this is something that the government would not try to block or prevent from happening. It is important that they come in and that we hear about the process.

The Chair: Mr. Reid and then....

Mr. Scott Reid: Further to that, Mr. Chair, the first round of appointments is occurring very soon. Nominations, as I understand it, will be closed on the day after Valentine's Day, two weeks from today. When the nominations have closed, we assume the panel will be meeting and will be busy, so it seems reasonable to me that we should ask them to come here.

We're not inviting all of them, I assume, but the select people we can get—including, I would think, the chair—ought to be invited to come here prior to the 15th.

The Chair: The 15th of February?

Mr. Scott Reid: Yes, the 15th of February, as it follows that their workload is going to be lower and then much higher. It seems like a reasonable alternative for us.

The Chair: Are there any other comments?

Mr. Lamoureux.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Blake, were you thinking of all of the committee appointments or were you thinking of one or two? Right on the surface, I think it could be a good thing to do. I'm interested in what it is you're really trying to get at. Is it all committee members? The timing is important, because they're going to be very busy, I'm sure—

Mr. Blake Richards: Sure—

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: —as Scott has pointed out.

• (1215)

Mr. Blake Richards: Yes. Mr. Reid just alluded to that as well, and being aware of what he just said, I think it's important that we do this as quickly as possible so that we're not into the period of time where they're going to be looking at the appointments themselves.

I agree that it should be as soon as possible. We might want to look at it right after the break, at the first meeting after the break, on the understanding that we may not be able to get all of them here. I think it's important that we try our best to get those we can. I think it would be important to have the chair, at the very minimum. Obviously, we would want to invite them all, and hopefully we can have at least a few of them come and appear. I would think that at least the permanent federal members would certainly be the most important. I don't know if others have other thoughts on this, but I would think that at a minimum it would be certainly the chair and hopefully the permanent federal members.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Chair, some of my own colleagues have raised this particular issue. I have had some discussions about the possibility, if it were to come up at PROC, in terms of where it is we would like to be on this particular issue. I think it's being very open and reasonable. If that's what PROC.... I look to my colleagues and members of the committee if you want to have that discussion now, but I think that in principle it could be a good thing, as a couple of members have already approached me to get my thoughts on it. I'm interested in any other thoughts there might be, but in principle, yes, and then leave it with the subcommittee...?

The Chair: Mr. Chan.

Mr. Arnold Chan: The only issue I wanted to put to you, Mr. Richards, is whether you want to deal with it here or at the subcommittee on the agenda.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay. I've just been having a quick discussion with my colleague. We were looking at the calendar.

Given that the appointments are moving forward in a pretty quick fashion, it might be advisable to try to see if it's possible to have.... I don't know the locations of these members, but it might be advisable for us to try to see if we can utilize some time on Thursday for that, because that would be before the process begins.

Certainly, we should be trying to move on this as quickly as we can, because this is a new process and we want to make sure that we've looked at and considered it before it begins.

The Chair: Ms. Sahota.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I just want some clarification as to exactly what we would be doing with the members. Would we be questioning them here for an hour or the duration? Is that what you're suggesting?

Mr. Blake Richards: Yes, absolutely. That's exactly it.

That's what the standing order would indicate that we do. We would have them come in to appear before the committee, and we would have a chance to ask them questions.

The Chair: Just for clarification, the standing order allows us to “examine the qualifications and competence” of the appointees.

Mr. Chan.

Mr. Arnold Chan: I'm just mindful, given the timing that Mr. Richards has suggested, of whether it would be appropriate for the chair to approach the government to see whether this is in fact doable by Thursday. It's hard for us to know right now their availability.

I recognize the time sensitivity. We're going on a break week the following week. I think after we come back, this committee won't meet again until February 16, correct?

The Chair: Correct.

Mr. Blake Richards: At the end of the day, obviously this should happen as quickly as can be done. I understand that Thursday is a tight timeline. I don't know the location of the chair or the other individuals, but I would ask if the chair, or the clerks on behalf of the chair, could approach and see if they could be here for Thursday. At a minimum, the chair and maybe some of the other permanent members could be here.

If need be, we could then utilize the first meeting after the break for the remainder of the appointments. If we just couldn't make it work for Thursday, obviously we'd have to consider that. However, I think it should be this Thursday, if possible. If it's absolutely not possible, certainly it should be the first meeting after the break, at a bare minimum.

The Chair: Mr. Dusseault.

Mr. Arnold Chan: Perhaps I could simply move a motion and ask that the clerk look into the availability of the chair of this committee.

• (1220)

Mr. Blake Richards: Why not the other permanent members as well? It wouldn't hurt.

Mr. Arnold Chan: I'll amend that to include and/or all of the other members listed in the orders in council, and then to report back to the subcommittee on the agenda, just so that we would know—

Mr. Blake Richards: Well, that would prevent the possibility of Thursday. I think we should give the chair and the clerk direction to try to see if they can come for Thursday. If they can't, then I think the backup date should be the first Tuesday after the break. Let's give some specific direction on that.

Mr. Arnold Chan: I was just thinking of process. We don't meet until Thursday, so it's hard for us to even have a conversation about whether they're available or not.

Mr. Blake Richards: But we can authorize that conversation to occur. We don't have to have it reported back. If they're available, if we've authorized them to bring them in, there's nothing preventing them from coming on Thursday if they're available.

I think our backup option could be the Tuesday following the break. We have that ability as a committee to make that direction and have it carried out.

The Chair: Mr. Lamoureux.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Richards, just from listening to the motion, are you saying it's better that we get one or two who might be available to come as early as Thursday, or are you suggesting that we're better off to wait until the following time when they come before the committee and we have a larger number?

Mr. Blake Richards: Yes, that's kind of my thinking, that it would be best if we could get some clarity around the appointments and the process before it begins. I think if we can get the chair, or one or two of the members, on Thursday, I think that would be advisable for us to do.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: I think that was Arnold's suggestion in his motion, that as opposed to going to the subcommittee, if there are a couple of committee members, particularly the chair, who are available to come as early as this Thursday, we go ahead and invite them.

Mr. Blake Richards: Yes, I think we should. Exactly. I would agree.

The Chair: Do we have a motion on the table to see if any of the members can come Thursday, and if not, the first Tuesday after the break? Is that your motion?

Mr. Arnold Chan: That's fine. In terms of how the motion should read....

The Chair: To the clerk, I'd like to ask for clarification. It says that the standing order allows us to examine their qualifications and competence. Can we ask them any other questions? Mr. Richards

referred to how the process would work, which is separate and a whole different topic.

Okay, the clerk suggests that it's a hearing on the appointment, so whether the person is the person who should be appointed, basically, or they're qualified.

Are committee members clear on what they can ask?

Is there any further discussion on the motion?

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Can we hear the whole motion, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Mr. Chan.

Mr. Arnold Chan: I move that the clerk be directed to see the availability of the chair of the independent advisory board on Senate appointments and/or any of the other appointees on their availability to appear before this committee for this Thursday, and if they are not, to see if they are available to appear on the following sitting of this committee, the following Tuesday, February 16.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: That pretty well decides our committee business for now. I will mention that I was a little generous on the time slots today because we had enough time for the Clerk. When we're more pressed for time, I won't be so generous on your time allocations for questioning.

The meeting is adjourned.

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