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# **Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development**

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**EVIDENCE**

**Tuesday, April 12, 2016**

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## Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

Tuesday, April 12, 2016

•(1315)

[English]

**The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Angela Crandall):** Committee members, I see quorum.

I must inform you that the clerk of the subcommittee cannot accept any motions except for motions for the election of the chair. The first order of business for the subcommittee is to elect a chair. Pursuant to a motion adopted by the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development on February 4, the chair of the subcommittee must be a member of the government party.

I'm now ready to receive your motions.

Mr. Miller.

**Mr. Marc Miller (Ville-Marie—Le Sud-Ouest—Île-des-Soeurs, Lib.):** I'd like to nominate Michael Levitt.

**The Clerk:** Are there any further motions or nominations for the chair?

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

(Motion agreed to)

**The Chair (Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.)):** First of all, I want to thank my colleagues for electing me the chair of this committee. I do have some remarks, but the first thing I'd like to ask is that if the committee is in agreement, I'd invite the clerk to proceed with the election of the vice-chairs.

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**The Clerk:** Then I'm ready to accept nominations for the positions of two vice-chairs. Generally in this subcommittee, the vice-chairs are members of the opposition.

We'll proceed with the first vice-chair.

Mr. Sweet.

**Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC):** I nominate Cheryl Hardcastle.

**Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC):** I nominate Mr. Sweet.

**The Clerk:** They're from different parties. Are there any other nominations? Okay.

Shall we deal with them one at a time? We'll deal with the nomination of Ms. Hardcastle for position of vice-chair. Is it the will of the committee to adopt the motion?

(Motion agreed to)

**The Clerk:** Ms. Hardcastle is duly elected as a vice-chair of the subcommittee.

Is it the will of the committee to adopt the motion that Mr. Sweet be elected as a vice-chair?

(Motion agreed to)

**The Chair:** I think they're just passing out the routine motions that were used in our last Parliament by the subcommittee. If there are no objections, these may, if the subcommittee chooses, serve as a template for what we do this time, and of course, they are debatable if necessary.

Are there any objections?

Do we have consensus on the routine motions? Great.

Given that is the case, I'd like to invite the analysts to the table, please.

I'd like to take a moment to talk about this committee and how we might proceed. Given that this committee is somewhat unique and that there is only one returning member from the last Parliament, Mr. Sweet, I'd like to go over what has been past practice and how we can continue that practice.

This subcommittee has developed a long-standing culture, which is regrettably unique on Parliament Hill, of working by consensus, avoiding votes and confrontation whenever possible. This is not always possible, and granted, we are bound by the Standing Orders no matter our customs. I'd like to think that the nature of the work that we do in this subcommittee is not partisan and that we should do what we can to avoid having this committee develop a culture of partisanship and competition. In no way, however, are the rules suspended. We are bound by the Standing Orders and the mandate set before us by our parent committee, the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Any of you at any point can insist on your rights and it is each of our rights as an MP to call votes, introduce motions or amendments, or move away from the consensus model. At all times my job is to uphold the rules which means moving away from the consensus model to the partisan model when this happens. I will always encourage members to seek consensus, but I will never prevent members of this committee from operating according to the rules. Every member has the right to act in a non-consensus manner whenever he or she chooses and should not be criticized for that because that's how the parliamentary system is established. My practice will be to seek a return to the consensus model as soon as possible once the non-consensus item of business has been dealt with, and I hope that's the model preferred by everybody when it's available to us.

The other thing I wanted to discuss with you was a set of guidelines that might serve us on this committee. I'll admit that I'm borrowing heavily from Scott Reid, the previous and esteemed committee chair from the last session. David can confirm this or not, but they seemed to meet with approval in the last parliamentary session.

First, when possible, we, i.e., you, should choose the subject matter on which consensus seems likely to exist. We all share the same concerns for human rights and the same strong belief in them. Any hearings in which human rights issues at hand become a proxy for some other issue will inevitably depart from the consensus model.

Second, when possible, the subject matter should be timely. It should be possible to conduct the hearings and prepare for them in a way that will not be made irrelevant by the passage of time. Sometimes we have to accept that events in some country or region are too fluid for a committee like ours to consider effectively. We have only two hours a week to consider committee business and hold hearings as well as draft reports. This is not a lot of time. We must be judicious in how we use this time especially so that we can do as much work as possible before the summer recess.

Third, when possible, we should focus on situations where Canada has international clout. There are areas in the world where Canadian influence is significant, and it is towards those areas that we might direct our attention to have the greatest impact. Canada exerts influence in a variety of ways, for example, commercial links, alliances, and shared history, the Commonwealth, and the Francophonie. It is up to you to decide what we study, but I ask that we direct our energies where they can best be put to use.

●(1320)

Fourth, we should keep our inquiries tightly focused. When tangential issues are introduced into hearings that start out with a fairly narrow focus, we stand to stretch the bounds of whatever motion we adopt as a committee. It is easier to ask for this than to achieve it, so I'll make that suggestion as chair and ask for your support.

I propose that I should interpret all motions to study this or that situation in as narrow a manner as the wording of the motion permits. If the subcommittee regards the interpretation that I have given as being too narrow, any of you will be in a position to correct me and say that I'm going too much in the other direction. I won't be insulted, but I'll regard it as helpful advice on the direction in which the committee wants to go.

It may turn out that the committee will decide what really should happen is that the motion should be reworded and amended to allow a broader discussion to occur, but we'll start by treating these motions narrowly. In practice, that will mean disallowing witnesses who are likely to be presenting outside the scope of the motion, and if a witness comes before the subcommittee and starts presenting off the topic they were invited to present on, I will be rather firm and ask them to remain on topic.

That doesn't apply to questions that you ask. You are free to ask about anything. Seeking out implications is part of the job but they're not part of the witnesses' presentations when they agreed with this committee to stay within the range of the motion that we had presented to them.

I am hopeful this practice will help in keeping the subcommittee productive, but I can only do that if there is consensus that it's appropriate for me to do so and if I get the feedback indicating whether or not I'm doing it in a way that is satisfactory to the committee.

Fifth and last, we should keep the number of subjects on our agenda lower rather than higher. Each of us may be and will be approached by interested parties with a genuine tragedy somewhere in the world and we seek to show our compassion by proposing a motion that it be the subject of hearings or a series of hearings. As admirable as our intentions might be, the danger is that we will lose our focus as a committee.

While I have no right to limit the right of members to move motions on additional topics, I will routinely ask the subcommittee members when they are introducing a motion whether they have spoken to their colleagues prior to bringing the item forward. If it becomes part of our subcommittee's culture to accept that these discussions prior to introducing motions happen offline before things get moved, I think this will save us valuable time in committee.

I hope I'm actually summarizing the five basic principles or practices that have evolved, and David can confirm that, or not.

I apologize for this spiel and I'm very happy to accept commentary on this, or any other commentary on the committee's business.

It's my hope that this committee will be productive, and I have no reason to believe otherwise. There is no shortage of human rights issues across the globe to keep us fully engaged.

I'd like to make a suggestion, and of course it's up to the committee to decide, and it is that we take an opportunity at some point to travel to New York to talk with officials and representatives of the UN and its various bodies to get a greater understanding of the international organization and institutional foundations of international human rights. Of course, this would require the approval of our parent committee or steering committee as need be, but I submit the idea to the committee for you to mull over. During this week I ask you to discuss possible committee business with your colleagues so that we can have some topics of study. I will ask at our next meeting whether you have consulted with your colleagues in this regard.

If there is nothing further, I would ask for the committee's consent to adjourn until next Tuesday to discuss committee business, but certainly, we can have some discussions now if there are things that have come up.

Mr. Sweet.

• (1325)

**Mr. David Sweet:** Mr. Chair, thank you very much. That was a good elucidation with regard to how we've operated, and I appreciate the fact that you spent the time with Mr. Reid to learn that and appreciate his service. I also appreciate the fact that you took the chair. In this committee, the chair position is voluntary, so you don't get an honorarium, and it is simply because of your desire to serve that you do that. With that in mind, I would like to ask that one of the first things the committee does is draft a letter of appreciation to Mr. Reid for the almost 10 years that he was the chair of this committee, and of course, he had enough experience and enough wisdom to be able to brief you, and I think that would be an appropriate act of diplomacy for us as our first act of this committee.

I'd like to also make one addition, and I apologize if I may have drifted off while you were saying everything in history, but I think there was one aspect that wasn't mentioned. We had a habit that when anybody who was involved in human rights advocacy in prominent organizations was in town, we'd try to interrupt our schedule and take advantage of that, because as a subcommittee, we don't have a large budget, and it costs to bring people from across the globe. Often people are in Ottawa for different reasons and we can capitalize on their being here and get a briefing from them. Maybe you could add that as part of the culture, if the rest of the committee is in agreement, that if another member knows of someone who's

travelling through, we may consider to suspend the schedule to capitalize on that opportunity.

• (1330)

**The Chair:** Mr. Sweet moved a motion about the letter of appreciation to Scott Reid, the previous chair for the last decade or a good chunk of it. Do we have unanimous consent on that?

(Motion agreed to)

**The Chair:** Great. That's our first item of business then.

In terms of the issue of human rights advocates who may be in town coming to committee, certainly in principle it seems like a favourable idea. I think it would probably come back in terms of consensus on an individual basis who those individual speakers are and whether there is consensus to having them appear. I think if that consensus exists, that can either be done off-line or during a meeting of the committee prior to their attendance. If we have that consensus and everybody is in favour of it, I don't see this as an issue, keeping in mind the limited number of sessions between now and the summer recess.

Are there any other points of order or business from the floor? No?

As I said in my preamble or my spiel, I think we're going to postpone Thursday's meeting and instead meet a week from today at the same time and same place. Between now and then, we can connect off-line on some possible topics and areas of study. I think that would be great. We can discuss this after the meeting, but I think we can come back in next Tuesday with a direction on a study that we want to start the ball rolling with.

Yes.

**Mr. David Anderson:** I was just wondering if there is some way we can get group email addresses. If everybody is using their P9 account, that's easy. If they're not, then it's a little more difficult. But if we're going to start communicating, it's good to have the email contacts for everyone here.

**The Chair:** Everyone is on P9, and maybe the clerk could send out some of our staff contacts as well to make sure we have that as well.

All that being said, I adjourn this meeting.





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