



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES  
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

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# Standing Committee on Finance

EVIDENCE

**NUMBER 010**

Thursday, December 16, 2021

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Chair: Mr. Peter Fonseca





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• (1620)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Fonseca (Mississauga East—Cooksville, Lib.)):** I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 10 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance. The committee is meeting today to discuss committee business.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format pursuant to the House order of November 25, 2021. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application. The proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website. So you are aware, the webcast will always show the person speaking rather than the entirety of the committee.

Today's meeting is also taking place in a webinar format. Webinars are for public committee meetings and are available only to members, their staff and witnesses. Members enter immediately as active participants. All functionalities for the active participants remain the same. Staff will be non-active participants and can therefore view the meeting only in gallery view.

I will take this opportunity to remind all participants in this meeting that screenshots or taking photos of your screen is not permitted.

Given the ongoing pandemic situation and in light of the recommendations from health authorities, as well as the directive of the Board of Internal Economy on October 19, 2021, to remain healthy and safe, all those attending the meeting in person are to maintain two-metre physical distancing and must wear a non-medical mask when circulating in the room. It is highly recommended that the mask be worn at all times, including when seated. Participants must maintain proper hand hygiene by using the provided hand sanitizer at the room entrance.

As the chair, I will be enforcing these measures for the duration of the meeting and I thank members in advance for their co-operation.

To ensure an orderly meeting, I'll outline just a few things.

Interpretation is available at the bottom of your screen in English or French, and as a reminder, all comments should be addressed through the chair.

With regard to speaking lists, the committee clerk and I will do our very best to maintain a consolidated order of speaking for all members, whether they are participating virtually or in person.

I see Mr. Beech's hand up, and then I guess Mr. Poilievre is next on the list.

**Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Carleton, CPC):** Yes, actually I had just informed the clerk before Mr. Beech. Therefore, the order seems to have been reversed.

**The Chair:** Well, Mr. Poilievre, I had seen Mr. Beech's hand up already.

**Hon. Pierre Poilievre:** You just saw it now, though.

**The Chair:** No, I had seen Mr. Beech's hand up.

**Hon. Pierre Poilievre:** That is quite an achievement that you managed to do so. You must have a time machine.

**The Chair:** I did see Mr. Beech's hand up, so it will be Mr. Beech and then Mr. Poilievre.

**Mr. Terry Beech (Burnaby North—Seymour, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair. I've had my hand up for 40 minutes. It has been quite exhausting, so thank you for recognizing me. I'll put it down, now that I have the floor.

I would like to move the following motion with regard to—

**Hon. Pierre Poilievre:** Mr. Chair, on a point of order, I just want to talk about the confusion that you caused at previous meetings and that seems to have spilled over into this one regarding the order of exchanges in committee, where you mistakenly came under the impression that the way questions and answers work is that the member asks a question and the witness then gives an interminable speech for the rest of the time left.

That is not how the rules work, and as a result, today we see more confusion where you're recognizing a member who was behind me on the list and he is now claiming he had his hand up for 40 minutes. Of course, we haven't been meeting for 40 minutes, so that's impossible.

These kinds of games are going to cause more and more disorder as the meeting goes on and potentially make it impossible for any of Mr. Beech's or anyone else's motions to get adopted.

That unfortunately is the case and it is unfortunate that you are obstructing the committee's work in this way. We obviously have important work and planning to do for Canadians, but that can't be done if you continue to play these kinds of games.

I've been on this committee since 2017. We did not have these problems under the previous chair. He was a Liberal, a proud, long-standing Liberal, a former cabinet minister with whom I had many disagreements, but he did not play games in the manner that we're now seeing. It is causing a distraction from the work we need to do today and the work we need to do going forward.

I suspect that it will continue to cause these same problems if we don't get them solved, and that will prevent us from getting programming motions passed or achieving anything else that we desperately need to achieve in these times.

As you know, we have a lot of issues to address. We are the finance committee in a time where inflation is at a generational high, when housing prices have increased more than at any time in recorded history, and when our economy sits on the precipice of the debt crisis—

• (1625)

**The Chair:** I'll address your point of order, Mr. Poilievre—

**Hon. Pierre Poilievre:** What we need to do, frankly, is get back to the way committee functions. Unfortunately, you don't seem to want to do that—

**The Chair:** Madame Chatel.

**Mrs. Sophie Chatel (Pontiac, Lib.):** I'm not sure this is a point of order.

**Hon. Pierre Poilievre:** It's causing a lot of disruption here when we could be doing valuable work. I would ask that you begin—

**Mrs. Sophie Chatel:** I'm challenging Mr. Poilievre to explain how this is a point of order.

**The Chair:** Mr. Poilievre, I'll speak with the members and I'll speak to your point of order—

**Hon. Pierre Poilievre:** No, but I'm not—

**The Chair:** Mr. Poilievre, you're done.

Mr. Poilievre, listen. In our first meeting, the committee adopted routine motions. I would request that you go and read through those routine motions again. In those routine motions, we set up question and answer time. There was an allotment, which was the six minutes or five minutes, or however it was broken down. I've been more than fair, actually, in terms of allowing for extra time beyond that time with members.

If members would like to change those routine motions and change how we do it in terms of allowing for questions and answers, that could be done. That's up to the members of the committee, but routine motions were passed, Mr. Poilievre, so we're going to move on.

Mr. Beech's hand was up from the get-go of this meeting. I've recognized that you've stated you want to speak also, and you're up right after Mr. Beech.

We'll hear now from Mr. Beech.

**Mr. Terry Beech:** I agree with the member opposite in that—

**Mr. Greg McLean (Calgary Centre, CPC):** Sorry, Mr. Chair, I thought Madame Chatel had a point of order.

**Mrs. Sophie Chatel:** I was questioning whether that was a point of order. That was my point of order.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Madame Chatel and Mr. McLean.

Mr. Beech.

**Mr. Terry Beech:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We all want there to be fairness and we all want to get on with the good work that we're here to do for Canadians. I agree with that point from Mr. Poilievre.

I have a motion I'd like to introduce, Mr. Chair. I'm going to read it now, as follows: That the committee hold pre-budget consultations for the 2022 budget, and that it commence hearing from witnesses the week of January 31st, 2021; the Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister and departmental officials be invited to appear before the committee; each party submit a prioritized witness list no later than 6:00 p.m. on Friday, January 21, 2022; that all submissions for the 2022 pre-budget consultations be published on the digital binder site of the committee.

I'm sending a copy to the chair for distribution.

I so move, Mr. Chair. Thank you.

**The Chair:** Send it to the clerk, please, so the clerk can distribute it, Mr. Beech.

Mr. Blaikie.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP):** I have just a quick point of clarification on that.

I'm confident it was an error, but I think he said January 31, 2021. I'm sure he meant 2022.

• (1630)

**Mr. Terry Beech:** It's my first timing error coming into the new year.

Thank you, Mr. Blaikie.

**The Chair:** Thank you for clarifying that, Mr. Blaikie, and for that change.

The motion is open for discussion.

Mr. Poilievre.

**Hon. Pierre Poilievre:** First of all, when will this motion be distributed?

**The Chair:** Clerk, have you received it? No.

Mr. Beech, if you can please share the motion so all members can—

**Hon. Pierre Poilievre:** Is the motion considered moved, given that we don't have copies of it?

**The Chair:** It is considered moved, yes.

**Hon. Pierre Poilievre:** Where is it?

**The Chair:** We are receiving it. Can it be sent to all members then, Clerk?

Ms. Dzerowicz, could you check your mike to see that everything is in order?

**The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Alexandre Roger):** Ms. Dzerowicz, we can't hear you. We will have someone call you from our IT side.

**The Chair:** I will give Mr. Beech a moment. I think he's changing the date.

**Hon. Pierre Poilievre:** It looks like he wasn't ready to speak yet. We don't have the motion.

What's the problem here?

**Mr. Terry Beech:** The motion has been circulated. I'm just trying to get all the Liberal members a copy as well, but everybody should have it.

The critics have it in their P9. Could they distribute it to all the members around the table? I don't have a view of everybody around the table at the moment, so I sent it to all the critics.

**The Chair:** Mr. Beech, did you send it to the clerk? All we need is for the clerk to receive it. Let the clerk distribute it.

**Hon. Pierre Poilievre:** He has a whole department supporting him here.

**The Chair:** Ms. Dzerowicz, we can hear you now.

**Ms. Julie Dzerowicz (Davenport, Lib.):** I'm sorry to interrupt, but I'm back.

**Mr. Terry Beech:** Mr. Chair, I'm sending it to the other members also.

I believe it's in your inbox. Do you mind forwarding it over to the clerk?

**The Chair:** Gabriel has it.

Thank you, Gabriel. You're like Santa Claus. You deliver.

**Hon. Pierre Poilievre:** Could I please get a written copy of that?

**Mr. Terry Beech:** I wanted to perhaps [*Inaudible—Editor*]

**The Chair:** Sure. Do you want to speak to the motion, Terry?

**Mr. Terry Beech:** I would be happy to, Chair.

**Hon. Pierre Poilievre:** You had already given me the floor, Mr. Chair. You had actually given me the floor, and I was asking to have a copy of the motion so I could address it.

**The Chair:** Okay. You're getting the motion, Mr. Poilievre.

Have you received it, Mr. Poilievre? Would you like to hear from Mr. Beech about the motion?

**Hon. Pierre Poilievre:** When he's back on the speaking list, that would be great. I still don't have a copy of the motion.

**Mr. Terry Beech:** I believe it's in your P9, Pierre.

**Hon. Pierre Poilievre:** I do not use that.

**The Chair:** Do you have Mr. Poilievre's email? He doesn't use P9. He uses something else. I don't know what—P8?

• (1635)

**Mr. Terry Beech:** I would be happy if you could propose a solution.

**Hon. Pierre Poilievre:** All right. I have a copy.

**Mr. Terry Beech:** Thank you.

**Hon. Pierre Poilievre:** We have provided the copy. I think my motion goes quite well with this motion, in that it addresses the problem the chair caused at the last meeting and makes sure that it doesn't happen at future meetings.

My motion would come as an amendment to this. It would read:

That during questioning of witnesses at all future hearings the chair of the committee apply the following rule: that the time to respond to each question not exceed the time taken to ask it, unless with the permission of the member who has the floor.

We can call that the “Easter rule”, because this was how Wayne Easter, the previous Liberal chair, ran the committee.

Of course, Liberals have raved about how successful the previous Parliament was in responding to COVID. Well, all of the COVID decisions had to come through the finance committee, so in those extraordinary times we were, as a committee.... Although I don't agree with all the policy decisions made, there is no doubt that the—

**Ms. Julie Dzerowicz:** I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

I believe that this might be a separate motion, although I do find it wonderful that Mr. Poilievre really cherishes our former chair.

**The Chair:** Are you proposing an amendment to the motion, Mr. Poilievre?

**Hon. Pierre Poilievre:** Yes, it is an amendment. It amends this motion, but it also amends the committee's rules, so that for all future hearings this would be the rule. It would behoove the committee to get back to the normal course of business and exchanges in committee by adopting this amendment. That would allow us to move forward with a programming motion to get budget consultations going.

It's a very small thing, obviously, just going back to the way we did it in the last Parliament, and that should be very uncontroversial. Of course, it is in order, because committees are their own masters and they can make the rules how they like to. The adoption of this amendment could result in expeditious adoption of other committee business, and we can then all raise a glass of eggnog and celebrate the forthcoming Christmas period.

**The Chair:** Mr. Poilievre, can you send that to the clerk for distribution, please?

Now I have on the list Sophie, Julie and then Yvan.

**Mrs. Sophie Chatel:** I need a clarification on this motion.

Is it that when we ask a question, and the question is brief but requires a longer explanation, the witness cannot use more time answering the question than the time we used to ask the question?

**Hon. Pierre Poilievre:** The answer to that question is in the final clause, which is “unless with the permission of the member who has the floor”. If you ask a short question and the witness says, “Look, I’d love to give you more information; I just don’t have enough time,” then you could say, “Sure, please help yourself. Take your time.”

It does create an equality of time, so that the witness and the questioner get the same amount of time in each block and we don’t have a 15-second question followed by a three-minute, unrelated answer.

**The Chair:** Can I call you guys by your first names. Is that all right?

I have Julie, Yvan, Jake and then Gabriel.

**Ms. Julie Dzerowicz:** You can call me Julie.

Anyway, I find it admirable, Mr. Poilievre’s admiration for our former chair.

Mr. Chair, I don’t recall that the rule Mr. Poilievre is stating existed the last time around in the finance committee. If I recall correctly, Mr. Easter tried to manage the time. He did try to keep it more or less in the same time frame.

However, similar to what Ms. Chatel was alluding to, sometimes an answer takes a little longer than a question. Overall, I think the former chair tried to be very fair and very balanced and, if anything, he tried to give a little extra time particularly to our opposition members. I don’t believe we ever had a rule in place that formalized that if you asked a two-second question, the witness had to give a two-second answer. Quite honestly, I think it would be detrimental to our hearing some of the more complete answers we may need to hear in order to have proper deliberations and make proper decisions and recommendations on this committee.

While I appreciate Mr. Poilievre’s concern, I think there has always been an element of fairness around how long people speak. There is consideration in general around the responses. I’ll leave it at that.

I would not be in favour of this motion. It would be negative in terms of our being able to hear proper and full answers and to debate and make proper recommendations, as I’ve already said.

• (1640)

**The Chair:** Thanks, Julie.

I have Yvan, Jake, Gabriel, Daniel and Adam.

**Mr. Yvan Baker (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.):** I don’t agree with Mr. Poilievre’s amendment, and there are a couple of things I want to say. The first is that I don’t think this would be fair to the witnesses. Some of the questions can be answered in the same time as the question is asked, but many of them cannot. In general—there are exceptions, but in general—it takes less time to ask a question than it does to answer it, especially if it’s a question that doesn’t require a yes-or-no answer. I don’t think this would be fair to the witnesses or to the other members, because they wouldn’t get to hear the answers. I also don’t think it would be fair to the members of the public who are trying to watch and follow.

The second thing is a point of clarification for Mr. Poilievre. Would this also mean that witnesses are guaranteed the same amount of time as the member to speak? For example, if a member spoke for two and a half minutes, would that guarantee the witness two and a half minutes of response time, or if the member spoke for four minutes, would it guarantee the witness an equal amount of response time?

At the very least, I would think that if Mr. Poilievre is putting forward something balanced, then balance or equality in terms of time would require that this be guaranteed to the witness as well, and I’m not sure whether members on this committee would be comfortable with that.

In truth, what Mr. Poilievre is proposing, unless we make that change, would not be balanced or fair.

Once again, I am opposed to the amendment. It’s not fair to ask a witness to answer questions that are asked in five seconds, when sometimes it requires a 20- or 30-second answer. I don’t think it would advance the work of the committee.

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Jake.

**Mr. Jake Stewart (Miramichi—Grand Lake, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I support the amendment. I found out, personally, here on the committee that when you ask a question as simple as, “How much does it cost to administer the program?”, when a witness goes on for two minutes and doesn’t answer the question.... What happens to the MPs around this table is we spend all that time coming up with a good question that the Canadian public deserves an answer for, yet because the witness either doesn’t know the answer or doesn’t want to provide it, whichever it may be, we lose our ability to ask more questions because of the time they take to ramble.

This amendment is really sufficient. I’ve sat on a number of committees in my life and I’ve always found that when the chair interferes with the proceedings too much.... I used to chair the climate and environmental stewardship committee in New Brunswick. I would never get involved. I’d only shut down the debate if it got out of hand, but I would never intervene. I wanted people on the committee to have the back and forth. I wanted the witnesses to have the freedom to answer a question.

This amendment is really sufficient because, I can tell you, the people of Miramichi—Grand Lake want these questions asked. More importantly, they want the answer. If a witness comes in, they should know the answer. Everybody in the Canadian public knows it. If I ask a 30-second question and they take two minutes and don’t provide an answer, that takes two more minutes away from me.

Around this table, we’re restricted. We’re restricted to the time limits upon us, five minutes, six minutes, four minutes, whatever it is. You’d like to ask a number of questions in that time frame. I get it if they can’t provide an answer. They should just say, “I don’t know the answer,” and then I can ask another question, rather than have them speaking for five minutes and ruining a member of Parliament’s opportunity to ask an important question as a follow-up.

This amendment put forward by Mr. Poilievre really keeps the witnesses in check and keeps them accountable, and it allows all the members of the House who are on this committee to ask more questions. The more we can ask, the better.

That's why I support it.

• (1645)

**The Chair:** Thanks, Jake.

I have Gabriel, Daniel and then Adam.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie (Joliette, BQ):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The honourable member Mr. Poilievre is right. Before the election, the committee was chaired by Wayne Easter, and he would apply this rule, which is essentially the same as the one used during a committee of the whole in the House.

When the issue came up a few meetings ago, you said that the general rule was that the time taken to ask a question and the time taken to answer it should be the same, and that you would be the judge. The honourable member is now looking to establish that rule formally and give it a stricter application, as is the case in a committee of the whole. I actually have a question for him, but I want to finish sharing my opinion on this.

Further to Mr. Baker's comment, when former chair Wayne Easter saw that the witness wouldn't have an equivalent amount of time to answer the question, he would interrupt the member asking the question to give the witness the same amount of time. That was how the committee was run previously, and I completely agree with the principle because it worked well.

Now this is the question I have for Mr. Poilievre. As I recall, Wayne Easter would apply the rule mainly when ministers and high-ranking officials appeared before the committee. When the witnesses were members of the public or representatives of organizations invited by the committee, he didn't stick to the rule quite as rigidly.

Regardless of the motion or amendment we adopt, I think it is especially important to apply this rule in the case of high-ranking officials, public servants and members of the government. In the case of witnesses who we have invited and who aren't as accustomed to the back and forth of a parliamentary committee, it may not be as important to apply the rule rigidly.

What does the honourable member who proposed the amendment think?

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Gabriel.

I have Daniel, Adam, Pierre and then Greg.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** I don't think it's any surprise. I think everybody knows I wasn't on the committee in the last Parliament, but I have it on good authority from my colleague Peter Julian, who was on the committee; he seems to recall that there was a serious and successful effort by the chair to try to keep the answers to a question roughly proportionate to the length of time it takes to pose the question.

I don't think that Mr. Baker has to worry too much in terms of whether this works or doesn't work. It works, and was a normal practice in committee of the whole in the examination of the estimates. We did it last week, I think it was. This has been a week when a lot of things have blended together. If it wasn't last week, it was the week before, right around December 9, I think.

I don't think anybody would say things kind of fell apart there, and I also recognize in Mr. Poilievre's motion that there is the possibility for members of Parliament to cede more of their time. It doesn't mean the witness gets another six minutes on top of the six minutes allocated. Just as in the committee of the whole, when you have 15 minutes and you decide to use it all for questions and answers, it doesn't magically become a 30-minute period. It just means that your 15 minutes are divided more proportionately between the MP and, in that case, the minister, but here it would be the witness.

This is reasonable. It would be a good practice. I have sat on a lot of committees where sometimes the most heated and conflictual moments come when there is a feeling that a witness is using all the time but maybe not speaking directly to the issue that the member is interested in. Of course, we have only so much time, so you will see members trying to intervene in order to get the witness back on track, as it were, or to speak directly to the issues that are of interest to the member and that they want to use their time to discuss.

One of the potential virtues of enshrining a rule like this more formally would be to avoid those situations where things are getting a little more heated and a little more intense. It could help bring the temperature down a bit by giving MPs more of a clear sense of how they can manage their own time at committee instead of having to jockey with the witnesses in order to try to get that time management down.

It could have a salutary effect on the proceedings of the committee to eliminate that kind of requirement for members who want to see their time used in a particular way to have to compete with a witness. Of course, it's not always like that, but there are cases when it is like that. I believe we've already seen some of that at this committee in this Parliament, so I think it is a good way to try to avoid the worst instances of that.

I'm happy to speak to the main motion, too. There is a bit of awkwardness where we are clearly talking about two separate kinds of issues, so I would have been happy to just see them presented separately. In any event, if we want to dispose with this relatively quickly, I'm okay to put the two together. If we're pretty confident that both are going to pass, then we may as well pass them together and be efficient, because efficiency is a virtue for all members of the committee. We're probably going to talk a lot about efficiency. We may as well lead by example.

• (1650)

**The Chair:** Thanks, Daniel.

We have Adam, Pierre and Greg.

**Mr. Adam Chambers (Simcoe North, CPC):** I'll be relatively brief. This is about how we want to set our meetings and run them efficiently. I think it is a good practice and will enforce some discipline.

We run the risk of the committee seemingly ending up with a dysfunctional nature, where what will occur is a bunch of speeches every time there is witness testimony, whether that's because it's a fellow member of Parliament, a colleague as a witness, or others who maybe feel a bit unsettled because they don't have an answer on the tips of their tongues. This will force some discipline. Frankly, it's quite reasonable, and, regarding a member's time with witnesses, it is the member's choice how they choose to use their five minutes.

The member may like to make some opening remarks and show some statistics to set the stage for some questions. That is incredibly reasonable as well. I don't think it means the witness should have that long, in terms of replying, just because there was a set-up.

The question itself should be specific. We will get far better answers from witnesses. The meetings will run more crisply and more efficiently, and we'll all find ourselves a little more informed and have a better level of discussion.

**The Chair:** Thanks, Adam.

Pierre.

**Hon. Pierre Poilievre:** A number of questions have come forward. Mr. Baker asked a question and I think Gabriel gave a good answer. Yes, the principle is that the witness gets a long answer, a very long answer, if they get a very long question. That kind of forces a discipline on the member not to ramble, which politicians, occasionally even myself included, have a tendency to do. It disciplines us to get to our question.

I would actually go a little further than even Gabriel said. The witness will, in the end, get more time than the members, because the witness has an opening statement. That is the moment when the witness is invited to really elaborate on and build out their concepts and ideas. They usually have 10 minutes, which is a very long time to speak. I'm not saying this is the perfect answer. I think it is the worst answer—except for all the others, as Churchill said about democracy.

Mr. Chair, you rightly pointed out the other day that the interruptions where people are speaking over each other are hard for the interpreters. They're hard for everybody. This is actually a solution to that. If I know I've asked a 30-second question and I'll get a 30-second answer, I don't have to barge in to reclaim my time. The reason members get anxious to barge back in is that they get only five minutes, so if the witness starts to give a speech, they know they won't get very many questions in. The chair's job actually gets very easy. You literally just look at the clock and say, "You asked a 23-second question, so there will be a 23-second answer." It really doesn't leave any room for anyone on the committee to feel short-changed, because we're just dealing with the mathematics of time.

As for the occasion raised by Mr. Baker and Mrs. Chatel, where a member asks a question in three seconds that clearly cannot be answered, that will be evident to everyone in the room. It will be self-defeating. Let's say someone says, "Give me the history since the book of Genesis. Start now." I mean, everybody will say that's a ridiculous challenge. The member will get nowhere and will get no sympathy for getting a non-answer.

Let's say, though, that the member asks, "Look, how much money is there in the Canada pension fund?" We're looking for a number at that point. It doesn't require a speech. This, I think, is the best system we can come up with in order to regulate the very limited amount of time we have for these conversations.

As for Mr. Ste-Marie's other point, I think Wayne was a little more generous with non-ministers and officials. If there were people who were not professional at testifying, they were given a bit more leeway. No one would fault the chair if he were to do the same when we have witnesses who are not members of the executive branch or of the offices of Parliament.

That's the best I can do, I think, in responding to the good questions and concerns.

• (1655)

**The Chair:** Thanks, Pierre.

I have Greg next, and then Sophie.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Greg McLean:** Mr. Chair, I'll keep my comment short and sweet, as the honourable member mentioned.

I agree with both points raised by Mr. Ste-Marie and Mr. Blaikie.

[*English*]

I will tell you, Mr. Chair, that this was the practice of the previous committee I was on. I don't know why it's being contested here at all, because it makes for better meetings that run much more smoothly.

That being said, I yield.

**The Chair:** Thanks, Greg.

I have Sophie next, followed by Terry and then Yvan.

**Mrs. Sophie Chatel:** If we are going ahead with this motion, I like Gabriel's suggestion that it should be witnesses who are used to this and are regularly invited. I don't know how we can phrase that. I can tentatively offer "witnesses who are regularly invited to this committee", or maybe "senior officials and ministers". I don't want to be part of a committee where the chair has to look at 30 seconds and then 30 seconds. I think it would be unfair to put that burden on them.

I would change the last sentence. Instead of saying "unless with the permission of the member who has the floor", I would say, "when the member who has the floor asks for a short reply". That would seem to be more.... If you ask a short question, you could ask the witness for a short reply. The chair will then know what's going on and be able to compute the time.

When we invite witnesses, I want to hear what they have to say. Just because I ask a 30-second question, I don't want to put a burden on the chair to interrupt the witness when I want a long answer, because they're there to provide their expertise.



**The Chair:** Thank you, Sophie.

I have Terry, Yvan and then Julie.

**Mr. Terry Beech:** I'm not sure if there was an amendment moved there, necessarily, but I want to suggest a friendly amendment to Pierre. I'm suggesting it only as a friendly amendment. If he doesn't accept it as a friendly amendment, that's fine, and we can move on.

Just to give some flexibility given the way the amendment is worded, after the colon, where it says “that the time to respond to each question not exceed the time taken to ask it”, there might be a circumstance where it is obvious to the chair—or to anyone—that somebody is closing their sentence or just coming to the end and might not be within that window of a couple of seconds, I would suggest that we add the term “approximately”, so that the time to respond to each question not exceed the approximate time taken to ask it, just to give that flexibility.

Again, I'm not trying to do anything to change the basic nature of what the mover is trying to accomplish. I just think it probably more accurately reflects how the committee was previously run.

• (1700)

**The Chair:** Would you like to speak to that, Mr. Poilievre, in terms of the friendly amendment?

**Hon. Pierre Poilievre:** It would not be a friendly amendment.

**The Chair:** We have Yvan and then Julie.

Yvan's hand was up. I'm sorry, Julie.

**Ms. Julie Dzerowicz:** That's no problem. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I wouldn't mind hearing from the clerk.

Is Mr. Poilievre's amendment in order?

**The Chair:** The clerk confirms it is in order, Julie.

Yvan, do you have your hand up?

**Ms. Julie Dzerowicz:** I'll pass it back to Yvan and then maybe I'll get back on.

**The Chair:** You know what, Julie and Yvan, or anybody who is on the screen, I go by the clerk, who is instructing me that we go in order of how I see the hands as they come up on the screen. That's what I'm going by, so I have Yvan now.

**Mr. Yvan Baker:** I have just a couple of thoughts.

One is that I haven't seen this rule applied on the committees I've served on—for example, environment and defence in the last Parliament—but I think a couple of points are important.

The first—and maybe, Mr. Poilievre, you support this—is I just want to be sure I understand. There is a bit of discretion, so that if you ask for a dissertation on inflation, for example, and you do that in three seconds, the witness has some time, and some discretion is given to the chair or some mechanism is in place to ensure we treat witnesses appropriately and respectfully and we get answers to the questions you've indicated you want answers to. That's one point of clarification I would put to Mr. Poilievre and any other members of the committee about, to see if they agree.

On the second point, I just want to make sure we're clear.

[*Translation*]

I want to follow up on what Mr. Ste-Marie said about the amount of time allocated to witnesses. I'd like some clarity on a few things.

Everyone agrees that witnesses should have the same amount of time to answer as members have to ask their question. For instance, if a member has five minutes, two and a half minutes go to the member for questioning and two and a half minutes go to the witness for answering. The chair is the one who interrupts the member to give the witness the necessary time to answer.

I'd like some clarification on that. I want to be sure I understand what Mr. Poilievre is trying to do and what Mr. Ste-Marie said.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Yvan.

I have Julie and then Daniel.

**Ms. Julie Dzerowicz:** Just for the record, it's so hard to be here while you guys are all there. I just wanted to let you know.

I would like to formally move what my colleague Mr. Beech proposed: that we add the words “approximately equal time”, and that applies to ministers and government officials. I don't have the amendment Mr. Poilievre suggested, so I'm not able to actually read that out properly to you, but I want to add the word “approximately” and I would like it to apply ministers and government officials. I would like to formally move that, Mr. Chair.

This is a good discussion. Mr. Blaikie mentioned something similar to what I said, where Wayne very much tried to keep things on a very even keel. To those members who mentioned that, for those who were not government officials or ministers, the former chair did provide extra time and, in most circumstances, did allow witnesses to finish what they had to say. He really tried to be very balanced with the time for all of the different sides and all of the different parties.

My two amendments—the adding of “approximately” and the adding of “the ministers and government officials”—address a number of the issues that have been raised in our conversation over the last 20 minutes. I hope that they are adopted by the committee, so that we could move on to maybe discussing the pre-budget consultation aspects of this motion.

• (1705)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Julie.

I have Daniel, Adam and Pierre.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** Alas, I fear my intervention may have come too late, as we now have a subamendment on the floor. I wanted to offer that in the *House of Commons Procedure and Practice* manual, under “Committees of the Whole” and “Other Uses of Committees of the Whole”—I don't have the pagination because I'm on my phone, Mr. Chair—it says:

[T]he House frequently adopts special orders setting additional conditions for debate, such as rules ensuring that the answer by the Minister or Parliamentary Secretary does not exceed the time taken for the question....

That language is pretty clear. The problem with the language of “approximate”—while I think that's largely what the chair will end up doing, and there's a bit of discretion in the committee of the whole to that effect—is that it makes your job a lot more difficult. Part of the idea is to set a clear rule that makes it clear how you're to proceed, so if there is a disagreement about the extent to which that's happening appropriately, you can lean on the rule. If you have to get very strict with the clock, then you can. We all hope things will proceed in such a way that people are satisfied that it's roughly similar in terms of time and won't be challenging you on that too often.

However, in the event that there is a challenge, you want the rule to be clear enough that you have firm guidance. If it's not, I fear we will descend into argument about the meaning of “approximate” and your conduct as chair, and whether it's acceptable to the committee or not.

There's a bit of what people sometimes call “future tripping” by my Liberal colleagues about how the rule will happen in practice. I hear that. Until we get a bit of experience with it and people have a sense of what to expect, that's likely to happen. I like having clearer wording. What we're hearing is that the expectation is that this would more likely happen with ministers and with departmental officials than with outside witnesses.

Part of it is to set the rule. If the committee feels like things are proceeding well, this isn't going to come up. Even if a witness is taking a little longer but the MP is not objecting, that is more or less in the motion Mr. Poilievre has proposed in the first place. It's going to come up in hard cases, where there's friction. At that point, you want a clear rule.

The initial wording is adequate. We need a bit of experience with it in order to build a bit of trust and to have people feel good about how it's going to be implemented. If we need to revisit because it is falling apart, then we can do that. Trying to craft something right now that's going to speak to all potential cases of breakdown is going to be difficult. The initial wording really does give you the tools you need, Mr. Chair, to implement what would be a clear intention of the committee if it were to pass. With a little more experience, in the event that it's not working, we can hammer out a compromise.

I'm still inclined to support the wording of the original amendment.

• (1710)

**The Chair:** Thanks, Daniel.

It's Adam, Pierre, and then Julie.

**Mr. Adam Chambers:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will do some long soul-searching this holiday. I find myself agreeing very much with my NDP colleague. This is the 10th meeting. We have a very good track record.

I just note the time, for the record. It is 5:10. I think we could dispense with much of the discussion. The main motion, at least, seems relatively reasonable. The amendment by Mr. Poilievre seems very reasonable. If members wish to yield more of their time to witnesses, that is completely within their right, but for all the reasons mentioned by my colleague Mr. Blaikie, it would be very nice and in the Christmas spirit, or holiday spirit, if you will, and in cooperation that we dispense with this relatively quickly.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thanks, Adam.

Pierre, and then Julie.

**Hon. Pierre Poilievre:** I couldn't agree more with Adam. The word “approximately” is too approximate to be clear, and I think we're going to end up, as our friend Mr. Blaikie said, debating the meaning of that adverb rather than debating the substance before committee on a given day.

In the House, during committees of the whole, it's actually very sharp. It is a three-second question and a three-second answer, a three-minute question and a three-minute answer. Somehow, committees of the whole actually work quite well; we've been very well served by them. Therefore, I think we can just apply the same rule.

Remember that members can offer more time. They can say, “Actually, I think this is going to take a longer time.”

The other thing that can happen is that if a member of the government side believes a minister has not had enough time to answer an opposition question, they can always say, “Minister, I note you had more to say; please take some of my time to elaborate on the answer that you gave to the opposition.” There are a lot of opportunities to manoeuvre around the strictures of this, and I think we should adopt it.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Pierre.

Julie.

**Ms. Julie Dzerowicz:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

To Mr. Poilievre's most recent comments, the finance committee is not similar to the committee of the whole. I want to point that out.

I also want to point out that part of my amendment to the subamendment was to address something Mr. Ste-Marie had mentioned.

I will just read out my amendment to the subamendment, if that's okay, because I think we're coming close to a vote: "That during questioning of witnesses at all future hearings, the chair of the committee apply the following rule: that the time to respond to each question not exceed the approximate time taken to ask it unless with the permission of the member who has the floor; and that this rule apply to ministers and senior officials."

**The Chair:** Thank you, Julie.

Now we have Daniel, and then Yvan.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** We've had a pretty good sampling of opinions around the table. I was going to ask if you might test the committee for unanimous consent at this point to consider the subamendment defeated on division, the amendment passed on division and the main motion as amended passed on division.

**Hon. Pierre Poilievre:** Could you just repeat that? There was a lot.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** The subamendment, which is Ms. Dzerowicz's motion, would be considered defeated on division.

**Hon. Pierre Poilievre:** Yes.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** The amendment would be considered passed on division and the main motion as amended would be considered passed on division.

I just wonder if you might test the committee. I respect that Mr. Baker and other members might want to talk some more. I'm not trying to stop anyone from saying more. I'm just saying, if you test the committee and people are happy with that, we can conclude the debate on all three of these items efficiently.

• (1715)

**The Chair:** Thanks, Daniel.

I will let Mr. Baker speak, but just before I do, what I've been hearing is that members' time is precious and you have only so much time on committee. You are looking to make the committee as efficient and effective as possible. You want fairness and balance on the committee; you're looking for proportionate answers within the right timings, and you're looking for the chair to be able to hold that.

What I'd also like to know, just in terms of what I'm hearing from everybody, is how prescriptive you want me to be. If I'm clocking this at 10 seconds and then it's 10 seconds, that's so prescriptive and it would be very challenging and difficult for the chair to cut people off, but you're looking for an answer that gets to the point within reason within that time. Is that it?

**Hon. Pierre Poilievre:** No.

The reason we're writing it down, Chair, is that basically every word you used was a subjective one. You can say the word "fairness", "approximately" or "reasonable", but if we all agreed on the

meaning of all those words we probably wouldn't even need to have political parties. We'd all agree on everything.

We're trying to lay down specific rules here so we get equal time. This is done by other chairs. It was done by Mr. Easter. It's a little awkward the first time you try it, kind of like riding a bicycle, but it gets very natural after that. At times Mr. Easter would literally interrupt mid-word—not mid-sentence, but mid-word—and it was fine. The witness very quickly got to understand. These were ministers and top officials testifying on \$100-billion emergency programs. They got to understand that they had approximately 15 seconds to get the information out, and they got the information out.

It is a firm discipline. It is not a general sentiment. If we leave it to general sentiment, we end up with the kind of bickering that broke out at the last meeting.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Poilievre.

I will commit to Mr. Poilievre and to members here that I will go back and look at the recordings. I'll look at those timings in terms of the question and answer and how Mr. Easter was conducting those meetings, what the exchanges were and how much time they took. Maybe with the clerk's help we can get some of those timings and bring those back to the committee so everybody is aware of what was happening before.

I've sat on international trade and on foreign affairs. I chaired a subcommittee on human rights. What I've learned and how I've conducted those meetings are the same as what happened on those committees. I'm just being open with the members.

I'm going to go to Yvan before we conclude this.

We'll have Yvan and then we'll look to see if we go to a vote or on division as Mr. Blaikie has requested.

**Mr. Yvan Baker:** Thanks, Chair.

[*Translation*]

I would just like some clarification from committee members.

Mr. Blaikie talked about the importance of clarity, and I agree with him that it's very important. He said it was one of the reasons why he was in favour of this motion.

However, I want some clarity on what would happen if a member took more than half of their allocated time to question the witness. I would just like to be clear on that.

For instance, if I have five minutes, and I go on for two and a half minutes, the chair is supposed to interrupt me to give the remaining two and a half minutes to the witness and thus make sure that the witness has the same amount of time to respond. Is that indeed the committee's intention? Is that how this will work?

I just want that to be clear before we vote, because it will be pointless to debate the motion afterwards. If a member could shed some light on that for me, I would certainly appreciate it.

Thank you.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Gabriel.

• (1720)

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Baker, here's how it worked in the last Parliament. If our allocated time was five minutes to question the witness, the chair would interrupt us two and a half minutes in, leaving the witness the other two and a half minutes to answer.

That said, the member still had the ability to make a comment rather than ask a question. I've had occasion to use my time to address the committee regarding the issue in hand, instead of questioning the witness.

However, when we hit the halfway point in questioning the witness, Mr. Easter would stop us and give the rest of the time to the witness.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Gabriel.

Daniel.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** In my experience on committees of the whole, when a member has very little time left, they can use almost all of it to make a comment if they so wish.

When the member ends their remarks with a question, the chair indicates how much time is left for the answer and asks for a brief response.

The member chooses whether they wish to make a comment or not. If that is how they decide to use their time, they clearly aren't looking for an actual answer.

That's how committees of the whole work. The precedents are quite clear and significant when it comes to how this works.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Daniel.

Let me just say that I sat in the Ontario legislature, and they have clocks in committee and in the chamber. I don't know if members would like to try something like that, where you have six minutes, you see the clock, and as soon as it strikes six you're done. Rather than the chair having to try to find the end to an answer or to cut somebody off, we could try something like that. I'd be open to bringing that to our committee if members are open to that.

Mr. Beech.

**Mr. Terry Beech:** I thought our colleague from the NDP had a very reasonable solution, and I would like to see if we're going to test his solution.

**The Chair:** This is all in the Christmas spirit, right? Great. I think we've heard from everybody.

Clerk, are we voting on the subamendment to the amendment?

**Mr. Terry Beech:** On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I was referring to the NDP's suggestion on unanimous consent, given division on the subamendment, and then adopting the entire.... Actually, I would suggest that my colleague Daniel, who brought this up in the first place, repeat it so all members understand it. Perhaps we could proceed that way.

**The Chair:** That would be excellent, yes.

We have Daniel, please.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** My proposal was to consider Ms. Dzerowicz's subamendment defeated on division, Mr. Poilievre's amendment passed on division, and the main motion as amended. This would be Mr. Beech's motion, as amended, passed on division. If that's amenable to everyone on the committee, I don't see that we need anything further than a yes.

**The Chair:** Mr. Beech, is that clear to you?

**Mr. Terry Beech:** That sounds great.

**The Chair:** To the committee, the subamendment would be defeated on division. The amendment would be passed on division and the main motion would be passed on division as amended.

(Subamendment negated on division [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

(Amendment agreed to on division [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

(Motion as amended agreed to on division [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

**Hon. Pierre Poilievre:** Merry Christmas.

**The Chair:** I was just about to do that. Gabriel is going to bring us more Christmas cheer as we go into the new year.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie:** Mr. Chair, I'd like to take this opportunity to wish everyone happy holidays.

I have a question for the clerk.

When the committee met previously, we were in the practice of adopting a motion to have the committee obtain all pre-budget consultation submissions that had been provided prior to the last election.

Could the clerk give us the wording of that motion? I could then move it, and the committee could adopt it.

Thank you.

• (1725)

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Mr. Clerk, can you speak to that?

[*Translation*]

**The Clerk:** That is actually covered by Mr. Beech's motion.

**Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie:** All right. Very good.

Thank you.

[*English*]

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** I move to adjourn.

(Motion agreed to)

**The Chair:** First, I just want to wish all of you and your families a healthy, safe, happy Christmas season, new year and holidays. All the best to everyone.

Thank you very much.

We are adjourned.

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