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MOTION TO STRIKE A SPECIAL SENATE COMMITTEE ON HUMAN
CAPITAL AND THE LABOUR MARKET—DEBATE ADJOURNED

Speech by:
The Honourable Diane Bellemare

Wednesday, October 26, 2022

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[Translation]

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MOTION TO STRIKE A SPECIAL SENATE COMMITTEE ON HUMAN CAPITAL AND THE LABOUR MARKET—DEBATE ADJOURNED

Hon. Diane Bellemare She said: Honourable senators, on behalf of the Standing Senate Committee on Rules, Procedures and the Rights of Parliament, I have the honour to move a motion to create a Special Senate Committee on Human Capital and the Labour Market.

This motion reflects a fairly broad but not unanimous consensus on the part of committee members resulting from discussions held by the committee in February 2022, and which are currently ongoing, about the structure and mandates of committees.

We divided this review into two steps. As you know, the first step consisted of a stylistic review of the committee mandates. This step ended with the adoption by the Senate of our third report, which led to amendments to the *Rules of the Senate* in July 2022.

The second step of our review, which is currently under way, consists of a more in-depth study of the structure and the mandate of Senate committees. During our prior discussion in February, May and June, we noted serious problems with our committee structure. It was clear that there was an urgent need to debate issues related to employment and human capital.

Many senators on the committee expressed their concerns about the fact that important and timely issues related to the labour force, the labour market, immigration and employment are not being given proper consideration by the Senate.

As you know, honourable colleagues, labour market and human capital issues are fundamental components of creating and sharing prosperity in Canada. They're also central to the policy choices and strategies needed to ensure continued prosperity, promote equity and combat inequality and poverty. They're also at the root of regional concerns and solutions to encourage all groups to integrate into Canadian society.

Labour issues obviously intersect with federal and provincial jurisdictions. However, the federal government has played a unique role since it gained constitutional jurisdiction over unemployment insurance in 1940, as has the Bank of Canada, which independently monitors the country's employment level.

The complexity of the labour market requires a nation-wide discussion between the federal and provincial levels. The Senate is well positioned to play an important role in addressing human capital and labour market issues. We have representation from all regions of Canada, we have senators with experience relevant to their region and we have the political remove to study these issues with some degree of neutrality.

Canada is facing major challenges associated with the inevitable aging of the population, which is part of the reason for the labour shortages. In addition, Indigenous peoples are experiencing high unemployment rates and would like to participate in sustainable wealth creation. We have to look at how our federal immigration, employment and workforce development strategies can help us address these issues. In addition, our Employment Insurance system, an economic stabilization force with which there were serious problems during the pandemic, still hasn't been reformed since these events.

Currently, no committee is really working on these problems, not for lack of will or interest, but for lack of time and resources.

The Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology would be the appropriate committee to study several human capital and labour market issues. However, it is the third-busiest committee after the Standing Senate Committee on National Finance and the Standing Senate Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, meeting an average of 55 hours per fiscal year.

We invited the Chair of the Social Affairs Committee, Senator Ratna Omidvar, as well as the former chair, Senator Chantal Petitclerc, to share their thoughts regarding the committee's workload. The conclusion was unanimous. Human capital, the labour market and employment are all important issues that need to be examined, but the committee does not have the time to deal with them. The idea of creating a special committee on human capital and the labour market was welcomed by Senator Omidvar and Senator Petitclerc, as well as by the majority of senators from various parties and groups who sit on the Senate Committee on Rules, Procedures and the Rights of Parliament.

Now let's look at the specifics of the motion.

This motion proposes to create a special, not standing, Senate committee on human capital and the labour market. The proposed mandate for this committee mirrors the language we used for the stylistic review of rule 12-7. The special committee would be appointed until the end of the current session. It would therefore be temporary. It would be composed of nine members, to be nominated by the Committee of Selection. It could deal with any matters relating to human capital, labour markets and employment generally. As with most standing committees, the Senate would have to authorize it to consider any particular matter by adopting an order of reference.

Many people were concerned about this special committee's mandate. Let me reiterate that we gave it a general mandate, as is done for all committees, because any decisions regarding the subjects to be studied, once the committee is formed, would be made by the Senate through an order of reference.

I want to be clear that an order of reference must be adopted for a committee to study any matter. The committee's mandate in the motion remains general, yet specific enough to cover the relevant subjects.

Some senators, as well as leaders and liaisons, have raised questions about whether we have the financial and administrative capacity to create this special committee. We are short on financial resources and human resources, especially clerks, technicians and translators. We spoke with Shaila Anwar, the principal clerk for Senate committees, about the issue of human resources in a public meeting.

There is also the potential extra workload for senators that comes out of creating a committee. In that context, we even talked about reducing the number of senators per committee for the rest of the parliamentary session. Our discussions made us appreciate the need for a more thorough review of the structure and mandate of the committees, and that is what we will undertake as soon as the current study is over.

As you know, the number of committees has increased over time. A review of the structure of the committees is necessary. If we cannot increase the number of committees in the long term, perhaps we should merge committees or do things differently to ensure that committees can carry out their mandates effectively. Our future work on these issues will lead to solutions, for which I hope there will be a consensus in this place.

We asked the leaders and liaisons of each group for their opinions of our work plan for the committees file. As I stated earlier, they were not in unanimous agreement, but most were in favour of creating a special committee on human capital and the labour market. However, everyone recognized that there are constraints that must be considered.

As a democratic parliamentary institution, we must have the administrative and financial capacity to carry out our work. Reality sometimes requires us to make difficult choices about how our administrative and financial resources are allocated in order to prioritize certain studies over others.

I am moving this motion, not in my name, but in the name of the Standing Committee on Rules, Procedures and the Rights of Parliament, in the knowledge that we will not be able to make a decision immediately about the creation of this special committee. However, we can have a debate about whether it is necessary to create a special committee on human capital and the labour market. We are sure to find solutions for bringing this project to fruition, if that is the will of the Senate.

Thank you for listening. *Meegwetch.*
