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Motion to Strike Special Committee on
Senate Modernization—Debate Adjourned

Speech by:

The Honourable Diane Bellemare

Thursday, December 10, 2015

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[Translation]

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MOTION TO STRIKE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON SENATE MODERNIZATION—DEBATE ADJOURNED

Hon. Diane Bellemare: Thank you, Your Honour. I will be rather brief, because I have not prepared a formal speech. I would first like to take a moment to congratulate our colleague, the Honourable Serge Joyal, on the hard work, expertise and thoughtful reflection that he has put into addressing the issue of the Senate over the years. I think this will provide us with some very timely reading over the winter break.

I want to address certain aspects of the motion currently before us. I think it is welcome. For several weeks and even months now, the members of this chamber have been asking for a duly formed committee to examine the question of modernizing the Senate. However, when I read this motion, a few things came to mind.

First of all, regarding modernization, I think that everyone wants it, the public wants it, and maintaining the status quo is impossible. We can talk about modernization, but we must recognize that we have in fact made some changes since the headline-grabbing scandal that affected us, for instance in the area of ethics. We have made some strides.

This brings me to the point that the motion refers to modernization, but it fails to define the committee's mandate. On this point I very much agree with Senator Baker, who just pointed out that our work here complements the work done in the House of Commons and that, to a certain degree, it would be very hard to modernize the Senate without also thinking about modernizing the work of the House of Commons. Since we work together and our legislative work is very important, we eventually are going to have to align our rules and procedures so that we can really create some added value from a legislative standpoint.

With that in mind, without necessarily formally amending the motion, we should all agree in this chamber that if, when we are talking about modernizing the Senate, we see the limits of what we can do and we can identify changes that are needed in the House of Commons, we should not refrain from doing so, even though that goes beyond our mandate.

Incidentally, when we look at the numbers on the work we do here in the Senate — my assistant crunched the numbers this summer — it is rather astounding. Since 1960 — which was the Twenty-fourth Parliament — and including the Forty-first Parliament, 709 bills have been introduced during each parliament, on average. Of course, not all of these bills were passed in the House of Commons. Of the 709 bills we received, we passed, on average, 145. Of those 145 bills we passed, we amended just six, on average. The average accurately reflects what happens in the different parliaments. There are some variations. For example, during the Forty-first Parliament, just one bill was officially amended and passed, but during the Thirty-seventh

Parliament, 12 bills were amended and passed. There are variations, but on average, the number is six.

We could be more effective. In that sense, modernizing the Senate means adding greater value through our work. I think that would be a worthwhile direction to take, even though it is not written in the motion.

I am on board with inviting experts. I think that this is explicitly stated in the motion, but there are experts here in this chamber, and we must not forget that a number of problems in this chamber, in my opinion, are the result of internal rules and procedures. When I came to this chamber three years ago, I didn't really understand what was going on. I had spent 25 years at a university, where we managed ourselves, everything was collegial, and it was in no way chaotic. Since we are senators, people with experience, I thought that we would be recognized as having that experience and that we would be able to work relatively independently, although I realized we are affiliated with a political party. However, I was surprised to see that we are treated as though we are kids in school because of the rules. I was a professor for 25 years and I know the rules. I didn't treat my students as strictly as we are treated here with our rules.

In a way, with the passing of time, some processes have become institutionalized in order to foster party discipline. In fact, we are a political chamber and we must pass government legislation. However, is it necessary to institutionalize practices that force us to act without the luxury of reflection? In my opinion, that is the reason why we are unable to provide the added value that is expected of us, which is to improve legislation and foster debate.

• (1750)

If someone were to ask me what has struck me the most in my three years in the Senate, I would say that it is the fact that there is no debate in this chamber. There is some debate, but most of the time people don't listen to each other. They plug their ears, close their eyes or look elsewhere. They don't look at each other, so the debate doesn't exist. There is no added value.

I think those are very important elements to consider. In that regard, the services of experts are worthwhile, but we have to think about these things ourselves to set rules and an operating structure for ourselves. We don't want chaos. We want to operate in a disciplined manner.

That is why I am going to support Senator Cowan's proposal. However, I am going to say what others might be thinking. I am wondering whether we need to form another committee. Haven't we reached a point where we could discuss how to modernize the Senate in the chamber? Senator Greene and Senator Massicotte organized a meeting of senators and it went extremely well. The people who participated put a lot into it. They filled out a questionnaire, and there was a great deal of discussion.

We need to organize how we look at this issue, and I hope that the 15-person committee will come up with some fresh ideas. On that note, I would like to ask Senator Cowan if he would agree to meet half way between an ongoing debate in this chamber and a discussion in a specific committee. I would ask him if he would

agree to add a short paragraph to his motion that would require the committee members to systematically report back to the chamber on their debates and deliberations.

You say, "that the committee be empowered to report from time to time." I would like regular reporting. I would like there to be a monthly report in this chamber because let's not forget, honourable senators, that we will have new recruits in this chamber who will be rather lost. My concern is that if there are 15 of us discussing this, when we report everything back here, objections will be raised and in the end all the fine proposals we make will fall by the wayside.

Thus, to help all our senators grasp what we are discussing and take ownership of the changes and proposals that are made, I would propose a monthly report.

I therefore propose that, notwithstanding usual practices, in the first five days when the Senate sits each month, the committee report to the Senate on the committee's progress on its study.

For the committee to report regularly, the first five days are important. I ask if you would agree to introduce that. If so, I will not move a motion. If not, I will move an amendment. Thank you, honourable senators.

[English]

The Hon. the Speaker: With the agreement of the house, Senator Cowan, if he wishes, can respond to Senator Bellemare without closing debate. Is it agreed?

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

Senator Cowan: The rules talk about questions or comments, so maybe I can ask a question or make a comment and put it all together, with leave.

Senator Bellemare was kind enough to take me aside and mention the latter two points to me. The first part I didn't hear. Certainly, in the motion itself, I suggested that the committee be empowered to report from time to time, and I would certainly hope that they would not wait to complete the whole of their work before reporting back to us, but rather, as they came forward with a suggestion they wanted us to try, they would come and report on that in a series of interim reports. If we want to clarify that, as you suggest, I have no objection to that.

I might make another point by way of comment as this was a point that Senator Bellemare mentioned to me outside. She said, and alluded to it in her remarks, "Why don't we just do it all here instead of having a special committee?" My response to her, which I would like to put on the record, is that in my experience, when you have an important task and you make it the responsibility of everybody, it becomes the responsibility of nobody. I think this is such an important thing that I do believe we need to give this job to a select group who will be acting on our behalf and who will focus on this task, reporting, as you suggest, Senator Bellemare, on a regular basis to us by way of interim reports. If we give these people this particular responsibility, of course, any senator will be able to attend these committee meetings. They're not to be held in private. If the motion passes, I would suggest they be public. I think many senators, even those who will not be on the committee, will attend and provide the expertise that you speak about. That's my intention, and I readily agree to the suggested amendment.

(On motion of Senator Martin, for Senator Carignan, debate adjourned.)
