



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

House of Commons Debates

VOLUME 147 • NUMBER 050 • 2nd SESSION • 41st PARLIAMENT

OFFICIAL REPORT
(HANSARD)

Monday, February 24, 2014

—

Speaker: The Honourable Andrew Scheer

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Monday, February 24, 2014

The House met at 11 a.m.

Prayers

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

• (1105)

[*English*]

ELECTION OF THE SPEAKER

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC) moved:

That the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs be instructed to consider the advisability of instituting a single, preferential ballot for the election of the Speaker by replacing Standing Order 4 with the following:

“4. The election of a Speaker shall be conducted by secret ballot as follows:

(1) Any Member who does not wish to be considered for election to the Office of Speaker shall, not later than 6:00 p.m. on the day preceding the day on which the election of a Speaker is expected to take place, in writing, so inform the Clerk of the House who shall prepare a list of such Members' names together with a list of all Ministers of the Crown and party leaders, and shall provide the same to the Member presiding prior to the taking of the ballot.

(2) Members present in the Chamber shall be provided by the Clerk of the House with ballot papers, on which shall be listed, in alphabetical order, the names of all the Members whose names have not been placed on the list provided pursuant to section (1) of this Standing Order.

(3) The Member presiding shall announce from the Chair that the list provided pursuant to section (1) of this Standing Order is available for consultation at the Table.

(4) Members wishing to indicate their choice for the Office of Speaker shall rank each candidate listed on the ballot in the Member's order of preference by marking the number “1” in the space adjacent to the name of the candidate who is the Member's first preference, the number “2” in the space adjacent to the name of the Member's second preference and so on until the Member has completed the ranking of all the candidates for whom the Member wishes to vote.

(5) A ballot on which a Member has ranked one or more, but not all, of the candidates is valid only in respect of the candidate or candidates whom the member has ranked.

(6) Members shall deposit their completed ballot papers in a box provided for that purpose on the Table.

(7) The Clerk of the House shall, once all Members wishing to do so have deposited their ballot papers, count the number of first preferences recorded on the ballots for each candidate, and, if a candidate has received a majority of first preferences, provide the Member presiding with the name of that candidate, whereupon the Member presiding shall announce the name of the new Speaker.

(8) If, after the count referred to in section (7) of this Standing Order, no candidate has received a majority of first preferences, the Clerk of the House shall

(a) eliminate the candidate who received the least number of first preferences from any subsequent counts and, in the event that, at the conclusion of a count, there is an equality of votes between two or more candidates, both or all of whom

have the fewest first preferences, eliminate all of the candidates for whom there is an equality of first preferences;

(b) in all subsequent counts, treat each second or lower preference as if it were a first preference for the next highest candidate in the order of preference who is not eliminated; and

(c) repeat the process of vote counting described in paragraphs (a) and (b) until one candidate has received a majority of first preferences, at which point the Clerk of the House shall provide the Member presiding with the name of that candidate, whereupon the Member presiding shall announce the name of the new Speaker.

(9) Every ballot shall be considered in every count, unless it is exhausted in accordance with section (10) of this Standing Order.

(10) A ballot is exhausted when all the candidates on that ballot in respect of which a preference has been made are eliminated.

(11) In the event that, after all other candidates have been eliminated, the process of vote counting has resulted in an equality of largest number of first preferences between two or more candidates, Members present in the Chamber shall be provided by the Clerk of the House with ballot papers, on which shall be listed, in alphabetical order, the names of all candidates who have not been eliminated, and the vote shall proceed in like manner as the first vote.

(12) After a Speaker has been declared elected, the Clerk of the House shall destroy the ballots together with all records of the number of preferences marked for each candidate and the Clerk of the House shall in no way divulge the number of preferences marked for any candidate.

(13) During the election of a Speaker there shall be no debate and the Member presiding shall not be permitted to entertain any question of privilege.”;

and report its finding to the House no later than six months following the adoption of this order.

He said: Mr. Speaker, Motion No. 489 proposes to change Standing Order 4, which governs the election of the Speaker of the House of Commons. If this motion is adopted by the House, the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs will be asked to review a proposed new method for electing Speakers, details of which are contained in the text of the motion.

Mr. Speaker, while you offered to read the entire motion for the benefit of the House, I think members would be happy to consult with the written copy that is available on today's order paper.

The committee would be required to report back to the House within six months, but it is free to do the following: (a), accept the new proposed voting method; (b), reject the proposed new method; or, (c), make amendments to the recommendation and report back to the House with the recommended amended version in place of the original. As things stand, the Speaker is currently elected by what is known technically as an exhaustive ballot. Each MP casts a single ballot for his or her preferred candidate. The candidate who has secured the smallest number of votes is dropped from the ballot. Then, new rounds of voting take place with candidates being dropped from the ballot, one per round of voting, until a single candidate finally secures 50% of the vote.

Private Members' Business

To those of us serving today, this system of voting may seem to have existed since “time whereof the memory of man runneth not to the contrary”. In fact, the system was introduced in 1986 during the first term of the Mulroney government. It was based, in large measure, on the recommendations of the Lefebvre committee, which had reported on suggested changes to the Standing Orders in 1982, when Pierre Trudeau was prime minister.

Prior to that, Speakers were elected by an open show of hands; votes took place along partisan lines; and the Speaker was chosen, in practice, by the prime minister of the day. From 1953 until the 1980s, the Speaker had been chosen in consultation with the leader of the opposition, and one gets the impression that this was sometimes a perfunctory consultation. However, before the 1950s, even that did not happen. The Speaker was nominated in an entirely partisan manner, with the prime minister nominating the Speaker, and a senior minister seconding the nomination. Nominations were done by motion, which precluded a meaningful contest for the post, even in times of minority governments.

What we now have is clearly an improvement on the system that existed as recently as 20 years ago, but it is capable of being improved on, in several respects. For starters, it can be an interminably long process. Following the 2011 general election, six ballots were necessary to finally produce a majority for the winning candidate. As the rules require at least an hour to pass between ballots and the process of balloting takes some additional time, this consumed an entire day. It was not quite as long as the election of a Pope, but, at the time, the similarities did not escape some of the wittier members participating in the process.

We, in the 41st Parliament, were lucky. In 1986, Speaker Fraser was elected in an epic eleven-ballot process. Other highlights have been six ballots, in 1994; four ballots, in 1997; five ballots, in 2001; and five ballots, in 2008.

A second problem is that the current system can produce tie votes and there is no mechanism for resolving such ties. In 1994, there was a tie vote on the fifth ballot between the two remaining candidates, Gib Parent and Jean-Robert Gauthier. The solution that was jury-rigged at the time was to simply conduct the ballot all over again, with everybody voting as they had done before. Someone changed his or her vote, so it worked. However, such changes of heart cannot be regarded as being guaranteed to happen every time, as demonstrated, for example, by the 35 successive tie votes when the U.S. House of Representatives attempted to break a tie in 1800, between presidential candidates Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr. Therefore, formalized tie-breaking rules would be an improvement.

A third consideration, which is a problem from my point of view, although not perhaps in the eyes of all members, stems from the fact that the current system discreetly calls for all ballot papers to be destroyed and for the results of each ballot to remain a secret. That is in order, one assumes, to prevent MPs from casting their ballots strategically rather than on the more austere considerations of the competence and character of the candidates who ought, in the eyes of those who wrote the rules, to more properly guide our votes. This is fair enough, but it obviates the chief merit of the exhaustive balloting system at party leadership conventions.

Where exhaustive balloting is used, knowledge as to which candidate has received what number of votes is key to the deal making that allows one candidate to supercede another. Some people regard this deal making as a key advantage, which is why the system survives in the constitutions of some parties, and also in the rules that govern the election of the Speaker in the British House of Commons, where vote totals are known. In fact, anybody can look up the Wikipedia article on the 2010 election of the Speaker there, to see how the balloting went.

Having experienced the divisiveness of the final ballot in party leadership runoff elections—and many of us have certainly experienced that, whether at a convention or whether the party membership is casting the ballots—I do not personally share this particular enthusiasm for deal making. I do share the austere preference expressed by those who have designed our rules and kept the results secret.

However, once the decision to keep the results secret has been written into the rules, I am at a loss to determine what advantage is served by dragging out the process through multiple ballots. They are being conducted in the presence of an information vacuum, and therefore cannot serve any purpose whatsoever, other than to take up time.

Why not allow MPs to simply indicate all of their preferences at once, on a single piece of paper, by ranking each of the candidates and placing a number beside that candidate's name on the ballot paper, and then have the clerks total up the preferences?

There is a final problem with the current system. One additional advantage of not revealing the vote totals for any of the candidates is to allow individuals to drop off the ballot with their egos relatively intact, since nobody can be certain whether the individual being dropped has finished in close contention to the next lowest-scoring candidate.

However, under the current rules, which were put in place after the eleven-ballot extravaganza in 1986, any candidate who receives fewer than 5% of the votes is removed from the ballot. In 2011, more than one candidate dropped off the ballot following the first vote, indicating that at least one person had received less than 5% of the vote, and making it pretty clear who had suffered this particular stigma. A preferential ballot would perhaps eliminate this minor problem.

I want to talk a little about consideration of timing. Although I did not plan it this way, the timing of this motion is perhaps fortuitous. The same committee, during the same time period, will be studying Motion No. 431, proposed by our colleague from Saskatoon—Humboldt. That deals with the related issue of how to elect committee chairs. Likewise, the committee on procedure and House affairs will be in a position to continue the review that was started earlier in the 41st Parliament, on the Standing Orders as a whole.

These subjects could perhaps be studied at the same time, thereby allowing a more efficient use of the committee's time than would be possible if they were dealt with discreetly over the four-year life of a Parliament.

Private Members' Business

Let me talk now about why the motion is structured as it is. In preparing this motion, I had two options. The first, which I did not choose, would have been to refer the subject matter to the committee, but only with a general instruction as to the outcome that I would have preferred.

This is the approach adopted by my colleague for Saskatoon—Humboldt. That motion, no. 431, states:

That the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs be instructed to:
(a) consider the election of committee chairs by means of a preferential ballot system by all the Members of the House of Commons, at the beginning of each session and prior to the establishment of the membership of the standing committees....

The motion gives no further instructions regarding the actual wording of the standing order that would result. Alternatively, I could have laid out a motion consisting of the finalized version of the Standing Orders and voting system. If I had done that, a vote in the House in favour of the motion would have resulted in a change to the Standing Orders to take place immediately, without any oversight or potential amendment taking place at the procedure and House affairs committee.

Both approaches seem to have drawbacks. In my view, the former approach would not lay out a clear enough instruction. The proposal might have been seen as impractical, if an actual formula were not in front of the committee. On the other hand, a specific formula might have put us in the position of adopting a suboptimal solution, or potentially even a very problematic solution that I simply have not recognized and that could have been identified and corrected in committee.

Let me talk a little about the substantive side of Motion No. 489. It makes three meaningful changes to Standing Order 4, which governs the election of Speaker. First and most significantly, it changes the electoral system by which Speakers are elected. Second, it creates a method of resolving tie votes. Just as our current system has on one occasion produced a tie vote, it is entirely possible that the process of counting and reassigning the second and third preferences of MPs could result in a situation in which the two remaining candidates would have an identical number of preferences.

• (1110)

In such an event, proposed rule 4(11) will apply, and a runoff election between the two remaining candidates would take place. Members will recognize that this is, in practice, a holdover of the existing system. Likewise, proposed rule 4(8)(a) provides that if two or more candidates are tied for the least number of votes in a given round of counting, they will both, or all, be dropped from the ballot, and their votes will be redistributed among the remaining candidates.

Third, the embarrassment that might occur if one or more candidates for the speakership are revealed to have had virtually no support will no longer be an issue, as it will no longer be evident which candidates dropped off the ballot and in which order.

An obvious question to ask when dealing with a proposal like this is whether it has been tried in any other jurisdiction or we are engaging in an experiment which has no precedent. In answering this question, I have turned to the parliaments of the Westminster model, that is to say, the parliaments of countries, which, like Canada, have drawn their model directly from the United Kingdom.

The mother of parliaments at Westminster is by far the most widely emulated legislative institution on the planet. The Commonwealth of Nations furnishes the world's largest laboratory of democracy. The British Parliament has spawned literally hundreds of imitations, on every continent and in islands of every ocean.

In addition to the countries of the Commonwealth, there is a legislature, often with two chambers, each of which has its own rules for electing its presiding officer. These are in every British colony, and in sub-national jurisdictions, such as Scotland and Wales, Canada's provinces, and the states of Australia and India.

I have not done a complete review of all the rules governing the election of the Speaker in each chamber of each parliament in every one of these jurisdictions. Some have been easier to locate than others. The researchers at the Library of Parliament are still trying to assist me in locating the rules used in some of the jurisdictions that are less easy to locate. The states of India, which in some cases seem not to have translated their rules into English or French, are proving at the moment to be the greatest challenge.

However, many other parliaments do have rules that are readily available. I would encourage any member, who has the interest, to consult with me prior to the vote on Motion No. 489 in order to see the list, by which time it may well be close to being exhaustive.

Based on the nearly 80 models with which I have been able to consult so far, I can say this. With regard to number one, the most common model, Commonwealth-wide, is the one used in Canada's House of Commons. The Speaker is elected by means of an exhaustive vote, which is a system similar to the one we use.

Number two, some jurisdictions, including New Zealand's House of Representatives, continue to elect the Speaker in the traditional way: by means of an open vote on a motion that *x* be named as Speaker, or by an election conducted by a show of hands.

Three, in some jurisdictions, the process of balloting is sped up by accepting that if balloting continues for multiple rounds, the winner need not have more than a plurality of the vote. For example, in Cyprus, nobody can win on the first ballot with less than half the votes cast. On the second ballot, 40% will do, and on the third ballot, simply having more votes than anyone else will suffice. This means that, in practice, these jurisdictions have adopted a first past the post system for the third ballot. That is similar to the one that let me take my own seat in the 37th Parliament with only 38% of the votes cast by the electors of Lanark Carleton.

Finally, there is a single major jurisdiction in which a single preferential ballot is used. The chair of India's upper house, the Rajya Sabha, or Council of States, is elected by all members of both the upper and lower houses using a single transferable vote. The chair is also the vice president of India, which explains why both houses participate in the vote. I do not recommend that we copy this aspect of the model, but I want to make it clear that the system has functioned well for over half a century in the largest democracy on earth.

Private Members' Business

On a final note regarding the merits of preferential ballots, the system of using preferential ballots in elections where only one candidate can win is known as the alternative ballot. A record of this system in producing winners who represent the consensus of the electorate is impressive. It has been employed at the federal level in Australia since the 1940s, and it is so well loved in that country that every Australian state and territory has adopted the model for its own elections. Some Canadian parties, including my own, have adopted this model for electing their leaders. Likewise, many local nominations are now conducted this way. It was through this system that I was first nominated, in October 2000, and dozens of other members here today have had the same experience.

Mr. Speaker, I will not go through the merits beyond this.

However, I do ask for your support when this motion comes to a vote, so that it may go to the committee for further debate and analysis.

• (1115)

Mr. Philip Toone (Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member opposite for his presentation. His motion is certainly interesting, and I think it merits more debate. I will support it so that it can go to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs for further discussion.

This House has a tradition, certainly a recent tradition, of fairly high turnover, unlike many of the Houses that he indicated have this preferential vote. I give, as an example, the House of Lords, in Britain, which is probably known for having one of the least number of turnovers of all the Houses he mentioned.

If it is a number of new members who are sitting in this House, whose first order of business would be to select a Speaker, would there not be undue influence by their party in this case, considering the rapidity with which the proposal would bring us to a choice of a Speaker? Would there not be undue influence by the party, which would bring us back to exactly the same problem he seems to be criticizing and is the reason we seem to be needing this change, as proposed in his motion?

• (1120)

Mr. Scott Reid: Mr. Speaker, first, the turnover in the House of Lords has improved in recent decades. I am happy to say that they no longer have to have their necks separated from their bodies in order to leave the House of Lords, as used to be the case. There is progress everywhere in democracy.

However, the member has a good point. We do have an unusually high turnover. He might well have compared us, simply, with the House of Commons in the United Kingdom, where turnover is actually much lower.

We tend to have these cataclysms. We had one in the last election, producing an entirely new slate of New Democrats from Quebec, for example. The years 1993 and 1984 come to mind. These things happen, so he has a good point.

He also brought this question to my attention at the last sitting of the House, and I undertook to do a review to see what other institutions have done.

In the British House of Commons, they have what they call a hustings beforehand, which is essentially an all-candidates debate, which allows members to hear what the different candidates have to say. I do not know if that is written into their rules or if it is something they do informally, but it is a practice that would have some merit and should be considered here.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the member made reference to another motion, Motion No. 431, which is before the procedure and House affairs committee, which deals with how chairs should be selected at our committees.

Is the member suggesting that if this motion were to pass, and I suspect that there is a fairly strong likelihood of its passage, that both of those motions be considered as one in going through the process? For example, in calling for witnesses, we would have them deal with both motions. Is that how he sees this particular motion carrying forward, given the time constraints? When I comment on the motion itself, I plan to talk a bit about the time constraints now before the procedure and House affairs committee.

Mr. Scott Reid: Mr. Speaker, although they superficially have a great deal of resemblance, they are actually different in their practical impact. What is being attempted in the other motion to which the member referred, Motion No. 431, is actually a more substantial change. It is quite a bit more substantial. It talks about the chairs being voted for by preferential ballot but selected from among the entire membership of the House. Therefore, we are talking about quite a substantial difference. I would hope that each of the two motions would be considered substantively on its own merits and not as two sides of the same coin.

However, in answer to the question about witnesses, I think the same witnesses would have the same kind of expertise on both systems, where they have been tried, and the success they have had.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Philip Toone (Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise in the House today to participate in the debate on Motion No. 489, concerning the election of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

The Constitution Act, 1867 provides that the Speaker of the House of Commons is to be elected by majority vote as quickly as possible and with the utmost diligence. Therefore, electing a Speaker is the House of Commons' first order of business following a general election. It is the top priority, so much so that it supersedes any other business. No motions, adjournment or otherwise, are received until the choice is made.

Between 1867 and 1985, the Speaker of the House of Commons was appointed by a motion moved by the Prime Minister. Since 1985, the members of the House of Commons have chosen their Speaker themselves, by secret ballot. Members indicate their choice for Speaker from the candidates on the ballot. The candidate who obtains a majority of the votes is appointed Speaker. If none of the candidates wins a majority during the first ballot, the candidate with the lowest number of votes is eliminated, as are all other candidates who receive less than 5% of the votes. A new round of voting begins, and the process is repeated until one candidate obtains a majority.

Private Members' Business

What about the Senate? Throughout the Senate of Canada's history, the Speaker has been appointed by the Governor General on the recommendation of the Prime Minister, under section 34 of the Constitution Act, 1867. Fortunately, here in the House of Commons, we have far more autonomy. However, as we have seen, that has not always been the case. The secret ballot system was instituted only very recently in the House of Commons.

The motion before us is asking us to go even further by mandating the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs to consider the advisability of instituting a single, preferential ballot. In short, we are being asked to conduct a study to determine whether a single round of voting would suffice. Rather than voting a number of times, as they do now, MPs would rank all the candidates in order of preference on a single ballot.

I am therefore wondering whether the existing system is inadequate. Would a preferential voting system benefit members of the House of Commons? To answer these questions, I would like to briefly explain the Speaker's role.

According to O'Brien and Bosc:

The duties of the Speaker of the House of Commons require the balancing of the rights and interests of the majority and minority in the House to ensure that public business is transacted efficiently and that the interests of all parts of the House are advocated and protected against the use of arbitrary authority.

They go on to say:

It is the responsibility of the Speaker to act as the guardian of the rights and privileges of Members and of the House as an institution.

As a result, our Speaker does not uphold the will of the party in power. In theory, he upholds the will of the House of Commons as a whole. The Speaker's role as the guardian of the rights and privileges therefore requires him to be completely impartial.

Again according to O'Brien and Bosc:

[The Speaker] must at all times show, and be seen to show, the impartiality required to sustain the trust and goodwill of the House. The actions of the Speaker may not be criticized in debate or by any means except by way of a substantive motion.

Clearly, the Speaker has a great deal of authority in the House. When we make our choice, we must be very aware of the Speaker's capacity and powers, as well as the obligations imposed on him or her.

• (1125)

Whether we use the voting methods being proposed today or the one used thus far, we are making a very important decision with serious consequences. It is crucial that the Speaker maintain a non-partisan role. We must not avoid the change if it will allow the Speaker to be more independent from the government.

Fortunately, there is a recent example of the introduction of preferential voting in order to improve democracy. My Conservative colleague mentioned it in his speech. I am talking about the House of Lords in the United Kingdom, which adopted such a measure in 2005. It went into effect in 2006. That house went through an impressive democratic shift under the leadership of Prime Minister Tony Blair of the Labour Party. Electing the Speaker by preferential ballot, as we are proposing here today, was an important part of reforming the House of Lords. However, the United Kingdom's

House of Commons kept the secret ballot method for electing its Speaker, which is the method currently used in the Canadian House of Commons.

Australia's Senate and House of Representatives also elect their Speakers as we do here. However, the Australian Senate does it differently than we do; it does not allow the Prime Minister, through the Governor General, to make the selection for members.

New Zealand uses a similar system, except that it does not use a secret ballot. Members vote by recorded division to elect their Speaker. Of all the methods mentioned, that is the only one that could eliminate the possibility of electing a Speaker independently.

Clearly, there is no unanimity among Commonwealth parliaments when it comes to the method for electing Speakers. However, all of those voting systems have one thing in common: the chosen candidate must receive a majority of the votes cast by the elected members, whether it is done by several rounds of voting by secret ballot or a single, preferential secret ballot. Both systems also allow members to have their say without any fear of undue pressure, since the vote is secret.

The advantage of successive balloting, or voting until a candidate has received an absolute majority of the vote, the method currently used by the House, is that it allows voters to elect a single preferred candidate. If more than one round of voting is needed, the members are able to adjust their preference, if they want, based on the remaining candidates. They have time to think about it.

Multi-round balloting has also been used by a number of other entities in Canada, such as unions and community groups, which might lead some believe that this system is the traditional way of voting for a candidate. However, the downside of this system is the time it takes to elect the speaker. The vote generally takes several hours and is longer if more than one ballot is necessary. In short, the more candidates there are, the longer it takes.

The advantage of the proposed preferential voting system is that it reduces the time needed for electing a speaker. However, in this case, it is hard for new MPs to become well acquainted with the process and the candidates. The candidates for speaker can take the floor for five minutes before the election, but that does not leave enough time for MPs to ask questions.

There is a rather impressive turnover in the House of Commons. Last time there were a lot of new Conservative and NDP MPs. New MPs should have the time and opportunity to get to know the candidates.

• (1130)

Both systems have their advantages and the proposed system deserves a closer look. I support the motion and I will read with interest the report of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is indeed interesting that we are debating this particular motion at this time. One of the things I have noticed in sitting on the PROC committee is that there is a great desire from individual members to talk about principled issues related to democracy.

Private Members' Business

I made reference to a different motion, Motion No. 431, in the form of a question to the mover, which I did to highlight the fact that we have another motion dealing with another issue, but they are all about the idea of change and how we can improve the system. It makes me wonder what else we could be doing and having the PROC committee take a look at.

We are talking about the important principle of electing a Speaker, and how the Speaker should ultimately assume the responsibilities of the chair. After we debate that this morning, later on today we will be debating Bill C-23. Tomorrow morning, I will sit in the PROC committee, and we will debate Bill C-23.

I say that because, at the end of the day, I do not question the level of interest members have with regard to the important issue of the Speaker and how the Speaker assumes the responsibilities of the chair. However, we have to recognize that the interest in this goes beyond the chamber. There are many academics, other stakeholders, and average Canadians who take an interest, because it has a significant impact.

One member made reference to the fact that this is, in essence, one of the fundamental principles of our democracy. The legislation we have in Bill C-23 is a greater piece of legislation, I would argue, in terms of the responsibility of members of the House before the PROC committee today. Members need to be aware of what is taking place in the PROC committee today because of the profound negative overall impact it would have, and because of everything that has taken place in the bill's coming before the committee. This is something members need to note.

I just wanted to highlight this issue before I made my comments related to the Speaker, because it is important for us to recognize this whenever we can.

Having said that, as part of a provincial legislature I have had the opportunity to go through both worlds. These are the world where a Speaker is appointed and the world where the Speaker is elected by peers. I would like to share a little bit on that point.

I can go back to 1989 and 1990, when we had an appointed Speaker in the Manitoba legislature. Denis Rocan was the Speaker. Gary Filmon was the premier who appointed him. One of the early decisions that had to be made was with regard to Meech Lake. Members of the chamber might recall how important that decision was. It had a profound impact on the entire country. In essence, it defeated the Speaker recognizing an individual who sat in a third party. By using the word "no", he was ultimately able to prevent the Meech Lake accord from passing, denying Canada that constitutional reform.

I was there at the time. Speaker Rocan, in looking over and watching Mr. Harper because it was a very difficult situation at the time, played a critical role—

● (1135)

Mr. Gerald Keddy: Why would you mention the Prime Minister's name?

The Deputy Speaker: He is not referring to the Prime Minister.

Order, please. The hon. member for Winnipeg North has the floor.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Speaker, the situation Elijah Harper was in was fairly profound. There was a great deal of stress and anxiety about what was taking place in the Manitoba chamber back then, and the Speaker played a critical role in that.

I recall the privatization of the Manitoba telephone system. Again, it was under an appointed Speaker. There were allegations. I must admit I was one of those who levelled allegations that the government used the Speaker's chair to manipulate its own personal agenda. It was felt that, because he was an appointed Speaker, the Speaker was giving favour to the government's agenda in regard to Manitoba telephone system. That was one of the driving factors in the minds of many members of the legislature who said we needed to change the system in the Province of Manitoba. Ultimately, it was one of the reasons that led to our having an elected Speaker in the Manitoba legislature.

We need to recognize just how important a role the Speaker of the House plays. I have witnessed that today in the House of Commons. We have seen how the Speaker will gather clauses in a particular substantial piece of legislation, categorize them, and put them into one vote as opposed to a number of votes. Think of the actual impact that Speaker's decision had on the proceedings of this House. At the very least, any creative member could have had literally dozens of hours of valuable House time being consumed by huge numbers of votes. We saw that before, when a Speaker's ruling on an issue had us virtually sitting around the clock, plus. It was a ruling made by the Speaker of the House.

I can recall shortly after I won the by-election in Winnipeg North, there was a decision in regard to an individual minister's correspondence that dealt with foreign aid and whether or not she had intentionally misled the House by adding the word "not". It came to be known, in fact, that there was some misrepresentation going on.

I believe each and every one of us will recognize how critically important it is that, in moving forward, we get it right as much as possible. We have made significant progress over the years in regard to having the Speaker become elected. Wherever we go from here, whether it is a preferential ballot—or the member even made reference to a first past the post, third time around—or under our current system, we need to take a more holistic approach to the types of changes and reforms that are necessary in the House to allow a better sense of democracy that goes even beyond the Speaker. We could talk about issues of time allocation, committee functions, and the roles they play.

● (1140)

Mr. Brad Butt: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order with respect to debate that took place on February 6 in this House regarding the fair elections act.

I made a statement in the House during the debate that is not accurate. I just want to reflect the fact that I have not personally witnessed individuals retrieving voter notification cards from the garbage cans or from the mailbox areas of apartment buildings. I have not personally witnessed that activity and want the record to properly show that.

● (1145)

The Deputy Speaker: Thank you.

Resuming debate, the hon. member for Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is an honour to participate in today's discussion on Motion No. 489 on the process for electing the Speaker of the House of Commons.

My colleague, the member for Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, has a keen interest in the functioning of this chamber and the rules and processes that govern the House of Commons. I believe he has brought forward the motion with the objective of strengthening one of the key processes in which we participate as members of the House of Commons; that is, the election of our Speaker.

For nearly all of us, voting for the Speaker at the beginning of a Parliament is the very first task we perform as parliamentarians. I thank the member for Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington for bringing forward this motion for debate. While my colleague's motion is quite detailed, I think it is worth summarizing some of the key elements of the motion.

First, for the benefit of those who may be following the debate, it is worth reiterating the present secret ballot system that is used to elect the Speaker as it is currently set out in Standing Order 4. Essentially the process starts with a list of candidates, which includes all members except ministers, party leaders, and those members who have withdrawn their names from consideration.

When it comes time to vote, members of the House write the name of the candidate of their choice on the ballot. After the first round of voting, if no candidate receives more than 50% of the vote, the candidate with the fewest votes and all candidates who receive less than 5% of the vote are removed from the ballot, and a second round of voting takes place. The rounds of voting continue until one candidate receives more than 50% of the vote.

Motion No. 489 would instruct the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs to study and, within six months of the adoption of this motion, table a report regarding the advisability of implementing a preferential ballot for the election of the Speaker.

I should probably also acknowledge my support as far as the preferential ballot is concerned, because I was elected in my own nomination through a preferential ballot.

To give the committee something to study and work from, the member for Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington has kindly set out in his motion a very specific and comprehensive proposal to replace Standing Order 4 with a new process for electing the Speaker. Being an independent entity, the procedure and House affairs committee would be free to recommend any changes to the proposal, I am sure.

It is worth noting that my colleague's proposal does not do away with every aspect of the current system. The ability of MPs to not put their names forward for consideration to be Speaker and the rule that no debate or questions of privilege are allowed during the election of Speaker would be retained.

The key elements of the proposed preferential ballot system are as follows. Members would be provided with a ballot paper that

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contains the full list, in alphabetical order, of the names of those members who are to be considered for the position of Speaker. Rather than voting for a single candidate, members would be able to rank their preferred candidate, their second preferred candidate, and so on.

After the single round of voting, the Clerk would count the number of first preferences recorded in the ballots, and if a candidate had received a majority of first preference votes, then that person would be declared elected. If, after the first count, no candidate had received a majority of first preference votes, the Clerk would eliminate the candidate who received the least number of first preference votes from further counts. For these ballots, the Clerk would treat each second or lower preference as if it were a first preference for the next highest candidate in the order of preference who is not eliminated. This process would be continued until a candidate had obtained a majority of the votes.

The motion sets out further details, but what I have just highlighted is the crux of the proposal of the new system. It would allow for a single ballot to be cast by each member, and eliminate the need for multiple rounds of voting. I believe the member for Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington made it quite clear about the amount of time in history that many of these votes have taken and the exhaustive process.

While I would not want to speak for the member for Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, I see a simple question in the motion. Is there a benefit to be gained by eliminating the potential for multiple rounds of voting and possible jockeying for the position of Speaker? Quite frankly, as I mentioned just a moment ago, historically there has been quite a bit of time consumed by that very action.

• (1150)

I would be remiss if I did not take a moment to address the importance of the motion that we are debating today.

As we all know, the role of the Speaker is key to the proper functioning of this place; therefore, the election of the Speaker should not be taken lightly in any way, shape, or form.

With regard to the importance of the Speaker, it is worth quoting from a source that the Speaker would know all too well, *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, second edition, which states on page 307:

It is in this spirit that the Speaker, as the chief servant of the House, applies the rules. The Speaker is the servant, neither of any part of the House nor of any majority in the House, but of the entire institution and serves the best interests of the House as distilled over many generations in its practices.

Bearing the significance of this quote in mind and the key question at the heart of the motion, we must decide whether the current system for electing the Speaker needs replacing, and specifically whether it should be replaced by the proposed preferential ballot system.

Again, the key question is whether this is a study that procedure and House affairs committee should undertake.

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It is worth noting that already in this session members have decided to adopt two motions that would require the procedure and House affairs committee to study potential changes to the Standing Orders. Motion No. 431, regarding the election of committee chairs, was passed by the House on February 5, 2014. Similarly, Motion No. 428, which calls on the procedure and House affairs committee to recommend changes to the Standing Orders to permit electronic petitions, was passed by the House on January 29, 2014.

On top of those studies, the procedure and House affairs committee is also undertaking a general review of the Standing Orders, both under its own initiative as well as under a motion passed by the House in October 2013.

If Motion No. 489 were to join these other motions at the procedure and House affairs committee for study and the committee ultimately recommended changes to the Standing Orders, I feel it is worth reiterating a key message that came up during the previous debates on Motions Nos. 431 and 428.

The rules of the House are carefully balanced, based on parliamentary principles and traditions, and reflect the interests of all members. Changing these rules should not be a trivial matter. Rather, prudence, due diligence, and wide support among members are needed before making any significant changes to the Standing Orders.

Today's discussion is an important part of the consideration of the motion. I know that all members will take any proposed changes to the Standing Orders seriously. No doubt we will hear members from all sides bring forward their own questions and comments that will eventually shape the debate on Motion No. 489.

In closing, I go back one last time to what I see as the key question that arises when I compare the current secret ballot system for electing the Speaker and the proposed single preferential ballot system set out in Motion No. 489: is there a benefit to be gained by eliminating multiple rounds of voting? I believe that a preferential ballot would greatly increase efficiency over the present exhaustive ballot process we now use.

The next question, though, is whether the system would be strengthened by members' casting a single ballot that contains a clear ranking of their preferred candidates. Although I am clearly in support of Motion No. 489, I am not sure I can stand here today and give a definitive answer to that question. However, if today's motion were to be adopted, then the procedure and House affairs committee could undertake a closer examination of the proposed preferential ballot system and other related considerations and make that determination as a committee that is the master of its own destiny.

Mr. Craig Scott (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise along with my colleagues to speak to Motion No. 489, which I also will be supporting to go to committee.

This motion makes sense, in the sense that it would effectively create an efficiency-based change to our current system to elect Speakers. We currently do it through an exhaustive ballot approach, with multiple ballots. The alternative vote, or preferential voting approach, effectively compresses all of that and asks individual members to indicate in advance whom they would prefer as people fall off the list, until somebody acquires 50% of all of these votes.

I obviously accept, as my colleague who is introducing the motion noted, that there are differences. The mere fact that we vote ballot by ballot gives us time to talk to others and perhaps change our views, even though that is affected by the fact that the ballots are secret, and so the very purpose of multiple ballots seems to be defeated in our current system.

I see this as, effectively, an efficiency measure that makes a great deal of sense from that perspective. The other points that my colleague mentioned on clarifying such things as tie-breaking are also valuable.

I would like to also emphasize that the use of alternative vote—and I will use “alternative vote” and “preferential ballot” rather interchangeably—is not uncommon when it comes to electing individuals who have a functional role to play that is meant to bring together disparate elements within a given organizational setting. Examples are party leaders, presidents of associations, and Speakers of Houses. Lots of examples were given about how this method is also used in other countries, either the multiple ballot approach or the preferential ballot.

The key point that was brought up by my colleague is that we should not be thinking about this as a majority vote system; it is actually a consensus system. It is all about achieving broad support and allowing somebody to cross the 50% threshold, but with a whole series of votes that are second, third, and fourth choices. Therefore, it is a falsehood for us to say this is a majority system in any strong sense; it is all about creating consensus, even though almost always the people who are elected in this system probably have more of a plurality of votes than other candidates, but it is possible for somebody with fewer initial votes to leapfrog them. Nonetheless, it is erroneous to be referring to this as a “majority system”. It is first past the post, whoever gets past that 50% mark, but the 50% is actually not about first choices, and that is important for us to know.

The reason I want to make that clarification is that my colleague whose motion this is ended with a few references outside of the context where I said it is not unusual to have this. He gave the example of Australia, where the House of Representatives is elected according to an alternative vote or preferential ballot. That drags us into the realm of whether alternative vote is a valid way to elect multi-party legislatures, and here I just wanted to spend a bit of time explaining why support for this method in electing a Speaker in no way, from my perspective, translates into support for alternative vote as a way of electing, for example, members of Parliament, unless alternative vote is built into a broader system that accommodates the other needs of a fair voting system.

From my perspective and that of the NDP, obviously that would mean proportional representation. Alternative vote on its own, which currently is the policy of one other party in this House, is actually a regressive way to change our electoral system, and I will not even use the word “reform”. I want to ensure that we stay within the firm boundaries of electing Speakers as why we are open to AV here.

It is very important to note that in 1998 the Jenkins Commission in the United Kingdom made a number of findings. It basically said that alternative vote in the setting of multi-party legislatures, where members are elected in order to serve within a party system as well as represent their constituents, actually can produce and often does produce greater disproportionality than our already problematic single-member plurality system.

• (1155)

I want to be on record as saying that the alternative vote support that I have here is for the idea of electing leaders of parties for Speaker in this context, but I honestly think that there are so many other reasons that AV is not appropriate in other settings that we should confine it to the current context.

[*Translation*]

The Deputy Speaker: The time provided for the consideration of private members' business has now expired, and the order is dropped to the bottom of the order of precedence on the order paper.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

• (1200)

[*English*]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—INSTRUCTION TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON PROCEDURE AND HOUSE AFFAIRS REGARDING BILL C-23

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP) moved:

That it be an instruction to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs that, during its consideration of Bill C-23, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act and other Acts and to make consequential amendments to other Acts, the Committee shall: (a) hear witnesses from, but not limited to, Elections Canada, political parties as defined under the Canada Elections Act, the Minister of State who introduced the Bill, representatives of First Nations, anti-poverty groups, groups representing persons with disabilities, groups representing youth advocates and students, as well as specific groups which have been active in society on elections rules; (b) have the power to travel to all regions of Canada, (Atlantic Canada, Quebec, Ontario, Northern Ontario, the Prairies, British Columbia and the North), including downtown urban settings, rural and remote settings, and that the Committee request that this travel take place in March and April 2014; and (c) only proceed to clause-by-clause consideration of the Bill after these hearings have been completed, with a goal to commence clause-by-clause consideration on Thursday, May 1, 2014.

He said: Mr. Speaker, I rise as much in sorrow as in anger: sorrow in terms of the state of affairs of our democracy. We have been watching, drip by drip, the democracy that we love and respect, and that is respected around the world, being deteriorated, removed, and changed.

I will be splitting my time with the member for Hull—Aylmer.

The government brought in a bill that proposed massive sweeping changes to the way we conduct elections here in Canada. However, not long after we began discussing it, the government moved a motion to shut down debate. During the course of that debate, the government said, "Well, this is not all that important because it is the House discussion, and we want to get this to the committee to do some real work and get things done".

We did not buy that necessarily. We wanted a good, strong, thorough opening debate here so that the committee would have a

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strong foundation to begin its work. However, the Conservatives have a majority and win votes ten times out of ten when they collectively stay together.

Members will appreciate that in a healthy, mature democracy there are two pieces in dealing with legislation. One is the process by which it is analyzed: who gets input, who gets a say, and what the process is for final determination. The other is the substantive part of the bill.

We put a motion on the floor at the committee to say that we would like to have certain witnesses. It is pretty motherhood, quite frankly, in terms of the witnesses we had; there was no shock there, no games, no twist. It was straightforward.

Also, given that there has been no consultation with the opposition parties or the Chief Electoral Officer, we said we would like to make sure the bill had a review that went beyond what would sort of be regular procedures here: we should get this committee out on the road, into the communities and to the people who would be affected by the proposed changes to the election laws, and give them their say.

The government, early on, indicated it might be open to that. There were actually some off-line discussions that lasted about two or three hours. However, in moving forward, as we were setting out how long we had and beginning to lay the foundations of getting negotiations, I was advised on the floor of the House of Commons that the iron curtain had come down from on high and, no; there would not be any public hearings outside the safety and security of the Ottawa bubble.

Our motion is not only reasonable, it also provides a target starting gate for clause-by-clause. Opposition parties do not normally do this. Why? It is because it would box in the timeframe and manoeuvrability.

However, we were trying to instill in the mind of the public, and most importantly in the government, that we really do want to have a negotiated process that involves getting outside the security of the safety bubble in Ottawa. Give people a chance to have their say, give us an adequate number of days and hours to discuss this properly, and then we could reach an agreement. We could then move on and begin to fill in the days we have identified. We could get speakers lined up, do the usual sorts of things, identify the communities we would be going to, and then start talking about who we would see there. All of that should be happening right now.

Those who study the history of this place and our democracy will know that any attempt to change the rules of the election needs to have the buy-in of all those who participate. We just finished the Olympics. Did the host country decide all of the Olympic rules? No; there is equal input from all the participants because it is the rules of the game, and then we enjoy the games.

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•(1205)

That is what used to happen in Canada. It blows my mind that I even have to make the statement, and then the government refused to meet with the Chief Electoral Officer. It is ridiculous. We took one of their reports, and it took over two Parliaments for us to go through every clause and talk about it, have give and take, bring in experts, review the idea, and bring back the experts. However, that was a minority government. That was when there was a much stronger sense of the real Canadian democracy that we know.

We have the floor at committee, call it a filibuster. It is not much of a filibuster; it has only gone one meeting. Nonetheless, we have the floor and we are not relinquishing it. We have sent a message: we are not going to allow any committee travel that we have a say in, in terms of fast-tracking it with unanimous consent. The government members can still do things by motion, but they will have to take the time. We are not giving them the unanimous consent, the way we normally would.

It is not because we are being petulant, but because we believe this is important. As the official opposition, it is our job, our responsibility to Canadians, to put up resistance as a matter of course and in particular when we think something wrong is happening.

With what is at stake here, these are some of the concerns we have. I want to get this on the record. We are concerned that this new legislation will block tens of thousands of students, seniors, aboriginal people, and low-income Canadians from exercising their right to vote.

It is bad enough that most of them are being left out of the economy of Canada, now there are folks who want to keep them out of the elections of Canada. Why? One does not have to stretch their imagination to guess why the government would like those folks to stay home.

It will create loopholes that will allow big money back into Canadian politics. We know, and all Canadians know, that the Conservatives have more money than probably all the other political parties put together, but certainly more than all the other political parties. Money, in and of itself, in a democracy does not outright buy an election, but in a tight one only a few seats need to be bought.

Let us remember, we live in a country with a system right now, as proud as we are of our democracy, in which a party can get less than 40% of the vote and it still gets 100% of the power. That is why this system fails Canadians. At the end of the day, we need to move to proportional representation. That is another debate. That debate will become a reality when the NDP forms the government in 2015 and brings in proportional representation. Then we will be back on the cutting edge of modern democracies.

Lastly, we in the official opposition are concerned that the bill, and we think it says so straight out, will ban Elections Canada from teaching kids about our democracy.

We have these concerns. The government will say that they are not legitimate. Fair enough. Let us go ask the Canadian people what they say. It is their elections. It is their Canada. It is their democracy. They are the ones who stand to be disenfranchised. We need to go to

those communities and give them an opportunity not to only say why this bill affects their rights but also to show us. We should go to the far north.

Those of us who have international election observation missions know the extreme differences between voting in cities and in rural villages and mountains. It is the same here in Canada. People in the far north have a very different political election experience than those who are in cities. We have concerns about what is going to happen in the cities. Let us get out there.

My last comment is this: we can solve this in 30 minutes. I said that I rise more in sorry than in anger. We want to get off the process and get on to the substance of the bill. I believe within 30 minutes we could sit down and negotiate with the government a process that is a fair compromise. We are not going to get everything we want, but neither should the government. Let us negotiate, compromise, come up with a process that we can all live with, give Canadians their say, and then we can get on with debating the actual details of the bill.

•(1210)

However, until the government stops ramming things through, believing it has the right to deny Canadians their voice, we will continue to fight and use every tool we have to bring democracy to this place, even if the Conservatives do not believe in democracy.

Mr. Paul Calandra (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and for Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am sorry you had to suffer that speech by being in the chair.

The reality is that this particular piece of legislation has yet to have a minute in committee. We know that when Bill C-23 was first introduced, the New Democrats, before even reading the bill, had said they would not support it. That was painfully obvious when the critic for democratic reform admitted in front of the press that he had not read the bill and said the NDP was still not going to support it.

Moreover, we had some debate in the House and heard two areas of concern. One was with respect to vouching. I note that on page 25 of the bill, it states that subsection 143(3) would be modified but still provides some leeway for the polling officer with respect to people's addresses. I have yet to hear from the NDP what it would propose. We also know the Minister of State for Democratic Reform has clearly stated that the Chief Electoral Officer would still have the mandate to go out and speak to people.

In the absence of hearing anything from the NDP on what it would do differently in the bill, outside of those two areas, would the hon. member agree that we should start committee hearings on this and get further debate going?

Mr. David Christopherson: Mr. Speaker, I stand to be corrected, but I do not recall hearing in those remarks any mention of the Canadian people or of giving citizens their say. No, the Conservatives want to make this about another battle in the bubble between the government and the opposition and to have people say, after looking at it, that it is just a political squabble and it does not matter. That is exactly what their game plan is.

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The member did not talk one bit about why it is okay to deny Canadians their right to have a say on their election in the places they live. That is the issue before us. This motion is exactly the one we made in committee. We are not getting the results we need at committee, so we brought it to the highest authority in Canada, the Parliament of Canada, because we want Canadians to have their say. The member did not address that and that is the issue before us: Canadians have a right to have a say about their democracy and their elections, and we are not letting go.

• (1215)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Liberal Party has been very clear on this issue. At the end of the day, Liberals believe that the manner this legislation has been brought in is an absolute and total disgrace. The government should have worked not only with Canadians but also with Elections Canada officials and had proper consultation. Many, including myself, would argue that it should have consulted Canadians prior to introducing the bill. The government brought it in with time allocation, limiting members on both sides of the House from being able to contribute to the debate. Now the bill is stuck in committee. Hopefully, it will be stuck in committee for a long time.

What Liberals take great umbrage with is that the government feels it does not have to do any form of real, genuine consultations outside of Ottawa. We too have argued that we need to go into all regions of our country.

Maybe the member could further explain the time limitations he has put in the motion.

Mr. David Christopherson: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague from Winnipeg North, who is also a member of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, which is the committee seized with this bill.

I want to say that the third party has been very supportive of ensuring that we push the government to bring Canadians in. I would also underscore the hon. member's comment that we would all be better served not only had the Chief Electoral Officer and Elections Canada been consulted but also had Canadians been given the opportunity to provide input at the front end of this.

The whole idea of the government is that it can just ram this through. During the Olympics, it brought in massive overhauls and, New Democrats think, problematic changes that are going to hurt Canadians' right to vote. At the same time, it dropped a budget and brought in a full overhaul of the immigration system. This is not coincidence.

The process that New Democrats have outlined gives us two months to travel the country and an opportunity to start doing clause-by-clause before May 1. That is ample time to give Canadians their say, allow the committee to do its work, and have the bill, if it is good enough, in place for the next election.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nycole Turmel (Hull—Aylmer, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to support the excellent motion moved by my colleague from Hamilton Centre. This motion would allow Canadians to express their views on a bill that, in its present form, is anti-democratic.

In light of the irregularities that occurred in the last election, it is obvious today that serious reform is needed to guarantee the integrity of our electoral process.

Considering what we have seen over the past two years with the party in power, I am not surprised, but I am very disappointed that the Conservatives did not seize this opportunity to strengthen our democracy. Instead, they have chosen to use this reform to serve their own election interests. Even worse, they are trying to sneak their bill through without consulting anyone.

Why cut debate short only one hour after introducing the bill? Is that democracy?

My colleague's motion is quite simple. The Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs should be allowed to do its job and make recommendations after consulting experts, the groups concerned and especially Canadians. That is true democracy.

In a democracy, the people are part of the discussion, organizations working in the field are given a chance to express their views and the opinions of experts are taken into account in order to make an informed decision.

To achieve this goal, the members of the parliamentary committee have no choice but to meet with Canadians in every region of our country. That is an obligation and a responsibility for us as representatives of the people. Why is the Conservative government putting up obstacles? This type of travel is commonplace. Parliamentary committees must meet with witnesses who are unable to come to Ottawa.

If the Standing Committee on International Trade can travel to Belgium and France—which is fine by me—for its study of the Canada-European Union free trade agreement, then I really do not see why the government would be against this committee leaving Ottawa to hold hearings on an issue as important as electoral reform.

I cannot for the life of me understand why the Minister of State for Democratic Reform did not think it would be a good idea to consult the experts before proposing changes to the Canada Elections Act. He did not even ask the top official at Elections Canada, the Chief Electoral Officer, for his opinion. That is just unbelievable. We are fortunate to have so many experts within the public service and society in general, so why did the government choose to do without their expertise?

This botched approach strongly suggests that the government is not in fact seeking the best possible electoral reform for Canadians, but the best possible electoral reform, or should I say deformation, for the Conservative Party.

Canadians will gain nothing if the government reduces the Chief Electoral Officer's powers.

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After the robocall scandal and the whole “Pierre Poutine” affair, dozens of my constituents emailed me to say they wanted us to find out what really happened with that sordid story. The people of Hull—Aylmer and the rest of Canada want to have confidence in their electoral system. They want Parliament to take real action to ensure that such fraud never happens again.

That is the same reason the Chief Electoral Officer asked for more power, including the power to request financial documents related to elections and to compel witnesses to testify.

What does this bill actually do? The opposite. It removes a number of Elections Canada's powers. It even prohibits Elections Canada from promoting voter participation. That is shameful.

● (1220)

Canadians will gain nothing if the government makes the voting process more difficult for vulnerable individuals. Democracy is founded on the fact that each vote counts. Social status, age and occupation have no bearing; we are all equal. Canadians take that principle to heart.

We cannot accept that the government is putting up roadblocks for seniors, students and members of aboriginal communities when they wish to exercise their right to vote. However, that is exactly what this bill does by proposing to eliminate vouching and the use of voter ID cards as proof of identity. This measure does nothing more than impede thousands of voters.

In 2011, more than 100,000 people used vouching in order to vote because they did not have a valid ID card. I would like to provide at least example of this.

Take, for example, an 85-year-old woman who has always voted, from the time she was 18. She has no photo identification, she does not drive, she has no ID that proves her address and the electricity bills, heating bills and so on are all in her husband's name. In 2011, her husband vouched for her. Under this bill, she will not be able to vote in 2015. Seniors are being put at a disadvantage, and their access to democracy is being restricted. That is very important to note. It is happening. Their voices count and they need to be defended.

Canadians will gain nothing if the government changes funding rules and increases the influence money has on Canadian politics. By increasing the maximum threshold for individual donations, allowing candidates to pump significant amounts of money into their own campaigns, and amending the list of election expenses that count towards spending limits, the Conservative Party is simply going through the back door to give itself the right to spend more than its adversaries. The Conservatives are putting their interests ahead of concern for an electoral process that is based on the quality of ideas, not wallet size.

What do Canadians have to gain from this electoral reform? The response is quite simple: nothing. They have nothing to gain, since this is a partisan bill designed by and for the Conservative Party. This bill is an affront to the democracy we know and love in Canada. Those are not my words, nor are they the words of an opposition member. Marc Mayrand, the Chief Electoral Officer, called this bill an affront to democracy.

Our democracy is worth protecting. As I said at the beginning, I am very honoured to support my colleague's motion, since protecting our democracy starts with getting back to the basics: listening to the public we are here to represent.

● (1225)

[*English*]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to get some clarification from the member regarding the NDP motion. Could she expand on why the motion reads that the New Democrats want to go through it clause by clause by May 1?

The idea that we consult broadly across Canada is truly important to the Liberals. We would like to get a commitment from the government that would see us go to all of the different regions of Canada, thereby allowing Canadians to have their say on a very important law the Conservatives are proposing to change.

The Conservatives have not done their homework. They have not consulted prior to debate. They have not consulted with Canadians or the Chief Electoral Officer. They have not worked in co-operation with opposition parties, given the fundamental importance of democracy and how critically important our election laws are.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nycole Turmel: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his support of this motion and for raising some very important points.

He mentioned the goal of doing a clause-by-clause study by May 1. It is very clear, and Mr. Mayrand has also expressed this. He said that we must absolutely conclude our consultations before May 1, 2014, to be ready for 2015.

Our motion was very clear about the best way to go about that. We identified places where we could go to hear what Canadians have to say and to have time to explain to them the shortcomings of this bill.

I appreciate the opportunity to clarify that point.

[*English*]

Hon. Michelle Rempel (Minister of State (Western Economic Diversification), CPC): Mr. Speaker, the form and substance of the motion before the House today appear to be a matter for committee business, and so I wonder why my colleague has decided to put the motion forward. To me, it seems that we should just get on with business at committee, hear witnesses, and start examining the bill.

I really do not understand the purpose of the motion, given that the committee is the master of its own business and that, from my understanding, there have been a lot of a discussions about what witnesses should be coming forward and allowing the clerk to be do so. To me this seems like a big delaying tactic preventing the committee from getting going.

I wonder whether she would respond to that.

● (1230)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nycole Turmel: Mr. Speaker, I am not surprised to hear that question.

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First, over the past two years, we have seen nothing but gag orders to prevent us from discussing bills in depth.

Second, since our country is so large and we are talking about major democratic electoral reform, it is very important that Canadians have both the opportunity to share their opinions and the time to do so.

As for the deadline, we were very clear. We did not ask for a one- or two-year extension, but instead suggested that this be done in the next three months, to meet the needs of the Chief Electoral Officer. We will be prepared to discuss it on May 1. That gives ample time to carry out the reform, which will be done in a democratic fashion.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse (Louis-Saint-Laurent, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to start by thanking my excellent colleague from Hull—Aylmer for her speech. I was lucky to work with her for so long as members of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. I know that she understands these issues and that she is really concerned about the proposed reform.

I would like to ask her a question about the committee travel she mentioned in her speech. Two years ago, I participated in a diplomatic mission to Ukraine with the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. It was extremely interesting.

Our goal was to hold public hearings and produce a report on the state of democracy in that country. We travelled to many regions of Ukraine and heard witnesses from all walks of life. I think that undertaking those consultations was an excellent initiative that gave us a better understanding of what was going on over there.

We have before us now a bill to reform the Canada Elections Act. We think it would be a good idea to do the same kind of consultation because we understand the importance of consulting people from all walks of life before making changes to our democratic system. However, I am having a hard time understanding why the government would carry out consultations in other countries but not even bother to do so in our own.

Can she comment on that?

Ms. Nycole Turmel: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for raising that point, which is really what it all comes down to for the NDP.

We want to enable everyone to see the differences among the regions and the provinces and to express their opinion. Democracy is all about giving people opportunities to express themselves. They may not be able to come to Ottawa to do that, so we have to go to them. Ukraine is a great example of that.

I would like the party currently in power—that is right, currently—to explain why it is so strongly opposed to that kind of consultation. Its stance is preventing the committee members from doing a thorough job.

[*English*]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will begin my remarks by addressing the issue of vouching. It is a subject opposition members have raised, and I would like to point them to some key facts.

Canadians can use 39 different forms of identification to prove who they are and where they live. If they fail to bring any of those, the law allows someone to vouch for them. Due to massive irregularities in the use of vouching, the fair elections act would end the practice. To highlight these irregularities, I pointed to a compliance review commissioned by Elections Canada as evidence of the problem. It included audits from four ridings in which irregularities in vouching averaged 25% of cases. Some have questioned this fact and its importance. The fact comes from page 15 of the Elections Canada compliance review I mentioned. The author was Harry Neufeld, the former Chief Electoral Officer for the Province of British Columbia.

Some correctly point out that the national rate of irregularities is actually 42%. The difference arises from the fact that the 25% number is an average of just four ridings, and the 42% number is a nationwide figure. At worst, I have understated the problem. Either way, both numbers are correct and both are shockingly high.

Are they important? Some argue that they are just minor paperwork glitches that have no importance with respect to the integrity of the vote. Yet that is not what the author of the report found. Mr. Neufeld defined irregularities as “serious errors”. Those are his words. They are not small details but are serious errors.

This is how he officially defined it:

An “irregularity” is a failure by an election officer to administer safeguards demonstrating that a voter is entitled to receive a ballot.

Some have correctly pointed out that this failure does not automatically mean that the voter is not eligible to vote. By that logic, we would not require any form of identification rules whatsoever. Instead, we would put the onus on the elections official to prove that a person is not eligible. Someone could walk in and assert his or her identity or address, and unless officials could prove beyond a doubt otherwise, the person would cast a ballot. In that instance, there would be literally thousands of fraudulent votes, and there would be no way to stop it, because one cannot prove a negative, nor should we expect elections officials to try.

ID requirements exists for a reason. Failure to properly identify voters, as so often happens with vouching, allows people to vote when they are not eligible or to vote more than once.

It should not be a guessing game, yet that is what vouching has become in nearly half of the cases where it is used. The facts contained in Elections Canada's own compliance report state:

Serious errors, of a type the courts consider “irregularities” that can contribute to an election being overturned, were found to occur in 12 percent of all Election...cases involving voter registration, and 42 percent of cases involving...vouching.

The latter point is particularly devastating. Judges do not overturn election results for nothing, yet the report states that vouching irregularities, which occurred 50,735 times in the last election, are serious enough for a judge to consider doing so. That number of 50,735 irregularities related to vouching comes from page 69 of the aforementioned report.

Business of Supply

That is not all. While vouching is theoretically intended to extend the right to vote, it may ultimately rob people of that very same right. When courts invalidate votes because of serious irregularities, there is a chance that legitimate ballots can be invalidated along with them. In other words, a contaminated process can deprive even honest votes from being counted at all.

• (1235)

Why not simply administer vouching more competently instead of ending it altogether, as some ask? The answer to the question of quality assurance seems to be addressed as well in the Neufeld report. Let me quote:

During two of these elections, quality assurance programs involving Onsite Conformity Advisors...were applied. However, vouching irregularities still averaged 21 percent during the OCA monitored elections. This indicates that overly complex procedures cannot be remedied simply by improved quality assurance.

To translate, in the four ridings audited, there were irregularities in 25% of the cases where vouching was used. One in four vouched votes had an irregularity. The compliance review then asked if the number of irregularities would be reduced if there was extra supervision to enforce compliance. Sadly, it only reduced them from 25% to 21%. Therefore, even with extra efforts to impose better compliance, one in five cases where vouching was used involved an irregularity.

It is also important to note the key principle here. Yes, we must allow every eligible voter to cast a ballot. That is why the fair elections act proposes another day of advance voting and would require Elections Canada to advertise ID requirements so that people would know what to bring.

Let us consider another way someone's vote can be taken away, and that is through the fraudulent vote of someone else. If an honest voter casts a ballot for candidate A, and a fraudulent voter casts a ballot for candidate B, the fraudulent vote mathematically cancels out the weight of the honest vote. As such, fraudulent voting is a form of disenfranchisement and is one Canadians expect us to combat.

These are serious problems. Our identity laws must be serious as well.

Let me turn my attention to the issue of fundraising. The opposition has raised concerns about the decision to exclude in the fair elections act the cost of fundraising calls and letters to previous donors from the overall spending limit. This criticism, to start with, is at best hypocritical. Both the Liberals and the NDP exempted fundraising calls from spending limits in their own leadership races. They had no problem with the principle of exempting these costs in their own internal party practices. Why do they not believe that those same principles should apply in a general election?

I should also note that fundraising expenses are already partly exempted from the spending limit under subsection 407(2) of the existing Canada Elections Act, so it is not a foreign or exotic concept that there would be some exemptions. The reason is that there is a difference between campaigning, which is to seek out votes, and raising money for campaigning.

People do not put mileage on their cars while they are standing there putting gas in. They put mileage on their cars when the wheels

start turning. That is the fundamental difference between the two, and that is the reason both the NDP and the Liberals have made the decision that fundraising costs should not be included under spending caps within their own leadership races. We are rendering consistent with their practices the law of the land.

The number of donors to a party is very small, so calls directed to them could not substantially help get out the vote, not to mention that donors are the most motivated to vote and the least in need of a reminder call. A suggestion that people could use a fundraising call as an indirect effort to finance their entire "get out the vote" operations is completely impractical and devoid of basic knowledge of how campaigns actually work and the demonstrable, documented facts about how many donors are actually out there in the universe.

Furthermore, the fair elections act includes a provision that deals with the purpose of the call. The purpose must be fundraising. It cannot be something else. If the purpose were actually to get out the vote, the call would not be exempted from the spending cap. Concerns about a call being used for something other than its intended purpose are therefore not valid.

• (1240)

The fair elections act also includes compliance measures that would make it hard to skirt these rules. Under the voter contact registry, which the fair elections act would create, unsolicited phone calls to individuals to raise funds for a registered party or candidate would be captured as voter contact calling services. That means that they would have to be specifically reported on a candidate's expense return. Furthermore, the script would have to be kept for an entire year. Therefore, if anyone were to allege that a purported fundraising call was actually designed to do voter turnout, then the investigator could look at the script to ascertain what the purpose of the call actually was.

These would all be new compliance requirements that did not exist prior to the fair elections act.

Furthermore, it would require an external compliance audit that each party would be subjected to. Parties would have to hire an external auditor who would look at all the expenses and claims of the party to ascertain if they had been properly reported, and if they had not been, the commissioner, as the watchdog of elections law, would be able to undertake a law enforcement investigation.

All election period spending by registered parties is eligible for a 50% rebate from taxpayers. If fundraising calls are not exempt from election spending, taxpayers will be stuck paying half the cost of fundraising calls and letters. We judge that inappropriate. Parties across the way might believe that taxpayers should be forced to pay for half their fundraising costs. We in the Conservative Party disagree.

According to proposed sections 348.16 and 348.19 of the Canada Elections Act that we propose in clause 77, political parties would be required to keep a copy of scripts and recordings used to make unsolicited voter contact calls for up to one year. As I stated earlier, this could become an investigative tool for the commissioner or the watchdog of elections.

Business of Supply

The fair elections act would require tough new requirements for audits of party expenses. There would also be firm limits on what parties could spend during a campaign. They should not have to use up those limits to raise the money in the first place.

I return to the issue of the purpose test. Under proposed subsection 376(3), there is something called a purpose test for the exclusion of what would constitute an election expense. Calls would have to be made for the purpose of soliciting monetary contributions from past supporters. The more a party relied on these calls to obtain other forms of support from past supporters, the higher the risk that they would be investigated and potentially prosecuted for having failed to submit a complete election expense return. As required by proposed subsection 376(3), the calls would have to be made for the purpose of soliciting monetary contributions in order for their costs to be excluded from the mandatory reporting as an election expense. This would thoroughly deal with the false allegations of the opposition on the subject of fundraising costs.

Allow me to move to the subject of section 18 of the existing act. Our change in the fair elections act to section 18 would require Elections Canada to focus its advertising budget on the basics of voting: where, when, and what ID to bring; and what special tools are available to help disabled Canadians cast their ballots. We know that there have been serious deficiencies in Elections Canada's communication of this basic information in the past, because its own data shows as much. According to Elections Canada's own surveys, 50% of youth were not even aware that they could vote before election day. They were not aware that they could vote in an advance ballot, by mail, or by going to a local Elections Canada office.

• (1245)

Thus a student who is occupied with studies or work on election day might not know they could have voted earlier and, as a result of that logistical obstacle, they miss the chance to cast their ballot altogether. Some 73% of aboriginal youth are unaware of this information.

I think it is an appalling failure that Elections Canada has not informed youth of these voting opportunities, especially considering that the agency says it has dedicated an inordinate amount of its budget to informing Canadians. If that is really the purpose, then it is not currently being fulfilled. The fair elections act would ensure that it would be, by focusing the advertising budget of Elections Canada on the basics of voting, the information that people require to cast their ballots.

The act would not prevent the CEO from speaking publicly. He is not only allowed to speak publicly under the law but is required to do so under sections 534, 535, and others, and that would not change in the fair elections act.

I should add that all of the data that Elections Canada provides on the reasons people decided not to vote in the last election point in the direction that the fair elections act is headed. Let me quote from an Elections Canada report on the May 2, 2011 election: "In 2011, 60% of non-voters cited everyday life issues as the reason for not voting." While voter turnout increased in 2011 when compared to 2008, there is more work to be done to increase participation in Canada's democracy.

What were these everyday life issues? The report indicates that 17% of people were travelling, 13% had a busy work or school schedule, 10% were just too busy, and 7% lacked information. Those are some examples of the composition of the overall 60% who said that everyday life issues prevented their voting.

Let us break this down. First, we have a solution for travellers. One, they could vote by mail and two, they could vote in advance. However, as I stated earlier, half of young people are not even aware of that. Why does Elections Canada not inform them? The fair elections act would make sure it does.

If a person is too busy, again they can vote in the advance ballot like two million other Canadians did, and the fair elections act would give them an extra day on which to cast their early ballot.

People lack information, which is the case for 7% of non-voters. That is exactly why the fair elections act would require the agency to give people the basic information on voting, where, when and what ID to bring.

The fair elections act looks at the data that Elections Canada provided on the reasons people are not voting and provides direct, tangible solutions that would help people cast their ballot. That is exactly what the law should do; it should respond to data, and respond it would.

I should also point out that the current promotional campaigns of Elections Canada have failed. When they started, the turnout was 75%. Now, roughly five elections later, it is 61%, and the drop has been most precipitous among the people whom the Elections Canada campaigns claim to help.

Are we to suggest that Elections Canada's ads have actually turned people off voting? Of course not. We are suggesting, though, that it has failed to give people the basic information they require to vote. That is not my personal conclusion; that is the result of looking at the data Elections Canada has put on its own website, and we are responding to that data.

I look forward to debating that bill as we move forward. We have had an excellent debate so far, and I look forward to hearing the suggestions of members of the opposition, the government side, and members of civil society as the bill enters rigorous study at committee.

• (1250)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse (Louis-Saint-Laurent, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the minister for his comments today. However, to be honest, I would have liked to hear him talk a bit more about the motion before us, since what the NDP wants is for Canadians to be consulted about the major changes to the Canada Elections Act.

Business of Supply

Since this bill was introduced, the minister has spoken a lot about voter turnout among youth. He stresses that he wants to increase this as much as possible. The best way to figure out how to increase voter turnout among youth is to ask them why they did not vote, what prevented them from voting, and so on. He cited statistics about the fact that, for example, most young people did not know that they could vote in advance. If, on election day, that young person, that student, shows up and cannot vote because the vouching system no longer exists, the reality is that this person who has the right to vote, who is a Canadian citizen with the right to vote, will not be able to vote.

It is very important to be able to consult Canadians, to ask them what the real problems are. These young people will be able to tell us exactly what will help improve voter turnout. I think that is the only way to get an idea of how to improve the Canada Elections Act.

I would like the minister to comment on that.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Speaker, Elections Canada accepts 39 forms of identification, including student cards. That is just one example; Elections Canada accepts many other documents. However, we are changing the legislation to compel Elections Canada to inform the public of the types of identification required. Young people should have this information before the election so that they can go and vote with the proper identification in hand.

The fair elections act will make that happen.

•(1255)

[English]

I should also point out that we need to help disabled Canadians cast their ballots. The fair elections act would require that the agency inform disabled Canadians of the special tools available to help them cast their ballots. For example, the Canadian National Institute for the Blind has stated:

Voting is a democratic right for all Canadians. We are happy to have the opportunity to work hand in hand with Government representatives to increase accessibility and awareness of elections amongst the blind and partially sighted community. We need to empower all Canadians to participate in the democratic process and make choices about their leadership....

We could not agree more.

**Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Wind-
sor, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, later on I will talk about the issue of the addresses on particular IDs. First, however, I note that many municipalities across this country have engaged the idea of online voting, some with a great success. A good place for us to explore the idea of online voting is Elections Canada. However, my understanding is that it would be more difficult under this legislation for Elections Canada to embark on a study or a pilot project to find out more about online voting and best practices, and so on, using examples not only from this country but also from others around the world.

Would the minister agree that Elections Canada would be a good place to do these pilot projects? And would this bill not disallow it from doing that?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Speaker, no and no.

On the first point, no I do not think Elections Canada should be allowed to test a pilot project on online voting. Quite frankly, it does

not have a legal mandate to do so, and there are very serious security questions about the integrity of online voting, which we should not allow to happen without a debate in Parliament first. Right now, the law would require that such a pilot project be approved by two committees of the House of Commons. The fair elections act would require both Houses themselves to approve any such pilot project.

Here I would note that Elections Canada made 165,000 serious errors or irregularities in the last election. That is with a traditional old-fashioned ballot system. Imagine if those kinds of mistakes were transmitted to an online voting system. Imagine the mayhem that could unfold on election day if there were serious technical problems related to online voting.

There might be a case in the future to consider it. However, right now it is at best unproven, and at worst very dangerous, and the agency should have to prove its case to Parliament before trying.

Hon. Michelle Rempel (Minister of State (Western Economic Diversification), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I again point out that the substance of the motion before the House today deals with committee business. For folks who are watching today who may not be familiar with the parliamentary process, once a bill is sent to committee, it is examined there, along with testimony by witnesses from civil society, and folks from departments, et cetera, who come to testify before members of Parliament who look at the substance of the bill.

Could my colleague comment specifically on whether or not parliamentary committee in Ottawa would have the ability to hear testimony from witnesses just like we do with any other bill? Frankly, I am not sure why we are spending a day debating the substance of committee work in the House of Commons. I am hoping that the member could perhaps speak to the ability of the committee to get this work done, and perhaps question why we are not just getting on with the business of reviewing the bill within committee, where it is right now.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Speaker, the committee should do its work on the bill, and that is what we are proposing. Let us get to work. Let us bring in all the best experts in the field and have them testify. They can come from right across the country. Committees have budgets to bring witnesses here. We can put together a long list of them for an exhaustive consultation on the bill, so that everyone in the country with something to say on it can feed their input into the extensive system we have. Why do we not get to work on it? Let us get busy.

I have already been to committee to testify. Jean-Pierre Kingsley, the former CEO of Elections Canada, has said that the fair elections act is already an A minus. Let us work together at committee to make it an A plus.

•(1300)

[Translation]

Ms. Éline Michaud (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I find the comments made by the Minister of State for Democratic Reform rather strange.

Business of Supply

We know very well that the Conservatives have a majority on the committee, so if they do not want to hear from certain witnesses, we will not hear from them. If the minister thinks his bill is so good, why will he not take it across Canada to hear directly from Canadians and hear what they have to say? I think he needs to hear what people think, especially people whose right to vote is being taken away, particularly students.

Earlier, I heard some people shouting about the use of student cards to vote. I think those people have not been in school for many years. Indeed, since a student card does not show the person's address, it alone cannot be used to vote. Some people cannot afford to get the necessary identification, because there are some fees involved. Low income Canadians cannot necessarily get a birth certificate, for instance. I think they deserve to be heard by the minister and they should not be ignored because of the internal procedures governing committees.

I would really like to know why the minister will not support our motion.

[*English*]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Speaker, I can just name a few: a driver's licence; health card; passport; certificate of citizenship; birth certificate; Indian status card; social insurance number; old age security card; student ID card; provincial or territorial identification card; liquor identification card; medical health care clinic card; credit or debit card; employee card; public transportation card; library card; Canadian Forces ID card; Veterans Affairs Canada health card; Canadian Blood Services card; Canadian National Institute for the Blind ID card; a firearms possession and acquisition licence; a fishing, trapping or hunting licence; an outdoors or wildlife card; a hospital bracelet worn by residents of long-term care facilities; a parolee identification card; a television service bill, or a utility bill, including for public utilities commissions, like hydro, gas, and water; bank cards; vehicle ownership cards; correspondence from a school, college, or university; a statement of government benefits like employment insurance or social insurance; an attestation of residence issued by a first nations authority; a government cheque or cheque stub; a pension plan statement of benefits; a residential lease, mortgage statement, income or property assessment, property insurance; or a letter from a public curator.

I could go on and on. There are 39 different forms of ID that people could use. Ideally I will not have to list them all because the fair elections act would require Elections Canada to inform every Canadian of what ID they need to bring.

Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windor, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, here is the issue.

Mr. Brad Butt: How about a death certificate?

Mr. Scott Simms: Mr. Speaker, my hon. colleague from Mississauga—Streetsville joked about having a death certificate. I do not think that is very nice of him to say. He should probably reconsider what he says in the House. That is not very nice really. I heard you the first time—

The Deputy Speaker: Order. The member has been here long enough to know that he has to direct his comments to the Chair and not to other members of the House.

Mr. Scott Simms: My apologies, Mr. Speaker. I should apologize if my speech interrupted his heckling.

Sometimes debate just degrades itself. I am sure the member did not mean to say that a death certificate could be involved here. It may seem kind of funny, but let us be serious.

I want to stick to the cards issue for just a moment. I have my health card right here; normally I would table it, but considering I will probably need it, I am just going to keep it with me for the moment. However, there is no address on it, and I think a lot of these identification pieces do not have an address.

A lot of people around the country still use their voter ID card, especially people who are older or who are in rural areas. They think that will suffice, but it does not. What I am getting at is that sometimes people continue their voting patterns from one election to the next. Despite the best efforts by Elections Canada to communicate information about the ID out there, sometimes people do not receive that information. Some are people who are in areas that do not get high-speed Internet or who do not have access to high-speed Internet. It is not only cost prohibitive but is just prohibitive in general.

I will talk about vouching for a moment. I think we have seen the fraud that has taken place, and I agree that there are problems with vouching. Every democracy has a problem with its voting system when it comes to this sort of thing, and vouching is one of those areas where people could take advantage. However, the problem is that vouching has been thrown out completely. That is not the solution here. What we need to do is look at vouching itself and make sure that the people who are vouching are the right people to do so. Officials within Elections Canada could be given a greater role.

There are people who just do not have the required ID. People may not have a job, or they may be in a circumstance in a rural area where maybe there was only seasonal work. They may be retired. They may be illiterate. The government can talk about 39 pieces of ID or 300 pieces of ID, but when even the most basic identification does not contain addresses, it is a problem. That is why vouching should exist for these people, and for students and first nations. It is unfortunate that the government has done this.

Let me go to the core of what we are arguing here, which was put forward by the NDP in talking about the discussion to take place with the country. If we have this discussion, we could see a perfect illustration of just how bad an idea it is to throw out vouching completely.

There are places where this happened in by-elections, such as Etobicoke Centre. We could hear from people there. We could also hear from first nations people who say that if this happens, if vouching is thrown out, many people will be disenfranchised right away. That is it. That is all. There is no recourse.

Business of Supply

That is a whole generation of people who will not be voting. Chances are that if they do not vote early on, they are more likely not to vote in the future. As we know, as a smart person once said, bad governments get elected by good people who do not vote. Maybe that is the case we have here.

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: No, that was Chrétien's.

Mr. Scott Simms: Again, Mr. Speaker, I apologize. I know sometimes my speech interrupts heckling, so I will just proceed. I would like to talk about how getting out across this country is a good idea, but the best idea was lost.

The government keeps talking about taking this to committee, having a full discussion and talking about everything, putting it all on the table, talking to experts and the people affected, and if we need to change it, we will change it.

However, that is a disingenuous argument, because that is not how the system works. That is not the spirit of what we do here. I am talking about process now, and I know a lot of people complain that I talk too much about process, but it is very important.

During debate—which was cut short by the government, incidentally—we talked about the pros and cons of this bill. I was the first person in this party to speak. Actually, there were only three speakers to start with before time allocation was put on it, and I was the third speaker. I said at the time that I was not going to say definitively that I was supporting it or was against it until I had listened to the debate.

● (1305)

There are a lot of things that I do not like in this bill, but I will still debate it and hold out for any misgivings that I have to be dispelled by the minister or anybody else here. I will give the minister credit for being here during the debate. That is not often done by every minister, so I congratulate him for that.

Here is the issue. It is disingenuous to say that we can change this bill once it gets into committee. That is because we had a vote at second reading, and the whole idea of voting at second reading is to tell Parliament that we accept this bill in principle. If we take the bill and vote yes at second reading, we have genuinely said yes to it and we are now going to fix the edges of it to make it fit into the law of our country.

We might learn that a few words need to be changed. This is one area. Maybe the elections commissioner could have a few more tools or maybe we could change in a certain direction, but the whole point is that we cannot make fundamental and major changes to the bill, because it has already passed second reading. Parliament has said yes in principle.

Members might say that it does not matter and that the committee is its own destiny. They might say that the committee can change the bill, and that is fine. They might say that the majority can agree to change it, and that is fine. However, it cannot be done like that, because it is your call, Mr. Speaker. If somebody makes an amendment and even if every member on the committee decides to accept it and make the change, you can rule that they are not allowed to do that, and we have no say.

It has been done before. I have seen it. That is the problem.

How do we get around it? I am glad someone asked. What we can do is send it to committee before second reading. Then the bill can be changed in a very substantial way.

The government has already done that. It did that with its first environmental bill. It put it to the committee before second reading. Obviously the government believes there are circumstances that will dictate that this can be done. However, this time it is not the case.

What are we left with? Yes, we do want to take this across the country and get the advice of others. We want to see and illustrate what this legislation will mean. I just talked to the member about online voting; there is a good example.

We can say that online voting is open to abuse, and to a great extent I agree. It is not an easy thing to do. People can vote multiple times. As I have always said, the thing is that with technology nowadays, it is so easy to circumvent it. If members put a digital lock on certain cultural material on their laptops, iPads, or tablets, I will give my 19-year-old son 48 hours to get around it.

The point is that although many things could go wrong with online voting, that does not mean that we ignore it. There are municipalities across the country that are fully engaged in this approach. Right now, the way it works is that if Canadians feel that everybody is voting online, from cities across the country to *Canadian Idol*, there must be a way that democracy can be exercised to the point where online voting has become a secure method.

The option of doing that needs to be explored. Maybe we could conduct a pilot project, and the perfect people to do that would be the people who know the process of voting. If we want to engage people who are experts in the world of technology, especially the security of technology, the organization to do that would be Elections Canada. We might think, according to this new bill, that both Houses would have to vote to do that. There is nothing wrong with that either, but what I would like to do is give Elections Canada some of the tools by which it could do that.

Let us face it: some form of online voting is coming. Whether we like it or not, it is coming, so we have to look at ways to engage the technology that we are presented with.

● (1310)

What I find ironic, though, is that the government will stop at no lengths to open up government to online services. In other words, “You want to apply for EI? Go online.”

If the government is so paranoid about the security of online services, why does it keep pushing for us to apply online for EI, cards, firearms acquisition, or whatever? It is all out there. We can do it all online. The Conservatives get to practise government in a cheaper way. They have to cut somewhere, so this is how they do it.

However, the fundamental concept is that if it is so secure for the Government of Canada to engage citizens in everything else, why can it not look at online voting? Instead there is just an outright dismissal of the idea.

I would say to the government that allowing these people and the election commissioner to have that ability is a fundamental way of empowering Elections Canada to do its job.

When I was in Mongolia, one of the things they talked about was Elections Canada. They like the fact that we have this institution called Elections Canada that is separate from the government and that acts in its own way to ensure the integrity of our exercise of democracy.

In Europe they say the same thing. They like Elections Canada and they like what we are doing, but they are not as eager to say now that it is as good as it was, and the fundamental reason is within this bill.

The government has taken the elections commissioner, the person who gets to the bottom of any fraud that is taking place, from Elections Canada and put him into the public prosecutions office. Now, on the surface, the independence of that particular commissioner sounds like a good thing as, if I may push the analogy even further, the minister wants to have this person be the ultimate referee in a hockey game, so making that person independent makes him more of a referee.

What he does not tell us is that he put him on the ice as a referee but he took his whistle away from him. It is hard to go around yelling people at who are doing wrong. They will not hear him unless he has a whistle.

The fundamental tool of applying to a judge to get information is not only what we believe is the right tool to have, but the Chief Electoral Officer and the elections commissioner both want it.

Mr. Speaker, you are doing your job right now. You know a heck of a lot more than I do about what gives you the best tools available to do your job. That is why you sit in that chair.

If the elections commissioner and the Chief Electoral Officer say that applying to a judge is the tool they want to compel people to provide witness testimony, that is the tool they want. They cannot even ask. They feel that it gives the commissioner too much power, that they do not really need that power, and that it is too excessive.

Well, that is for a judge to decide. That is why they do not have that power outright. They apply to the judge to get it. That is the whole point of doing what we are doing.

The government says that this person will be outright independent, but it would just be moving that person to another building. That is it. That is all.

As I have said before, and I will say it again, that does not make that person neutral; it is making that person neutered, without the right tools.

Pardon the expression; most members cringed. However, that is exactly what is happening here.

I would say to the government in this particular case that these things will find their way into committee as testimony, but the problem is that we have already voted yes in principle, and a lot of fundamental changes cannot be done. I hope that an amendment that is forthcoming to allow the commissioner to do this would be

Business of Supply

accepted by the government, and beyond that I hope we get to a third reading where we find ourselves with a bill answering all the questions we want.

However, if the government does not want to take this bill out into the public realm, that is not a good sign.

• (1315)

When there is debate in the House, it is from different people, whether it is ministers, members of the official opposition, members of the third party, or independent members. Even the backbench of the government should be challenging some of the stuff that is in this legislation.

There were three speakers, one from the government, one from the NDP, and then a Liberal, and that was it. That was all we got, and then there was time allocation. There was some debate after that, but it is certainly disingenuous when the Conservatives say, "We can invite whoever you want. We can allow anyone to discuss this. However, after a member from each party speaks, that is it, and then we are going to move on very quickly, unless, of course, you feel that going to the public with this type of bill, to allow the discussion to take place, is going to result in what you do not want to hear".

An hon. member: Hardly.

Mr. Scott Simms: Mr. Speaker, I did not put that right. Let me put it in Conservative speak. "We do not want to hear" means it is a circus show, a gong show. In other words, "Give us what we want to hear; otherwise it becomes an exercise that is not helpful to democracy", which does the complete opposite. It actually hurts democracy; let us be honest.

As far as a resolution is concerned, the intent of it is right, but I am kind of worried about the date of May 1. I think maybe they might want to change that to make sure it goes beyond May 1. I understand the intent of it, but I think going beyond May 1 would allow more people to speak. It states in the bill the regions that members want to go to, and it pretty much covers everybody in geography and everybody in society. I will read from it. It talks about the regions: Atlantic Canada, which my esteemed colleague from Avalon and I are proudly from, Quebec, Ontario, northern Ontario, the Prairies, British Columbia, and of course, the north. That pretty much covers everything.

In rural and urban areas, absolutely, we would get to the nub of the issue about rural vote vouching, which really helps people there. It talks about first nations as well, which is very important on the vouching issue; anti-poverty groups; groups representing persons with disabilities, which has come up quite a bit. The minister goes to great lengths to point out what the government is doing for people with disabilities, and I do not doubt his intention and good-willed nature, but what is going to happen is that the government's intent to do something good would be subjected to a policy that would fail in its execution. That is with regard to vouching, of course.

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The right to vote freely and fairly is fundamental to the integrity of Canada's electoral system. We all believe in that, we all want to vote for that, and we push for that, but remember that we are a model for the international community. If we are model for the international community—nations all over the world at any stage of democracy, especially the young democracies—why do we not want to hear from the public about how we can make this legislation better and not worse? I do not know if anybody in the House has noticed—some people have, but not everybody—according to the emails and unsolicited input I get, a lot of people have problems with this bill in a very fundamental and substantial way that will move us away from being the international model that we worked so hard to build.

• (1320)

Mr. Blake Richards (Wild Rose, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to ask the member a question, because he has sat in on some of the procedure and House affairs committee meetings. Of course, as a member, I have been there as well.

I can say that Conservative government members on the committee are prepared to get down to work and look at this legislation. We have committed to a significant period of time in which we can have meetings and hear from witnesses from all across Canada. There are all kinds of opportunities for those people to be brought in to Ottawa or be heard through video conferencing and other methods; so we can hear from people.

As the minister has very eloquently said today in the House, he is looking to take former commissioner Jean-Pierre Kingsley's comment that the bill has an A minus and turn it into an A plus. We are obviously suggesting that we are prepared to get down to work. We want to hear suggestions and try to work to make this great bill even better, if that is possible.

However, as we know, the NDP members on the committee are intent on having their members of Parliament travel across the country. They seem to be holding their breath like little children for the opportunity to have their members travel across the country when we would like to just get down to work.

It seems as though the member and the Liberal Party are in solidarity with the NDP on this point of wanting to have members of Parliament travel across the country. I would like to ask the member why that is. Why does he not want to get down to work, hear from people about this legislation, and get down to business, as we on the Conservative government side want to do?

Mr. Scott Simms: Mr. Speaker, it is a list that is chosen by the Conservatives, voted by them, to bring in the people they want to hear. Does the member for Wild Rose wish to control the machinations by which democracy is exercised? There is no doubt in my mind that the amount of input the member has received has been substantial.

I understand where the member is coming from. He has the intent to do the work that is required: to hear about the bill and all the technical matters involved. However, the problem is that there is a fundamental lag in the amount of information that is available out there that was not sought before this began. We always hear about the people who were never contacted but who have a strong opinion and a great deal of knowledge about this. Therefore, when the Conservatives say that they have heard within the confines of the

committee all the people they want to hear from, I mean, that is part of the disingenuous message.

If the member for Wild Rose really and truly felt that he is doing the hard work, then a vast majority of Canadians would say that he is not working hard enough. I am not casting aspersions on the member's personality. I have known him for a while, and he is a hard worker. However, this is to engage the public on something that is substantial and so important. I mean, it is our democracy.

The member talked about teleconferencing and calling in these people. However, these are the people the Conservatives want: only the people who already would give them good marks. He says he wants to bring in Mr. Kingsley who gave them an A minus, but he will not invite the people who gave them an F.

• (1325)

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the member for Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor for his intervention. I tend to agree with all that I have heard from him.

I have been in this place for eight years and, particularly since the Conservatives have had a majority, I have watched them control committees in a way that is very close to being offensive at times.

I find it ironic that the trade committee, discussing the European free trade agreement, is going coast to coast to coast to examine it, but not on a fundamental issue like the rights of Canadians to function within their democracy, to use their franchise to vote and to deal with the situation where nearly 100,000 would be dispossessed from their franchise. This strikes me as very ironic. I would like to hear the member's comments on that.

Mr. Scott Simms: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague, whom I have known for quite some time, for bringing that forward.

A while ago, the Conservatives talked about putting a piece of legislation—the first environment bill—to committee before second reading. I wish they had done that. Nevertheless, it was not done, but I would look at that as a way to do it.

It seems that, when we come up with ideas like our not liking vouching, every time vouching is brought up we focus on the lowest common denominator; so we always focus on what went wrong with the system. We never discuss what went right with the system and the fundamental reason why vouching existed in the first place.

I agree with the minister in regard to getting the fraudsters out of the system, but to do that is to look at the vouching system itself because in many cases it is being taken advantage of. However, I would say we do not need to throw the system out in order to fix it. By doing that, we are making a broad, general judgment that it does not work because there are fraudsters in the system. Would the government throw out employment insurance and other social programs because cheats exist in the system?

Business of Supply

There are a lot of people in this country. We need to look at fixing the fundamental core of the system to allow it to be of benefit. That is why we would go across the country. The minister has been in the House during the debate; good for him. However, now he needs to be out there, where it counts, to find out that when the rubber hits the road, this is what would happen. He must stop being dictated to only by the people who cheat the system and look at the people who benefit from it as well.

Mr. Scott Andrews (Avalon, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, one aspect of vouching is the ability of our returning officers and clerks who are trained by Elections Canada. We may have to do more training, which I believe is being addressed. Where this would hurt is in the hundreds of thousands of rural polls. There are small rural polls with less than 200 voters. The clerks who come from these areas know their neighbours. They know the people down the street. Quite often in a rural poll two people may be out walking, see that the poll is open, want to go in and vote, but have forgotten their ID. They go into the polling station and there is a clerk who is their neighbour. They live next door to this person. Why are the government and the Conservatives trying to take away the power of a returning officer or clerk at the table to say, “I know who you are. Your name is on the voters' list. You are my neighbour”, if they happened to be out and it was convenient for them to come and vote? We are trying to make voting more accessible and more convenient. Not allowing the clerks and the people at the table to use their judgment to say that, because they are neighbours or live in the community, they know them, would make voter turnout plummet.

• (1330)

Mr. Scott Simms: Mr. Speaker, that is a good question. The member sits next to me. I did not hand him the question in the first place. I wish I had. Then I could take credit for it.

The member brings up a good point, which I did not get a chance to address in my speech. I know the minister wants to achieve independence. Although therein lies a noble virtue, there are problems with that, one of which is that we are not giving elections officials the right tools. Another aspect is that people who are within the environment of Elections Canada have a direct working contact each and every day with returning officers, poll clerks, and all of the information that percolates within Elections Canada. They are there to see that first-hand. The auditors and people across the country within the field are there to see when red flags go up. Although the minister is trying to achieve some independence, we have to address the fact that it is not necessarily all a good thing. As I said earlier, we can put the referee on the ice, but if we do not give him or her a whistle, how effective would he or she be?

Mr. Craig Scott (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with my colleague, the member for St. John's South—Mount Pearl.

I would like to address briefly some comments from my colleague across the way, the member for Oak Ridges—Markham, and ask that he do his best to not take the word of whomever is feeding him this information. On the day that the bill was tabled, I appeared before the media and said that I was reading it. I had not yet read it all. However, I had read enough of it to be extremely worried about where it was heading and whether it was going to structure things in a very unfair way. I asked the media to be on the outlook for the details. It was the next day that I came out against the bill, after many

hours of reading it. Therefore, what my colleague has been fed by way of a line is completely inaccurate.

I would like to address the motion rather than the generalities of the bill; we have already had the second reading debate on it. I want to put it in the context of our request for cross-country hearings to be part of the procedures and house affairs committee study. There have been no public consultations in advance. We had a debate with the minister about how much he consulted, at all, in advance, especially with Elections Canada. We believe, in listening to the Chief Electoral Officer, that it did not take place. Certainly there was no consultation beyond a “hi, hello” session with the critics or the other parties. Therefore, it is all the more important now that we consider the public input side for something as fundamental as this piece of legislation.

It is hard to characterize the Canada Elections Act as anything other than one of the most fundamental statutes in our system. It cannot get anymore fundamental without it being a constitutional document. It is all the more crucial because tradition and convention have been flouted in the context of the bill. In the past, it has been very much the case, majority government or not, that all parties, including opposition MPs who may not belong to parties, are to be involved in some kind of inclusive way before a bill hits the House. That is in order that there is some degree of consensus and buy-in on changes that, by definition, should be consensual and non-partisan. That is not what has happened here.

That is all the more reason that the government and the minister need to be woken up to the concerns that those of us who have had a chance to read the bill have been raising, and that day by day, week by week, more and more people are becoming concerned about. That will only be fully apparent to the government if the committee is able to have some hearings outside of the Ottawa bubble.

I would also like to make a final link: If we had a fair voting system, this unfair elections act would never have hit the floor of the House. If we had a system where proportional representation was built in, we would not have a single party running a majority government. It would be rare in our history that a majority would be generated because it is so rare that one party gets 50% of the vote. The circumstances would be very different. The tradition, the convention, that parties should be consulted and work together on the Canada Elections Act would have been forced upon this government, assuming that it was the government, with fewer than 50% of the seats. If we had a proportional representation system, we would have had a more collegial consensus approach as to how the bill was generated. The concerns that we have been articulating and debating—and I must credit the minister for coming out and continuing to offer his point of view—would have occurred in advance. A lot of the problems in the bill would have been cut off at the knees, if the government were serious that it had no intent to do *x*, *y* or *z*.

Business of Supply

We just heard from the minister that the whole question of being able to call former donors is not going to be abused because any calls have to be for the purpose of that. I would like to hear the minister then say, here and now, that he would accept an amendment that says “for the sole purpose of calling former donors”, and that any other aspect of that call would itself be illegal and/or part of the campaign expenses. That would have been sorted out in advance, if we had been involved in this at an earlier stage.

The minister himself did not bring this up in his speech, but it has been brought up on several occasions by colleagues across the way that we do not do cross-country hearings for studies of bills. That is supposedly a truth. That is not a truth.

● (1335)

In recent memory, the relevant committee went to the Northwest Territories with respect to Bill C-15, the Northwest Territories devolution bill. Why? Although it is a piece of text that has to be studied as a piece of legislation, the context in which that bill is going to take root was important to that committee. With respect to Bill C-10, a bill on firearms control, the committee travelled to Toronto. These were for studies of bills.

Members on the opposite side of the House say that they only ever travel for policy studies. That does not help either. There is so much fundamental social context involved in the policy decisions made so far in this piece of legislation that it is important to hear from Canadians in their local settings, whether it is aboriginal communities on reserve, people in transitional situations in downtown cities or urban areas, students on campus, or Canadians who might not otherwise have a chance to testify before a parliamentary committee and are not used to tuning in to CPAC. These Canadians might nonetheless come to a committee hearing to listen and learn, whether or not they are testifying.

This legislation is fundamental legislation, and I think the minister realizes how fundamental it is. There are reasons that this legislation needs to be grounded in a broader consensus and with buy-in from Canadians at large. That is quite apart from the fact that other parties were not involved in bringing it forward.

I would also like to draw attention to my colleague from Louis-Saint-Laurent, who has spoken about the irony of a House committee travelling as far as Ukraine to study democracy there, including having public hearings. Yet, somehow this is being resisted tooth and nail in our own country.

I have been a harsh critic of the bill, ever since I spent a lot of time reading it in one day because we were having a debate on it on the very next day. I am concerned about every one of the replies that the minister has made. I am still concerned that without amendments those replies do not do the job.

Canadians can read what I have to say on my own website, something that I admit is provocatively entitled “The Unfair Elections Act is a Con Game”. They can read about the over two dozen concerns that I have, none of which have been obviated by any of the minister’s arguments, despite his best efforts. I am not going to go into those details.

After hearing from many Canadians, my current concern has only been deepened. These Canadians are not just experts in the field of

electoral law or electoral processes, but Canadians who have taken the time to read bits and pieces of the legislation and are drawing something new to my attention. If the social knowledge of ordinary Canadians can produce that kind of feedback to me, my guess is that the benefits of cross-country hearings would also produce insight for every member of the procedure and House affairs committee.

I want to end with a quote from Jessica McCormick, national chairperson of the Canadian Federation of Students, who is in Ottawa, and who hopefully would be on the list for Ottawa hearings. She gives an example of what the effects of the bill would be, which I think members can extrapolate as to why we would benefit from going around the country, at least as part of hearings. She said:

Canada has amongst the lowest youth voter turnout when compared to peer nations. The effects of Bill C-23 will make it harder for youth to vote by complicating the voter identification process and eliminating public awareness campaigns that encourage youth to vote.

Bill C-23 serves to cement the notion that politicians do not care about the issues that effect youth. It is our firm belief that the Bill will contribute to a decline in voter turnout that the provinces and peer countries are actively attempting to reverse. The decline is clearly a threat to a healthy democracy and must be meaningfully addressed, not encouraged.

It is that kind of input that I would be looking for, not just here on the Hill in parliamentary committee, but also across Canada through cross-country hearings.

● (1340)

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for an informative discussion and his thoughtful critique of the bill, as I do thank his Liberal counterpart. Both of them are tough and smart critics.

I find it interesting that the person the member cited as an example for the need to have cross-country hearings is someone he admits could testify right here in Ottawa, in parliamentary committee. I also find it interesting that the subject on which he cited this particular person was that of education.

It is clear that there is a correlation between the timing in which Elections Canada started its promotional campaigns and a precipitous decline in voter turnout. Correlation does not equal causation. However, causation can be explored by looking at the data on Elections Canada’s own website, which shows that the leading causes of youth non-participation are practical ones: half of them do not know that they can vote in advance ballots; a quarter of those who did not vote said it was because they did not know where, when, or how to vote; and 60% of non-voters across Canada said that it was everyday life issues.

Elections Canada’s communications should therefore focus on those things because those facts do point to causation. The fact that people are not aware of all their opportunities to vote is a form of causation. It is documented from Elections Canada’s own material.

My question is this. Why have the member’s critiques ignored all of that publicly available data that Elections Canada has provided?

Mr. Craig Scott: Mr. Speaker, the short answer is that I have a very different understanding from the minister of the relationship between causation and correlation.

Business of Supply

The minister has spent a lot of time on this, and he is now paring back. Criticism has shown him the error of his way, not on this point, but on the Neufeld report. He was constantly citing irregularities early on, as if they amounted to fraud, or even the serious risk of fraud. Gradually he has begun to nuance because he knows that people have read the report and understand that is not what Neufeld said.

There is the same thing on this score. Causation is not correlation. I asked the minister in our earlier debates why we cannot have the new section 18, as written in Bill C-23, alongside the old section 18. The two sections are not in conflict. The new section is a kind of marching order to Elections Canada to engage in the kind of targeted information-giving that the minister has made the case for being beneficial. However, he has made no case that public education and democratic outreach themselves are not beneficial. That is the difference between causation and correlation.

• (1345)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is important that we recognize that the minister has lost the point of the discussion and debate we are having here today.

The issue is that because this minister failed to consult with Canadians, with the Chief Electoral Officer, and failed to work with the opposition parties, we have substantially flawed election law that is being hailed in committee. There is a need for us to take it to Canadians. The committee needs to get outside of the Ottawa bubble and hear what Canadians have to say.

The members have a good reason to express concerns. We have all heard of the in-and-out scandal, the robocall scandal, and the overspending scandals. There is a need for Canadians to have direct input.

My question for the member is this. Does he not believe that the government would be better served by stopping this skating around the issue and agreeing to take this committee outside of Ottawa?

Mr. Craig Scott: Mr. Speaker, I honestly do believe that the government would benefit from it. There is a trust deficit with respect to this bill. That is one of the things hanging over the head of the government. The fact is that we have been able to show, through substantive critique, that there is a reason not to trust much of what is in this bill. The only way that is going to be set aside is if Canadians have confidence in the process that is producing the legislation.

We are not asking for the entire process to be cross-country. We are asking it to be built into what will also include close study. The two together will benefit the government, the bill, and Canadians.

Mr. Ryan Cleary (St. John's South—Mount Pearl, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I stand in support of the motion by the hon. member for Hamilton Centre that there should be nation-wide public hearings on the fair elections act, a bill known increasingly across this country as the unfair elections act.

The member for Hamilton Centre proposes that the House direct the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs to hear from witnesses while undertaking its study of the Canada Elections Act. What witnesses? They should include Elections Canada, political parties, the Minister of State for Democratic Reform who introduced the “fair” elections act, representatives of first nations,

anti-poverty groups, groups representing people with disabilities, groups that speak for youth, advocates, students, and Canadians in general everywhere.

Further, the motion calls on the committee to travel to all regions of Canada throughout March and April, and that the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs only proceed with the clause-by-clause consideration of the fair elections act after the public hearings have been completed.

To sum up, the motion calls on the Conservative government to hold public hearings on changes to the Canada Elections Act, a cornerstone of democracy, so that all Canadians can have a say on how it should be reshaped and adjusted to ensure that elections are above reproach, on how it should be chiselled so that it is solid, and strong, and able to bear the democracy that is one of the envies of the world. If we change the Elections Canada Act, then the electorate should have a say in that change. That request is simple, straightforward, and reasonable, especially with the scandals we have seen in recent years.

There were problems with the federal election of 2011 in my neck of the country, Newfoundland and Labrador. More specifically, there were problems with the election of Peter Penashue, the Conservative MP for the riding of Labrador.

Mr. Penashue won by 79 votes and went on to represent the province in the federal cabinet as the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, only for us to learn soon after his election that he had broken the law. He got elected by that slim margin of 79 votes by cheating. Mr. Penashue resigned in disgrace. He ran again in a byelection triggered by his resignation and lost. However, that loss was expected, considering the seriousness of the allegations against him, the allegations that Mr. Penashue, a Conservative MP, had accepted 28 illegal donations; allegations that he accepted corporate donations, which were also illegal; allegations that Mr. Penashue got an interest-free loan, which, once again, was illegal, from an Inuit company run by his brother-in-law; and allegations that he overspent the campaign spending limit.

Mr. Penashue basically bought his election and was able to run in the byelection with those allegations against him still outstanding, which boggled the minds of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians. What would have happened if Mr. Penashue had won and the allegations were proven true? What would have become of those allegations? Elections Canada was supposedly carrying out an investigation and so was the RCMP, but we have not heard a word since, not a peep. The silence across Newfoundland and Labrador and across this country has been deafening.

Was Mr. Penashue, whom the Prime Minister described as the best member of Parliament Labrador ever had, ever charged? Was anyone charged? No one that I know of was. Was anyone fined? No one that I know of was. Is there a problem with the Elections Canada Act? Yes, there is a problem with the act—

• (1350)

The Deputy Speaker: Is there a point of order?

Business of Supply

Mr. Paul Calandra: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member has done nothing in the last five minutes to discuss the content of the motion. In fact, I doubt that he actually has anything in his speech with respect to the motion before us.

I wonder, Mr. Speaker, if you might ensure and insist that the member get on to the actual substance of the motion, if he is prepared to do that.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Mr. Speaker, since the debate began, there has been a great deal of discussion about the bill, even though we are actually debating the motion. In my opinion, there is some wiggle room here. I would like to remind the House that the point my colleague from St. John's South—Mount Pearl is making is directly related to the many requests from the Chief Electoral Officer regarding changes to the Canada Elections Act. This issue is therefore relevant to the debate.

The Deputy Speaker: I agree.

[*English*]

It is a point of relevance, but it is a valid point that he is making within the context of the debate. He may continue.

Mr. Ryan Cleary: Mr. Speaker, this unfair elections act would actually strip Elections Canada of its investigative powers, not strengthen them. We saw how weak those powers are with the Penashue scandal.

The Commissioner of Elections Canada would be under the Director of Public Prosecutions and, therefore, no longer be a part of Elections Canada. My party and I would compare that to removing the RCMP's ability to investigate breaches of the Criminal Code. How is that going to fix anything? It is not.

Get a load of this. Under this unfair elections act, the Chief Electoral Officer would have to seek Treasury Board approval to hire technical experts. That theoretically means that the Chief Electoral Officer could have to seek government approval to investigate possible election cheating by government MPs.

Two key missing elements of the unfair elections act that Elections Canada actually requested and did not get include, first, more power for the Chief Electoral Officer to request financial documents to ensure that political entities are complying with their obligations. That is not in the bill. Second, the unfair elections act is also silent on the powers of Elections Canada to compel witness testimony. A major problem that Elections Canada faced in its robocalls investigations was that Conservative staffers refused to give testimony. That is not going to change either. I wonder why that is.

This unfair elections act would make voting more challenging for some Canadians. It would mean we could no longer vouch for someone when he or she does not have identification. Here I note that aboriginal people, university students, the homeless, and seniors in residences are less likely to have ID or mail on hand. Some 120,000 people used vouching to exercise their vote in the 2011 election, but they will not be allowed to use it in the next election. Clearly, the Conservatives are targeting certain demographics to suppress the vote.

The Conservatives are also changing the political financing rules in their favour. The unfair elections act would increase the limit for individual contributions from \$1,200 to \$1,500. That would favour the Conservatives, who tend to receive bigger contributions. The unfair elections act would also allow candidates to contribute up to \$5,000 to their own campaigns and leadership candidates to contribute up to \$25,000 for their own campaigns, which, once again, would give an advantage to the wealthy candidates the Conservative Party attracts. Conservatives look after their own.

The unfair elections act would remove the Chief Electoral Officer's power to engage in public education. The Chief Electoral Officer would be limited to telling voters where, when, and how to vote, but not why they should vote. Who better to talk about democracy than a key expert on democracy, the Chief Electoral Officer?

Under this unfair elections act, Elections Canada would be banned from teaching our children about our democracy, encouraging people to vote, and warning them about electoral fraud. Tens of thousands of students, seniors, aboriginal people, and low-income Canadians would be blocked from exercising their right to vote.

Between the robocalls scandal, the ongoing Senate debacle, illegal contributions, and campaign overspending, faith in elections in this country, the legitimacy of campaign results, has been shaken. What do we get? We get this unfair elections act.

The Conservatives are focused on shutting down debate. They are focused on ramming through a bill designed to stop people from voting and to ensure that they, the Conservatives, will win the next election. Only that will not happen. Newfoundlanders and Labradorians, and Canadians generally, know the difference and we will make sure that they do.

● (1355)

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I hope he knows the difference, because the reality is that his own party announced its opposition to the fair elections act before even reading it. I am not sure how New Democrats could know the differences between the status quo and the act without reading it.

Let me focus on the issue of section 18, which the member referenced. The fair elections act would amend it to require the agency to inform people of the basics of voting, including where and when, the ID to bring, and the special tools available to help people with disabilities cast their ballot. Beyond that, it would require the agency to inform people of how they can register to vote and correct any misinformation that might incidentally be on the existing voters list.

These are all things that Canadians need as basic tools to vote. Unfortunately, Elections Canada's own data shows that they do not have it. About 60% of non-voters said they did not vote for reason of everyday life issues. They said they found it inconvenient or difficult, or that they were busy. The fair elections act would ensure that this same 60% of people would be aware that they could vote early through an advance ballot, by mail or at their local Elections Canada office.

How could the member across possibly be opposed to that information being provided?

Mr. Ryan Cleary: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member across the way said at the beginning of his question that the New Democrats came out against the unfair elections act before it was released, but that is not true. We did not come out against this act before it was released.

To sum up, the Conservatives never let truth stand in the way.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

[English]

UKRAINE

Mrs. Stella Ambler (Mississauga South, CPC): Mr. Speaker, over the last week I spoke to a number of Ukrainian Canadians in my riding, and I rise today to say with caution that they are optimistic about the most recent events of the weekend in Ukraine.

Things are moving quickly, but finally appear to be trending in the right direction, which is why I feel I must comment on their behalf about the Liberal leader's remarks on Ukraine. When asked about the situation, he said, rightly so, that this was worrisome, but then he added, "especially because Russia lost in hockey, they'll be in a bad mood. We fear Russia's involvement in Ukraine."

These comments show an appalling lack of insight into the gravity of the situation.

Thankfully, Ukraine has chosen to return to the 2004 constitution, released prisoner Yulia Tymoshenko, and has called for new elections on May 25.

Our government has stated clearly and unequivocally that those responsible for the violence and bloodshed will be held to account, unlike the Liberal leader.

* * *

● (1400)

[Translation]

PYRRHOTITE IN MAURICIE

Mr. Robert Aubin (Trois-Rivières, NDP): Mr. Speaker, this morning, I released the results of a survey of the pyrrhotite victims in Mauricie.

Not surprisingly, the results paint a chilling picture. We are talking about a disaster that will cost over a billion dollars. From a residential standpoint alone, 1,300 families have already been affected, and an estimated 3,700 more will be added to that number.

Statements by Members

What is more, the numbers have yet to be tallied for the affected businesses, public buildings and infrastructure. The average cost for repairs varies between \$150,000 and \$175,000 for a residence.

What is surprising, however, is the federal government's lack of concern about this problem, which could occur anywhere in Canada if changes are not made to the federal standard for aggregates in concrete.

The Conservatives are choosing yet again to remain blind, deaf and dumb to the plight of the people in my region. What is worse, the Conservatives are getting rich on the backs of the victims who have to pay thousands of dollars in taxes to deal with this disaster.

In solidarity with the people, businesses, municipalities and the provincial government involved in this matter, can we hope that the Conservative government will at least appoint a credible spokesperson who would agree to sit down with elected officials and representatives of the Coalition Proprio-Béton?

* * *

[English]

CANADIAN ARMED FORCES

Ms. Joan Crockatt (Calgary Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, last Friday I had an opportunity, along with DART commander Lieutenant Colonel Walter Taylor, to give the Filipino community in Calgary an intensive briefing on our Canadian Forces' mission in Panay during Typhoon Haiyan.

Just seven days after the storm, our troops hit the ground, and their work was nothing short of amazing. DART delivered food to 2,000 children, cleared mountains of debris, flew 184 sorties, installed 27 water purification systems, and gave medical care to 6,600 people.

The mission was so successful in getting the Filipinos on a path to recovery that in Roxas City, they created a monument to the Canadian DART as a sign of their gratitude. Moreover, DART's model of local co-operation was so revolutionary that UN Under-Secretary-General Valerie Amos said:

This is the most effective civil-military coordination that we have ever seen at the field level and should be used as a model for future disasters....

We should all thank and commend DART for the phenomenal work our men and women in uniform have done in Panay. We are grateful and proud.

* * *

WINTER OLYMPIC GAMES

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I stand to congratulate all Canadian athletes, officials, supporters, and families on a truly spectacular Olympic Games.

The gold medal win by our men's hockey team was the brilliant final chapter in the Canadian story. Our women's hockey team captured their gold by staging a comeback victory many refer to as one of the greatest in Olympic history.

Statements by Members

Our nation stood proud as Canadian athletes distinguished themselves not only in the medal count but also where it really counts. They were modest in victory and gracious in defeat. There were the incredible stories, like the Dufour-Lapointe sisters, the Bilodeau family, the enormous generosity of Gilmore Junio who have up his spot to silver medallist Denny Morrison.

There was Justin Wadsworth, the cross-country ski coach who ran out to give a Russian skier a replacement for his broken ski so he could finish the race. And, of course, the beautiful spirit of Sarah Burke was ever-present.

We are a modest lot, we Canadians, but a proud people as well. On behalf of all our athletes, let me say to the rest of the world, in true Canadian fashion, “Sorry for being so awesome, eh”.

* * *

WINTER OLYMPIC GAMES

Mr. Bryan Hayes (Sault Ste. Marie, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to extend my congratulations to Team Jacobs from Sault Ste. Marie on winning the Olympic gold medal in men's curling.

This victory comes less than a year after winning the Brier, followed by silver at the Worlds. Consisting of skip Brad Jacobs; third Ryan Fry; second E.J. Harnden; lead Ryan Harnden; along with alternate Caleb Flaxey; coach Tom Coulterman, this team played with true Canadian spirit.

As Team Jacobs took their place front and centre on the Olympic podium, Saultites and Canadians across the country were filled with pride and admiration at their incredible talent, drive, and strength. This is the first Olympic gold medal for Team Jacobs and for Sault Ste. Marie, and it is the first time in history that both the Canadian men's and women's curling teams, with Jennifer Jones, Kaitlyn Lawes, Jill Officer, and Dawn McEwen, have won gold in the same Olympics.

Congratulations to the entire team and coaching staff for once again putting Sault Ste. Marie on top of the international sporting stage.

* * *

● (1405)

[*Translation*]

RAIL SAFETY

Mr. Tyrone Benskin (Jeanne-Le Ber, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in 2011, there was a train derailment in Pointe-Saint-Charles, which heightened existing concerns about safety in that neighbourhood. The derailment was caused by excessive speed. Unfortunately, this past weekend, there was a derailment in Saint-Henri, which caused a diesel fuel spill.

Our community, which has 6,000 people per square kilometre, has worked with such organizations as the committee *Nous et les trains* of Action-Gardien and people like Yves Lavoie in order to have CN and the government improve railway safety practices or, at the very least, comply with existing regulations.

[*English*]

I have contacted CN, with little or no response. In the House, we have called upon the Minister of Transport to take action, with little or no response.

When will the government and the Canadian rail industry take Canadians' safety seriously? The good people of Jeanne-Le Ber—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Souris—Moose Mountain.

* * *

UKRAINE

Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the events that unfolded in Ukraine over the last few days, in fact still unfolding, are nothing short of miraculous, breathtaking, and profound. The holding back of fundamental human rights—the freedom of expression, the freedom of speech, and the values individuals hold dear—has been broken.

I do not think anyone is under any illusion, however, that the road ahead is difficult, where personal interest will have to give way to the national interest and the overall good of Ukraine. Fundamental human rights and the rule of law must be fostered and allowed to take hold. We look to a free Ukraine, where individuals are allowed to be and become who they can be in a free and democratic society, without fear or trepidation.

As stated by our foreign affairs minister, “The unity of the Ukrainian people is fundamental. Canada stands firmly behind you, in this difficult journey towards democracy”.

May all of those who have paid a price—and there will be many more who will continue to pay the price—and those who paid the ultimate price, be forever remembered. *Vichnaya Pamyat*.

God bless Ukraine. *Slava Ukraini*.

* * *

WINTER OLYMPIC GAMES

Mr. Daryl Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings, CPC): Mr. Speaker, what an Olympics it was. While we in the House may occasionally differ on our politics, I do know that all of us can agree on one thing, and that is the enormous pride we hold in our hearts for the manner in which all of our Olympians represented us.

Through the highs and lows, they were an inspiration and a role model across the globe. Whether one was an athlete, a parent, a coach, a volunteer, or a fan, there were countless unforgettable memories. Who will forget Don Cherry predicting that our Canadian women were in tough but that with a never-say-die effort would come back for an exciting win, and then predicting that our men would play Sweden and win the gold in the final. Right on Don! That is Canadian, eh?

Who will forget the member of the Canadian coaching team's passing a ski to the Russian skier so he could finish with dignity before his home country, or Charles Hamelin embracing Marianne St-Gelais after his win, or, has been stated before by my colleague from down east, Gilmore Junio who unselfishly stepped aside so that Denny Morrison could compete and bring home a silver medal. That is Canadian, eh?

We all have countless unforgettable memories of what it means to be a Canadian, and I am so proud of all of our participants for showing the world what it means to be a Canadian, eh.

* * *

[Translation]

WINTER OLYMPIC GAMES

Mr. Matthew Dubé (Chambly—Borduas, NDP): Mr. Speaker, two incredible weeks came to an end yesterday in Sochi. Thanks to our athletes, those two weeks were filled with so many memorable moments, that I could never mention them all here.

As Alexandre Bilodeau joked in an interview yesterday, there were a lot of ups and downs on those mountains.

Our athletes were stellar representatives. Their passion, their intensity and their pride shone through at every single event.

[English]

Whether it was Mark McMorris winning Canada's first medal, Tessa Virtue and Scott Moir impressing us on the ice, Gilmore Junio giving up his spot to Denny Morrison, who went on to win a medal, as has been mentioned a few times today, our women's hockey team showing what it truly means to truly never give up, or our clean sweep of curling gold, Canada truly showed the world what we are all about.

I join all my colleagues in the House in saying thanks to all Canadians who represented us with pride in Sochi. It was an inspiration but, most of all, it was a heck of a lot of fun.

• (1410)

[Translation]

Congratulations to all.

[English]

Go, Canada, go!

* * *

WINTER OLYMPIC GAMES

Mr. Robert Sopuck (Dauphin—Swan River—Marquette, CPC): Mr. Speaker, for the past two weeks the Canadian Olympic team proudly represented our country in Sochi, Russia. Our Canadian athletes succeeded in spectacular fashion, earning ten gold, ten silver, and five bronze medals; a truly remarkable performance.

The country will not soon forget the inspiring performance of our athletes such as sisters Justine and Chloe Dufour-Lapointe, standing on the podium together with gold and silver in the women's freestyle skiing moguls events. I especially want to congratulate Jennifer Jones and our women's curling team from the St. Vital Curling Club in Winnipeg, Manitoba, my hometown, for going undefeated at the games. I would also like to pay special tribute to the Olympic team coaches and support staff, as well as supportive family members, who were all an essential part of this year's success.

Congratulations to all of our 221 athletes who made up our Canadian Olympic team. As has been said before, go, Canada, go!

Statements by Members

BLACK HISTORY MONTH

Mr. Joe Comartin (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am proud to rise in the House today in celebration of Black History Month. It allows us to commemorate the significant contributions of African-Canadian men and women throughout the history of Canada.

An example is Fountain Thurman, an American-born slave who settled in New Canaan, in Essex county, Ontario. In spite of the great danger that black soldiers faced, being captured by American forces and either summarily executed or returned to slavery, he fought in the War of 1812, in hopes of creating a better life for himself and his family in our country. His dreams mirrored the dreams of so many Canadians, one of freedom, optimism, and hope.

Mr. Thurman's legacy lives on through the generations of his descendants who, to this day, live on in Windsor and in Essex county.

On behalf of my constituents, and all Canadians, we are most grateful for the sacrifices that Mr. Thurman and countless other black soldiers made to protect the freedoms and liberties of our land. Their contributions played a pivotal role in moulding the Canadian fabric, and they must never be forgotten.

* * *

UKRAINE

Mr. Peter Goldring (Edmonton East, CPC): Mr. Speaker, twice in 10 years, the people of Ukraine have risen en masse against political tyranny, interference by the Russian Bear and Soviet-style thuggery.

Yanukovych disdained democracy and peaceful protest, employing henchmen whose rubber bullets and truncheons spilled much blood.

Yanukovych, this time, murderously outdid his despotic past. His trained sniper executioners pinpointed the deaths of unarmed patriots resisting efforts to move them from the Euromaidan. The heroes of the Maidan held their ground until sanity returned, with intervention by the European Union and a vote in Parliament to remove the evil tyrant from office.

He is now on the run, hoping to avoid having to atone for his murderous crimes against the citizens of Ukraine. The families of the dead and wounded patriots have the respect and sympathy from people of the free nations of the world.

Slava Ukraini!

* * *

UKRAINE

Mr. Marc Garneau (Westmount—Ville-Marie, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, following the removal of Yanukovych, the creation of an interim government, and planned elections in May, the Liberal Party adopted an emergency resolution on Ukraine yesterday at its convention.

Oral Questions

The party calls upon the Government of Canada to immediately and unequivocally express its support for the transitional process to a secure democracy. We also call for an observer mission of at least 500 Canadian observers, led by a pre-eminent Canadian, to help oversee the upcoming election. We call upon the government to encourage the international community to ensure that all human rights violations in Ukraine are investigated and prosecuted. The government must also call upon the IMF to meet with the new Ukrainian leadership, to provide economic support and develop a new restructuring plan.

Finally, we call upon the Prime Minister to make it clear to any foreign power not to interfere with the will of the Ukrainian people, as expressed by their elected representatives in the Verkhovna Rada, Ukraine's Parliament.

* * *

WINTER OLYMPIC GAMES

Mr. Randy Hoback (Prince Albert, CPC): Mr. Speaker, hockey is Canada's game.

Over the past two weeks, both our men's and women's hockey teams have defended their gold medals at the Winter Olympics in Sochi.

The women earned their fourth consecutive gold medal after a thrilling victory against our neighbours to the south. They overcame a two-goal deficit, then Marie-Philip Poulin captured the game-winning goal to beat the Americans 3-2 in overtime.

With one gold medal in the bag, Canadians from coast to coast braved the early morning on the final day of the Olympic Games to watch our men's team earn their second consecutive gold medal, in a dominating 3-0 win over Sweden.

On behalf of all Canadians, I would like to offer my sincere congratulations to all our champions. I thank Shaunavon's Hayley Wickenheiser, Regina's Ryan Getzlaf and Chris Kunitz, and Aneroid's Patrick Marleau for making all of Saskatchewan proud.

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●(1415)

[Translation]

CANADA POST

Mr. Alain Giguère (Marc-Aurèle-Fortin, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my riding of Marc-Aurèle-Fortin has the misfortune of being one of the first to be squeezed by the Conservatives' gutting of Canada Post.

While the 23 Canada Post senior executives pocket \$10 million a year, Rosemère, Bois-des-Filion and Lorrain will lose their door-to-door delivery, no matter the consequences for the elderly or disabled. This botched and harmful initiative will be implemented with the Conservative government's approval.

A responsible government would have proposed solutions in order to improve service and attract new clients, instead of cutting services, increasing prices and firing 8,000 people. The NDP will continue to fight alongside the elderly, SMEs, people with reduced mobility, workers and fellow Canadians to ensure they have access to the services they deserve.

Previous Liberal and Conservative governments squeezed the middle class. Now, they are drastically reducing services. Canadians deserve better. They deserve a party like the NDP, which will be on their side.

* * *

[English]

LIBERAL PARTY OF CANADA

Mr. Blake Richards (Wild Rose, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Liberal convention sounded like a blast from the past. Of course, without the promise of a tax increase, class warfare, deficit spending, and a national strategy on darn near everything, the Liberals just would not see it as complete.

Although I will spare Canadians a review of all of their proposals, the national energy strategy does sound terribly familiar. I wish I could say that the apple does not fall from the tree, but even that would be generous.

Canadians like Nathalie need not worry. Our Conservative government is saving her family of four \$3,400 in tax relief this year.

I am glad that the Liberal leader recognized that Canadians' strength is between their ears, but looking at the Liberal leader's speech on Saturday night, I am left wishing he offered something more than a little nutty in between his. The leader of the Liberal Party is clearly in over his head.

ORAL QUESTIONS

[Translation]

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, can the government update us on the urgent, rapidly evolving situation in Ukraine and tell us what action Canada is taking?

[English]

Can the government update Canadians on the rapidly evolving situation in Ukraine, and what Canada is taking in the way of action to help ensure free and fair elections for Ukrainians?

Hon. Chris Alexander (Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as the House has heard from statements by the Prime Minister and by the Minister of Foreign Affairs over the weekend, Canada is encouraged by developments over the last two days. The president has been impeached. Several of the key demands of the opposition have been met.

However, right now, unity is absolutely key. Canada stands ready to continue monitoring the situation with its friends and allies and to support a return to democracy, freedom, human rights, and the rule of law in Ukraine, as the Ukrainian people reach out to partners in Canada and elsewhere to resume their democratic path toward a brighter future, one free of violence.

DEMOCRATIC REFORM

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank the minister for that answer. Let us talk about a democratic path here in Canada.

Conservatives have said that public hearings on the unfair elections act would be “a gong show” and “a circus”. However, Conservatives supported the unelected Senate holding public hearings outside of Ottawa 25 times in the last year.

What do Conservatives think makes consultations by the unelected Senate vital, whereas letting Canadians speak to their members of Parliament is somehow a gong show? Why is there contempt for Canadians? Why is there contempt for democracy?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canadians have spoken. They have asked for a bill in the House that would keep everyday Canadians in charge of democracy by putting special interests on the sidelines and rule breakers out of business altogether.

That is why we have brought forward the fair elections act, which would close loopholes to big money, especially the use of unpaid debts. It would prevent fraudulent voting and it would provide increased opportunities for law-abiding, honest Canadians to cast their ballots.

The NDP announced its opposition to this bill before even reading it. It is time that the NDP read it, studied it, and, we would hope, supported it.

• (1420)

[Translation]

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we have read it and that is why we know that it is undemocratic.

The Conservatives want to give themselves the power to make hundreds of thousands of calls and hire hundreds of people to make those calls, all without it counting towards their limit. The Conservatives are the ones who want to change the law in advance so that they can cheat during the next election. That is their real goal.

That is why we want to consult Canadians.

[English]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I actually do not think that there was a question there, but I think the question he was about to ask is why would his own party be against exempting fundraising calls from spending limits, when in fact his own party did just that in the leadership that he ran in and won?

Section 7 of the NDP's own leadership rules says, under “Expenses not subject to the party's expense ceiling”:

d) Any expense for fundraising...

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, there are many who would contest this, but I refuse to believe that the minister is so dim that he does not understand the difference between the leadership race of a party—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Oral Questions

The Speaker: Order, please. I know the Leader of the Opposition knows that he cannot do indirectly what he is not allowed to do directly, so I urge him to be very judicious with his language, especially when describing our hon. colleagues.

The hon. Leader of the Opposition has about 15 seconds left to put his question.

Hon. Thomas Mulcair: Mr. Speaker, we are talking about the rules for a federal general election. That is the foundation of our democracy, and that is what they are trying to cheat on.

The Speaker: Order, please.

We have been hearing that word an increased amount in the last few weeks. It certainly does imply motives and impugn motives, so I am now going to ask members to refrain from using the word “cheating” when discussing tactics from other hon. members.

The hon. Leader of the Opposition now has a few seconds left.

Hon. Thomas Mulcair: Mr. Speaker, last week the word “hypocrite” from the Prime Minister was fine. I can affirm that we all know they are trying to cheat in advance.

* * *

THE ECONOMY

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Wascana, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, a thriving middle class drives our whole economy, but today middle-class Canadians are just as likely to move down the income scale as move up. Their earnings are flat. Household debt is 166%. Three-quarters do not have a pension. Two-thirds worry that their kids will not do as well as they did.

Cutting excessive EI payroll taxes would help. Filling a \$3 billion hole in the build Canada infrastructure fund would help. Clearing barriers to higher education would help.

Will the government do these sensible things to drive more economic growth for middle-class Canadians?

Hon. Kevin Sorenson (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, if the Liberal Party wants to help the middle class, perhaps the first thing it could do is pay back the money that its leader was charging charities. Certainly the middle class would be happy with that.

Unlike the Liberal leader, who has no idea what it is like to be in the middle class, our government has cut taxes 160 times for ordinary Canadians so that Canadian families with two children receive approximately \$3,400 more in their pockets every year. That helps the middle class.

* * *

TAXATION

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Wascana, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the current government's first official act in office was to increase personal income tax rates. Then it taxed out of existence \$25 billion in middle-income savings. It has imposed higher taxes on consumer products, on credit unions, and on small business owners. It is imposing \$5.2 billion in excessive job-killing Conservative payroll taxes.

Oral Questions

The Conservatives brag about tax cuts for so-called typical families, but 70% of Canadian families do not fit their definition of “typical”. Why is the middle class on the Conservatives' enemies list?

•(1425)

Hon. Kevin Sorenson (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, of course the hon. member is wrong. There are 160 tax cuts putting money back into the pockets of Canadians.

The Liberal leader has ideas, ideas that would take this country down the same road as Greece and Detroit. I am not surprised with a party whose leader believes in not worrying about the budget, saying that the budget will balance itself. He is the last one this country needs to listen to when it comes to taxes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Garneau (Westmount—Ville-Marie, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the first thing this government did was increase personal income tax.

Their taxes wiped out \$25 billion of people's savings. The Conservatives raised taxes on consumer goods, credit unions and small businesses. They are imposing \$5.2 billion in Conservative payroll taxes. Conservative policies have produced no discernible benefit for 70% of Canadian families.

Why has the government blacklisted the middle class?

[*English*]

Hon. Kevin Sorenson (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, this government has delivered historic tax relief for all Canadians, again leaving more money in the pockets of Canadians, including \$3,400 for the average family and cutting taxes 160 times. We have cut taxes in every way that governments collect them. We have increased the amount of money that Canadians can earn before paying any tax. We have introduced pension income splitting. We have reduced the GST from 7% to 6% to 5%.

Again the member is wrong in his accusations. This government cares about making certain that Canadians pay less tax.

* * *

DEMOCRATIC REFORM

Mr. Craig Scott (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Canadians are upset about the unfair elections act, upset about changes that would suppress the vote of youth, first nations, the homeless, and even seniors.

Changes to elections rules should be non-partisan. Instead, Bill C-23 would in effect rig the Canada Elections Act to give the Conservative Party an unfair advantage.

Canadians want to be heard and they must be heard, so when will the Conservatives do the right thing and agree to cross-country hearings with the Canadian people?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canadians have been heard and they will continue to be heard as we move forward with the fair elections act.

However, moments ago, the Leader of the Opposition was complaining about the exemption of fundraising calls from the spending cap. In fact, under section 435 of the existing act, Elections

Canada pays half the cost of all election time expenses of political parties. If we include fundraising calls, then taxpayers will be forced to subsidize 50% of the cost of fundraising calls. We do not think that is appropriate. Apparently, neither did the NDP in its last leadership race when it exempted those costs as well.

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Canadians know that unilaterally changing election laws to favour the government is wrong. A minister who refuses to face ordinary people about changes to our democracy is wrong. Is the minister really that afraid of having to meet people who do not agree with him, or does he find the thought of meeting Canadians and consulting them just too daunting?

I ask the minister this. What are the government's real reasons for refusing to allow Canadians to have hearings on this bill?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I think I have demonstrated right before them that I am prepared to face their disagreements on the floor of the House of Commons. Unfortunately, their disagreements came before they even read the bill. It is important for them to understand that, in particular, this fundraising provision exists in the NDP's own rule book, and if the Leader of the Opposition says that the change involves cheating, then he means that he cheated in his own leadership—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

•(1430)

The Speaker: Order, please.

It was just a few moments ago that I urged members to stay away from that word. Maybe the member forgot, but it was just a few rounds ago. If I have to keep interrupting the flow of question period, we are going to lose some time and members may not get to their questions.

The hon. member for Hamilton Mountain.

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, let us try again, and this time let us be clear. The minister is happy to spend over \$600,000 for other committees to travel. He is happy to throw away millions more on 59 Conservative appointments to the Senate. Yet the government draws the line on hearing from Canadians about fundamental changes to our elections.

Clearly, these changes are controversial. Will the minister now do the right thing and agree to the NDP's proposal to launch public consultations on this bill?

Oral Questions

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, the fair elections act does do the right thing. It puts everyday Canadians in charge of democracy by putting special interests on the sidelines and rule breakers out of business. It closes loopholes to big money, ends fraudulent voting, and makes it easier for law-abiding citizens to cast their ballots. Furthermore, it will crack down on rogue calls by political imposters by bringing jail time to that offence and a broad registry so that we can track automated calls and prevent abuses in the future. This is the fair elections act. Canadians are asking for it. Let us move forward. Let us study it. Let us get it done.

[Translation]

Ms. Nycole Turmel (Hull—Aylmer, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives' bill will deprive many young students and low-income seniors of their votes, and it will make life harder for people who do not have ID or who have a disability. The Conservatives are always coming down hard on the most vulnerable people in society. Today we are offering the minister a chance to get out of the Ottawa bubble. Will there be a free vote on the NDP motion for public consultations on C-23?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, voters can already use any of 39 forms of identification accepted by Elections Canada. In addition, the fair elections act will require Elections Canada to inform voters about the pieces of identification needed to vote in an election. Yes, voters need more information, and that is what the fair elections act will give them.

Ms. Nycole Turmel (Hull—Aylmer, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I get the feeling the minister is afraid of what Quebeckers have to say about his reform.

Can the minister tell us whether all aspects of his reform are constitutional and in line with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms? Has he received legal opinions about this and, if so, will he make them public?

[English]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, in the recent *Henry v. Canada* decision in the B. C. Court of Appeal, the court found that the requirement to prove identity and residence before voting was justified as a reasonable limit on voting rights under section 1 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. That being said, we need to ensure that every Canadian is aware of the identifications that are allowed and required of them. There are 39 identifications.

There will be an additional voting day on which Canadians can cast their ballot. This will ensure that all Canadians can cast their ballot and that the franchise will continue to be universal. We will ensure that the law is implemented to that effect.

* * *

[Translation]

THE ECONOMY

Mr. Guy Caron (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, NDP): Mr. Speaker, during the last 13 years of the Liberal regime, middle-class incomes stagnated. Salaries increased by only \$1.07 or 8¢ a year in real terms.

The Conservative government decided to continue in the same direction, with attacks on employment insurance, unions and pension plans. These concrete measures help reduce the debt load of middle-class Canadians and make life more affordable them.

The report in question has been gathering dust in a government drawer somewhere for seven years. Why is the government ignoring it? Why is it leaving the middle class to fend for itself?

[English]

Hon. Kevin Sorenson (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, every year the NDP steps forward at budget time and asks the Government of Canada to pick the pockets of Canadians. Every year that party comes forward with suggestions to spend, spend, spend, whether it is payroll taxes like EI or other payroll taxes.

We continue to put money back into the pockets of Canadians because we understand the difficulties that middle-class, ordinary Canadians face daily. Those difficulties would increase immensely with opposition parties coming forward and asking us to spend, spend, spend.

• (1435)

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the government's own research confirms how Canada's middle-class has been in a long decline. Between 1993 and 2007, middle-class incomes grew at just one-quarter of the rate of high-income Canadians. By 2008, 40% of middle-class families were spending more than they earned.

Middle-class Canadians suffered badly under the Liberals, and the Conservatives have only made matters worse with their attacks on EI, collective bargaining, and retirement support.

Will the government finally take action to help middle-class Canadians get a raise?

Hon. Kevin Sorenson (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, the greatest threat to the middle class would be a \$20 billion carbon tax. The greatest threat to the middle class would be the piling on of more taxes, taking more from their pockets. The middle class has been very well served by this government. Over one million new jobs have been created since the deepest part of the recession.

The IMF and the OECD have both projected that Canada will have among the strongest growth in the G7. That is good for all classes of Canadians.

[Translation]

Ms. Annick Papillon (Québec, NDP): Mr. Speaker, as we know, Canadian families are carrying more debt than ever before. They are mortgaging their future.

Oral Questions

Middle-class salaries have been stagnating for many years as a result of the failure to act by consecutive Liberal and Conservative governments.

The NDP is proposing concrete solutions, such as putting a cap on transaction fees, reducing credit card interest rates and limiting gas price fluctuations.

When will this government take action to help the middle class?
[English]

Hon. Kevin Sorenson (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, why does the NDP oppose a budget that is receiving such strong praise from all across the country? Here is just a small list of the organizations that praise economic action plan 2014: Imagine Canada, Special Olympics Canada, the Association of Canadian Community Colleges, the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations, Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters, Polytechnics Canada, the Royal Canadian Legion, the Canadian Cancer Society, the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, and the Canadian Federation of Independent Business. All of these line up with praise.

Mr. Glenn Thibeault (Sudbury, NDP): Mr. Speaker, once again the minister forgot to talk about Canadians and middle-class families that have fallen farther and farther behind while the Conservatives and previous Liberal governments have refused to act. From families being squeezed by unfair fees, to gouging at the gas pumps, to predatory rates from payday lenders, New Democrats have made a series of proposals to make life more affordable, but the Conservatives refuse to work with us. The government's own report says middle-class families need help, but empty promises do not pay the bills and do not put food on the table.

Why are the Conservatives refusing to make life more affordable for Canadians?

Hon. Kevin Sorenson (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, this budget contains measures that make the tax bills lower for all Canadians. Again, we will not cave in to the opposition party, which continually comes asking for a spend, spend, spend budget.

We have cut taxes 160 times. We will come to a balanced budget in 2015. We will come forward with policy and a plan that continues to build jobs in Canada and make certain taxes are lower. Whenever we do that, we can be assured of a couple of things. First of all, the Liberals and the NDP—

The Speaker: Order, please. The hon. member for York West.

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in 2008, the Conservatives misled Canadian farmers and truckers once again by promising to cut the diesel excise tax in half. They vowed that this would “benefit consumers who buy virtually anything that moves...”. After more than five years, their only movement is a retreat, a full reversal by a government that lacks credibility. Farmers, truckers, and all consumers are still waiting for this reversal to happen.

Would the minister agree that this broken promise goes to prove that we cannot trust the Conservative government?

• (1440)

Hon. Kevin Sorenson (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, we can go through tax after tax that this government has cut. Perhaps what we should do is listen to what some of Canada's best economists speak about when they talk about this budget.

In today's *National Post*, Jack Mintz said:

While the Liberals might think the federal government has capacity to pump up debt-financed spending, the facts speak for themselves....

The Conservative government has done a good job by steering the federal government toward a balanced budget since the Great Recession.

We continue to have a plan.

* * *

[Translation]

TAXATION

Hon. John McCallum (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, during the last election, the Prime Minister made a solemn promise to introduce income splitting, which he described as “an historic step forward to achieve greater fairness for families”. Two weeks ago, he broke his election promise and abandoned his commitment to something he described as fair. Why?

[English]

Hon. Kevin Sorenson (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, we have made a commitment that, once this budget is balanced, we will continue to provide greater relief for Canadian families. That is exactly what we intend to do. Only the Conservatives can be trusted to lower taxes for families. We introduced pension income splitting for seniors. The opposition voted against it. As a result of our low tax plan, the average Canadian family pays \$3,400 less this year to the tax man than it did while the Liberals were in power.

Hon. John McCallum (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, that is no answer. Two years ago, the Conservatives made a solemn election commitment on income splitting. Two weeks ago, the Minister of Finance said that commitment needed more research. More research? From the C.D. Howe Institute on the right to the Centre for the Study of Living Standards on the left, think tanks have panned the proposal.

Just as important, do the Conservatives not do the research on election promises before they make the promises rather than two years later?

Hon. Kevin Sorenson (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I travelled across this country, both in preparation for the budget and also after the budget, what we heard from Canadians was huge thanks for measures like cutting the GST, thanks for the TFSA, thanks from the nine million Canadians who have now invested in their retirement through a tax-free savings account.

Tax freedom day is more than two weeks earlier than it has ever been under any Liberal government. Over a million low-income Canadians have been taken right off the tax roll.

This government has a plan. The plan is working.

* * *

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today Feathers of Hope released its results after bringing together young people from all over northern Ontario to determine what first nations youth need to flourish, no matter where they live.

First nations youth want to move to a brighter future and away from a legacy of residential schools and generations left behind. Feathers of Hope laid out a road map for all levels of government to work with young people on solutions and new ideas.

Will the minister commit to the recommendations Feathers of Hope outlined in its report and take immediate action?

Hon. Bernard Valcourt (Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, let me first congratulate the organizers of the Feathers of Hope Youth Forum for bringing together first nations youth to participate in discussions of the many challenges facing and opportunities available to aboriginal youth. My office was pleased to meet with the authors of that report the week before last, and we will, of course, review the report and keep on working with first nations youth all across Canada to improve their situation.

[Translation]

Mr. Jonathan Genest-Jourdain (Manicouagan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the action plan for first nations youth released today is about more than just a commitment to invest in education. This report shows that the government needs to focus on building a promising future for aboriginal youth.

The requests being made today are quite simple: respect, a listening ear and immediate change. We need to improve the living conditions in aboriginal communities and bring hope and healing to our young people.

Will the minister listen?

• (1445)

Hon. Bernard Valcourt (Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will repeat what I just said. First, I would like to congratulate the organizers of the Feathers of Hope youth forum for bringing together these individuals to discuss the challenges facing and opportunities available to aboriginal youth.

My office was pleased to meet with the authors of this report about two weeks ago. We are going to review the report and continue working with first nations youth in Ontario and across Canada to improve their situation.

* * *

CANADA POST

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, whether it is in the language of Shakespeare or Molière, the important thing is for it to make sense.

Last week, the people of Rosemère, Lorraine, Bois-des-Filion, Repentigny and Charlemagne learned that they would be the first in

Oral Questions

the G7 to lose their home delivery service. That makes no sense. It will make life difficult for our seniors and hurt small businesses.

The Conservatives claimed that the lockout in 2011 was terrible and would destroy our economy. Now, in 2014, they are the ones who want to destroy the economy.

Could the minister explain to us why she wants to cut services from people in the suburbs north of Montreal, while the 23 Canada Post executives are pocketing \$10 million a year?

[English]

Mr. Jeff Watson (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member will know that Canada Post is encountering dramatic deficits, and those are projected to be up to a billion dollars in just a few years. It has a five-point plan it has taken as an independent crown corporation that is arm's-length from the government on its operational decisions. It has released publicly its implementation plan, and I refer the member to read that plan.

Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Speaker, perhaps the member is confused. We do not need the Canada Post implementation plan. Now senior citizens in Kanata, Winnipeg, and Calgary are learning that they also will be among the first to lose home mail delivery. Can the minister explain to them why all other G7 governments can provide mail delivery for their seniors and small businesses but Conservatives cannot?

Mr. Jeff Watson (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in 2012 Canada Post delivered one billion fewer letters than it did in 2006, yet it is that member's colleague, the member for Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, who said, "We definitely do not have a crisis at Canada Post". I think only the NDP would believe that posting up to a billion dollar deficit in very short order and declining mail volumes and revenues that are irreversible is not a crisis. Canada Post has taken action it believes is necessary, and I point the member to its implementation plan.

* * *

[Translation]

CONSUMER PROTECTION

Mr. John Weston (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, CPC): Mr. Speaker, when consumers purchase a new vehicle, it is important that they have access to the most accurate information possible so that they can make the right decision for themselves and their families.

We notice that Canadians have concerns about how energy efficiency standards are set. Updated standards allow consumers to make informed choices and to save money.

Could the Minister of Natural Resources explain to the House what measures our government is taking to put consumers first?

Hon. Joe Oliver (Minister of Natural Resources, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the hon. member for his very important question.

Oral Questions

Last Friday, I had the pleasure to announce that we are updating vehicle fuel consumption labels. We will take into account differences in driving styles during cold weather and the use of air conditioning. That is how we are putting consumers first, by helping families make the right choice when they make such a significant purchase.

* * *

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Mr. Romeo Saganash (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in the last budget, there was no new money allocated to solve the housing crisis that affects the health and well-being of Canada's aboriginal peoples. In Nunavik alone, 900 families are looking for adequate housing. In the past, the minister said that he hoped to allocate funds, but nothing has materialized to date.

When will the government take real action to resolve the housing crisis in Nunavik and elsewhere in Canada?

• (1450)

Hon. Bernard Valcourt (Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government is definitely determined to improve the quality of life of all Canadians and to foster the economic development of communities. Since 2006, our government has supported, through the department I currently run, the construction of 11,000 new homes and the renovation of 21,000 homes in first nations communities.

I have personally met with Nunavik leaders, and we will continue to work with them to solve this serious problem in their region.

* * *

[English]

THE ENVIRONMENT

Ms. Megan Leslie (Halifax, NDP): Mr. Speaker, a report from the Bedford Institute of Oceanography shows that the Arctic Ocean is absorbing more energy from the sun. Canada's north is increasingly at risk from climate change, yet the government continues to minimize the threat. Conservatives on the environment committee are not even allowed to use the phrase, because they have been told so by the PMO.

Conservatives may not want to talk about it, but scientists do. There is increasing scientific evidence of the real threat posed by climate change. Why are the Conservatives continuing to delay taking action?

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq (Minister of the Environment, Minister of the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency and Minister for the Arctic Council, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government is taking action to address climate change. We have introduced new emissions regulations for vehicles, and we were the first major coal user to ban construction of traditional coal-fired power plants.

Thanks to our action, carbon emissions will go down close to 130 megatonnes from what they would have been under the Liberals, and we are accomplishing this without the Liberal's and NDP's carbon tax, which would raise the cost of everything.

Ms. Megan Leslie (Halifax, NDP): Their own officials would beg to differ, Mr. Speaker. The Conservative government loves to blame foreign radicals for criticism of their inaction on climate change, but now those so-called radicals are their own deputy ministers. Deputy ministers wrote to the Clerk of the Privy Council warning that action is needed now to protect Canadian communities, our wildlife, our food security, our health, and our economy.

Last week the Prime Minister also heard from President Obama about the need for urgent action. So why are the Conservatives refusing to act?

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq (Minister of the Environment, Minister of the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency and Minister for the Arctic Council, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are a founding member of and a major financial contributor to an international coalition taking action to reduce pollutants like black carbon. We contributed \$1.2 billion to developing countries so that they can reduce emissions and adapt to the changes.

We have also made addressing these pollutants a priority under the Arctic Council chairmanship.

Ms. Megan Leslie (Halifax, NDP): Mr. Speaker, why are the Conservatives' officials speaking out?

[Translation]

The deputy ministers of the environment are calling for the implementation of practical measures to combat climate change and condemning the Conservatives' lack of action, which is endangering our economy.

President Obama reminded the Prime Minister last week that measures to combat climate change must be implemented immediately. However, the Conservatives refuse to impose greenhouse gas emission reduction targets on the oil and gas industries.

Why is the minister ignoring the advice of her deputy ministers?

[English]

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq (Minister of the Environment, Minister of the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency and Minister for the Arctic Council, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government is a world leader when it comes to addressing climate change. We continue to work with the provinces in reducing emissions from the oil and gas sector.

It is premature to comment further on any work on the regulations, but what I can say is that thanks to our actions, we have seen significant reductions in greenhouse gases, unlike the previous Liberal government, which increased greenhouse gas emissions by 130 megatonnes.

AGRICULTURE AND AGRI-FOOD

Hon. Mark Eyking (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, yesterday it was reported that the PED pig virus has spread to Quebec. It has also been confirmed in Ontario, Prince Edward Island, and Manitoba. Hog producers in Canada have done everything possible to increase biosecurity on their farms, at a great cost. They are finding out now that the disease could have entered their farms via feed supplements from the U.S.A.

To the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food: Is it true that his department has allowed contaminated feed to enter Canada, with the potential of killing our hog industry?

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to assure the House and Canadians that this particular virus poses no risk to human health or to food safety. However, this risk is a concern to industry, which is why CFIA has issued the necessary permits to use a PED vaccine within the hog industry.

There is a feed company that has contacted its clients and has voluntarily issued a precautionary recall.

The minister continues to work with his provincial counterparts, and he has directed CFIA to work closely with the provinces on this virus.

• (1455)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): So he did allow it, Mr. Speaker.

There are piles of wheat all over the Prairies and empty ships in the Pacific Ocean, and the government is nowhere to be found. The pork industry is now in a crisis regarding exports.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Calm down a little over there.

Farmers are saying that this minister is an absolute failure. When is he going to take the steps necessary to support our farmers and stop taking them for granted?

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our minister had been working with his provincial counterparts regarding the PED virus long before this member even knew it existed.

When it comes to border control, the member is making irresponsible allegations, because the province of Ontario and the other provinces are supported by CFIA. It continues its investigation into the source of this virus.

Canada has strong border controls. It has measures on the import of live animals, including the cleaning and disinfection of empty vehicles returning from the United States. At ports of entry, CBSA officers refer swine to the CFIA for veterinary inspection, which includes a physical assessment of their health. Once again, this is no—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Laurier—Sainte-Marie.

Oral Questions

[Translation]

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Canadians are extremely concerned about the escalation of violence in the Ukraine. The entire world was horrified by the confrontations that left too many people dead or wounded. During this time of political transition in the Ukraine, what measures is the government taking to help find a peaceful resolution to the crisis that fully respects human rights?

[English]

Mr. David Anderson (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I really need to ask today where the NDP stands on this issue, because it was less than two months ago when the NDP critic for Ottawa Centre criticized us when he said, “Joining the protest signals that you’re...on one side”.

On this side of the House, we stand on the side of those who lost their lives. We stand on the side of the fight for democracy, and we stand on the side of the people of Ukraine.

Will the NDP members tell us today which side they stand on?

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would love to, and that is why I am on my feet.

We asked the government to act on sanctions. It would not act when we asked it to. We asked it to act on a visa ban. It would not act when we asked it to. Now we are asking if the Conservative government will join others and send a high-level delegation.

We wanted the Prime Minister to speak to President Yanukovich and ask him to stop. The Conservatives did not do that.

Will the government actually work with us to help the people of Ukraine? Will it send a high-level delegation to work with others to make sure that we get political transition and peace for the people of Ukraine?

Mr. David Anderson (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, obviously we support the Ukrainian people, a constitutional process, and the legitimate leaders as they work toward restoring democracy, but the member opposite needs to answer for his comment when he said, “Joining the protest signals that you’re...on one side”. He wanted to know why the minister was even out there speaking to the Ukrainian demonstrators.

The NDP needs to decide which side it is going to join. Is it going to join with us and stand with the Ukrainian people, stand on the side of the protesters, and stand on the side of the establishment of democracy in their country, or not?

* * *

HEALTH

Mr. Guy Lauzon (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, all members of this House can appreciate how important partnerships in health research are in ensuring continued breakthroughs in medical science. That is why I am so proud of our government's yearly investment of over \$1 billion to support nearly 13,000 health researchers.

Oral Questions

I would like to ask the Minister of Health to please update this House on our government's latest investment to support health research.

Hon. Rona Ambrose (Minister of Health, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I cannot agree with my colleague more that finding innovative ways to improve the care provided to Canadians is essential.

On top of our government's significant investments in health research that he mentioned, I was proud to announce this morning, along with my colleague from Ottawa—Orléans, over \$13 million to support the launch of three new national research networks in the areas of respiratory health, stroke and vascular health.

We are partnering with the Canadian Lung Association, the Heart and Stroke Foundation, and Hypertension Canada to put patients at the heart of our research and deliver life-changing results for Canadians.

* * *

● (1500)

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (St. Paul's, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, this afternoon the Omushkegawuk Walkers completed their 1,700 kilometre journey to Parliament Hill to demand respect and the honouring of treaties. Aboriginal youth from across northern Ontario are also on the Hill to release their impressive first nations youth action plan, "Feathers of Hope".

Will the minister honour the requests of these brave walkers and these inspiring young people, and commit today to working with them in equal partnership to make real changes in their lives?

Hon. Bernard Valcourt (Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canadians and these first nation youth have surely been witness to the historic announcement that was made by the government, along with the Assembly of First Nations, three days ago, whereby we dedicated an unprecedented amount of money to ensure that first nation youth all across Canada benefit from a good education system.

I think this is an important step that was taken by the government. Of course, we will continue to work with first nation youth all across Canada to help improve their situation and help them become part of this growing economy in all of Canada.

* * *

[Translation]

HOUSING

Mr. Robert Aubin (Trois-Rivières, NDP): Mr. Speaker, every time someone gets up to talk about the pyrrhotite crisis in Trois-Rivières, the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs says that it comes under provincial jurisdiction, that the Government of Quebec has a program and that people need to contact the provincial government.

The problem is that a study—if it was even necessary—has clearly shown that the federal government is directly connected to this crisis. Refusing to meet with victims will not make the problem go away.

When will the government appoint a credible spokesperson on this issue to meet with elected officials in the region and representatives of the Coalition Proprio-Béton, who are standing up for the victims?

Hon. Jason Kenney (Minister of Employment and Social Development and Minister for Multiculturalism, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pyrrhotite comes under provincial jurisdiction, and specifically the jurisdiction of Quebec. Anyone who is concerned about this issue should contact the Société d'habitation du Québec.

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INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS

Mr. Denis Blanchette (Louis-Hébert, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives are abandoning both the province and the City of Quebec once again. This time, it is in relation to the covered ice rink. As recently as last November, the Minister of Infrastructure, Communities and Intergovernmental Affairs said that he liked the project and that he was just waiting for Quebec to confirm that it would participate. That has been done.

However, in the middle of the Olympics we learned that the new building Canada fund will not finance infrastructure for amateur sport. How ironic.

Does the government have something significant and meaningful to offer Quebec City for its covered ice rink project?

[English]

Mr. Peter Braid (Parliamentary Secretary for Infrastructure and Communities, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is our Conservative government that has established the longest and largest infrastructure plan in Canada's history, providing stable and predictable funding over the next decade.

This includes the gas tax fund, under which recreational infrastructure is an eligible category. Here is what we have done with the gas tax fund. We have doubled it. We have made it permanent. We have indexed it. We have provided more flexibility.

Our government has provided the framework agreements to provinces, including Quebec, for their signature. We await their response.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-François Fortin (Haute-Gaspésie—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia, BQ): Mr. Speaker, we learned that the free trade agreement with South Korea has been finalized and, at the same time, we learned that the Prime Minister bowed to pressure from his MPs and is doling out \$500 million to Ontario's automotive industry to counter South Korean competition.

Fishers in Newfoundland have also received hundreds of millions of dollars in compensation for losses stemming from the agreement with European Union.

Why has compensation already been granted to the automotive and fishing industries but not to Quebec's cheese and dairy producers, who will also lose millions of dollars? Why? What is wrong with this picture?

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to point out that Canada's agricultural sector will benefit from \$1.5 billion through CETA. The supply sector, dairy producers, clearly have some concerns.

• (1505)

[English]

We are working with the sector to look at mechanisms that can be put into place if the dairy sector suffers losses because of CETA.

* * *

RAIL TRANSPORTATION

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, Irving Oil is to be congratulated for taking voluntary action to convert its own rail car fleet to get rid of the dangerous DOT-111 rail cars.

The U.S. safety regulator and the Canadian safety board have both said that these cars are unsafe, but they are still allowed. There are still tens of thousands of these cars rattling through Canadian cities carrying bitumen crude and Bakken crude.

After the Lac-Mégantic disaster we must not continue to see these cars used. We need to learn those lessons. Will the Minister of Transport commit to regulate so that we do not have to rely on voluntary actions? Get the cars off the tracks now.

Mr. Jeff Watson (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member will know that the DOT-111 tanker cars built under the older standard will be phased out. Given the integration of the Canadian and U.S. rail networks, with cars crossing the border every day, she should know that the minister has been working with her American counterpart on additional standards to strengthen the safety of tanker cars within Canada.

There has also been an advisory council that has been tasked to report back. It has reported back on this, and the report is being studied on an expedited and urgent basis.

* * *

AIR TRANSPORTATION

Mr. Dean Del Mastro (Peterborough, Cons. Ind.): Mr. Speaker, despite fierce opposition from municipal governments and residents, the Government of Ontario has continued to press forward on the Sumac Ridge industrial wind turbine project. Last week, I learned that the project, as proposed, would place restrictions on Peterborough airport, against the express wishes of airport management and the City of Peterborough.

This is simply unacceptable. Continued growth at Peterborough airport is critical to my local economy, and it cannot be constrained or restricted in this manner. Can the Minister of Transport please indicate if she has spoken with Nav Canada about the mitigation obligations that have been placed and proposed for Peterborough airport, and will she review the entire matter on behalf of my community?

Mr. Jeff Watson (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member will know that the

Routine Proceedings

Ontario government is responsible for approving land use plans for wind turbines. The federal government does not approve wind turbines. The role of the federal government and Nav Canada is to ensure that wind turbines do not cause concerns with regard to aviation safety.

Because this issue is of such concern to the member, the minister will have her officials look into this matter.

* * *

PRESENCE IN GALLERY

The Speaker: I draw the attention of hon. members to the presence in the gallery of Ms. Sara Olsvig, member of Parliament from Denmark and Chair of the Standing Committee of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region, and parliamentarians attending the standing committee meeting.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

[English]

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO PETITIONS

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 38(6), I have the honour to table, in both official languages, the government's responses to 15 petitions.

* * *

COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

HUMAN RESOURCES, SKILLS AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE STATUS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Mr. Phil McColeman (Brant, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the third report of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities in relation to Bill C-525, An Act to amend the Canada Labour Code, the Parliamentary Employment and Staff Relations Act and the Public Service Labour Relations Act (certification and revocation—bargaining agent).

The committee has studied the bill and has decided to report the bill back to the House with amendments.

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PETITIONS

MEDICAL MARIJUANA

Mr. Ted Hsu (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as members know I always stand to present petitions from my constituents, and today I have two of them.

S. O. 52

The first petition concerns the fact that the Conservative government has granted licences for the commercial production of cannabis. People of limited means in Kingston and the Islands have signed a petition to express their concern that personal affordable production of medical marijuana will be prohibited very soon, at the end of March. The petitioners call on the government to reverse that prohibition.

• (1510)

INCOME DISTRIBUTION

Mr. Ted Hsu (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have another petition from constituents about income inequality. The petitioners call for an evidence-based approach, perhaps like the Minister of Finance has now looked at regarding income splitting, to restore social equity and to reverse the actions that the current government has taken that have exacerbated income inequality.

PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION

Mr. Gerald Keddy (South Shore—St. Margaret's, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to present a petition from my riding of South Shore—St. Margaret's supporting proportional representation.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I also rise today to present a petition gathered by citizens of Canada who want to see our electoral system reformed, and want to see proportional representation. The signatories of these petitions are primarily from the Winnipeg and Brandon areas, appropriate today as we debate Bill C-23, which would fail to make our elections fairer.

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, the second petition is signed primarily by residents of British Columbia communities in the Lower Mainland, Burnaby, Surrey, and Vancouver. The petitioners are calling on this Privy Council to refuse to ratify the Canada–China investment treaty. It remains ready for ratification and Canadians from coast to coast are urging this Parliament to act to ensure that it is not ratified, as it would compromise our sovereignty for the next 31 years.

[*Translation*]

MINING INDUSTRY

Ms. Lise St-Denis (Saint-Maurice—Champlain, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I wish to present a petition on behalf of my constituents in Saint-Maurice—Champlain. The petitioners are calling for the creation of a legal ombudsman mechanism for responsible mining.

[*English*]

IMPAIRED DRIVING

Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present petitions signed by a number of Canadians who want to see tougher laws and the implementation of new mandatory minimum sentencing for those persons convicted of impaired driving causing death.

UKRAINE

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am tabling a petition today that expresses the concerns of Canadians from all across Canada about the events currently taking place in Ukraine. Ukrainians want accountability for what has transpired over

the past few months, particularly the government treatment of protestors. Seventy-seven protestors have died since violence escalated last week, and today Ukraine's acting government issued an arrest warrant for President Yanukovich.

The concerns in this petition reflect the calls by the Liberal Party this past weekend for an emergency resolution on Ukraine, calling on Canada to support Ukraine's transition to secure democracy and the international community to ensure that human rights violations are properly investigated and dealt with.

Canadians across Canada are united in their concern at what is going on in Ukraine.

* * *

QUESTIONS ON THE ORDER PAPER

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I ask that all questions be allowed to stand.

The Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Speaker: The Chair has notice of three requests for emergency debates, and I will hear them in the order in which I received the letters.

First is the hon. member for Ottawa Centre.

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REQUEST FOR EMERGENCY DEBATE

SITUATION IN UKRAINE

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am proud to stand today on behalf of my party and with Ukrainian Canadians and the people of Ukraine to request an emergency debate on the situation in Ukraine.

The situation has changed since I submitted my written notice last week, but it remains urgent and worthy of our immediate attention. This remains an emergency, and I would urge you, Mr. Speaker, to allow this debate to occur.

Free speech and the right to peaceful protests are fundamental to democracy. The extended use of repressive force by Ukrainian security forces has been entirely unacceptable. We are all saddened by the dozens of deaths and hundreds of injuries and unjustified arrests that we have seen over the past weeks and months. Canada should lead the international community in supporting the Ukrainian people in achieving a lasting political solution. That includes justice for human rights, justice for the victims, and respect for democratic freedoms.

In light of last week's deal between the government and opposition parties and the subsequent removal and indictment of former president Yanukovich, further Canadian action is urgently needed to support political mediation and monitoring, including support for documentation of crimes and delegations of observers before and during the election to be held later this year. Parliamentarians, meaning us, need an opportunity to discuss how Canada can best respond to the situation and assist the people of Ukraine. The House must remain engaged with the ongoing political crisis.

Earlier today I spoke with a member of the opposition in the Ukrainian legislature, who described the situation as an emergency. She pleaded with me to go forward with the request for an emergency debate. Ukraine is struggling politically and economically as a result of this crisis. We know that right now is a critical time for the people of Ukraine to make this important transition. The Ukrainian people need friends like Canada now more than ever.

This is an opportunity to take a firm stand on our support for the people of Ukraine. We must show that our friendship is a long-term commitment and that we will remain vigilant to ensure that the recent political progress in Ukraine just this past week is not jeopardized.

Finally, if I may, I would hope that all members of Parliament will remember that the focus is the people of Ukraine and that we will rise above any partisan shots that might be tempting for all of us to make in this debate.

• (1515)

SPEAKER'S RULING

The Speaker: I thank the hon. member for bringing this subject matter up. Obviously, it is of continual concern to many people in the House.

I did see fit to grant an emergency debate a short time ago on this very subject, and given the cycle of supply days today, I am not prepared to grant another one at this time.

SITUATION IN VENEZUELA

Hon. Jim Karygiannis (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, similarly, I am rising to ask for an emergency debate on the crisis in Venezuela.

Various cities in Venezuela have been undergoing peaceful student protests since Tuesday, February 11. These protests became violent when government entities began shooting and hitting peaceful protesters, resulting in six dead, and that number is growing. It includes two Catholic priests. Many others were hurt. Hundreds have been arrested and imprisoned without due process. Many have just gone missing.

News channels owned and managed by the government have not been reporting the situation. A Colombian news channel, NTN24, the only international channel broadcasting this news, has been taken off the air in Venezuela by the government regulatory body, violating national laws and human rights. Venezuelans are completely isolated and are relying on social media, which is being disrupted by slowing down the Internet, blocking images on Twitter, and even suspending the service. The Venezuelan government has limited the access of

Speaker's Ruling

international and non-governmental organizations to the country, obstructing their ability to record and denounce the constant violations of human rights.

Canadians of Venezuelan heritage are asking that we in the House stand in solidarity with the Venezuelans fighting for democracy. Mr. Speaker, I urge you to allow this debate to take place.

SPEAKER'S RULING

The Speaker: I thank the hon. member for Scarborough—Agincourt for raising this matter, but I do not think it rises to the threshold of granting an emergency debate at this time.

PED VIRUS

Mr. Malcolm Allen (Welland, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to ask for an emergency debate on what is called PEDv, or porcine epidemic diarrhea virus, which has affected the pork industry. It is now in four provinces across our country: Manitoba; Ontario; Quebec, as of yesterday; and Prince Edward Island.

It is a disease new to our country. It broke out in the United States last year for the first time. It is not an unknown virus across the world, but it is new to North America.

It is an insidious virus that does not affect human health and does not affect the food supply chain per se, but it can indeed destroy the entire pork industry in our country by basically killing off young piglets. When they contract that virus, as the title says, they literally dehydrate to death. The mortality rate is beyond 80%.

The pork industry itself says if this were to take a foothold and go through the barns of our pork producers in the country, we are looking at estimated losses of around \$45 million. Those would be catastrophic losses for them.

What is also important about this crisis is that the virus knows no boundary. It has affected the upper states of Montana and Wyoming, where it can go across the border into Alberta or into other provinces from those particular states. Pig farmers across the country are facing a huge dilemma. Just at a time when their industry had recovered for the last year and a half after a severe downturn, they are now faced with this catastrophic illness that is going through the industry.

That is why I ask today that we contemplate having an emergency debate to see what we can do federally, because at the moment it is being shunted and punted back to the provinces as a provincial issue. Clearly it has transformed across the borders and it is no longer just a provincial problem. It truly is a problem for the pork industry across the country. I ask that you entertain an emergency debate on that subject, Mr. Speaker.

• (1520)

SPEAKER'S RULING

The Speaker: I thank the hon. member for raising this issue.

Given the supply day cycles, I am not prepared to grant one at this time, but I understand it is an evolving issue, and the member may wish to try again in the future.

*Business of Supply***BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE**

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I propose a unanimous consent motion on the question of the situation in Ukraine.

I understand your ruling on the emergency debate and that your hands are very much tied by the rules of the House and the fact that we have recently had a debate. For that reason, notwithstanding there is some evolution and change in the circumstances in Ukraine, you are constrained, and it is difficult for you to grant an emergency debate in those circumstances.

However, there have been discussions among the parties, and in view of the importance of the situation, the concern that we have, the ongoing uncertainty, and the fact that it may evolve further, I believe you will find unanimous consent for the following motion:

That, notwithstanding any Standing Order or usual practice of the House, a debate on the subject of the evolving situation in Ukraine take place, pursuant to Standing Order 53.1, on Wednesday, February 26, 2014; that during the debate, no quorum calls, requests for unanimous consent or dilatory motions be received by the Chair; and that any Member rising to speak during debate may indicate to the Chair that he or she will be dividing his or her time with another Member.

I think all parties are very concerned that democracy be defended, that this is very much a situation where it hangs in the balance, and that Canadians want to hear from members of the House on it.

The Speaker: Does the hon. government House leader have the unanimous consent of the House to propose this motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Speaker: The House has heard the terms of the motion. Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to)

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order.

In view of what we just heard from the government side and the concerns raised about Ukraine, I would ask that we also do the same for Venezuela. Therefore, I would like to move the same motion that the House leader did, with different wording regarding Venezuela.

The situation there is just as critical, just as important, and just as deserving. Our discussion of Ukraine should also be for what is happening in Venezuela. The people in Ukraine are dying. The people in Venezuela are dying. It is a similar situation in different countries.

The Speaker: Does the hon. member for Scarborough—Agincourt have the unanimous consent of the House to propose a similar motion with Venezuela?

Some hon. members: No.

The Speaker: There is no consent.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[English]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—INSTRUCTION TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON PROCEDURE AND HOUSE AFFAIRS REGARDING BILL C-23

The House resumed consideration of the motion.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to stand in the House today to speak to the motion brought forward by my colleagues in the official opposition. However, and I think it will come as no surprise to members of the opposition, I certainly oppose the motion that the official opposition has brought forward.

It is also very important for Canadians to understand the context in which we are having this debate. The fair elections act has passed second reading and has been referred to committee. That committee is procedure and House affairs, of which I am a member. We have had the opportunity to begin examination of that bill starting two meetings ago, yet no examination has occurred except for one hour of presentation and participation by the Minister of State for Democratic Reform.

Since that time there has been no examination of the bill whatsoever, because members of the NDP, in particular the NDP critic for democratic reform, have been filibustering the committee. Why have they been filibustering? It is because the NDP, supported by the Liberals, have said that they want to see cross-country hearings on the content of the bill, and until they get a commitment from the government to engage in cross-country consultations, they will refuse to hear witnesses at the committee level.

This is a gross misuse of power. Obviously, opposition members have the ability, procedurally, to filibuster. We have certainly allowed that to happen. The irony is that all members from the opposition benches have said this is such an important piece of legislation, that Canadians need to be consulted, and that we need to hear testimony about the contents of the bill, yet they are preventing testimony from being heard at the committee level simply because they do not like the government's proposal to hear testimony at the committee level here in Ottawa.

Members of the opposition feel that effective and accurate testimony and widespread consultation with Canadians is paramount. They feel that without that cross-country tour, information and input from Canadians would be lacking. I cannot more vociferously and fundamentally disagree with their contention.

Let me first point out that I have heard today in debate from members of the opposition that our government is trying to stifle debate and is trying to prevent witnesses from appearing before the committee. Nothing could be further from the truth.

I, as many members would know, have been a primary government spokesperson on this issue, and I have stated publicly on a number of occasions that our government is willing to hear testimony from anyone in this country who has testimony they feel would be important for our committee to receive. We can do that with today's technology very easily.

Business of Supply

I doubt very much, despite the protestations of my friends opposite, that anyone in Canada who would like to give testimony before our committee would be prevented from doing so, given the state of today's technology. Whether it be through Skype, teleconference, or a number of other avenues that we have before us, literally every single Canadian would have the ability to forward testimony to our committee.

Members opposite have said that is simply not true. They have said that there are many people in remote areas of this country, on reserves, or in rural Canada who do not have access to the Internet, for example, and who could not get on Skype. I would suggest that anyone with a computer or with access to a computer would have access to our committee. If there is an individual in a certain location in this country that does not have Internet service, we will get them to the nearest location that provides Internet service so that we would be able to hear their testimony.

I have also stated quite publicly that our committee would be willing to meet at least 12 or 13 times to hear testimony.

● (1525)

To put that into context, most Canadians may be unaware of exactly how long a bill is normally examined. I can assure the Speaker that members in this place know as well as I do that the study of a bill, regardless of what legislation is being proposed, usually does not take 12 or 13 meetings for a full examination. Even our budget bills have not taken that length of time.

Yet, we have committed to hearing testimony, to sitting in committee, and to examining this bill, for up to 13 separate two-hour meetings because we feel that this is an important bill and should be scrutinized and examined carefully. To again put that into context, if we met for 13 separate occasions, on average that would be two to three times longer than a normal piece of legislation is examined by standing committees in this place. We are committed to that.

The opposition members who are talking the talk do not seem to be walking the walk. They are stating that while they feel this is an extremely important piece of legislation and should be examined carefully and thoroughly, they are refusing to allow the committee to do its work. They are refusing to allow witnesses to come forward and speak to the bill. That is all we are asking for. If they want to examine the bill, that is tremendous; so do we.

Are there improvements that could be made? Perhaps there could be. We have indicated that we would be open to any reasonable amendment that makes sense. We are not trying to ram this piece of legislation through, as the opposition would try to have Canadians believe. We are committed to putting more time in to the examination of this bill than probably any other piece of legislation that members have seen in this place. I would challenge any member sitting here today to tell me what other piece of legislation has been granted that amount of time for study because, frankly, there has not been. The opposition members are continually saying that the government is trying to ram this through. That is pure and utter hogwash.

I would also point out that the opposition members have stated publicly that they have two primary problems with this bill. Why are we not examining those provisions of the bill? One issue is on the

voter ID card. The fair elections act would do away with the voter ID card as we now know it. The second is the vouching practice. The fair elections act would dispose of the current practice that allows certain individuals to vouch for a potential voter who does not have the proper identification.

The reason that the fair elections act would do away with those two provisions is because, unfortunately, there is too much opportunity for abuse and voter fraud by both the use of voter ID cards and by vouching. Had we been engaged in committee hearings right now, undoubtedly we would have heard from, or at least we would have scheduled appearances of those people who could testify to fraud that has occurred in previous elections because of these two elements of the current practice of administering elections.

The voter ID card does not definitively prove the identity of any Canadian. With the permanent registry of electors, a card is sent out in the mail to individuals. However, it is not absolute proof that the person who is in possession of that voter ID card is actually the person who is entitled to vote.

We have heard a lot of debate over the past few weeks, and even today, where members are saying that voting is a privilege and a right. We could have a debate on whether or not it is a right or a privilege. What certainly cannot be denied is that voting means that the person casting a ballot has to be eligible; in other words, they have to be able to prove that they are the one who is eligible to vote. That is not an unusual demand or request to put upon Canadians. If we are not able to identify the individual who wants to cast a ballot, how do we know that person is eligible to cast a ballot? That is all that the fair elections act does.

● (1530)

Now, there will be some who argue that the provisions contained in the fair elections act are too cumbersome, unwieldy, and would actually disenfranchise people. Members of the opposition have pointed to statistics saying that in the last federal election there were 100,000 people who cast ballots because someone vouched for their identity and that if we did away with vouching those people would somehow be disenfranchised. I, again, beg to differ. I certainly do not know all of the 100,000 people who were vouched for in the last election, but I do know this. Over my five terms in office as a member of Parliament, I have seen voting practices in my riding, and every time we have had a federal election I have seen vouching in action. While I agree that many times the person who is vouched for is indeed eligible to vote, on many occasions it is not because they did not have the proper identification. Many times, frankly, they show up at the polling booth, and when asked to produce identification, they say they forgot it. They say that they have a driver's licence but do not have it with them, so someone then vouches for them.

One of the provisions of the Canada Elections Act is that Elections Canada devotes all of its advertising and considerable resources to educating Canadians and letting them know, not only when and where to vote, but what proper identification they must possess to prove their identity. That is all we are saying. If we cannot properly identify potential voters, how do we know these voters are in fact who they say they are?

Business of Supply

There have been arguments raised by members of the opposition that perhaps there are many people who have been vouched for in the last few elections who have the proper identification and did not have it on their person when they came to the polls but that there are many other people who do not have the proper identification that is needed. That is why in the fair elections act we have increased the number of documents that would be eligible for identification purposes to 39 different documents that could be used to prove the identity of a potential voter. If there is anyone in this country who cannot come up with two out of those 39 pieces of identification, that individual probably was not planning to vote in the first place.

We have heard examples of people in first nations and on reserves who perhaps do not have a driver's licence and lack the common pieces of identification that many other Canadians in, say, urban centres have. One of the provisions is that first nations members could get an attestation from anyone on the band council, stating that they are so and so and reside on this reserve. If individuals do not have a driver's licence or any commonly familiar pieces of identification, they could get something from their own council member stating that they reside there and are therefore eligible to vote.

As well, every Canadian has the ability to have a birth certificate. Most Canadians have bank accounts and therefore have something like a common debit card. University students, who perhaps do not drive and cannot produce a driver's licence, certainly have student cards, and they certainly have transcripts of their marks from their educational institution. All of these types of documents, and many more, would be proper identification under the fair elections act. We are not trying to disenfranchise anyone in Canada from voting; it is just the opposite. However, we want to ensure that fraud does not take place. That is all we are stating.

Another complaint that I have heard from members opposite is that by preventing these cross-country consultations we are in fact denying any consultation whatsoever. They also point out, and wrongly argue I would suggest, that no consultation was engaged prior to the drafting of the bill.

• (1535)

Let me point out the disingenuous nature of that argument. In the provisions of the fair elections act, there are 38 recommendations that were made by the current Chief Electoral Officer. I would ask members opposite, if there has been no consultation, how then do we have 38 recommendations that the Chief Electoral Officer made?

Of course, there have been consultations. I have been sitting on the procedure and House affairs committee since 2006, when we first formed government. We have heard, not only from this Chief Electoral Officer, but his predecessor, on many, many occasions. We have had many discussions with those individuals as to the type of elements they would like in any new election act that is brought forward. There were 38 recommendations from the current Chief Electoral Officer. How can the opposition say there have not been consultations? It does not make sense.

I would also point out that the first point of contact when trying to get consultations and feedback from Canadians are members of Parliament themselves. I do not know what my friends and colleagues in the opposition do, but when we introduce a piece of

legislation as important as this, I consult with my constituents. I find out what they have to say about things like vouching and voter ID cards, and our attempts to make the commissioner of elections independent from Elections Canada itself. I get that consultation. That is my job.

Apparently members on the government side may be the only ones doing their jobs because the opposition members say we are not consulting, that we need to hear from Canadians. What do they think their job is? They need to be consulting with their constituents and Canadians and bringing that feedback to committee.

There is no argument that I have heard from members opposite that would change my mind on whether there is a need for cross-country consultations. We can do the job here. We should be doing the job right now. However, because of the filibuster engaged in by members opposite, we are hearing from no one.

I want to hear from the Chief Electoral Officer. I would love to hear from the former chief electoral officer, who, by the way, has examined our legislation and, as he said, if he were giving a grade in a Master's class, he would give it an A-. That is a pretty good grade.

Are there ways that we could improve upon the legislation? Of course, there are. I do not think there has been a piece of legislation brought forward by our government, or any government previously, that could not in some way, shape, or fashion have been improved. That is what committees do. They thoroughly examine legislation, provide amendments, and suggest improvements. The committee then analyzes, discusses, hears testimony, and finally presents a piece of legislation to this House for further debate and an ultimate vote.

We are doing none of that now because the opposition does not want debate on the bill. We know why. Its members have stated publicly, before they even read the bill, that they were going to oppose it. The democratic reform critic, the member for Toronto—Danforth, a learned man and someone I frankly admire and respect, came out before he even read the bill and said they were going to oppose this.

I think, if nothing else, that tells the position of the opposition.

In conclusion, let me just say this. I have read the bill. I look forward to its examination in committee, whenever we get there. I sincerely applaud the work of the Minister of State for Democratic Reform for bringing a bill forward that would address a lot of the problems we have had in this country with things like fraudulent voting and big money that has influenced elections. I look forward to putting provisions in the bill to prevent those types of things from happening again.

• (1540)

It is a bill worth examination. I only suggest to my colleagues opposite that they allow us to do the proper examination that the bill deserves.

Business of Supply

Mr. Tyrone Benskin (Jeanne-Le Ber, NDP): Mr. Speaker, there is a whole whack of things I would love to ask the hon. member, but time is limited. I want to explore the technological question and put this to the member. Is he aware of the limitations of technology? Technology is a wonderful thing. I love technology and I am a tech guy, but there are limitations to technology that a live appearance will always outdo.

In the last budget the government put in an awareness that the rural areas are greatly in need of enhancement as far as high-speed connectivity is concerned, which is the basis of a lot of this technology. However, being in a community and being able to hear from multiple people, as opposed to one person on camera, is hugely important for a bill of this nature, which changes the nature in which people vote.

Will the member speak to that limitation and agree that face-to-face meetings with communities would be more advantageous than a one-on-one face on a camera?

• (1545)

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, no. I said earlier, if the member was listening to me, that one of the roles that members of Parliament have is to speak to constituents. I certainly talk to my constituents about the bill, but I would like to hear back from members who have done the same, if they have done so.

In terms of whether it would be better to take a full committee with complementary staff to travel thousands of miles, incurring perhaps hundreds of thousands of dollars in expense, than to get people who want to provide testimony before our committee into an area where they could actually sit in front of a camera and speak with committee members, quite frankly, we can do that with ease. We can arrange for anyone who wants to provide testimony to do so. It does not necessitate the time and expense of having a committee travel across Canada.

We want to hear from Canadians. The bill would allow us to do so, if only we can start engaging in the examination of the bill itself. However, because of the attempts by opposition members to filibuster, we are not hearing from anyone. No examination is taking place at the current time, and that is a shame.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I listened to the hon. member's remarks, and on his last point I would have to ask him how much our democracy is worth. Is it a matter of dollars? I do not think so. The member went on, with some great lines, that it has been referred to committee. Keep in mind that the bill was referred to committee after closure was placed in this chamber on the most important umbrella document in terms of how elections work and how people are elected.

The member said they would hold 26 hours of hearings. That is nothing. He asked if there is any other legislation. I remember lots of legislation by previous governments, even with the fisheries committee, that took hundreds of hours. Look at the GST hearings that were held by the Mulroney government, because they were big comprehensive issues and Canadians needed to be heard in their own areas.

Is not the real reason the government is so intent on holding hearings in Ottawa that it can basically manipulate the committee

more easily, as it has done in the past? Committees have become an absolute farce. If members move a motion, the government shoves it into secret and Canadians cannot even see or read how members voted. If the committee hearings are held in Ottawa, it is easier for the whip to hold backbenchers in line on the Conservative side, who do not have the backbone to stand and speak for Canadians. Is that not the real reason why Conservatives want committee—

The Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. parliamentary secretary.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: There is so much wrong with that, Mr. Speaker, that I really do not know where to begin. Let me try to correct the many inaccuracies of my friend from Malpeque.

I talked about 12 to 13 meetings being at least two to three times longer. I did not say how long in total. Since committees are the master of their own destiny, we could have extended meetings. We have offered to do so, and I have stated so publicly.

The member asked if it was not true that we want to put meetings in camera so the Canadian public cannot find out how we vote. We have already stated we will have the meetings in public, but the member does not agree with that. That member does not agree with anything we say, but that is no reason for him to spout inaccuracies about our position. We want to assure Canadians that this will receive proper examination.

The member spoke about hours of debate in the House. He knows as well as I do that the real work gets done in committee. Every member knows that. That is what we are attempting to do. It is the opposition that filibusters and does not allow witnesses to come forward.

Who does the member really think is preventing democracy from occurring: an opposition that refuses to allow committees to do their work, or our government that is suggesting enhanced and extended public meetings with as many witnesses as the opposition wishes to put forward? Who is really standing in the way of democracy?

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I have read Bill C-23 carefully. It is important for all members to note that it does not list what forms of ID would be acceptable. The process would be much harder than my hon. colleague seems to understand; for instance, I'll turn to some of the examples he used. Could a student with a student card vote? No. Imagine that student has a student card and a transcript? Could that student vote? No. Imagine that student has a student card, a transcript, and a birth certificate, all IDs mentioned by my hon. friend. Could that student vote? No. Students could not vote unless they were responsible for the utility bills at their place of residence and they had a bill to prove their residence. This is a complicated area and could eliminate the right to vote.

My friend asked if it is a privilege or a right to vote. He just needs to look at section 3 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which says that voting is a right.

Business of Supply

We do not have a fraud scandal in this country. We do not have any evidence that Canadians are voting more than once. We have evidence that people are trying to confuse voters by sending them to the wrong polling stations. We have a lot of evidence that Canadians are losing trust in the system and are not getting out to vote. We do not have any evidence of the idea that Canadians are voting more than once. Our problem is that they are voting less than once.

• (1550)

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, with reference to the member's last point, had we been engaged in hearings at the committee level, we would have heard testimony that people have voted more than once. There is proof of voter fraud. Unfortunately, that cannot be presented at committee because the opposition is refusing to allow witnesses to come forward who could provide that type of evidence.

I also stated, and the member should be aware of this, that out of the 39 pieces of documentation that are available, 2 of those 39 would be required, 1 with a name and 2 with addresses. I would again put my offer forward. I would be surprised if the opposition could produce a list of Canadians who would not have any of those 39 documents to prove that they have the right to vote. We need an examination at committee, even if there were the odd example. If those members think that the list of 39 documents is insufficient, then they should bring forward other suggestions. We cannot even do that because the opposition is refusing to allow the committee to do its work and refusing to allow a thorough examination of the bill.

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Mr. Speaker, currently at committee we are not getting to the point of this piece of legislation. We have a motion before the committee, which is almost exactly the same as the motion we are debating today that says exactly what the committee must do, and that is to lay it out, do not let the committee decide, but just do what today's motion says. I have been chair of a committee in this place for a long time. I have never seen committee work done this way before. I have certainly not seen it done here in the House.

Could the parliamentary secretary tell me if we have had difficulty in committee before with respect to picking witnesses or planning our studies or the way to move forward? Would it not be better to be talking about that?

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, I agree completely with my colleague, who is the chair of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. This is not the way to handle a committee. We do not put forward a motion saying here is what the committee must do.

Committees are the masters of their own agenda. Frankly, as I have stated publicly and as I have stated again today, our government has said that if members want to put forward a list of witnesses, we are not going to oppose it. We want to hear from people.

This contention from the opposition that we are somehow trying to ramrod this bill through, without hearing from Canadians who want to speak to the bill, is absolutely false. It is disingenuous, and the opposition should be ashamed for trying to take what we have given, which is a sincere effort to open up and allow further witnesses to come forward.

Why do we not, as a committee, just get to work?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault (Sherbrooke, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to start by saying that I will be sharing my time with the member for Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot.

I am pleased to speak today to the very important motion moved by the NDP. It has come to this with the debate on Bill C-23, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act and other Acts and to make consequential amendments to certain Acts.

This involves a law that is vital in a democracy. The Canada Elections Act is the most important law for our democracy. It is considered to be almost constitutional. We must examine the proposed changes with the greatest respect for democracy and Parliament, because the latter is responsible for this act.

The act was amended in the past. However, this is the first time, if my memory serves me well, that a government wants to amend it in such a cavalier manner. The government has not even bothered to consult or approach the other parties in this House, even though the other political parties participate in all elections and the democratic process.

Not only have the Conservatives failed to consult the parties, but they are also introducing legislation that will make draconian changes to the Canada Elections Act. I will not go into the details of the bill because I have already done so at debate on second reading.

However, I do not think that this is how the government should have gone about changing the Canada Elections Act. From the outset, the government has been trying to move forward with this as quickly as possible. Why? The reason is simple. The government is trying to hide things. The bill contains things that the Conservatives do not want to spend a lot of time talking about.

In fact, the government wants to move on to something else as quickly as possible, as is the case with most of the bills it introduces. The government tries to expedite the process in order to ensure that bills are passed very quickly before the public has time to realize what is happening. Once the Canada Elections Act has been amended, there will be no going back, unless we want to go through the lengthy process of amending the law again.

I am clearly very concerned about this issue. The bill makes significant changes that could affect certain segments of the population, namely young people. We have heard this during today's debate and at other times as well.

In Sherbrooke, there are two universities, one of which is located in my riding. There are also a number of colleges and CEGEPs. I therefore feel quite strongly about this issue.

As an MP, it is my duty to represent the interests of the people of Sherbrooke when it comes to this bill and today's motion, which deals specifically with consultations.

The committee should hold consultations across Canada, including in the Eastern Townships and Sherbrooke, which are areas that could be affected by this bill. It is the committee's duty to do so.

We are often asked why the House should tell a committee what it needs to do. I think the reason is quite simple: all the resources available to the committee have already been exhausted. The request has already been made and all the possibilities have been exhausted. As the chair of a committee, I can attest that the committee will continue to control its own destiny and agenda, no matter what happens.

● (1555)

If the House votes in favour of this motion, that would put pressure on the members of the committee in question. They would practically be forced to move forward and abide by the decision of the House as a whole.

I think that is what it has come to because we have already exhausted all the other avenues with the requests made in committee that were rejected by the Conservatives. We hope that this time, because all MPs will vote, some from across the way will see the light and vote with us on this motion that we have moved. We hope to be able to hold the consultations that we have been calling for since the bill was introduced, so that we can go directly to the people this affects. I think that is the key in all this.

I think this is the least we can do, given how important this law is for our democracy and how much respect we have for it. This has been done in a number of other files, for a number of other bills. Consultations have been held across Canada for various things. Earlier, other members gave examples of bills that were before parliamentary committees. Those committees decided to travel and hold consultations on those various bills.

Today, we have a bill to change the Elections Act, and the government is refusing to hold any consultations and talk to Canadians about this. It makes us wonder how important the Canada Elections Act is to the government when it cannot accept a request as simple as holding consultations like the ones that have been held for many other bills in the past.

It makes us wonder what the Conservatives are afraid of. That is the question that comes to my mind when I see the Conservatives opposing the idea of talking to Canadians. They must be afraid of something. We already heard the Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons say in committee that it would be a circus, a ridiculous spectacle. I do not remember his exact words, but he seemed to be ridiculing the idea of consulting Canadians. The parliamentary secretary seemed to be saying that it was ridiculous, there was no point and we should not consult Canadians.

We completely disagree. I think that we would see the complete opposite. It would be even more helpful for the committee members who will study the bill. After several consultation sessions, the committee members would be able to go through the bill clause by clause, taking into account what they heard in the various communities across Canada, whether it was on aboriginal reserves—which we think will be significantly affected—on university campuses or in seniors' homes. These are examples of places the committee could visit to make a better study of this bill.

I think this bill has a number of shortcomings, and I think that consultation is the best way to make improvements. I may be naive,

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but even after three years here, I have faith that it is possible to improve this bill. Maybe I am kidding myself, but I still think it is possible.

The best way to improve the bill is to consult the people who will be affected by the changes to the Canada Elections Act. This may involve some amendments to the bill, because we will truly know what kind of impact these changes will have and how we can improve the bill. I hope that will be possible.

I ask my colleagues in all parties to support this motion to consult all Canadians across the country.

● (1600)

[*English*]

Mr. Ted Hsu (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, if a committee went on the road to speak to Canadians about this bill, which affects how we choose our federal government, one question I would ask people, which we could not do in committee here on the Hill, is to put up their hand if they could donate \$1,200 to an election candidate, which is the maximum amount. I bet very few hands would go up because very few people could afford to donate that much. Then I would ask them why we should give those people who already donate the maximum even more influence in the political process when most people cannot afford that. That is the sort of thing we could do by going across the country.

I would ask my colleague to comment on that.

● (1605)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: Mr. Speaker, the ultimate goal is to hold consultations from one end of the country to the other, not just in Ottawa. It is a question of speaking with people who have real-life examples and experiences to share. They may be able to add something to the debate.

Here, in Ottawa, we will hear from experts who have studied the elections act, but that is not enough. It is very important to hear from them when we are studying a bill, but it is also very important to hear from people who cannot travel here and who have real-life examples to share. That is impossible if we stay in Ottawa.

When we hold consultations, people are able to hear testimony or to make a presentation when a committee stops in a nearby city. However, that becomes impossible when committees sit only in Ottawa. It is not that easy for people outside Ottawa to add their voices and be heard.

Therefore, it is to the committee's benefit to go to them—that way, we can hear testimony that we surely would not hear if we were to stay here, in the Ottawa bubble.

[*English*]

Mr. Paul Calandra (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and for Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we have heard a lot from the opposition members with respect to the debate. However, it seems to always come down to a couple of key factors for them. One is an increase in the maximum amount of money Canadians can contribute, should they wish to. Page 185 of the bill outlines that it increases by \$25 a year starting January 1.

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The opposition talk about vouching. On page 25 of the bill, subsection 143(3) identifies that it gives the polling clerk some leeway when there is no clear indication of address. I asked the member a question about that section the last time he spoke to this. We still have not heard an answer from the NDP on how that provision can be improved.

It further talks about giving political parties an opportunity to seek rulings from the Elections Commissioner. We have not heard any response on that. That could include what forms of ID are required.

We also hear a lot about the outreach and education function of the Chief Electoral Officer. However, when we look at page 10 of the report of the last election from the returning officers, the people who run the elections, they support the government's position of what Elections Canada should do in order to increase voter turnout.

Those are the areas that the NDP and the Liberals keep focusing on. We have been at this for a number of hours and days and not once have they come up with even one thing to change any of those sections.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: Mr. Speaker, I have only 50 seconds to respond to a very broad question.

The member seems to be saying that I did not talk about the points he raised, but today's motion is not about the actual content of the bill. It is about holding public hearings across Canada. I already made a speech about the content of the bill.

With all due respect, Mr. Speaker, I am discussing the subject of the motion we are studying, which is about holding Canada-wide consultations. I spoke about that in my speech because that is the subject of debate today.

I hope to have the support of all my colleagues opposite to pass this NDP motion.

[English]

The Deputy Speaker: It is my duty pursuant to Standing Order 38 to inform the House that the questions to be raised tonight at the time of adjournment are as follows: the hon. member for Brome—Missisquoi, The Environment; the hon. member for Saint-Jean, Rail Transportation; and the hon. member for Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, Science and Technology.

• (1610)

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Claude Morin (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise today because I want to help protect something that is very precious to Canadians: our democracy.

The motion moved by the member for Hamilton Centre is a reasonable response to the Conservatives' misguided efforts with respect to democracy. As my colleague from Sherbrooke said earlier, this is electoral "deformation".

What we are asking for is not complicated. We want Canadians and stakeholder groups to have a chance to express their views on these significant changes to our election legislation. When I say Canadians and stakeholder groups, I mean Elections Canada, the

minister, of course, first nations, anti-poverty groups, people with disabilities, youth and students from all parts of the country, urban, rural and remote alike.

The committee has to travel. It cannot stay here in the ivory tower in Ottawa. No one can deny that Ottawa is an ivory tower. When we are here, we do not know what is going on in the rest of Canada.

Many committees travel in the course of their duties. Going to see people is essential. We have no choice. I do not see why the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs would not travel in this case. The government will say that it would be an expense, and I agree. However, some expenses are essential to democracy, and consulting the people is one such expense.

I think that, in devising this reform, the Conservatives did not pay much attention to people's reality. I think they could not care less. They are not spending money on the right things, if you ask me, and this is a serious threat to our democracy.

Since we are talking about democracy, I would like to take a little step back. The word "democracy" means "power to the people". We all agree on that. I think the government is afraid of the people. The Conservatives are well aware that because they came up with such a bad bill, consulting people who are worried about this kind of reform might not go well. People would put the Conservatives in their place. That might be what happens.

I have not had the opportunity to speak to Bill C-23, the subject of our motion. I would like to provide a brief overview to illustrate how essential our motion is and how badly the government has botched this bill.

To start, this bill will strip Election Canada of its investigative powers. The Commissioner of Canada Elections will now be under the Director of Public Prosecutions. That would be like removing the RCMP's ability to investigate Criminal Code offences. It makes absolutely no sense. This is a serious change that will prove to be completely ineffective.

Furthermore, the government also wants to take away the Chief Electoral Officer's power to engage in public education, but public education is essential. This will in no way contribute to increasing voter turnout. The Chief Electoral Officer will not be able to talk to people about aspects of the electoral process or work to prevent electoral fraud. This is especially problematic.

The Chief Electoral Officer will also have to seek Treasury Board approval to hire experts. This is serious interference in the work of a senior official. That is not so unusual around here, as we know that the government enjoys that type of thing. However, this makes our electoral system less effective and again threatens our democracy.

• (1615)

The bill will also eliminate the ability of electors to prove their identity through vouching. This may seem minor, but it is a very serious issue. Some people will no longer be able to vote. Let us take for example an elderly woman who does not have a driver's licence and whose accounts are all in her husband's name. She will not be able to vote. Another example is a student who has a student card but does not have a driver's licence. That person will not be able to vote.

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I would also like to add that voter information cards will no longer be able to be used as proof of identity. This creates the same problem.

The bill also increases the maximum threshold for individual donations from \$1,200 to \$1,500. This means that the electoral process would continue to favour people with money. Why are we doing this when Quebec did just the opposite? Quebec decreased the maximum amount of donations. I therefore do not see why we are doing the opposite. It does not make any sense.

The bill will also make it possible for candidates to contribute \$5,000 to their own campaigns. I would like to give a very specific example. When I ran for my party, I had little to no money. If this bill had been in effect at that time, I could not have run for office and I would not be here right now. However, my constituents tell me that I am living up to their expectations. This bill would therefore rule out quality candidates who do not have the money to contribute to their campaign. Money is always being put first and foremost.

As I was saying earlier, many committees travel in the course of their duties and that is essential. I do not see why committees should be prevented from going to consult with Canadians. I want to reiterate that I believe that the government is afraid of what might come out of those consultations. To reassure my colleagues, I would like to add that I often hold consultations in my riding on anything and everything. I like consulting my constituents and finding out what they think about many topics.

The government should start doing that because it is essential, particularly since this bill has a direct impact on various segments of the population that need to share their opinions. Consulting these people will only help us to do a better job, and of course, we should go to them rather than making them to come to Ottawa. It is really important.

As I was saying earlier, good things do not come cheap. We need to move forward and improve our electoral system. Electoral reform would be a good thing, of course, but not in this way. This is not the right approach. That is my opinion and that of all my colleagues here at this time. You cannot impose things on people in this way, by ramming them down their throats and telling them that this is how it will be from now on. We do not do that in our country. We have a democratic country that is a great place to live. We want to keep it that way. That is not what the government is doing at this time.

This government is jeopardizing a number of things, and that is very problematic. If the Conservatives were to accept this motion, it would be a good start, because consulting people and implementing real electoral reforms together with the people is a step in the right direction.

[*English*]

Mr. Paul Calandra (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and for Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will come back to it again. The member talked about vouching. She talked about a senior whose bills are all in her husband's name. Had the member actually read the bill, on page 25, on subsection 143(3), she would have seen that this is actually addressed. The polling clerk would have an opportunity to address that. Apparently the member missed that section.

The member also talked about the education feature. The returning officers' postmortem of the 41st general election, on page 10, talks about one of the things the returning officers identified as being the biggest problem in the last election and what could help improve voter turnout.

...ROs identified that there is a need to give out more information to electors; for example, there are not enough outreach activities and communications about where the RO office is located and on the voting process. They suggest taking out ads explaining that advance polls will be busier. Even if it was the day after, this would help ease voter complaints about long wait times. They also recommended being more proactive in informing the public about specific voting issues, and more advertisement on the Special Ballot process.

What they talked about was actually telling Canadians how to vote and about advance polls to make it easier for Canadians. That is what the people who run elections think would help make elections better.

Why is it that the member opposite rejects what the returning officers across this country pointed out as the—

• (1620)

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member for Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Claude Morin: Mr. Speaker, I did not hear a question from my colleague.

Therefore, I will not be answering a question and will instead repeat that, in my opinion, this process has been botched. Canadians must be consulted again and again and again.

That is all I have to say in response to that so-called question.

[*English*]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, people all over Canada are concerned about what the Conservative government is doing with respect to Bill C-23. In fact there were 3,000-plus delegates at the Liberal Party convention, and one of the priority resolutions was on this issue.

If I could quote directly from it, it says:

Whereas, instead of correcting these problems, Bill C-23 will amend the Canada Elections Act by:

Further restricting access to voting by disallowing vouching for voters, thereby preventing approximately 120,000 Canadians from voting;

Threatening the independence of the Commissioner of Canada Elections, by making this position part of government rather than leaving it with Elections Canada, which is independently answerable to Parliament;

Prohibiting the Chief Electoral Officer from communicating broadly with Canadians;

This is my personal favourite:

Hampering investigations into election breaches, by failing to give the Commissioner the power to compel witnesses to answer questions or provide documents;

This issue is very serious. The question we really need to get answered is why the government opposes taking this committee to Canadians by taking it to different cities in Canada in different regions so that Canadians have an opportunity to express their concerns directly to the government on a fundamental law that affects one of our principle foundations, that being democracy.

Business of Supply

Why does the member think the government is so tough in not wanting to go outside Ottawa to hear what Canadians have to say?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Claude Morin: Mr. Speaker, I was not sure that I would hear a question, but it came out finally.

I believe that the government does not want to consult the public because it is afraid of the people, as I mentioned earlier in my speech. In fact, as I was saying, democracy means power to the people. In my opinion, if a government does not consult its people, that is a sign that it is afraid of them.

[*English*]

Mr. Brad Butt (Mississauga—Streetsville, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise on today's opposition day motion. The NDP is asking the House to direct the work of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, of which I am a member, during its consideration of the fair elections act.

While I wholeheartedly support the need to consult with stakeholders and Canadians about the important issues raised in the fair elections act, I believe that it is the responsibility of our committee to decide how it will conduct itself and how it will structure its hearings. I am confident that the committee will ensure a thorough and comprehensive hearing of the fair elections act and will make every effort to hear all who are interested in this important matter.

The communications technology available makes it possible to hear from a wide range of individuals, wherever they may be. I will, therefore, be opposing the motion and encourage other members to do the same.

Let us talk a bit about the fair elections act. The act is a vital piece of legislation that proposes comprehensive changes to the Canada Elections Act. The fair elections act would ensure that everyday citizens are in charge of democracy by putting special interests on the sidelines and rule breakers out of business.

• (1625)

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. The motion before us today is not about the fair elections act. The government already invoked closure on the fair elections act in this chamber. The motion before us today is about whether certain witnesses should appear and whether the committee should hold cross-country hearings. That is the motion. I submit that the member is out of order in his remarks by talking about the fair elections act. We are not talking about it.

Mr. Paul Calandra: Mr. Speaker, on the same point of order, I know that you will no doubt remain consistent in your ruling, especially in light of earlier comments by both Liberal and NDP members with respect to this motion and their speaking notes.

The Deputy Speaker: It has been quite clear that the debate today is engaged both directly on the motion that is before us today, the motion from the official opposition, but also on the central bill that is the essence of that motion. It is clear to me, and it is my ruling that both issues are relevant to the debate before us today.

The member for Mississauga—Streetsville can continue.

Mr. Brad Butt: Thank you very much for that interpretation, Mr. Speaker.

I have been here all day listening to the debate. Just about every single speaker on both sides of the House has talked about elements contained in Bill C-23 as part of the debate today. Obviously, the member for Malpeque was not paying attention.

The bill would also make it harder to break elections—

Hon. Wayne Easter: Point of order, Mr. Speaker. I am not going to stand here and take that. I was paying attention. He's a government backbencher and knows the government invoked closure. It did, so why is he going to talk about the bill?

The Deputy Speaker: Order, please. It is not a point of order.

The member for Mississauga—Streetsville can continue, hopefully uninterrupted.

Mr. Brad Butt: Mr. Speaker, one would think that someone who has been here as long as that member would know the rules.

The bill would also make it harder to break the elections law. It would close loopholes to big money, pose new penalties on political imposters who make rogue calls, and empower law enforcement with sharper teeth, a longer reach, and a freer hand.

The fair elections act would protect voters from rogue calls with a mandatory public registry for mass calling, prison time for impersonating elections officials, and increased penalties. It would give more independence to the Commissioner of Canada Elections, allowing him or her control over staff and investigations, empowering her or him to seek tougher penalties for existing electoral offences, and providing more than a dozen new offences to combat big money, rogue calls, and fraudulent voting.

It would ban the use of loans used to evade donation rules. I am sure the member for Malpeque understands that one.

It would repeal the ban on premature transmission of elections results, upholding free speech. It would provide better customer service to voters and establish an extra day of polling.

In the case of disagreements over election expenses, it would allow an MP to present the disputed case in the courts and to have judges rule quickly on it before the Chief Electoral Officer seeks the suspension of the MP.

It would make the rules for elections clear, predictable, and easier to follow.

It would crack down on voter fraud by prohibiting vouching or voter information cards as acceptable forms of ID. This last provision, cracking down on voter fraud, will be the focus of my remarks today.

Business of Supply

Each time people vote fraudulently they cancel out the ballot of an honest voter. Studies commissioned by Elections Canada demonstrate mass irregularities in the use of vouching and high rates of inaccuracy on voter information cards. Voters would still have 39 forms of authorized ID to choose from to prove identity and residence.

The fair elections act would protect the integrity of the vote by ending the risky practices that are prone to errors and irregularities. The measures included in the act would strengthen our election system through reforms that would increase oversight, accountability, and enforcement while taking action to ensure the integrity of the vote and provide greater opportunities for Canadians to vote.

Among the important initiatives included in the act are measures to combat voter fraud and increase the confidence of Canadians in the electoral process.

The current provision that allows for the vouching system in general elections has been used in 2008 and 2011, as well as in by-elections since 2007. The Neufeld report, a study that was commissioned by Elections Canada to examine administrative deficiencies at the polls in the 2011 election, concluded that vouching procedures are overly complex and that this has contributed to irregularities in the polling process. It concluded that, among a sample of polls from Etobicoke Centre during the last general election and in by-elections in Victoria, Durham, and Calgary Centre, there were irregularities in 25% of the cases where vouching was used. A national sample based on the last election identified that, of the cases that involved vouching, 42% had irregularities.

Mr. Neufeld stated:

Serious errors, of a type courts consider "irregularities" that can contribute to an election being overturned, were found to occur in 12 percent of all Election Day cases involving voter registration, and 42 percent of cases involving identity vouching.

Even with increased quality assurance, the report indicates that the problem would not be remedied.

● (1630)

This was identified in the Neufeld report, and I quote:

Identity vouching procedures are unquestionably the most complex "exception" process administered at polling stations. The level of irregularities for vouching averaged 25 percent. During two of these elections, quality assurance programs involving Onsite Conformity Advisors (OCAs) were applied. However, vouching irregularities still averaged 21 percent during the OCA monitored elections. This indicates that overly complex procedures cannot be remedied simply by improved quality assurance.

Vouching is risky and subject to high levels of irregularity, and increased quality assurance would not remedy the problem. That is why our government took steps in the fair elections act to eliminate this practice.

In addition to the elimination of the vouching process, the fair elections act proposes to include measures to improve the communication to voters about what types of identification are acceptable at the polls. Canadians are often confused about what forms of ID are acceptable in order to vote. The fair elections act responds to this by requiring the Chief Electoral Officer to

communicate to Canadians what forms of ID are acceptable in order to vote.

Research shows that most electors have identification with their name and date of birth. The Uniform Law Conference of Canada states:

Almost all voters have some documentary evidence of who they are and their date of birth....

What is often most difficult for a voter to provide is documentary evidence of residence....

There are many options to choose from in order to vote. Canadians can choose 2 among 39 unique forms of ID that show their name and residence. In addition to providing their name, which almost all Canadians can do, residency can be demonstrated with documentation issued by the responsible authority of a shelter, soup kitchen, student or seniors residence, or long-term care facility. These documents include an attestation of residence, a letter of stay, an admission form, and statement of benefits. I believe that virtually all Canadians can meet the identification requirements, given the exhaustive options that are available.

I will not take time to list all 39 options, but I think it is important to read into the record a few that many Canadians already have: driver's licence, health card, Canadian passport, certificate of Canadian citizenship, birth certificate, certificate of Indian status, social insurance number card, old age security card, student ID card, library card, public transportation card, Canadian Forces identity card, a Veterans Affairs health card, hospital bracelet worn by residents of long-term care facilities, letter from a public guardian, public curator, or public trustee, or a bank credit card statement.

I have only mentioned 16 of the 39 options; so this provides members with a good idea of how many identification options are available.

While Elections Canada has estimated that as many as 120,000 voters have used vouching on election day, these voters could have proven their identity and residence if that requirement and the options available had been explained to them. The fair elections act would require in law that Elections Canada communicate what forms of ID would be accepted at polling stations. This important measure would provide voters with the knowledge they need about what identification to bring before they head to the polls.

Another important matter addressed in the act is the use of voter information cards. The voter information card is a card that Elections Canada sends out during an election campaign to every elector whose name appears on the list. It informs electors when and where they can cast their ballots on election day or at the advance polls. A card is also sent to every elector who is added to the list of electors during the revision period. The voter information cards play an important role informing Canadians about where and when they need to vote.

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●(1635)

However, they have not been used as a proof of identification and residency at the polls, apart from some pilot projects conducted by Elections Canada, and there is evidence that their use as ID presents proven risks of voter fraud. Voter information cards with inaccuracies are regularly sent to electors, which could allow those attempting to subvert election law to use them to vote more than once or in the wrong riding.

An Elections Canada report on the last election showed that roughly one in six eligible voters do not have a correct address listed on the national register of electors. The information from the register provides the information for voters lists that is reproduced on the voter information cards. In other words, one out of six voter information cards are wrong. That is why the fair elections act would prohibit the use of voter information cards as a form of acceptable identification.

As I have demonstrated, there is a wide range of voter identification documents that are accepted at the polls, which have a proven level of accuracy. There is no need to add voter information cards to that list, in light of the apparent lack of reliability of these cards for identification purposes.

Canadians must have confidence in the democratic and our electoral process. Not only do they need to know how to cast a ballot, but Canadians want to be sure that legitimate votes are not cancelled by illegitimate ones.

As I have demonstrated today, the fair elections act would go a long way to ensuring that Canadians have the confidence in the electoral process that they want and deserve. With the measures to eliminate vouching and communicate the many types of voter identification that are acceptable at the polls, I believe that the incidents of voter fraud would be greatly reduced.

Together, all of these initiatives have advanced the voter identification process significantly from what it was a decade ago.

Of course, there still remains the important debate that will continue on the fair elections act, which will include the examination of the bill by the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. Canadians, interested parties, and stakeholders will have the opportunity to make their views known.

I have complete confidence that the committee, of which I am a member, will ensure that the study of the bill and the hearings are conducted in such a way as to allow a comprehensive review of the issues.

I do not believe that, to accomplish this, the committee needs to be directed by this House.

It is for that reason that I will not be supporting the motion. I once again call upon members of this House to oppose the motion.

I hope that tomorrow, at the procedure and House affairs committee, the filibustering will stop, the list of witnesses will be established, and we will start to have proper, full, and robust hearings on the bill. We have heard from the minister already. The minister came, spent an hour, and took every question directed at him. Then, as soon as the minister had finished, the filibustering by

the NDP began. I am hoping tomorrow, at committee, we will get on with the job that we are paid by Canadians to do, which is to do a robust, careful examination and invite dozens and dozens of witnesses to come in to give us their expert testimony on the bill. I look forward to hearing that testimony from Canadians here in the House of Commons when the committee resumes the good work that it needs to do for all Canadians.

●(1640)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Ève Pécelet (La Pointe-de-l'Île, NDP): Mr. Speaker, there is a difference between a member of Parliament's job and the government's job. I would like to remind my colleague that it is the government's job to consult Canadians. I hope he has not forgotten that aspect of the government's job.

The motion simply asks the government to consult the public. I think it is strange that I did not hear a single good reason in my colleague's speech for not consulting Canadians. He extolled the virtues of his bill, which is fine, but he is hiding behind procedural rules to shirk the government's responsibility to consult Canadians. My colleague did not give a single reason in his speech for why consulting Canadians would not be in their best interests.

[*English*]

Mr. Brad Butt: Mr. Speaker, when the member referred to the motion, she suggested that it would direct the government to tell the procedure and House affairs committee to hold hearings across the country. The government does not tell committees of the House how to run their own business.

I am a member of the procedure and House affairs committee. It is generally a very cordial committee. We have had witnesses from the list of witnesses submitted by the opposition and from the list that we submitted. Almost all of the witnesses are included on the list and are invited to come and make their full presentations. That is the important work of the committee.

The government is not directing the procedure and House affairs committee, but it would be nice to actually start working on the bill tomorrow instead of having the Hamilton Centre filibuster.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would prefer to see the committee take direction from the House rather than see what we know is going to happen, which is that the Conservatives, who are in the majority on the committee, will take their direction from the parliamentary secretary. We know that is what happens on all committees.

We heard a lot of the government spin on Bill C-23 from the member for Mississauga—Streetsville, but we heard nothing on why he is opposed to engaging Canadians in their own communities. When he was talking, I almost had a vision. That vision was that the Conservative backbenchers in this place would actually stand up for democracy, break ranks with their government, and allow a committee to travel across the country and hear from Canadians. I ask the member opposite if he thinks it might even be three or four.

I hear Conservative backbenchers get up and talk about how they are members of the government. They are not; they are members of the governing party, and they have a responsibility to their constituents to stand up.

Business of Supply

Does the member think that one or two or three might stand up for democracy, rather than the usual situation of being puppets on a string, taking their direction from a parliamentary—

• (1645)

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member for Mississauga—Streetsville.

Mr. Brad Butt: Mr. Speaker, the fact of the matter is that the committee had set aside, I believe, 12 meeting dates and had a huge list of potential witnesses. We were already starting to pre-vet them as a committee. They would be excellent witnesses.

We can get much more accomplished and hear from many more interested parties by holding the hearings here in Ottawa. We have great technology. Maybe the member does not know what a teleconference is, but it is an excellent way of hearing expert testimony from people without having to fly them or 12 members of a committee halfway across the country. That testimony is just as good, if not better, for use in our deliberations on the act.

Assuming the filibuster does not continue tomorrow morning, we are going to finally begin dealing with this bill in a proper way under our procedures at committee.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Jacob (Brome—Missisquoi, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his speech.

I would like to know why Marc Mayrand, the Chief Electoral Officer, went so far as to say that as a result of the reforms in this bill, he can no longer speak about democracy in this country.

[*English*]

Mr. Brad Butt: Mr. Speaker, the unfortunate thing is that we have not had a chance at committee to hear from the Chief Electoral Officer because the NDP is filibustering the start of the meeting.

I look forward to Mr. Mayrand coming to the procedure and House affairs committee and giving us his expert testimony, but I have to say that the previous chief electoral officer gave this bill, in its present form, an A minus. He said that it was a very good and very strong piece of legislation.

I think it can be better. We will take a look at the expert testimony that we get at committee. We will listen to the witnesses and figure out if there are ways that we can make it an even stronger bill to make Canada's democratic process even better.

Mr. Paul Calandra (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and for Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it was interesting to hear the member for Malpeque talk about democracy, because he ran for a party that made a whole host of promises and then systematically, one by one, turned its back on every single promise that it made to the Canadian people. I do not recall the member, who was also a cabinet minister, standing up for democracy or standing up for what he told the Canadian people in advance.

However, the member was talking about the filibuster at committee. Could he expand on this and explain how many people the committee has actually heard since the bill has been before us and why we are not hearing from witnesses?

Canadians give us \$500 million a year. That is what it costs to run this place and send members of Parliament back home every single weekend. I wonder if the hon. member could tell me some of the steps he is taking in his riding to engage the people in his riding and hear what they are saying on the bill. Could he expand further on what the filibuster is and why the opposition members are so desperate to stop the committee hearings and prevent it from hearing from people such as the former chief electoral officer, who gave this bill an A minus?

• (1650)

Mr. Brad Butt: Mr. Speaker, I am paid to do a job. Canadians in Mississauga—Streetsville sent me here to work, and some of my most important responsibilities as a member of Parliament are to do the work at committee.

Committee is the real grunt work around here. Committee is where we hear directly from Canadians interested in a piece of legislation, interested in participating in a study, interested in giving us their best knowledge. However, at the procedure and House affairs committee, we are not going to get that, because the hon. member for Hamilton Centre has decided he would rather keep yammering at committee and filibustering instead of hearing from witnesses.

At the first set of hearings on the bill, the minister came for an hour. He was straightforward and answered every question clearly and directly. As soon as that was done and the minister's testimony was over, the filibuster gates opened up. In the second hour at committee, zero was accomplished. Absolutely nothing was done on the bill, and I suspect that when we reconvene at 11 a.m. tomorrow, the filibustering member for Hamilton Centre will be at it again.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Laurin Liu (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we know that this bill will affect thousands of Canadians, including seniors and students.

However, the Conservatives simply said that students would have to bring their student card to go vote. They do not even know that student cards do not have the student's address on them. That shows just how out of touch the Conservatives are.

We need to travel across the country to consult Canadians, to talk about their realities and to consult them on the details of this bill.

I think that we owe it to Canadians to do an in-depth study of this bill. They also deserve to be consulted before the election rules change, because elections belong to Canadians and not to the government.

[*English*]

Mr. Brad Butt: Mr. Speaker, I know there has been a lot said about the student ID issue, so let us remember a couple of things.

First of all, people have to be 18 years of age or older to vote in Canada, so we are not talking about high school students and we are not talking about younger people.

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Second, if people are age 18 or over and are in a post-secondary institution, they will have student ID, photo ID in most cases, from the universities or colleges. The ID may not have a specific address, but then students can bring in the second piece of ID, such as a lease or a copy of a transcript mailed to their parents' home as their principal residence. It is not just one piece of ID. With a student ID card and a transcript, they can vote.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the member for Louis-Saint-Laurent. Come to think of it, Louis St. Laurent was a former prime minister of Canada.

Listening to the member for Mississauga—Streetsville and his view of the functions of committee, Canadians watching closely who are not very careful will end up believing in Cinderella and the fairy godmother.

We had omnibus bills before the finance committee for which we had 3,000 amendments. We voted for 55 hours, and the Conservatives did not accept one single amendment. Now they try to tell us today how wonderful it is in committee.

I am proud of the member for Hamilton Centre, the riding adjoining mine, for standing up for democracy as we understand it to be and for stopping these people from trying to force through a bill that is tainted, that is wrong.

I always try to look for what is good in people, and so far that approach has served me well in life. I sincerely believe that many of the members of the Conservative government who sought office to be members of Parliament did so to serve Canadians, their very neighbours. I also believe that many came to this place to try to make Parliament a better place, but now I have to ask a question of these same good members, these pro-democracy Conservatives: how did it come to this point?

There is much more wrong with the bill than the vouching part. Hearing speech after speech from the government side, one would think the only problem the opposition saw with the bill was around the vouching. That is very far from the facts. There is much more wrong.

I have to ask how these governing, pro-democracy Conservatives reached the stage where they feel so empowered that they can justify to themselves that somehow it is their right, and it is right and proper for them, to deny tens of thousands of Canadians their participation in our democracy.

The arrogance of a few over there is quite astounding. One has been recently quoted as saying that holding hearings for Canadians is virtually as important as a circus. That same member must perceive that Canadians who want to come before the circus would be clowns.

According to the member for Hamilton Centre who sits on PROC, the procedure and House affairs committee, the Conservatives in the beginning were showing interest in perhaps having hearings across the country. All of a sudden, that changed. As the member for Hamilton Centre said earlier today, the iron wall came down. We now have to bring this question to this place, the highest level of our Parliament, and get an answer from Parliament, not from the Prime Minister's Office.

The opposition day motion is seeking the opportunity for Parliament to give direction that we believe would cause this committee to do its job properly by hearing witnesses who cannot necessarily come here, witnesses region by region. People will come before the committee from Elections Canada. We hope there will be agreement on the witnesses here among the political parties, but representatives of first nations, anti-poverty groups, groups representing persons with disabilities, and groups representing youth advocates, students, and others have raised their concerns and done so quite publicly.

Among the things that are wrong, tens of thousands of students, seniors, aboriginal people, low-income Canadians, and the homeless are the ones who are most at risk. That is where a significant problem lies in the bill. We have to come to this House and ask Parliament to allow the proper outreach on a bill, a bill that is affecting our very democracy.

• (1655)

Trade committees travel on a variety of trade issues, including the EU agreement. I am not criticizing that travel because it is important.

I will say, again, that when we consider making a change to a law that would affect an individual's opportunity to vote, we must be careful. It is important.

I was a school board trustee before coming to this place. A wonderful part of my job was talking to grade 4 and 5 students and answering their questions about democracy. As an MP, I return to many of those schools to talk to those kids.

It would be ridiculous to ban Elections Canada from teaching kids about our democracy, about encouraging people to vote. It is important that Elections Canada warns people about election fraud. The person on the street has an obligation to see where the problems might be and report them if they find them.

In my mind, the Prime Minister is trying to use U.S.-style voter suppression tactics and bring big money into Canada's elections. The Conservatives have been shutting down debate and are trying to ram through a bill designed to stop some people from voting. Would it happen to be those people who might vote for someone else?

This legislation would strip Elections Canada of its investigative powers.

One would think that in travelling this country we would come across people who could provide good solid input, people who might not be able to access this place. Almost immediately, I think of professors at universities.

This legislation proposes to remove the power of the CEO at Elections Canada to engage in public education. I come back to this because it is so basic and fundamental. The CEO would be required to seek Treasury Board approval to hire technical experts. Has a person not been put in place to manage this file? Would that individual not have the capacity to seek out technical experts? It is strange.

Business of Supply

With respect to voter ID cards, I would suggest that this is government manipulation in order to keep the focus on vouching and ID cards. There are other things that are so clearly problematic.

The bill proposes to change the amount of money, up to \$5,000, that people can contribute to their own campaigns. If people run for the leadership of a party, they could put \$25,000 into their own campaigns. That would provide people with money an upper hand over people who are less affluent. The idea of a democracy is to allow anybody to come here.

There is not just something wrong with this legislation, but things are missing from this legislation.

I have said many times in this place that the true purpose of committees is to work together. When a government brings a piece of legislation forward, I see it as the responsibility of the opposition to try to make the legislation better. We have come to the stage in our committee where we are butting heads all too often and the opportunity to make the bill better is not there.

In closing, I want to go back to the most fundamental thing. The good people who are in this place and who do have the proper intentions should pause and think about what they are about to do. We are about to take part in a process that would limit a person's franchise in this country. This legislation would put an artificial limitation on a person's ability to vote in a federal election. It would limit people's ability to choose their government.

It is very clear to those of us on this side of the House that we need to start looking at the people who would be disenfranchised. There are many in society who are already disenfranchised in many ways. Many individuals are poor. First nations are disenfranchised. This legislation would be an added suppression, for lack of a better term.

We can do better than this. Members should truly consider hearing from Canadians. They should put their trust in the democracy that Canadians deserve.

• (1700)

Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is interesting when one comes to this place and discovers what happens in the backrooms, in the recesses of this place. When we first heard about voter fraud, robocalls, and all of those things, the promise was made to bring forward legislation that would change the reality of elections and make them more fair and honest. I naively expected that there would be something to prohibit robocalls and to make sure that Elections Canada has the personnel and financing to get to the bottom of what happened. I do not see it in the bill.

I would like to ask my hon. colleague what he thinks is going on. Why do we not see real and genuine reform of the elections act?

Mr. Wayne Marston: Mr. Speaker, the side of me that tries to look for the good in people would say it was an accident, an omission. However, my time has taught me that there are things done by parties in this place to move themselves forward in the eyes of the public. They are not always the kinds of principled things that we would like to see.

If we look at the situation of robocalls in the last election and the fact that they were traced to the voter lists of the Conservative Party

of Canada, it certainly calls into question the point the member is making about why there is not more there on this issue.

• (1705)

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I enjoyed the remarks from the member for Hamilton East—Stoney Creek. The key point he made was that the committee be allowed to do its job properly, and in order to do that, it should travel.

Mr. Speaker, I think you know that even with committee hearings here in Ottawa, in theory that should work. However, the practice with the government has been one of absolute control of its members at committee. That is where we run into the problem with the hearings in Ottawa.

I have always found that when committees travel they become less partisan. It is not as possible for the parliamentary secretary to come in the room, put his hand on a shoulder, and say “you're a member of the government”. They are not; they are a member of the governing party and they have a responsibility to constituents. However, the pressure on backbench members, especially from the Conservative Party, is not as great when we are out in the country.

Could the member explain how committees are working, or more properly, as he said, not working, in Ottawa in the community's interest, so that Canadians understand why it is necessary for the committee to travel?

Mr. Wayne Marston: Mr. Speaker, as a member of the finance committee a number of years ago, I travelled across the country during pre-budget hearings. We went to Washington, and I actually came to like, quite a lot, some of the people from the government side on that committee. They were good honest people.

However, when we look at the functioning of the committees in this place, we see something different. We offer amendments after amendments, and they are never looked upon favourably by the government. It restricts the amount of debate that goes on in committee. There are a variety of things that happen there. When it comes to witnesses, there is a control exercise that is quite shocking.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, this is an important opposition day motion. I have not made it clear before, but I will make it clear now that I intend to vote for it. We need cross-country hearings. Ideally, we should expand them to the other issues that worry Canadians about the health of our democracy, particularly our perverse first past the post voting system. It is the only system in a democracy that allows the minority of voters to elect a majority government. This time it happened to be Conservative; in the past, it has been Liberals. However, it does not reflect the way that Canadians really vote.

I wonder if the member has any comment on that.

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Mr. Wayne Marston: Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for the question and the observation. The fact is, proportional representation would have made this place look entirely different from what it does today. That, in my opinion, and the opinion of my party, is healthy for democracy. Some people are getting elected with a very small plurality, but they get to govern as if they have the majority of the Canadian public when they only have roughly a third of it.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse (Louis-Saint-Laurent, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to have the opportunity to speak to this motion today. It is absolutely crucial that we examine Bill C-23 properly. Not only is our motion—which calls for public hearings on the matter to be held across Canada—entirely reasonable, but these hearings are absolutely essential in order to better understand our Canadian democracy and improve the Canada Elections Act as much as possible, as it should be.

I am fortunate to be a member of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, the committee we are discussing here today, the one being asked to conduct these consultations. As vice-chair of the committee for a little over a year now, I have had the opportunity to take part in many debates. For instance, at the beginning of this period, the committee was tasked with examining the recommendations of the Chief Electoral Officer. The committee also had to produce a report on what it thought of those recommendations and on the changes that he recommended that the government make to the Canada Elections Act.

After the 2008 election, the Chief Electoral Officer made about 50 recommendations. Some were minor, while others were quite significant. They would have corrected the major problems with the Canada Elections Act. When the matter came before the committee, the process was quite long and a great deal of discussion took place.

However, the tremendous advantage of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs—and one of my colleagues here today can confirm this—is that it is one of the committees that operates most effectively on the Hill. That is my opinion. Most of the time, things are dealt with by consensus and by mutual understanding, and we almost always manage to find common ground that everyone can agree on. That is the advantage of dealing with matters that are usually non-partisan.

As for the recommendations of the Chief Electoral Officer, at the time, I thought we had an excellent discussion. In the end, we were able to produce a report that most committee members agreed on. They found many of the Chief Electoral Officer's recommendations to be worthwhile.

We now have before us a bill that we have been waiting for for a very long time. It has been a long time since these changes were requested. It has been a long time since the committee tabled its report. It has been a long time since the NDP, in response to major election fraud issues, had a motion unanimously adopted in the House, outlining the specific changes that needed to be made to the Canada Elections Act as quickly as possible. This is urgent. The Chief Electoral Officer was very clear. These changes must be made as quickly as possible so that they can be implemented in time for the 2015 election.

If we wish to prevent other cases of major fraud, such as the robocalls, and other issues that emerged during the 2011 election, such as voter suppression, then yes, significant changes need to be made as quickly as possible. However, Bill C-23 contains all sorts of measures that come out of left field and do not solve anything. That is a problem.

For example, the Chief Electoral Officer made an excellent recommendation with regard to vouching: election workers should be hired in advance in order to prevent as many problems and administrative errors as possible. Right now, the Chief Electoral Officer does not have that authority. He was therefore asking to be able to hire election workers earlier in the process so that he would have more time to give them the proper training and did not have to hire workers too quickly and at the last minute. This would considerably reduce the number of administrative errors made on election day. Is this measure included in the bill? No. Instead, the government decided to completely eliminate this system, which allowed some groups of people, namely young people, people living in rural areas and others, to vote. This bill will completely deprive them of that right.

It is thus absolutely essential to go and get the opinions of the people who will be most affected by this bill, meaning people with reduced mobility, seniors, members of first nations and students.

I would like to focus on youth and students, because they are very important to me. Last spring, I tabled a motion before the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs to study voter turnout among young people.

• (1710)

We know this is a major problem because fewer and fewer young people are voting. The numbers are quite alarming. During the 2011 election, the 18 to 24 age group had the lowest turnout by far at 38.8%. That means that barely 38% of young people between the ages of 18 and 24 came out to vote on election day. Those who did vote used the voter card or vouching. Youth voter turnout is currently at a catastrophically low level. What is more, some of those who voted in 2011 would not have been able to if these measures had been in place.

The minister keeps saying that his bill will contribute to improving youth voter turnout. The problem is that this is not 1984 and ignorance is not an asset. Just because the minister says that the bill will improve youth voter turnout does not mean that it will magically be so. The truth is, if the Conservatives were truly interested in improving youth voter turnout, then why would they get rid of the voter card as a form of identification for voting, and why would they get rid of vouching? No other measure has made it easier for young people and students to vote.

Business of Supply

To come back to the heart of the motion, if the Conservatives are so convinced of the merits of their measure, if they are so convinced that it will truly help young people vote more, then why would they not consult them? Why would they not go across Canada, meet with the groups most affected and ask them whether they really think that these measures will contribute to improving voter turnout at every election?

When I hear what the Conservatives have to say about how they have no intention of consulting or desire to consult, that tells me they know exactly what they are doing. I think they are perfectly aware that these measures will make it harder for young people to vote. That is their goal. That is what they are trying to achieve.

Consulting—going to see people to ask them what they think about an issue as fundamental as our democracy—is not complicated. It is something committees do all the time.

Two years ago, I participated in a diplomatic mission of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. I went to Ukraine with an all-party group of MPs to hold public consultations. All day long, people from all over came to talk to us about democracy in Ukraine, about how it works, about what could be improved, about major problems and obstacles to democracy in Ukraine.

We did not stay in Kiev. We went all over, to all the regions. We went to Kharkiv in the east and Lviv in the west. We travelled around. We went to see people. That gave us a complete picture of the reality over there. Had we stayed here in the basement of the Centre Block, had we told the Ukrainians to Skype us and tell us what was going on in their country, I do not think we would have been able to understand the situation as well as we did.

It was an extraordinary opportunity. It is something that Parliament must do, and it is fantastic. Why can we not do the same thing here, in our own country? Why is it so hard to say that this is something very important that needs to be done? We need to go to every region across the country to meet with people and talk to them about the state of our democracy and the proposed changes. We need to ask them what they think and find out what their reality is.

We need to go to downtown Vancouver, where homelessness is an issue. We need to go up north and talk to aboriginal communities. We need to go anywhere where there are major issues. That is not too tall an order if we want to do our best to improve democracy in Canada.

• (1715)

[English]

Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it was great to work with the member on the procedure and House affairs committee for a number of years. She always did her homework and is someone who can speak to the issues intelligently.

Considering the fact that so many of the recommendations that the Chief Electoral Officer placed before the committee are actually incorporated in this bill, and that it is important that the committee get on with the job of studying the bill and hearing from Canadians and witnesses, would the member urge her colleague, the member for Hamilton Centre, to stop his filibustering and actually allow

some of the committee members to ask questions of witnesses to further understand the bill and members possibly to offer amendments to improve the bill?

Would the member urge her colleague to get on with the business of having witnesses appear before the committee so that the work can get done?

[Translation]

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. member for his comments. I really enjoyed working with him for many years as part of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

When we were working together in committee, we were always able to come to a consensus and move forward without constantly butting heads. However, I find his question a bit sad. I would like to remind him that during the last committee meeting, we spent an hour asking the minister questions and there was no stalling or anything of the sort. Well, that is where the committee is at right now.

During the first committee meetings about Bill C-23, the government very clearly stated that it was not completely closed to the idea of holding public hearings. That was what we proposed in exchange for our collaboration, and the government said it would look into it. In the end, the government slammed the door in our faces and said that it was out of the question.

I am wondering what happened to discussion, co-operation and understanding. I do not think that the NDP is the problem.

• (1720)

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is important that we recognize there are really two issues here.

One is that we have fundamentally flawed legislation that needs serious amendments. We hope and anticipate that this issue will eventually be dealt with once we get into clause by clause.

Then there is the process issue. The process to date has been absolutely disastrous. The government did not do any pre-consultation. It did not do anything to work with Elections Canada. It failed to work with opposition parties on the issue. There is no consensus. It is not a fair elections bill, but more a Conservative elections bill.

What we need to do is to have more co-operation. I would ask the member to recognize that all that the opposition is asking for jointly is to recognize that we need to go outside Ottawa with this committee. There is nothing strange about this particular request, given that this is a fundamental principle of democracy.

Would the member not agree with us that we need to go outside Ottawa to allow Canadians and stakeholders direct input into this very important law?

[Translation]

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague from Winnipeg North for his comments, which go to the heart of our motion here today.

Business of Supply

We are not asking for the moon. We are not asking the government to examine democracy in every Commonwealth country. We are simply asking it to go to the various regions of Canada to hear what Canadians have to say about these reforms, which are very important to our democracy. That is not a lot to ask.

In the end, since the Conservatives stonewalled us and called this a “circus” and a “gong show”, I think they are actually afraid of hearing what the people they are trying to muzzle have to say about this bill. They are afraid of hearing the opinions of people who will tell them that what they are doing is not working. When the Chief Electoral Officer tells the Conservatives that, they panic and say the matter is becoming partisan. I think the only ones playing partisan politics here are the Conservatives.

[English]

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am rising to join the debate here. I have listened with considerable interest to the foregoing discussions, some of which, to be honest, seem a bit histrionic given the nature of the subject matter we are dealing with.

I have spent over a decade on the procedure and House affairs committee. Normally, people ask me how I manage to pull through on such an uninteresting committee and how I keep myself awake. However, as members can see, there is fun, travel, and lots of histrionics involved in all of this stuff, apparently.

The motion proposes to have the committee do three things with regard to Bill C-23, an act to amend the Canada Elections Act.

First of all, the motion proposes to hear witnesses, and it provides what I think is a very reasonable list of them:

...witnesses from, but not limited to, Elections Canada, Political Parties as defined under the Canada Elections Act, the Minister of State who introduced the bill, representatives of first nations, anti-poverty groups, groups representing persons with disabilities, groups representing youth advocates and students, as well as specific groups which have been active in society on elections rules....

It is all good, and I can think of others that I would add to that list.

The motion has three things, and I will drop down to the third, which is:

...proceed to clause-by-clause consideration of this bill after these hearings have been completed, with a goal to commence clause-by-clause consideration for May 1, 2014.

This is probably a reasonable timeline more or less, and one could quibble over that. However, in general, I do not think it is an unreasonable timeline.

Then, in the middle of the motion, is to have the power

...to travel to all regions of Canada, (Atlantic Canada, Quebec, Ontario, Northern Ontario, the Prairies, British Columbia and the North), as well as downtown urban settings... and rural and remote settings, and that the Committee request that this travel take place in March and April 2014....

As a member of the committee, I would get to join in on this road show. Putting aside the small quibble that I never considered northern Ontario to be a separate region of Canada on a scale with, say, Quebec, I find it to be a fairly reasonable layout of the different parts of the country we could go to. The trouble with travelling around this way is that it would not improve our ability to hear from witnesses who have worthwhile, intelligent things to say.

I had the good fortune to be on the last travelling road show of the procedure and House affairs committee about a decade ago. I think I am the last person still on the committee who was on it at the time we travelled, in that case, all over the planet to hear about ideas for electoral reform. We divided the committee into two groups. Some of us went off to Australia and New Zealand while others went off to Germany and Scotland to look at their electoral systems. We were looking at alternative electoral systems to what Canada had at the time, and still has.

I wrote about my experiences in an article, which I happen to have a copy of here, called the “Road to Electoral Reform” from the *Canadian Parliamentary Review* in the autumn of 2005, in which I made the following observation:

On February 1, 2005, committee members (including me) voted a travel budget of \$289,695 for the European and Antipodean trips. Later, while the committee was abroad, one committee member...complained to the media about the large size of the travel budget.

It was not I who complained but a member who at the time was sitting as a Liberal and who now sits as a New Democrat. However, I concurred at the time and I still concur with the assessment that we did not get value for money on that occasion. I assume we can travel more inexpensively this time, were we to do so, than we did travelling all over the world.

For one thing, the committee insisted on travelling business class. I am sure we could all agree to travel coach, at best, and perhaps by some other means of locomotion. There was a fair bit of expense, partly because, as all such committees do, we had to ship translators, clerks, and all kinds of people, to make sure that we could function as a committee wherever we happened to be. However, it seems to be a lot of expense for not much benefit.

• (1725)

In the intervening years I have chaired the international human rights subcommittee. We hear frequently from experts who come from all corners of the globe by means of video conference. We have seen video conferencing vastly improve from where it was 9 or 10 years ago. We have people, not just from first world countries, but from other countries, who come in loud and clear. The fact is that we can hear from people from more or less anywhere without the need to travel, and we can provide them with simultaneous translation and so on.

Now, this is significant because we regularly hear from two different witnesses. In fact, the week before the break, we heard from one witness in Ottawa and another witness by video link at the same time. We got two for the price of one in the allotted hour. We cannot do that when we are on the road, unless we also have video links on the road with us, which would be an additional expense. I cannot see how we would improve our efficiency with that.

The fact is that when we are dealing with issues like problems relating to urban groups, downtown areas, or remote areas of the country, we are going to get a lot of common issues. We are going to get distinctions too, and we will best see what those issues are if we have an interaction of the sort that can be done electronically. All of this can be done better without travelling than it can be done when we are travelling.

Business of Supply

For example, there could be a goal to look at some form of infrastructure. If we were going to consider whether a new tunnel had to be blasted through the Rocky Mountains to accommodate a rail line, I could see the point of travelling. I cannot see the point of travelling for this sort of situation.

There was a very interesting case before the Supreme Court about a year and a half ago, in which a former Liberal member of this place, Borys Wrzesnewskyj, challenged the election of a current member of this place, the member for Etobicoke Centre. The Supreme Court heard the case, which had to do with whether it was legitimate for individuals at a seniors' residence that has closed access—these are the very elderly who have 24-hour care—and who voted in the absence of someone vouching for them, ought to have had their votes counted.

Interestingly, in that election it was the Liberal position that they should not have been allowed to vote because no vouching had taken place. That is the opposite of the position that is being taken today.

However, the interesting thing about this is that the Supreme Court of Canada held hearings in Ottawa and it was able to do so without having to travel to the site. Now that court and other courts have, on very rare occasions, travelled on location. Courts might do this sometimes for murder investigations, for example. However, in this case it did not feel the need because there was no need.

The issues that we are dealing with are issues that can be dealt with best by doing it here in Ottawa. That is a very clear example.

In the midst of saying this, I overheard a member pointing out that it was a split Supreme Court decision. That is correct. In fact, there was a majority and a minority. I am not sure how that relates to the question of whether it had to travel. First, good Lord, if we could not allow split decisions, nothing but unanimous votes could occur in this place, let alone the Supreme Court, so I cannot imagine what the member's objection is.

However, no one objected. No one on the Supreme Court, or anywhere else, objected to them holding these hearings in Ottawa. It was the best place to listen to these arguments.

I sometimes hear people using such extraordinary language in this debate that one would be left with the impression that they are talking about the kinds of civil rights abuses and voter rights abuses that took place in the American south prior to the 1960s.

I am looking at a petition that is available online where people are encouraged to write in about Bill C-23. It has made incorrect assertions.

- (1730)

Under Bill C-23, Voter ID cards will no longer be accepted. This will prevent thousands of students, seniors and Aboriginal people from voting.

Actually, under Bill C-23, the card that reminds people to vote will not be accepted as ID. That is very different from what is being implied here, that somehow people's identification would no longer be accepted. Of course, this would not prevent anybody from voting.

In the example I just gave of Borys Wrzesnewskyj saying that the current member for Etobicoke Centre should not be allowed to sit here, what he was saying is that we insist that individuals be deprived of their right to vote if they do not meet up with the highly

technical definition, and highly restricted version, of their right under section 3 of the charter to vote. That is the position that the NDP has defended. The broader position that one has a right to vote has not been taken into account.

The NDP uses this kind of language. Here is another example from the same petition:

Bill C-23 makes it much harder for students, seniors, aboriginal people, and low-income Canadians to prove their right to vote, and will prevent many thousands of Canadians from voting.

The fact is that many people have distinct issues that can make it difficult to vote. These people include seniors, some of whom do not have the kind of ID that we often think of, such as a driver's license; students; aboriginals; and, I would mention, disabled people, particularly people with mobility issues.

I would add other groups to the list as well, such as people who have recently moved. The NDP motion makes no reference to people in suburbs. I guess I can see why the NDP has forgotten that the suburbs even exist, given the amount of electoral success it is having there. Recently constructed suburbs across the country have not been properly enumerated. In every election, this is where there are the greatest problems.

When I was first elected, I remember very distinctly that in Kanata, a suburb of Ottawa, Morgan's Grant was an area that had just been built. It is not new anymore, but it was in 2000. One polling station was set up, which included something like five or six times as many voters as any of the other polling booths at that location. The result was that after the poll shut, it took over an hour for everybody to go through and vote, simply because Elections Canada had not been aware that so many people were living in the area, which on their maps was still empty fields.

All of these people have genuine problems related to exercising their ability to vote. What these people need to know is how to exercise their franchise. How can they learn that? They can learn that if Elections Canada runs advertisements advising them how to exercise their franchise, for instance, if they have just moved into a location and have not received a voter card, or if they have been asked to go and vote on the voter card at an address that is wrong. That happens a lot. We hear all kinds of talk about how the Conservative Party was ostensibly trying to send people off to the wrong locations.

Let me tell the House about what happened in my constituency. When the riding of Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington was set up in 2004, people who lived in the town of Perth were told to go and vote in Perth Road Village, which sounded good. The local returning officer was unfamiliar with Lanark County, which had been added to the riding. However, Perth Road Village is the road from Kingston, Ontario, to Perth. Perth Road Village is an hour's drive from Perth. Therefore, residents were told to go and vote in a place that they literally could not get to.

Business of Supply

What do people do in a situation when Elections Canada has told them to go and vote in the wrong place? What do people do if they go to the polling station they are used to going to and there are no forms to fill out so that they can vote at a location other than the one they normally vote at? Are they deprived of their ballot, their right to vote and their franchise? Those are the kinds of questions they should be answering for people, but of course, they do not do that.

Their advertising right now is all about why people should vote. We have all seen these ads from various elections. I suspect that they are extraordinarily ineffective at getting people out to vote. The ads are all about why it is people's fault that they are not getting in a vote, why they are not motivated enough to get out and vote, and why they should be motivated. If they were better human beings and better citizens, they would be out there voting. That is nonsense.

The primary reason for people not voting is that they do not know how to.

●(1735)

The Chief Electoral Officer does not go around knocking on doors, but during elections I do. We have all had this experience, I suspect. We knock on the door, but the person does not come down, at least not immediately. Then we realize that the reason it did not happen is that the person is an elderly shut-in on the second floor who cannot get down until a son or stepson or whoever comes and carries him or her down the stairs, or perhaps someone was changing a diaper. How are those people going to get out and vote? Letting those people know how they can vote at advance polls or how they can vote by mail, et cetera, can be an enormously valuable exercise. That is being offered.

I mentioned the highfalutin rhetoric suggesting that somehow people are being deprived of their right to vote and that somehow we face a civil rights crisis of the sort that existed in the American south. I find this deeply offensive, and I took the time to go and look up a couple of examples of the abuses that went on in that part of the world in that era to make the point that nothing of the sort exists here.

I have with me a couple of Louisiana literacy tests from the 1950s and 1960s. These were collected by a man named Jeff Schwartz, who is a former volunteer with the civil rights group Congress of Racial Equality. He has been collecting and archiving and putting online some of the forms that were used in various southern states in order to ensure that African-American voters could not participate.

The courts had agreed in the United States that it was reasonable that people had to have at least a grade 5 education or had become knowledgeable to that level in order to exercise their citizenship rights. By the way, no such rule exists in Canada. There is no requirement that a person be literate in order to vote. That is a very important distinction.

However, that requirement could then be manipulated. Local authorities could test and see whether an individual was fit to be registered to vote. The authorities would exercise these tests in a highly arbitrary manner designed to ensure that every white voter, no matter how ignorant or illiterate he or she might be, would get to be registered, and that every African-American would be excluded, no

matter how intelligent, articulate, or well educated that individual might be.

Having looked at some of the questions on this test, I can say we can forget about a grade 5 education. I have been in five degree programs, including two Ph.D. programs. I have taught university and I have published two books, and I cannot figure out the answer to some of these questions.

For example, here is a question from the Louisiana form:

Write every other word in this first line and print every third word in the same line, (original type smaller and first line ended at comma) but capitalize the fifth word that you write.

What is the right answer to that question?

Question 9 from this list states, "Draw a line through the two letters below that come last in the alphabet", and there is a series of letters.

Question 10 states, "In the first circle below write the last letter of the first word beginning with "L" , and there is a series of circles.

Another question is "Cross out the number necessary, when making the number below one million." That is interesting. Does it mean the number below 1,000,000, which is 999,999, or does it mean to take the number with all these zeros and scratch them all out to get 1,000,000? Of course, this was designed to ensure that if I were a white guy and got it wrong, it would be right, and if I were an African-American guy and I got it right, I would be wrong anyway.

By the way, the literacy test mentions that "This test is to be given to anyone who cannot prove a fifth grade education" and "Do what you are told to do in each statement, nothing more, nothing less." That is an important caveat that makes sure someone will fail. It continues: "Be careful as one wrong answer denotes failure of the test." Imagine if that was on a driver's test. We would have no drivers in Canada. It then states, "You have 10 minutes to complete the test."

I could go on and on. If I get the consent of the House, I would love to table these items so that members can examine them. If not, I can provide the email address.

My point here is there have been genuine abuses of the rights of voters. I have given an example from the United States, but we can find examples from other countries, including this one.

No such abuse is being considered or has been considered by any party that is here. The fact is that we have a good system, but we want to make it better by doing a series of technical amendments to how elections run in Canada. It would benefit the country and it would benefit democracy.

●(1740)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): For a point of clarification, is the hon. member seeking the unanimous consent of the House to table such documents?

Mr. Scott Reid: Mr. Speaker, I seek unanimous consent.

Business of Supply

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Does the hon. member for Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington have the consent of the House to table the documents that were mentioned?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

[Translation]

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse (Louis-Saint-Laurent, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I sincerely thank my hon. colleague for his intervention. I have been working with that member on the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs from the very beginning.

When he speaks, he often raises excellent points. I heard many in his speech here today. I think some elements need a little clarification.

He told a lot of anecdotes, so I will also use a bit more of an anecdotal approach. Personally, for several years—I mean about four or five years—I lived far away from my parents while I was in school, and I never changed my address. I did not have any of the things that students are asked to have in order to vote where I was. I therefore always used vouching in order to be able to vote, since I lived a 10-hour drive from my parents' place.

I wonder if the member could explain how he can justify the fact that someone like me who is interested in politics would not have been able to vote in federal elections if the measures proposed in Bill C-23 had been in effect at the time.

• (1745)

Mr. Scott Reid: Mr. Speaker, I am not sure that I understand the point of the question.

A student has the right to vote and can exercise it just like anyone else. There may be an enumeration problem.

[English]

Enumeration is what we call it. There are areas where people move a great deal. Students move a great deal, so it makes sense to do more enumeration. This is an area where I believe Elections Canada could improve administratively, and I would encourage it to do that. I am not sure that is what the member is getting at, but having a cleaner voters list is the best way of doing it. There is a 20% overall error rate in the voters list, and that needs to be improved. Some groups have a higher than 20% average, a lot higher. Students would be one of those groups, but that is not their fault. That is the fault of the procedures, which really ought to be improved.

Mr. Ted Hsu (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to contest the assertion of my hon. colleague that this bill is really a number of technical amendments. My view is that it is not technical amendments. It is actually tilting the playing field a little. The direction I am concerned it is tilting the playing field is to people with money.

Currently people can donate only \$1,200 to political parties. That is being increased to \$1,500. Not that many people can donate \$1,200, so the people who have means will be able to donate more and have more influence in the political process. I do not think that would be thought a technical amendment if we went across the

country and asked people how many can actually donate that much and how many of them really want people who have that much extra money to have even more influence over the federal government.

Mr. Scott Reid: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member has obviously been talking to the people at Revenue Canada who do my taxes every year, because they always challenge the fact that I claim that I donated \$1,200 to the Conservative Party and \$1,200 to the Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington association. I had to dig up my figures and send them in a couple of years ago. It challenged my contribution to the Scott Reid campaign. I could not find the receipt for it, but I pointed out that I am Scott Reid and the Elections Canada website shows that somebody at my address with my name donates to the Scott Reid campaign, so either I really did donate or I hacked into the Elections Canada website and changed the information there, in which case it would want to charge me with something more serious.

With regard to the \$1,500, as I understand it, that is just keeping up with inflation. I should point out, though, that one of the first acts of the Conservative government was to lower the donation rate from \$5,000 to what at the time was \$1,000 per person. It has since crept up due to inflation. Only real human beings could make donations, not corporations or unions. That was a big change. That was down from \$5,000, which was where the Chrétien government had put it. I thought the Chrétien government did a good thing.

Before that, if we go back and look at the situation a decade ago or a decade and a half ago, there were quarter million dollar donations from corporations. A large part of what was being done was chasing these donations, having giant fundraising dinners and so on. It really was an inferior way of organizing things. Nothing happening now bears any resemblance to that world, nor does the money donated now have any resemblance to the, frankly, corrupting influence money had back at that time.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, on the member's comments with respect to campaign finance, the fair elections bill seeks to allow small donors to contribute a little bit more to democracy through the front door while blocking illegal big money from sneaking in through the back door. It closes the unpaid-debt loophole, which has allowed large donors to call their donations loans, which are never actually repaid.

At the same time, as the member for Kingston and the Islands correctly points out, it allows a very modest increase in the donation limit. The balance we are trying to strike is to allow parties to finance their operations and allow Canadians to contribute as they wish while preventing anyone from contributing enough to actually influence, in their own personal favour, a decision by the Government of Canada at the expense of everyone else.

I wonder if the member could comment on whether we have struck that balance.

Business of Supply

• (1750)

Mr. Scott Reid: Mr. Speaker, the answer is yes. In general, the financing arrangements in this country have been heading in the right direction. They have been improving. If the goal were to reduce contributions to zero, which is what would happen eventually in practice as inflation goes up, it would make sense to never change it from the level set back in 2006. I do not think that is a wise idea. We want to make sure that individuals can contribute.

Something that was done in 2006 that has not been changed in this legislation, which is very important, is getting rid of the corporate donations and union donations.

There was something else done as well that is very significant. This took place at the beginning of the 41st Parliament. That was the elimination of the per vote subsidy to parties. I always thought that was a kind of poison in the system. The party that did the best got a subsidy larger than any other party. That would tend to reinforce its electoral advantage, so success would, logically speaking, breed greater success and greater advantage, which in turn would breed yet more success, electorally speaking, more funding, and greater advantage.

Getting rid of that was the most important thing that has been done. It is not part of this law, but it is one of the most important things that has been done for democracy in this country. I am very happy that it was abolished. I think this year the last of those subsidies comes in. We will have a much purer, cleaner democracy when only individuals are able to donate to parties.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, it is hard not to pick up on the point from the hon. member for Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington on removing the per vote system, which was the only way many Canadians felt their vote actually counted.

Moving on, the member cited the Supreme Court decision that dealt with the current member for Etobicoke Centre while missing one of its central features, and that is the majority decision of the judiciary. I want to draw the member's attention to this sentence: "The goal of accessibility", that is the goal of being able to fulfill the section 3 right to vote under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, "can only be achieved if we are prepared to accept some degree of uncertainty that all who voted were entitled to do so".

In other words, the ability to have vouching to make sure that people have the right to vote and can exercise that at the polls is so important that it is why the court found, in that instance, that the results of that election would not be overturned. We must have the right to vote and ensure that Canadians are not ensnared in a series of complicated ID preferrings that require multiples of different forms of ID.

I ask my hon. colleague if he does not think the Supreme Court was right on that point.

Mr. Scott Reid: Mr. Speaker, I think the court actually was absolutely right on that point. Remember that this decision revolved around the eligibility to vote of senior citizens at a limited access, 24-hour care facility serviced by a mobile poll.

The argument being presented by the Liberal Party in this case, and supported by the dissenting judges in this ruling, was that the

right to vote under the charter is a pro forma right. People must be qualified voters, and there can be very severe restrictions on what that means, including purely technical restrictions.

There is no question that the people who voted in that case could not be vouched for. There was no one living, including their spouses, if they had living spouses, at the same poll who could vouch for them. They were going to be deprived of their vote on that basis and an election overturned. The Supreme Court was entirely right to say that just because they did not have someone vouch for them was no cause to disallow their vote.

This is, in fact, the exact opposite of the point the member is making. This is about people who could not be vouched for. At no point in these discussions have I heard anyone talk about the people who did not benefit, who could not benefit, from the vouching system who were nevertheless being deprived of their right to vote by this kind of technical argument. Therefore I am very supportive indeed of that part of the Supreme Court's ruling.

• (1755)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Françoise Boivin (Gatineau, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am quite pleased to have the opportunity to speak to our opposition motion. First, I would like to mention that I will be sharing my time with the hon. member for York South—Weston.

I am pleased to rise to speak to the motion because I have already had the opportunity to speak to Bill C-23. I believe that it is important to point out that this motion is being brought forward on an opposition day.

It is an opposition motion, as the previous speaker, the member for Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, pointed out, and it concerns some very specific points in the very specific context of Bill C-23. Time allocation has been imposed to prevent discussions from continuing and to shut down debate. A time limit has been imposed in order to send the bill to committee as quickly as possible, which will prevent many of our colleagues from expressing their views on this matter.

Based on what I have heard today in the House, what is about to happen in the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs may not be what I would call a great example of democracy.

When I arrived in Parliament for the first time, in 2004, I had the great pleasure, as a new MP, of sitting on the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. I recognize that there was a minority government, but that was another reason for us to work together.

I heard the member, who is the vice-chair of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, tell us that the committee members usually work together quite well. I think it is important to explain why to the people in the House.

Business of Supply

The Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs belongs to all of us. This committee is responsible for ensuring that our democracy is healthy and is working well. The Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs deals with questions of privilege or the various issues that the chair is sometimes called upon to consider. In general, the members who sit on this committee realize that they have the very important job of ensuring that ours is a true democracy and that this democracy and our ability to speak in the House are not undermined. Our rules and procedures already do enough to enable the government to play hardball when introducing its bills.

We need to put this bill in perspective. It is not a matter of repeating speeches similar to the ones we heard on Bill C-23. I am sure everyone here had the pleasure of reading that brick of a bill.

I agree with the member who spoke before me. He said that the bill contained a lot of technical aspects. However, there are also a lot of substantive elements in this bill. I was shocked to hear them say with a straight face that the bill was all technicalities. I certainly do not think that figuring out how we can get people to exercise their right to vote is a technicality. Figuring out who will oversee how Canadians exercise their right to vote, how our elections are carried out and so on, is not a technicality. I think it is important to point that out.

Now we have a motion that was moved by my colleague from Hamilton Centre. As I was reading the motion, which starts with, "That it be an instruction to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs that...", I could not believe that we were forced to move a motion in the House to obtain a right that I think should have been a *sine qua non* in Bill C-23.

● (1800)

I read the motion and saw what it was about. Sometimes, during discussions that take place in the committee I sit on, I have concerns about the daily exercise of a real democracy. When I hear speeches like the ones I have heard today and there is such a lack of discussion, I am extremely worried that this will extend to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

We all know how important consultations are. I realize that I can use Skype and my computer to consult people. However, absolutely nothing beats meeting people in person. It is not true that anyone who wants to voice their opinion of certain decisions that are about to be made can come to Ottawa and speak their mind.

Earlier, I heard my colleague talk about a trip taken by the members of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. I was probably the only member of the committee who refused to go along. Is it right to travel to Australia, New Zealand, England or Ireland to study the changes in the electoral system, when we could read about them in a book by the wonderful Law Reform Commission of Canada?

It seems to me that, instead, we should go see what impact Bill C-23 will have on certain communities in Canada and certain groups that are targeted by some of the measures. We should talk with different groups, not just about the issue of vote suppression, which is extremely important and a major concern of the NDP, but also about the fact that this Conservative government thinks low

voter turnout is a result of Elections Canada failing to do its job to promote the elections.

Last week, I went to my riding and talked with some people, including some young people from Nicolas-Gatineau composite school. There was a fundraising activity organized by Alexandre Guindon, a bright young guy in his final year of high school. We talked about the current state of Canadian democracy and how young people are not interested in voting.

If youth are disinterested, it is not because Elections Canada is not doing its job. It is because this kind of issue has been treated with such a cavalier attitude. We are faced with a government that does not pay much attention to the existing rules and then changes other rules. That raises some questions. The public is becoming somewhat cynical, and I am seeing that not just among young people, but among seniors as well. They are saying that voting is becoming increasingly complicated, that they no longer know what is required and that they have no desire to go vote. We need to meet with these people in their communities and reach out to them.

It is impossible to be against the idea and possibility of meeting with groups if none of them have made that request to the committee. It concerns me to see that the Conservative majority on the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs is standing in the way of openness and the full and appropriate exercise of democratic rights.

I am gravely concerned to see that this has spread all the way to this committee, because this is the committee that protects our privileges. If it is unable to protect Canadians, I wonder how capable it will be of protecting those who represent Canadians in the House.

Everyone should reflect on that for a minute. We were told to read the bill and we read it. Now, the Conservatives need to read the motion and realize that it will not bite. It simply says that Canada, a democratic role model for other countries on how to exercise the right to vote, should start by looking in the mirror.

● (1805)

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, because we are coming to a vote shortly, I want to take this opportunity to highlight what I think is the most important issue. We are talking about an election law. The government needs to take responsibility and build consensus. It is very apparent that the government did not do its job. It did not consult with Elections Canada. It did not consult with Canadians. It did not consult with opposition parties. It invoked time allocation, or closure, on the bill at second reading. We have a responsibility to ensure that this legislation is amended, improved and, most importantly, that we bring it to different communities outside Ottawa.

Business of Supply

My final question on the issue is this. Does the member, like Liberals in the House, believe that it would be a tragic mistake for the government, in any fashion whatsoever, to try to pass the bill through committee without going outside Ottawa and visiting communities to get their direct input on such important legislation affecting the fundamental principle of democracy here in Canada?

Ms. Françoise Boivin: Mr. Speaker, that is exactly what I have been saying for the last 10 minutes.

[*Translation*]

It is important to go to the people. Otherwise, we will not see them in Ottawa. These people cannot necessarily travel. This is critical to the democratic system here in Canada, our electoral system, which I agree has some big problems. I think that all members of the House agree on that. We have to look at ways to solve the problem. People need to realize that the bill was introduced two years later. One of my colleagues moved a motion in the House. Everyone supported it. Even so, now we have a bill that changes many sections. We have a serious problem here. I do not know why the Conservatives are so afraid to listen to people and go to them. They do not seem to have a problem travelling all around the world.

[*English*]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, one of the measures in the fair elections act deals with the loans loophole. That is the loophole that allowed Liberal leadership candidates to take hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt from large donors and then to exceed the donation limit by refusing to repay those debts.

The fair elections act makes this an offence. It also prevents non-financial institutions and non-political parties from loaning money to candidates in the first place. It is to prevent people from getting insurmountable levels of debt. In other words, it closes the loans loophole. I wonder if the member across agrees with that provision.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Françoise Boivin: Mr. Speaker, once again, the only thing the Conservatives have managed to do today is avoid saying anything about the content of the motion.

The motion is not Bill C-23. The minister prevented us from spending more time debating that bill. Then he had the nerve to rise while we were talking about a motion to let the committee do its work properly after preventing us from engaging in further debate in the House. Maybe if he had been there when I expressed my opinion, or if others had had more time to say what they think about this issue, he would have the answer to his question.

I would advise him to read the motion, since he likes to tell us to read his bill. Our motion is a little shorter than his bill. He should read those ten lines and then tell us that what the motion proposes is anti-democratic.

[*English*]

Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I listened carefully to my colleague and I know that one of the biggest concerns people have across the country about our democracy is voter turnout. It affects the legitimacy of democracy because, as we know, with a 60% voter turnout the current government got a majority with 40% of that vote. Basically, we are talking about 25%

of the eligible voters electing a majority government, yet the government is removing the opportunity for the Chief Electoral Officer to actually encourage people to vote.

I got an email today from a scrutineer in the 2011 election who was at a poll near a university and was appalled at the number of young people, whose voter turnout is even less than the 60%, or more like 40% for those aged 18 to 24, who did not get a chance to vote because of the rules. Even as they are now, the rules were inadequate to allow them to vote, even with the 39—

• (1810)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Order, please. The hon. member for Gatineau.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Françoise Boivin: Mr. Speaker, the exercise of our democracy is one of my concerns.

Clearly, I am very concerned about the percentages, the voter turnout for our elections. The fact that the Conservatives decided to blame Elections Canada for these low turnouts suggests to me that they already have all the answers to the questions they are asking, or else they refuse to see other possible answers. In fact, perhaps it is the way things get done in the House and the way the government acts sometimes that turn people away from politics.

[*English*]

Mr. Mike Sullivan (York South—Weston, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will be brief.

We are talking about the single most important right in our charter and are dealing with a government that wants suppress everything dealing with that right. The Conservatives were accused of suppressing votes in the last election. They have suppressed debate on the bill by moving closure, and now they want to suppress citizen participation.

We have suggested, and I think most Canadians would agree with us, that wide consultation on the bill, which does dramatic things to our laws that affect our vote, would be the best thing, wide consultation with a number of Canadians across Canada. That will not happen no matter how many days of hearings we have. At hearings in Ottawa, we will not even get to 1% of the 120,000 people who had to be vouched for in the last election. We will not even get one-tenth of 1%, or one-one-hundredth of 1%, of those people to show up, whereas if we went around from community to community, we could actually talk to those people in the course of discussing the bill.

The Budget

In this country we have made it easier to vote and have enfranchised more and more people at every step of our history. We have gone from people having to own property to now having to own no property to vote. There was a time when voting was by a show of hands. Now it is a secret ballot. Voting was on different days in different ridings. Women did not have the right to vote. There were no advance polls. People who were too poor to have a fixed address could not vote. We fixed that. Certain races, such as Japanese Canadians, could not vote. We fixed that. Aboriginal Canadians could not vote. We fixed that. At every step of the way, we have made it easier to vote. Now we will make it more difficult for at least 120,000 Canadians.

I know, because I have dealt with some of the individuals who have no way of proving their address, absolutely none, despite several of the members opposite suggesting that changes to subsection 143(4) would fix that. There is no change to subsection 143(4). It will have exactly the same words as the Canada Elections Act has today. All that has been removed is the reference to vouching; that is the only thing that has been changed.

The Conservatives suggest that somehow it is some kind of gift to allow a deputy returning officer to amend the regulations to allow someone to vote. It is an absolute and outright falsehood to suggest that. That is not what is happening here. At least 120,000 will not be able to vote in the next election if the bill goes through unamended. I do not believe the Conservatives would allow any such amendment. They are not very gracious with amendments to any of the bills they have brought forward, and I doubt we could find 10 amendments to all of the bills that have come forward and been amended by the opposition.

This is about vote suppression, plain and simple. It is about changing the rules so that certain individuals may find it easier to cheat. We are not suggesting that raising the penalty is not a good thing, but if we cannot catch anyone because they can escape prosecution or being investigated, and do not have to testify, and do not have to give evidence under oath, all of the penalties in the world will not fix the system.

I would urge those opposite to vote in favour of the motion so that Canadians across the country can have their voices heard.

• (1815)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Order, please. It being 6:15 p.m., it is my duty to interrupt proceedings and put forthwith every question necessary to dispose of the business of supply.

Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): All those in favour of the motion will please say yea.

Some hon. members: Yea.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): All those opposed will please say nay.

Some hon. members: Nay.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): In my opinion the nays have it.

And five or more members having risen:

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Call in the members.

[Translation]

Mr. Philip Toone: Mr. Speaker, I request that the division be deferred until tomorrow, February 25, at the expiry of the time provided for government orders.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Accordingly, the recorded division stands deferred until tomorrow, at the expiry of time provided for government orders.

[English]

Hon. John Duncan: Mr. Speaker, I would request that we see the clock at 6:30 p.m.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Is it the pleasure of the House to see the clock at 6:30 p.m.?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

* * *

THE BUDGET

FINANCIAL STATEMENT OF MINISTER OF FINANCE

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Pursuant to an order made on Wednesday, February 12, the House will now proceed to the taking of the deferred recorded division on the subamendment to Motion No. 6 under ways and means proceedings.

Call in the members.

• (1845)

(The House divided on the amendment to the amendment, which was negated on the following division:)

(Division No. 63)

YEAS

Members

Allen (Welland)	Andrews
Angus	Ashton
Aubin	Bélangier
Bennett	Benskin
Bevington	Blanchette
Blanchette-Lamothe	Boivin
Borg	Boulerice
Boutin-Sweet	Brahmi
Caron	Casey
Charlton	Chicoine
Chisholm	Choquette
Chow	Christopherson
Cleary	Comartin
Côté	Crowder
Cullen	Davies (Vancouver Kingsway)
Davies (Vancouver East)	Day
Dewar	Dionne Labelle
Donnelly	Doré Lefebvre
Dubé	Dubourg
Duncan (Etobicoke North)	Dusseauit
Easter	Eyking
Fortin	Freeman
Fry	Garneau
Garrison	Genest
Genest-Jourdain	Giguère
Godin	Goodale

Adjournment Proceedings

Gravelle
Harris (Scarborough Southwest)
Hsu
Jacob
Julian
Kellway
Larose
Laverdière
LeBlanc (LaSalle—Émard)
Liu
Mai
Martin
May
McGuinty
Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue)
Morin (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine)
Morin (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot)
Murray
Nash
Nunez-Melo
Patry
Perreault
Plamondon
Rafferty
Ravignat
Rousseau
Scarpaleggia
Sellah
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Jones
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Leslie
MacAulay
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Mathysen
McCallum
Michaud
Morin (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord)
Morin (Laurentides—Labelle)
Mulcair
Nantel
Nicholls
Papillon
Péclet
Pilon
Quach
Rankin
Regan
Saganash
Scott
Sgro
Stewart
Thibeault
Tremblay
Turmel

Maguire
McColeman
Menegakis
Moore (Fundy Royal)
Norlock
Oliver
Opitz
Paradis
Poilievre
Raitt
Reid
Richards
Saxton
Seeback
Shiple
Smith
Sorenson
Storseth
Sweet
Toet
Trotter
Uppal
Van Kesteren
Vellacott
Warkentin
Weston (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country)
Weston (Saint John)
Wilks
Wong
Young (Oakville)
Mayes
McLeod
Miller
Nicholson
O'Connor
O'Neill Gordon
O'Toole
Payne
Preston
Rajotte
Rempel
Rickford
Schellenberger
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PAIRED

Nil

The Speaker: I declare the subamendment defeated.

NAYS

Members

Ablonczy
Adler
Albas
Alexander
Allison
Ambrose
Anderson
Ashfield
Bateman
Bergen
Bezan
Block
Braid
Brown (Leeds—Grenville)
Brown (Barrie)
Butt
Calkins
Carrie
Clarke
Crockatt
Davidson
Del Mastro
Dreesen
Dykstra
Fantino
Finley (Haldimand—Norfolk)
Galipeau
Glover
Goldring
Gourde
Harper
Hawn
Hiebert
Hoback
James
Keddy (South Shore—St. Margaret's)
Kent
Komarnicki
Lake
Leef
Lemieux
Lizon
Lukiwski
MacKay (Central Nova)

Adams
Aglukkaq
Albrecht
Allen (Tobique—Mactaquac)
Ambler
Anders
Armstrong
Aspin
Benoit
Bernier
Blaney
Boughen
Breitkreuz
Brown (Newmarket—Aurora)
Bruinooge
Calandra
Cannan
Chong
Clement
Daniel
Dechert
Devolin
Duncan (Vancouver Island North)
Falk
Findlay (Delta—Richmond East)
Fletcher
Gallant
Goguen
Goodyear
Grewal
Harris (Cariboo—Prince George)
Hayes
Hillyer
Holder
Kamp (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge—Mission)
Kenney (Calgary Southeast)
Kerr
Kramon (Prince Edward—Hastings)
Lauzon
Leitch
Leung
Lobb
Lunney
MacKenzie

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

A motion to adjourn the House under Standing Order 38 deemed to have been moved.

[*Translation*]

THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr. Pierre Jacob (Brome—Missisquoi, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my first question is for the Minister of the Environment and his colleagues.

On page 323 of the latest budget, we find:

...new mining and related processing activity...can be associated with a variety of environmental impacts... and...could have an impact on the goals of the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy.

I would like to know what impact these activities will have on the goals of the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy and what the government plans to do to ensure that the goals of the federal strategy are achieved.

My second question concerns the need to create sustainable development policies, which has become a political imperative. Even our colleagues opposite are starting to admit that we have to do something about this.

I would like to quote the Conservative member for Kitchener—Waterloo, who, on January 6, said the following on CBC radio:

We are seeing the effects, the impacts of climate change. With climate change comes extreme weather events. We saw that through the floods in southern Alberta, we're now seeing that with the ice storms in Kitchener-Waterloo and Toronto...

Does the parliamentary secretary agree? Does he believe that climate change causes extreme weather that affects Canadians?

When I questioned the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development, he said that nothing similar to Bill C-481 exists. He said that there is no clear requirement that any proposed legislation must undergo a strategic environmental assessment. As for regulatory impact analysis, it applies only to regulations, not bills.

In light of that, can the members opposite tell me if they will support my bill, Bill C-481, which puts environmental sustainability at the heart of the House of Commons' decision-making process?

• (1850)

[English]

Mr. Colin Carrie (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the member for his questions about Bill C-481.

Our government is committed to enhancing the transparency and accountability of environmental decision-making. The fact is that it is our government that created the Federal Sustainable Development Act, which serves as evidence to this commitment.

That being said, we do not see any reason to support the bill from the member opposite, which is calling for a massive new bureaucracy that would provide no new benefit to taxpayers. Rather than a meaningful enhancement of transparency and accountability, the bill would add a layer of red tape that is redundant and unnecessary in light of the actions that our government is already taking and the effective tools that are already in place.

The entire bill perfectly demonstrates the wasteful policies of the NDP. Rather than finding problems that need solutions, it instead wants to increase the burden on Canadian families through higher taxes by coming up with a solution when there are no problems. In fact, I think everyone should be a little concerned at the growing slate of evidence that the NDP does not have a plan for Canada, other than to increase taxes on hard-working Canadians.

That being said, I would like to take the opportunity now to provide an update on the significant progress being made in implementing the Federal Sustainable Development Act.

In 2010, our government tabled Canada's first federal sustainability development strategy, or FSDS. For the first time, Canadians had a comprehensive picture of actions across government that contribute to environmental sustainability. Since that time, much has happened.

Since 2011, departments and agencies have produced annual departmental sustainable development strategies that are integrated into their core planning and reporting processes and that contribute to the overarching federal strategy.

Our government has also demonstrated its commitment to measurement, monitoring and reporting, by issuing two progress reports with an expanded suite of environmental sustainability indicators.

The 2012 progress report was tabled in Parliament in February 2013. Fulfilling the requirement to update the FSDS every three years, the 2013-16 FSDS was tabled in Parliament in November 2013.

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For that reason, we will not support the NDP in its never-ending crusade to find new ways to waste taxpayers' money. Instead, we will continue to enhance the transparency and accountability of environmental decision-making through our current legislation.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Jacob: Mr. Speaker, the parliamentary secretary has not answered the questions. He did not answer the first one, which was addressed to him or the minister, or the second, and definitely not the third. I will repeat the last one.

When I questioned the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development, he said that nothing similar to Bill C-481 exists. He said that there is no clear requirement that any proposed legislation must undergo a strategic environmental assessment. There is therefore no cost, no red tape, no burden for Canadians and no additional taxes.

In light of that, can the members opposite tell me if they will support my bill, Bill C-481, which puts environmental sustainability at the heart of the House of Commons' decision-making process? After all, what good is money if we have no planet?

• (1855)

[English]

Mr. Colin Carrie: Mr. Speaker, we have been very clear. We will not be supporting that bill. The government already has tools in place to inform decision making in support of sustainable development. These include strategic environmental assessment, or SEA, and regulatory impact analysis.

SEA is used to identify and assess the environmental effects of federal policy, plans, and program proposals, and must explicitly address their effects on the goals and targets of the federal sustainability development strategy. Most regulations of significance require the publication of regulatory impact analysis statements, or RIAs. The RIAs summarize the results of cost-benefit analysis, outlining the potential positive and negative economic environmental and social impacts on Canadians, businesses, and governments.

All that is to say that our government has the tools in place to ensure transparency and openness when it comes to environmental decision making, and we have implemented it all without creating a massive, new, and redundant bureaucracy, which the NDP would like to do.

[Translation]

RAIL TRANSPORTATION

Mr. Tarik Brahma (Saint-Jean, NDP): Mr. Speaker, on October 25, 2013, I asked the Minister of Transport a question about the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives report condemning the shortage of inspectors in the transportation of dangerous goods division. In 2009, there was one inspector per 14 tank cars. Now there is one per 4,000 tank cars. The report also pointed out that some trains are over three kilometres long and weigh over 18,000 tonnes. This issue is of vital importance to the riding of Saint-Jean and especially to Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, because the MMA line goes right through the downtown.

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MMA, for those who do not know, is a repeat offender that logged 272 accidents, including 111 derailments, between 2003 and 2013.

Interestingly, the parliamentary secretary said two things in his answer. He said, first, that the minister had been taking action and, second, that we should let the authorities continue their investigation and that Transport Canada would not hesitate to act on recommendations. Three months later, Canadians want to know exactly what action the minister took.

I would remind the House that, since 2001, it has been a Transport Canada requirement that all railway companies have a safety management system. Unfortunately, the changes that were made to the Railway Safety Act in 2012 and came into effect in May 2013, two months before the Lac-Mégantic tragedy, did not prevent the deaths of 47 innocent people. Why? Because all the new requirements in those regulations were voluntary. That is as absurd as asking students to grade themselves.

Thus, it is the culture itself that needs to change, because current thinking—that private companies will put human safety ahead of profitability—simply does not work. At least the Lac-Mégantic tragedy has served to demonstrate that the Conservative philosophy does not work in the real world. The first mission of any government is to physically protect the population, but this Conservative government failed to protect the lives of its citizens.

I would like to come back for a moment to the shortage of inspectors, which is addressed in a report that calls MMA “a ‘bad apple’ that ignored its own directives”. Transport Canada currently has only 35 inspectors in its transportation of dangerous goods division to cover all transportation modes. While the volume of oil transportation by rail has skyrocketed, the Conservative budgets of 2010-11 to 2013-14 have cut the budget for rail safety by 19%. Over the same four years, Transport Canada also shaved its transportation of dangerous goods budget from \$14 million to \$13 million.

In its throne speech, the government stated that it will require railways to carry additional insurance. That shows the difference between the Conservatives and the NDP. While the Conservatives propose increased compensation for the victims of disasters, we in the NDP want to ensure that such disasters never happen, by introducing controls by independent inspectors, increasing the number of inspectors and making it mandatory to ensure that train cars are safe.

I ask the question again here this evening: exactly what did the minister do to improve the safety of rail transportation of dangerous goods? The truth is, we all know the answer: nothing.

● (1900)

[English]

Mr. Jeff Watson (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government's top priority remains the health and safety of Canadians. That is why we have increased funding for rail safety.

In budget 2009, our government affirmed our commitment to a safe, reliable transportation system by earmarking \$72 million, over five years, for rail safety measures. This included dedicated increased funding to ensure a permanent rail inspectorate of over 100 positions nationally.

In fact, Transport Canada spent 65% more on rail safety in 2012-13 than it did in 2006-07, going up from \$20.7 million to \$34.2 million.

Strong federal railway safety regulations are currently in place to ensure the safety and protection of the public, but we agree that more can be done. That is precisely why our government has already taken many steps to increase rail safety in Canada and will continue to do more.

Recent amendments to the Railway Safety Act came into force on May 1, 2013, and the minister instructed officials in the department to accelerate the development and implementation of regulations stemming from these amendments.

The introduction of these regulations will strengthen the regulatory framework by requiring all companies to obtain a safety-based railway operating certificate, introducing the rapid administration of tougher monetary penalties, reflecting the central importance of safety management systems, and clarifying the authority and responsibilities of the Minister of Transport. If regulations are not followed, companies will face the full force of the law.

Following the tragic events in Lac-Mégantic, our government has taken further concrete steps to enhance the safety of rail and the movement of dangerous goods by issuing an emergency directive to all federally regulated railway companies, which impose measures pertaining to the securement of unattended locomotives and the number of crew required for operating a locomotive carrying dangerous goods.

These rules have now been made permanent and have the force of regulation.

The Speech from the Throne also noted two significant regulatory actions we would pursue: first, that shippers and railway companies would be required to carry additional insurance, so they are held accountable; and second, that we would take targeted action to make the transportation of goods safer.

We are taking a similar approach to that of the world-class tanker safety initiative that we developed for marine transportation, focusing on prevention, response, and liability.

Following on this second point, the minister issued a protective direction, on October 17, 2013, requiring all parties who import or transport crude oil to conduct classification testing. They must make those test results available to Transport Canada upon request, update their safety data sheets, and immediately provide them to Transport Canada's Canadian Transport Emergency Centre.

Finally, until such testing is completed, they must also ship all crude oil as class 3, flammable liquid, packing group I when shipping by rail.

The minister asked a special working group inside Transport Canada to develop an emergency response assistance plan for these flammable liquids. This group has come back with recommendations that the minister and Transport Canada are reviewing on an expedited basis.

It is vitally important to engage all interested parties, from community representatives to technical experts to industry officials, in order to identify practical ways to further improve rail safety and the safe transportation of dangerous goods.

Our government has continually demonstrated our commitment to the safety of Canadians by, in addition to some of the measures I outlined, implementing every one of the Transportation Safety Board's recommendations arising so far from the investigation at Lac-Mégantic.

Our government's commitment to safe transportation in this country is clear, not just in our words but in our actions.

• (1905)

Mr. Tarik Brahmi: Mr. Speaker, the parliamentary secretary was not able to explain how the Minister of Transport has been taking so-called targeted action because, obviously, she has not.

The reason why all the amendments to the Railway Safety Act that came into force in May 2013 could not save the lives of 47 innocent Canadians is that they were all based upon self-regulation, and the number of inspectors has not increased in spite of the exponential increase in the transportation of dangerous goods by rail.

So, I ask the question again. What did the minister do to protect the public against the deadly consequences of self-regulation in the private railway industry?

Mr. Jeff Watson: Mr. Speaker, I am not sure that the member opposite understands how the system works.

First, rail companies must primarily be responsible for their safety. We have regulations in place, and if regulations are not followed, the companies will face the full extent of the law. The Railway Safety Act amendments that were brought in require regulation for implementation. Those are being done on an expedited basis and will provide additional safety measures.

However, since Lac-Mégantic the member should know that protective directions have been issued on the classification and testing of flammable liquids. There are information-sharing protocols now with first responders. There are now permanent emergency protective directions that carry the full force of regulation and law. A number of important actions have been taken.

By the way, we continue to hire inspectors.

The members opposite continue to vote against the appropriations.

While we are at it, the minister has directed the Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities to study the transportation of dangerous goods and report back with further recommendations.

It is that member and his caucus who are blocking our ability to get to Lac-Mégantic and the Bakken oil fields, and who are playing politics on the Elections Act. If those members are serious about

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getting on board with rail safety in this country, they should quit the obstructionist politics.

[*Translation*]

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Ms. Laurin Liu (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have the opportunity to return to a question that I raised on February 14 concerning changes to the National Research Council Canada.

The NRC is the former engine of scientific innovation in Canada, and it has been credited with an impressive number of discoveries, such as the pacemaker and various computer animation techniques. However, the Conservative government has decided to “reform” the NRC. In the past two federal budgets, it has allocated \$188 million to the NRC to help it refocus its work on business needs. The Conservative government wants to make it a one-stop shop that serves business.

Although almost \$200 million has been spent on the restructuring, we are still waiting for the government's detailed business plan. Even worse, everything is being carried out in absolute secrecy. It is not just the opposition parties and the “paranoid, evil journalists” who are worried. Scientists on the ground are also worried.

According to a survey by the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada, 86% of NRC scientists believe that recent changes are limiting or will limit basic research and that this will have a negative impact on research and development generally.

It seems that the growing shift from basic science to commercially oriented applied science is not improving Canada's record on innovation—at least not according to the scientists who are best qualified to say so.

What is more, it is important to see that this reorganization is part of the Conservative government's efforts to cut research budgets. Even when we take into account the effect of the stimulus spending won by the opposition parties, between 2008 and 2013, \$600 million was cut from the science and technology budgets of science-oriented departments and agencies; as a result, 2,141 jobs were eliminated.

At the NRC alone, an estimated \$129 million and 798 positions were cut. When the government brags about having invested \$188 million over two years in the NRC, we have to keep in mind that \$129 million was cut over the last five years and that most of the money allocated for restructuring will not go toward actual research.

The worst is yet to come. According to the calculations of the Professional Institute of the Public Service, between 2013 and 2016, ten science-oriented departments will have lost \$2.6 billion and 5,064 jobs. This is a real assault.

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These cuts have a real impact on the pool of scientific knowledge and information available to Canadians. We have talked a lot about scientific libraries being dismantled, but we also need to talk about the individuals who work for the government and who were, in and of themselves, walking encyclopedias, filled with knowledge that benefited all Canadians.

For example, I am thinking about Jean-Pierre Gagnon, who is one of the leading North American experts on the transportation of dangerous goods by rail, and on DOT-111 cars in particular, which were the ones involved in the Lac-Mégantic tragedy. A government engineer for 32 years, he retired because of workforce adjustment.

My question is the following: How can the government say that the cuts to science will not have an impact on future generations?

● (1910)

[English]

Hon. Mike Lake (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am happy to respond to comments made earlier by the hon. member for Rivière-des-Mille-Îles regarding National Research Council scientists and the new mandate of the NRC.

Our government's top priority is jobs, economic growth, and long-term prosperity. That is why we have made record investments in science, technology, and innovation. We understand the importance of providing support for scientific discovery as well as supporting Canadian scientists who work in our research institutions across the country.

Since 2006, our government has provided more than \$11 billion in new resources for basic and applied research, talent development, research infrastructure, and innovative activities in the private sector. We have also more effectively aligned federal research support with business needs. That is why Canada is ranked first in the G7 for support for research and development in our colleges, universities, and other research institutes.

Where we see an opportunity to improve is in moving more ideas from the labs to the marketplace. That is also why the government has transformed the NRC to focusing its activities and assets on supporting business innovation, helping to address Canada's challenges in this area. The NRC has set an ambitious goal for itself: to become the most effective research and technology organization in the world. Its revitalization is an important piece of the government's overall strategy in support of innovation. The government will continue to support the NRC and its scientists as they work toward this goal, while at the same time continuing to support basic research. It is clear that we are taking steps to ensure that the National Research Council remains a world-class organization.

We will continue to protect and build on our strength in basic research and bring more ideas from labs and workshops, where science, research, development, and innovation are thriving, to the marketplace.

Furthermore, economic action plan 2014 reinforces Canada's economic strength, with new support for research and innovation totalling more than \$1.6 billion over the next five years. Specifically, the plan proposes to create the Canada first research excellence fund,

with \$1.5 billion in funding over the next decade, to help Canadian post-secondary institutions excel globally in research areas that create long-term economic advantage for Canada.

As the economic action plan reaffirms, our government is committed to supporting science, technology, and innovation to pursue business-led initiatives that meet private sector needs, create jobs, strengthen our knowledge economy, and improve the quality of life for Canadians.

[Translation]

Ms. Laurin Liu: Mr. Speaker, the truth is that the government cut \$600 million from science-oriented departments and agencies, and another \$2.6 billion will be cut over the next five years.

The government can cut ribbons and publish all the press releases it wants, but we know that these cuts will have an impact on the health and safety of Canadians. It is unrealistic to think that these cuts will only affect administrative services. The government needs to get its head out of the sand. These cuts will affect ecosystems, air and water quality, the survival of endangered species in Canada and, of course, the health and safety of Canadians.

Unfortunately, the cuts are being carried out in secret, and we will only be able to determine the real impact that these irresponsible cuts will have on Canadians in a few years, when we have to deal with more disasters.

I urge the Conservatives to reconsider the cuts they made to basic science in Canada and I urge them to be accountable to Canadians across the country.

● (1915)

[English]

Hon. Mike Lake: Mr. Speaker, the government understands the importance of providing support for scientific discovery and has provided more than \$11 billion dollars since 2006, in new resources for basic and applied research, talent development, research infrastructure, and innovative activities in the private sector. We have more effectively aligned federal research support with business needs.

Economic action plan 2014 is a continuation of this narrative. It is one of maintaining our economic strength and adding new support for research and innovation. The creation of the Canada first research excellence fund in the budget is evidence of this, with \$1.5 billion in funding over the next decade to help Canadian post-secondary institutions excel globally.

We can boast of an enviable record, as Canada remains the G7 leader in research and development expenditures in the higher education sector as a share of the economy. Our government understands the importance of science, research, and innovation and is committed to supporting both basic and applied research.

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[*Translation*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The motion to adjourn the House is now deemed to have been adopted.

Accordingly, this House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 10 a.m., pursuant to Standing Order 24(1).

(The House adjourned at 7:16 p.m.)

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