



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

House of Commons Debates

VOLUME 147 • NUMBER 055 • 2nd SESSION • 41st PARLIAMENT

OFFICIAL REPORT
(HANSARD)

Monday, March 3, 2014

—

Speaker: The Honourable Andrew Scheer

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Monday, March 3, 2014

The House met at 11 a.m.

Prayers

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

• (1105)

[*Translation*]

NATIONAL LYME DISEASE STRATEGY ACT

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP), seconded by the hon. member for Oakville, moved that Bill C-442, An Act respecting a National Lyme Disease Strategy, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

She said: Mr. Speaker, today I am very honoured to introduce this bill for a national strategy on Lyme disease at second reading. When we are able to work together as members of Parliament, anything is possible.

[*English*]

Today I stand here with the great honour of presenting a bill in my name. If I could, I would remove my name and put the names of all of us on it. This is a truly non-partisan effort, and this is reflected in the process of this legislation in the House so far.

At first reading, in June 2012, the seconder of my bill was my friend the hon. Liberal member for Etobicoke North, who has been very active on many health issues. Today I have the enormous honour of having my bill seconded by the hon. member for Oakville, himself a champion on a number of health issues. I commend him and the Minister of Health, in fact all of the Conservative members, for bringing forward Bill C-17, An Act to amend the Food and Drugs Act, Vanessa's law. I look forward to seeing that legislation made into law. These are important steps, which prove that individuals can change public policy, as I hope we will here.

By coincidence, the hon. member for Oakville has also taken a stand on the Lyme disease issue, having written a foreword to a Canadian book called *Ending Denial: The Lyme Disease Epidemic*.

In this non-partisan spirit, the official opposition, the New Democratic Party, was the first party to signal full support for my bill. The New Democratic Party health critic, the hon. member for Vancouver East, signalled some time ago that I could count on her party's support. It means a tremendous amount to me personally to have this support. It acknowledges the importance of this legislation.

The hon. member for Edmonton—Spruce Grove, the Minister of Health, has herself been very willing to work with me, which means the bill has the potential for success. We have sat down and worked over this bill, and there are some amendments that I would expect to see in committee. I do not regard them in any way as other than helpful. This bodes well for our ability to work together to make a difference on this issue.

What is this issue? Everyone in the Chamber is now familiar with the fact that Lyme disease is spreading. It is spread through a very specific bacteria that is carried by ticks, often blacklegged ticks or deer ticks, and it is now spreading to other species of ticks. The bacterium *Borrelia burgdorferi* is a bacterium that brings with it both a potential personal tragedy and a very troubling set of symptoms for diagnosis.

As I have said, this disease is spread through ticks. As we have seen, this disease can be delivered to other areas through the agency of birds. The range in which these ticks occurs across Canada has been spreading, and it is part of the increase in vector-borne diseases that are anticipated in relation to global warming and the climate crisis.

We know there are more cases of the disease. It was shocking to many, when in the summer of 2013, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in Atlanta, Georgia, issued a revised estimate of Lyme disease in the United States. Its new estimate increased the prevalence of Lyme disease ten-fold, reporting that the previous year's 30,000 cases were probably 300,000. This is a timely reminder to us in Canada that the incidence of Lyme disease is spreading.

To the credit of Health Canada, since 2009 Lyme disease has been a reportable illness in Canada. There is no question that we know it exists in Canada, and health professionals have a mandatory duty to report a diagnosis of Lyme disease. We are also aware that it is under-reported. Currently any medical practitioner who diagnosis Lyme disease has a responsibility to inform the provincial health authorities, who in turn report this to the Public Health Agency of Canada. At this point, only 310 cases have been reported across Canada.

I am sure my colleagues on all sides of the House know that the number of cases is somewhat low, just in terms of our own anecdotal experience of constituents who have Lyme disease, and from the number of petitions we have received in this place from people urging us to find a solution and urging better treatment and a cure. We cannot estimate exactly how low that is, but as in the United States, I think we will find that as we increase awareness we will have a clearer understanding of the incidence of the disease.

Private Members' Business

Let me review quickly what the bill would do. This is a bill to deal with the threat of Lyme disease, but it does it in a couple of different ways. The bill's goals are to create a national surveillance system dealing with the problem that I just mentioned; we do not always have good information on exactly where the ticks are spreading and how prevalent they are.

The other area that is important is to get a handle on better awareness, perhaps national standards, or at least a sharing of best practices, to understand the challenges of diagnosis and treatment.

The bill calls for:

- (1110)

[*Translation*]

3.(b) the establishment of guidelines regarding the prevention, identification, treatment and management of Lyme disease, including a recommended national standard of care that reflects current best practices for the treatment of Lyme disease;

[*English*]

It also calls on the Minister of Health, working with others, to create a national program of educational materials to increase public awareness, but also to assist medical professionals. The process by which this would take place is that once the bill has come into force, there would be a mandatory obligation on the minister of health to convene, within six months, a national conference of provincial and territorial ministers of health, as well as the stakeholders, who are described in the bill as representatives of the medical community and patient groups, for the purpose of developing this national framework.

I am very heartened that at this relatively early stage in the consideration of Bill C-442, it has already received the support of important elements within the medical community. I want to cite particularly, and to thank, Eric Mang, director, health policy and government relations for the College of Family Physicians of Canada, who wrote in the fall of 2013 that they support the bill. He stated:

[The College of Family Physicians of Canada] supports further studying the economic and health impacts of Lyme Disease to ensure that Canadian physicians have the necessary tools and knowledge at their disposal. Guidelines produced as part of the strategy should include the input of family physicians and be available to all primary health care providers.

Even more recently, on February 27, 2014, I was thrilled to receive a letter from the Canadian Medical Association and its president, Dr. Louis Hugo Francescutti. Coming from the medical community, it is important that I read some of this letter into the record at second reading debate. He wrote the following:

Diagnosis of Lyme disease can be difficult because signs and symptoms can be non-specific and found in other conditions. If Lyme disease is not recognized during the early stages, patients may suffer seriously debilitating disease that may be more difficult to treat. Given the increasing incidence of Lyme disease in Canada, continuing education for health care and public health professionals and a national standard of care can improve identification, treatment and management of this disease. Greater awareness of where ticks are endemic in Canada, as well as information on the disease and prevention measures, can help Canadians protect themselves from infection. A national Lyme disease strategy that includes representation from the federal, provincial and territorial governments, the medical and patient communities can address concerns around research, surveillance, diagnosis, treatment and management of the disease. In addition, public health prevention measures will advance our current knowledge base, and improve the care and treatment of those suffering from Lyme disease.

With the support of those two important associations of medical professionals, the Canadian Medical Association and the College of Family Physicians of Canada, I am encouraged to know that we can work together as members of Parliament from all parties in this place. The approach set out in the bill for a national conference urges federal and provincial jurisdictional responsibility in the health community; the medical community, the doctors, health care professionals, nurses, people who deal with trying to sort out a diagnosis for Lyme disease when it is not always easy; and the patient communities, people who have advocated, who have cried out for help, people for whom this bill represents the first ray of light in what, for many, has been years of suffering. I am enormously encouraged by the support from the medical community.

I want to now turn to the support from the patient community. I would never have thought to put forward a private member's bill on Lyme disease had I not encountered so many Canadians who are suffering from the disease. My first friend who told me she had Lyme disease was Brenda Sterling, of Pictou County, Nova Scotia. From her wheelchair, she told me that she had been bitten by a tick and now she was virtually disabled. I was shocked. I did not know Lyme disease could be so serious when I first met Brenda, but she educated me about it.

Then when I moved to Saanich—Gulf Islands and was living in Sidney, I kept meeting people who were experiencing Lyme disease, some of them kids. It is heartbreaking to know a brilliant, beautiful young woman, Nicole Bottles, who is in a wheelchair and not able to go school. It is not because the wheelchair is a difficulty, but because the Lyme disease, as she says, muddles her brain from time to time. She has trouble concentrating and she has not been able to keep up with her schooling. However, she and her mother, Chris Powell, whom I think have met many of the people in this chamber today, have come to Ottawa and advocated for Bill C-442. They see it as a way to get to better levels of awareness.

I am so grateful to James, Michael, and other young constituents, like Eric, and his family. When I think about why I chose this bill, it had a lot to do with Eric and his family. His father-in-law was a strong supporter of mine, and I wondered how I could ever thank him. I am thankful to Fraser, among many people, for my bringing forward a bill that could try to make a difference in thousands of lives.

As we work toward this bill, let us keep a couple of hopeful things in mind. One is that we should never fear the outdoors. Some people have come to me since this bill was tabled saying, "For Heaven's sake, be careful that we don't create fear of going outside". I want to emphasize that is not my intention.

I subscribe to the view of some who have described nature deficit disorder as a real threat to our kids. They need to get out and engage with wilderness. They need to be in nature. It increases learning abilities, capabilities, and emotional maturity. It is great for kids to spend time outdoors.

Private Members' Business

We have become used to the education challenge of a thinning ozone layer, which due to the Montreal protocol is reversing the thinning process. Over the years we have become used to asking what the UV rating is, wearing long-sleeved shirts, remembering to use sunscreen, and wearing a broad-rimmed hat, something that did not occur when I was a kid. These are common-sense prevention measures.

We need common sense to be a part of our daily routine. When our kids go out to play, we need to say, “Tuck your pant legs into your socks”, and when they come in from playing outdoors, to say, “Let me give you a quick check to make sure you haven't picked up a tick”. Those kinds of things are common-sense prevention measures.

The good news when facing Lyme disease is that it is preventable. That is why a federal framework makes so much sense. If we are aware of the disease, and watchful, we will not get it in the first place. However, if we do get it and diagnosis is speedy and correct, the treatment works. The treatment need not take long, and one can recover to a complete state of health and well-being.

Lastly, let us shine a light of hope for those dealing with the challenge of continuing debilitating symptoms. With a real focus and continued research, we can find treatment measures that will work for the entire Lyme patient community.

I am indebted to all of the members who have come here this morning for second reading, and thankful for their support. With their help, this bill will become law.

• (1115)

Mr. Bryan Hayes (Sault Ste. Marie, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for Saanich—Gulf Islands for bringing forward this important piece of legislation on behalf of one of my constituents, who suffered for the longest time in terms of finding a diagnosis and then treatment. She was not able to find appropriate treatment in Canada, and I believe she went to Mexico three times for treatment.

In terms of best practices and treatment, is the intent to look worldwide and go outside of Canada and the United States, to search for the best treatment possible?

• (1120)

Ms. Elizabeth May: Mr. Speaker, I want to make a point clearly and this gives me a good opportunity. I am not a medical doctor. A few of us in the House are, but for the most part, I want to make sure that the medical diagnosis and research is left to medical experts, the ministers of health provincially, federally, and territorially.

I would think it makes sense to do what my hon. friend suggests. My constituents have gone to the U.S. and to Mexico for treatment. I was interviewed this morning by Kamloops CBC, where a family is trying to raise money for some treatment in Florida. I do not know what it is.

It is important that as members of Parliament we set up a framework to allow the research to extend to wherever the answers will be found, but we should not prejudge that. We should make it possible for medical professionals to seek out best practices.

I think a lot of those may be in Canada. We just need to share across provincial and territorial boundaries, and perhaps international ones as well.

Mr. Murray Rankin (Victoria, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I congratulate and thank my friend and neighbour from Saanich—Gulf Islands for her excellent presentation and for her hard work on the bill.

During her speech, she alluded to certain amendments that might be brought forward at committee stage, and I wonder if she could advise the House on the kind of amendments she would consider acceptable.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Mr. Speaker, it is helpful to perhaps give a prelude. I do not assume anything. I am keeping my fingers and toes crossed that the bill gets through second reading and to committee.

The Minister of Health has been very forthcoming in sharing with me some of the things she thinks would make the bill easier, from her point of view, and obviously I want to do everything possible to be reasonable and bend over backwards to make sure we can accept any amendments.

The kinds of things suggested are really sensible. I do not want the bill to create, for instance, any federal or provincial jurisdictional conflict. It has been suggested that we change the terms “standard of care” to “best practices” and “national strategy” to “federal framework”, and to give the Minister of Health, who in the current version of the bill is given six months to hold a conference from when the bill enters into force, to perhaps make that longer, to ensure that federal-provincial processes are respected. It could go to perhaps 12 months.

None of those things strikes me as anything other than helpful, and I certainly look forward to getting the bill to committee so that those amendments can be made.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I pick up on the need for having that national strategy, as individual provinces, some more than others quite possibly, look at what can be done with Lyme disease.

Would the member comment on why it is so important that there be a national strategy? This way we could better serve all Canadians.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Mr. Speaker, I think the reasons are clear in terms of the context. Some hon. colleagues have asked me why the federal government should be involved in this. Partly, unlike other diseases, this one is preventable. Better knowledge and sharing of best practices can allow Canadians, wherever they go across this country, to know—as with the metaphor of UV radiation and skin cancer—are we in a part of the country where ticks bearing this bacteria are endemic? Are we in a place where we should perhaps be more vigilant than usual?

The more we share across provincial boundaries, best practices, the more the medical community is able to benefit from what some doctors are doing in one part of Canada, which is quite different from what is happening elsewhere. Sharing best practices as a country will make sure that all Canadians, wherever they live, are better protected from this terrible disease.

Private Members' Business

Mr. Gerald Keddy (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Revenue and for the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is certainly an honour for me to rise today to participate in this debate on Bill C-442, an act respecting a National Lyme Disease Strategy. I would like to begin by commending the member for Saanich—Gulf Islands for her stewardship of this important bill, and I would like to acknowledge its support by many members in the House.

The hon. member mentioned in her comments that many of us, myself included, live in areas where the blacklegged tick, or deer tick, is endemic. In addition, many of us, myself included, have constituents who have contracted Lyme disease at some point.

This is an endemic disease. It is a Canada-wide disease, and it is a disease that is spreading. For those reasons, we need a national strategy. The support for this bill underscores the need to work together and to address this emerging infectious disease in order to minimize the risk for Canadians.

Across the country, the number of reported cases of Lyme disease has increased significantly in the last decade. In fact, the actual number of cases in Canada is estimated to be up to three times higher than reported because many Canadians may not seek a full diagnosis and, quite frankly, many medical professionals do not know how to diagnose Lyme disease.

To underscore that point, as the hon. member would know, Lyme disease was first reported in Lyme, Connecticut, in 1975 or 1974. Here we are, 39 years later, with Lyme disease endemic throughout New England and now it has spread into Canada, following the white-tailed deer, of course, and we still do not have a national strategy for Lyme disease. That underscores the need for the important discussion we are having in the House of Commons today.

This has led to a growing recognition among governments, health practitioners, and stakeholders that work needs to be done to address this emerging infectious disease. Support for this bill also highlights the need to better leverage efforts at the federal level and across jurisdictions in Lyme disease surveillance and research.

Our government has already established improved surveillance specifically aimed at Lyme disease, and welcomes the sponsor's efforts to bring additional attention to this important issue.

The proposed bill highlights the need for continued action by governments, stakeholders, and the public health and medical communities to improve the understanding and awareness of risk factors, prevention, and treatment options. The objectives of this bill are laudable, and in fact align with the many activities already being undertaken by our government. Canadians should be reassured that the government has not been standing still.

We are already making significant progress under the leadership of the Public Health Agency of Canada. We are working with provincial and territorial health authorities and other partners in informing Canadians of the health risks from contracting Lyme disease. We also continue to help protect Canadians against Lyme disease through improved surveillance, by conducting research, by providing factual and evidence-based information to Canadians, and by providing support for laboratory diagnosis. Since 2006, our government has invested \$4.6 million through the Canadian

Institutes of Health Research to specifically fund research on Lyme disease and to disseminate the latest findings and knowledge to the scientific community.

These efforts are a central component of the Public Health Agency of Canada's approach to infectious diseases in Canada. More specifically, our approach to Lyme disease takes important action to reduce the disease's impact.

We do this by enhancing surveillance, prevention, and control; research and diagnosis; and engagement, education, and awareness. These three areas are consistent with the key elements of the bill, and our approach is already delivering results. However, as mentioned before, we are also prepared to do more, and in a collaborative fashion, to further address this emerging infectious disease.

● (1125)

That is why I want to signal to the House today that the government supports the intent of Bill C-442 and that we will be proposing practical amendments to ensure that the vision and values expressed in the bill can be realized and provide maximum benefit to the Canadian people.

The bill addresses an important issue, but it needs to be refined to remain consistent with the jurisdictional roles and accountabilities of Canada's federal system of government. In keeping with the spirit of the bill, we must be mindful of our federal role and respect jurisdictional accountabilities.

As we know, the provision of health care services in Canada falls under provincial and territorial jurisdiction. It is the provinces and territories that establish and monitor standards of care for health providers. It is also the purview of relevant medical colleges to define clinical care guidelines.

It is not the federal role to tell medical professionals how to practise. The proper role for the federal government in this area is to ensure that best practices are being shared across all jurisdictions, so that Canadians can be reassured that treatments are guided by the best scientific evidence.

In a similar vein, dictating to provinces and territories how and where to allocate their spending is contrary to our government's approach to fiscal federalism. However, it is within our federal role to facilitate collaboration across jurisdictions and with stakeholders to monitor and address the challenges posed by Lyme disease.

We are doing precisely that through our involvement in the Pan-Canadian Public Health Network and our collaborative work with stakeholders such as the College of Family Physicians of Canada and patient advocacy groups.

For example, the Public Health Agency of Canada is already working with the College of Family Physicians of Canada to engage health professionals on Lyme disease by increasing awareness among health care providers to enable them to recognize, diagnose, and treat the disease in its early stages.

Suffice it to say, while we concur with the bill's goals and objectives, it would need to be amended to reflect these jurisdictional realities, which is something that the hon. member has already mentioned she is supportive of.

Private Members' Business

This government is looking forward to working with the member for Saanich—Gulf Islands and will propose amendments in these areas to ensure that the bill is consistent with the provinces' and territories' primary role in delivering health care.

Early on in my speech, I mentioned that 39 years ago, Lyme disease was first diagnosed in Lyme, Connecticut. It took 39 years to get to this stage.

I have heard some members in this place—as the hon. member for Saanich—Gulf Islands has already alluded—question whether they would support this piece of proposed legislation. Some members say that Lyme disease is not prevalent in their area or that it is not endemic in their area.

I would suggest to these members that they had better take a look at whether they have white-tailed deer in their area. The blacklegged tick, better known in my part of the world as the deer tick, came to North America with the white-tailed deer. It has spread very successfully in most jurisdictions of North America.

As deer become more urban, or perhaps as humans become more rural, more white-tailed deer are moving into what were once rural areas, which are now urban areas. Therefore, this disease is only going to get worse, and it has been wildly underreported. There are a number of cases we are still trying to diagnose that I suspect will end up being Lyme disease or some variant of Lyme disease.

In closing, I commend the hon. member for Saanich—Gulf Islands for her very important and extremely timely work on this file. I have a number of constituents in South Shore—St. Margaret's in Nova Scotia who are watching this file as it proceeds forward. These folks either have contracted Lyme disease themselves or have family members who have contracted Lyme disease.

This is a terrible, insidious disease that is very difficult to diagnose. Therefore, this is very timely legislation.

• (1130)

Mr. Murray Rankin (Victoria, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to rise and speak to Bill C-442, an act respecting a national Lyme disease strategy at this second reading stage. Again, I would like to acknowledge the work of my colleague from Saanich—Gulf Islands in bringing forward this very important initiative.

I want to say from the very outset that the official opposition will be voting in favour of this bill.

I want to acknowledge as well the pioneering work of former MP Judy Wasylycia-Leis who, well over five years ago, urged the health minister to implement such a strategy. Our NDP health critic from Vancouver East has also written to the Minister of Health about this issue and pushed very hard to establish a national strategy to diagnose, treat, and do better surveillance for Lyme disease in response to the growing threat of infection from coast to coast. Both she and I have seconded this important bill. Receiving early and appropriate treatment would improve the quality of life for thousands of Canadians and their families.

Lyme disease is one of the fastest growing infectious diseases in North America. I have heard first-hand about its devastating effect from a constituent, Nicole Bottles, who is a 20-year-old sufferer of

Lyme disease. She is now in a wheelchair and met with me in Ottawa to advocate for this national strategy bill.

Early treatment of Lyme disease reduces the severity and duration of the illness. Experts agree that more accurate testing and earlier treatment of Lyme disease would reduce the health care costs associated with a lengthy illness and the more severe side effects, particularly for women, who suffer longer-lasting effects when their Lyme disease goes untreated. As members know, Lyme disease is caused by a specific bacterium spread through tick bites. It is one of the most under-diagnosed diseases in Canada. However, Lyme disease symptoms can range from a localized rash to fatigue to very serious central nervous system disorders that can lead to paralysis.

Let me begin by outlining the nature of the disease; then I will talk about what Bill C-442 is intended to do to address the problem.

Last month, the newspaper in my community, the *Victoria Times Colonist*, reported that a Vancouver Island hawk became the first raptor to join the list of species believed to spread Lyme disease. Research scientist John Scott found a Cooper's hawk with 22 ticks on it, 4 of which were infected with the bacterium that causes Lyme disease. It is the first raptor or bird of prey known to host this bacterium. The Cooper's hawk was found on the doorstep of a house in Oak Bay, part of my constituency. It flew into a window. Then it was delivered to the wild animal rehabilitation centre near Victoria, where it was examined.

Five of the six species of ticks that live on Vancouver Island are apparently involved in the transmission of Lyme disease. Other known reservoir hosts include songbirds, deer, mice, and rabbits. I would agree with my hon. friend opposite from South Shore—St. Margaret's that deer have become an increasing part of the problem, and in communities such as Oak Bay, the rapid increase in the deer population can only cause additional concern about the spread of this devastating disease, because the ticks feed on the blood of animals and humans and pass on Lyme disease. The ticks feed on species that include mice, birds, and the like; then they carry the bacterium and bite humans, and the disease cycle begins.

Ticks are most common during the warmer months, so Canadians who live in areas of our country with mild winter temperatures and minimal snowfall, such as southern Vancouver Island, have an increased risk of coming into contact with ticks. However, as Bill C-442 notes in its preamble, climate change is one of the factors causing more and more regions of Canada to be at risk. As we experience more warmer weather ahead of us, that would only increase the tick distribution across the country, as scientists have predicted.

Private Members' Business

By 2009, Canadian physicians were required to report on cases of Lyme disease to their provincial health registries. However, according to *CBC News* last year, national statistics are still unavailable at this time.

• (1135)

Recently, as the hon. member for Saanich—Gulf Islands mentioned, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated the number of people in the United States affected by Lyme disease was around 300,000, but that figure is 10 times higher than what is reported to that agency. In the province of New Brunswick in 2009, there were 128 confirmed cases of Lyme disease, but by 2011, that number had doubled to 258.

If Lyme disease is treated at early stages with antibiotics and the tick is removed, the severe neurological symptoms that often occur can be avoided. I am told that in some states in the United States, such as Massachusetts, it is relatively routine for the tick to be removed and antibiotics administered at that early stage. However, there seems to be a different level of awareness in Canada; hence, the need for the strategy before us.

Unfortunately, there does not seem to be any standardized testing for Lyme disease in Canada, so Lyme disease advocates and health practitioners say the different types of blood tests performed to identify Lyme disease currently yield inaccurate results. What does that mean? It means that patients who in fact have Lyme disease are often not diagnosed or are misdiagnosed with such illnesses as multiple sclerosis or chronic fatigue syndrome. They do not receive the appropriate treatment, thereby exacerbating the symptoms. I have spoken with some patients from Victoria who say they have had to travel to other countries, as the member opposite for Sault Ste. Marie has also acknowledged, possibly because the treatment in Canada ranges so dramatically and is often inadequate.

What would Bill C-442 do, then? First, it would track the incidence rates, create educational materials to raise awareness about Lyme disease, and establish testing and treatment guidelines, as well as track the related economic impacts of Lyme disease. Second, Bill C-442 would support research and implementation of better and more reliable diagnostic testing, as well as increased education and awareness among physicians. In short, the bill would create a coordinated strategy, which is long overdue.

Canadians deserve to get adequate testing and treatment for this disease. The federal government is responsible for improving the surveillance of Lyme disease, as well as establishing best practices so that the provinces can better understand the disease and adopt evidence-based measures to improve outcomes.

The Canadian Lyme Disease Foundation, or CanLyme, is in full support of Bill C-442. President Wilson stated, “This bill responds to the failure of existing guidelines to reliably detect and treat Lyme disease”.

As the member for Saanich—Gulf Islands already noted, the College of Family Physicians of Canada has also supported Bill C-442. It stated, “The CFPC supports further studying the economic and health impacts of Lyme Disease to ensure that Canadian physicians have the necessary tools and knowledge at their disposal”.

I regret that past governments have failed to take the appropriate leadership role on a range of important health issues, including the kind of coordination and funding that are necessary for health innovations, testing, and treatment. It was only in 2009 that we began to track Lyme disease, and some have argued in my office that there has been a failure to heed the pleas to advance testing and treatment options in this country. Therefore, this is an issue where the federal government must show leadership in health care and work to better protect and support the health of Canadians.

This is far from a partisan issue. It does not help at all to talk about past governments. We want to stand firm with the hon. member for Saanich—Gulf Islands and all members of the House to address this problem. The time to act is now. Sufferers from Lyme disease are looking to the government for leadership. The official opposition wants to be part of that solution. It is time to get on with it. New Democrats will be voting in support of this bill.

• (1140)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is with pleasure that I rise today to support Bill C-442. On behalf of the Liberal caucus, I would indicate that we do support the bill and want to see it ultimately passed, going through our committee process and, obviously, third reading.

I was encouraged to hear from the leader of the Green Party that she is open to having some possible amendments that would not change the intent of the bill but, quite possibly, make it a bit more practical, in terms of its implementation.

Lyme disease is a very serious issue, as it has been said at length in the last 45 minutes. I thought I would emphasize it from a different perspective, from more of a personal perspective, in terms of what I believe is likely the most important issue facing this particular disease; that is, the whole sense of public awareness.

There are different regions in Canada, some more affected by Lyme disease than others. In Manitoba, it is a very serious disease. Many people are aware that in Manitoba we have beautiful, wonderful summers. Many of my friends have cottages out in rural Manitoba. There are all sorts of youth camps in the province. In some regions of the province of Manitoba—in particular, in the southeast—there is a higher risk factor of Lyme disease, and we need to ensure that there is a higher sense of public awareness.

Over the last three or four years, maybe, I have found that there seems to be a higher sense of a public awareness, but even today, I do not believe enough is being done in terms of promotional educational material and the government taking a proactive approach to ensuring there is a high level of education with respect to this particular disease.

That is one of the aspects of the bill that I do support in its entirety: the fact that we need to recognize that and incorporate it. I am glad it is actually in the legislation itself.

Private Members' Business

I have gone through all the different trails, for example, at Pelican Lake, which is in the southeast part of Manitoba. I have spent many days with my daughter, in particular. When we get back to the cabin after a half day of going through the trails, we might have a dozen or so ticks on us. Even though we have taken the precaution to wear long-sleeved tops and tuck our pant legs into our socks and put on some form of repellants, somehow the ticks have this ability to cling onto us. It does not take much.

We make sure we do what we can to get rid of the ticks, if we see them on us.

However, what amazes me, when I have had the opportunity to talk to people about Lyme disease, is the number of people who do not know what Lyme disease is. They know what a wood tick is and have often had them on their body, but they do not know what Lyme disease is. I find that to be actually quite tragic. These are individuals who I thought would have known: some of the more regular cottage-goers.

I made reference to youth camps. We have young people who participate in camps throughout Canada. I made comments with respect to southeastern Manitoba. We have had cases of Lyme disease identified in most provinces. Every year we will have literally tens of thousands of children participating in outdoor activities, in summer camps, and so forth.

As the leader of the Green Party pointed out, we want to encourage our young people, and all people, to appreciate and enjoy the outdoors, but it is very important that we recognize the advantages of being proactive in terms of material on this particular disease, because of the debilitating impact on someone acquiring Lyme disease.

● (1145)

Most would say that it takes two or three days before the symptoms are seen. However, it can often take a week or so. It has appeared months if not a couple of years after an original infection from a tick.

Symptoms are fatigue, fever, headaches, and a bull's-eye rash. People need to be aware of and look for these symptoms.

In terms of the consultation process, a priority is to come up with a program that has educational and promotional components.

The role of the federal government would be to work with the provinces and territories. That needs to be expanded to include the medical professions as well as the other stakeholders, such as school boards, non-profit groups, and groups that promote the outdoors. These include outdoors groups, cottagers, and ATV and jogging clubs. We need to heighten awareness of this disease.

I would like to think that we would take a holistic approach in developing an overall strategy. I recognize that the federal government has a strong role to play in terms of best practices. That is where we can complement provincial and territorial jurisdictions.

We need to make sure that there are resources. If we can be more proactive on the front end, we will dramatically impact the spread of

this disease. What we have realized is that the number of reports of Lyme disease is on the rise.

Bill C-442 proposes that the federal government convene a conference with the provincial and territorial health ministers and different stakeholders and that it establish a national medical surveillance program to use data collected by the Public Health Agency. The bill also calls for a report on the strategy, to be tabled here in Parliament. The strategy would be reviewed for effectiveness after five years.

I believe this is a bill worth supporting. We in the Liberal caucus support it and anticipate that it is only a question of time before it passes.

● (1150)

Mr. David Tilson (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to participate in today's debate on Bill C-442, An Act respecting a National Lyme Disease Strategy. I would like to start by stating my own personal support for Bill C-442. I am pleased to see that most, if not all, government members will be showing such support as well.

I am also pleased with how the federal government is working with the provinces, territories, and stakeholders to address Lyme disease. The bill would be a sound complement to these efforts.

As members of the House are aware, Lyme disease is a rapidly emerging infectious disease in North America and in Europe. It is transmitted to humans from the bite of infected blacklegged ticks. Over the past few years, I have met with a number of constituents from my riding of Dufferin—Caledon who suffer from Lyme disease and with the family members and friends of sufferers. They have related to me the symptoms they live with and the difficulties they have faced within the medical system.

In October 2012, I met with a constituent of my riding, whose name I will not use for privacy reasons, who has been suffering with Lyme disease for seven years. She informed me of the difficulty in diagnosing the disease, which is similar to multiple sclerosis. She also informed me of the type of treatment she has been receiving and gave me some detail about what it was like to live with this disease.

This constituent is quite passionate about raising awareness of this issue. She organized signatures for a petition, which I had the honour of tabling in the House. The petition called for the government to increase its efforts on behalf of those suffering with Lyme disease.

That brings me to the bill before us today. Numerous residents of Dufferin—Caledon have written to me regarding Bill C-442. I am honoured to speak to the bill.

The number of reported cases of Lyme disease in Canada increased ninefold between 2003 to 2012 to over 300 cases annually. One of our problems is that the actual number of cases of Lyme disease is estimated to be three times higher than the number of cases that are actually reported. Even more troubling, based on current trends, the Public Health Agency of Canada estimates that these numbers will continue to rise.

Government Orders

In the majority of cases, Lyme disease symptoms may include fever, headache, and fatigue. Fortunately, if diagnosed early, Lyme disease can be treated quickly and effectively with antibiotics. In cases of late diagnosis, where the disease has spread through the body, the burden of illness and the cost to the health system increase exponentially. Suffice it to say, if left undiagnosed, the impacts can be devastating.

Let me put in perspective why we need to make progress in raising awareness of the challenges Lyme disease poses and the importance of early diagnosis and treatment. This applies as much to the public at large as it does to health professionals.

If Canada were to indeed be managing the increased rate of Lyme disease, the difference in the costs associated with early versus late diagnosis would be startling. The Public Health Agency estimates that the potential cost of early diagnosis in 2020 would be just over \$8 million annually. However, for late diagnosis, that figure could rise to over \$338 million.

Fortunately, our government has made significant research investments in areas related to Lyme disease. Indeed, since 2006, we have invested over \$4.5 million. We have established improved surveillance specifically aimed at Lyme disease so that action can be taken quickly and effectively. We are also providing federal leadership, building consensus, mobilizing partnerships, and promoting education and awareness.

Research has shown that climate change is bringing Lyme-disease-carrying ticks further into Canada. Understanding and tracking their movement is an important part of any future strategy for combating Lyme disease.

Supporting research to generate new insights into how Lyme disease is evolving, why its impacts vary so widely, and how it can be treated is central to our efforts. That is why we are committed to supporting research on the range of strains of tick-borne pathogens and their geographic locations and on the epidemiology and intervention of the disease in Canada. This will help us better forecast how Lyme disease is spreading and how its impacts can be contained.

• (1155)

However, the federal government cannot and should not act alone. With Lyme disease now a national reportable disease, it should also come as no surprise that we have been working closely with the provinces and territories. Early measures include exploring how we can work together in communicating the risks of Lyme disease to the public and the medical professions.

We are also reviewing current Lyme disease guidelines to ensure that they are based on the best evidence available. This will help us educate Canadians in identifying and protecting themselves from Lyme disease.

These collaborative efforts do not occur in a vacuum. This is an integral part of the Public Health Agency of Canada's approach to managing infectious diseases. The agency's key areas of action are surveillance, prevention and control, research and diagnosis, and engagement, education and awareness.

Let me summarize just a few of the ways that work in these areas is providing real results for Canadians struggling with Lyme disease and their families.

The Public Health Agency is conducting surveillance of Lyme disease in Canada and is developing strategies to encourage preventive behaviour. It is investing in new laboratory methods to improve our surveillance of the tick that causes Lyme disease. It is undertaking research on new strains and pathogens of tick-borne diseases, and it is updating public health guidelines on Lyme disease. The agency is also working to develop new approaches to better educate both health care providers and the general public, especially those at risk of infection, about Lyme disease. Together these efforts will equip all stakeholders to better respond to Lyme disease.

Our government's current leadership in this area, coupled with the positive principle of the bill before us today, will serve to focus on protecting the health and safety of Canadians. It will recognize the need for action and leadership to mitigate the impact of Lyme disease. It will drive the imperative for evidence-based decision-making and the sharing of best practices. It will acknowledge the importance of collaboration to raise awareness of the disease, how to avoid it, and how to diagnose and treat it. It will also disseminate data on the real impact Lyme disease has already had on too many Canadian families.

That is why, as I said at the outset, I am supportive of the principle of the bill and look forward to reviewing the work undertaken by the health committee. I encourage all members of the House to support the bill.

• (1200)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The time provided for the consideration of private member's business has now expired, and the order is dropped to the bottom of the order of precedence on the order paper.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[*English*]

AGRICULTURAL GROWTH ACT

Hon. Gerry Ritz (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, CPC) moved that Bill C-18, An Act to amend certain Acts relating to agriculture and agri-food, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

He said: Mr. Speaker, it is a great honour to be here today to speak to this legislation, because it would deliver new tools and better services to help Canadian farmers grow their businesses.

Like the business of farming, the agricultural growth act is about putting in place those new tools and better services for Canadian producers. This legislation would support the growth of our farm businesses, the growth of our economy and, of course, the growth of our opportunities on the world stage.

Government Orders

Bill C-18 is also about being proactive about the future of Canadian agriculture and bringing existing legislation into the 21st century. Just as farmers adjust their business practices to suit changing weather or market conditions, governments must have new approaches for a new generation of agriculture.

The agricultural sector knows the importance of adapting to constantly shifting conditions. Farmers are not farming the way they did 10 or even 5 years ago. Bill C-18 would help our government continue to give farmers access to the tools they need to grow their operations and our overall economy.

It is important to note that the agricultural growth act, or Bill C-18, reflects years of extensive stakeholder consultations, some as long as 22 years. I would like to thank all of the stakeholders and stakeholder associations who took part in those consultations over that time and invested themselves in working with our government to identify the opportunities for improvements contained within this piece of legislation.

With the agricultural growth act we would be modernizing Canadian legislation on a foundation of science, technology, innovation, and international standards. The proposed legislation would bolster the competitiveness of Canada's agricultural sector while ensuring a consistent regulatory approach across all commodities.

Bill C-18 would bring existing legislation in line with new science as well as international standards used by our trading partners and, most importantly, the needs of Canada's farmers and the agricultural sector overall.

This legislation would strengthen the safety of agricultural products, the first link in the food chain, while reducing the regulatory burden for industry and promoting trade in agricultural products.

I am pleased to report that 2012 saw Canada's agricultural sector achieve record results and 2013 proved to be another banner year, with record production up some 27%. That said, we need to continue this growth curve.

The timing for the improvements proposed in the bill could not be better. World demand is increasing for the world-class food that our farmers grow. The global population is expected to reach 9.3 billion by 2050. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and others have forecast that global food production must increase by some 60% to meet that future demand. Canada's farmers are more than up to the challenge of feeding a growing and hungry world.

Farmers depend on exports for up to 85% of their sales on an annual basis. Farmers want to earn their money from the marketplace, and they can beat the competition hands down as long as we are playing on a level playing field. Our government continues to work with industry to level that playing field, open new markets for our farmers, and sign new free trade agreements.

Together, we delivered real results for our farmers by growing our jobs and our economy. We have reopened our beef market in Korea, which was closed for nine years. We implemented free trade agreements with nine countries in less than six years. Last fall, our

government reached an agreement in principle with the European Union on a free trade agreement that will add 28 new countries to that list, giving our farmers access to more than 500 million of the world's most affluent customers.

To help farmers meet this growing global demand our government delivered marketing freedom to western wheat and barley farmers, a freedom that many fought for decades to achieve. Farmers embraced that new reality by seeding two million more acres of wheat last year. Our agrifood sector is now the leading manufacturing employer in the country. Our exports have helped put Canada on the map as a major trading nation.

Our government is committed to supporting Canada's farmers and our world-class agricultural industry to ensure that they remain competitive in world markets and positioned to serve the needs of Canadians and a growing world population.

Through the five-year growing forward 2 agreement signed last April, our government is making strategic investments with the provinces and territories in innovation, market access, and competitiveness.

The agricultural growth act that I am speaking about today would modernize and streamline nine different statutes, seven under the purview of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, or CFIA, and two administered by Agriculture Canada. Some of the acts we would be amending date back to the 1950s. While the opposition does not realize it, a lot has changed since then and this legislation would go a long way in modernizing the tools and services available to Canada's world-class producers.

The agricultural growth act addresses many important areas, from seed to feed, to fertilizer to animal health, to plant production to plant grading, and to farm financing.

The agricultural growth act is designed to update and streamline government requirements while also helping industry meet requirements by reducing red tape and administrative costs while improving overall program delivery.

● (1205)

Let me explain how we could achieve this. What we would do with this proposed legislation is to build a more effective, innovative, and nimble legislative framework that supports farmers from the first planting of seed in Canadian soil to sales at home or abroad. For example, Bill C-18 would bring plant breeders' rights in line with those of our international competitors, which would level the playing field for Canadian farmers. UPOV '91 would be implemented and ratified.

Government Orders

The proposed changes would encourage increased investment in plant breeding in Canada, and encourage foreign breeders to protect and sell their varieties here. As a result, Canada's farmers would benefit from improved access to innovative new varieties that have been bred to enhance crop yields, improve resistance to disease and drought, and meet specific market demands.

At the same time, the act explicitly recognizes the traditional practice of saving, conditioning, and replanting seed that is personally saved from crops grown on a producer's own land. This is known as "farmer's privilege". It would be entrenched in this legislation, unlike UPOV '78, which we are now under.

For those who continue to say otherwise, let me be clear: read the bill. These proposed changes reflect consultation. The CFIA held national public consultations with plant breeders, farmers, horticulturalists, seed dealers and, of course, the general public. I would note that the majority of our farm community is supportive of these reforms.

A group of leading Canadian farmer and agricultural organizations has joined forces to support the agricultural growth act. Partners in Innovation includes the Canadian Horticultural Council, Grain Growers of Canada, Western Canadian Wheat Growers Association, and the western Canadian barley growers and a number of other commodity groups. This bill is also supported by the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, the Canadian Seed Trade Association, and the Canadian Canola Growers Association.

The group says that the strength of plant breeders' rights in Canada is "...critical for the future of our farmers and our agricultural industry's ability to compete in the global market."

The Canadian Federation of Agriculture also supports this bill. CFA President, Ron Bonnett said with respect to the act:

The proposed changes reflect a number of recommendations made by industry over the years and showcase the government has been listening. We're pleased the government has taken action and followed-up in a concrete way with legislative changes and formal consultations on these proposed amendments.

Of course, we will continue to consult with our agricultural industry here in the country before any changes are implemented, including regulatory changes. Our government remains committed to these consultations to determine the best way to move forward.

Another key change in the agricultural growth act concerns fertilizer and animal feed. The act would introduce the authority to require licensing and registration for operators of fertilizer and animal feed facilities involved in the trade of products across provincial or international borders. This will be in addition to the current system, where feed and fertilizer products are registered on a product by product basis. Licensing or registration of facilities and operators would provide an even more effective approach to ensuring that products meet safety standards, while providing greater flexibility and efficiency for the industries involved.

The work done by CFIA on the feed link for PED underscores the need for these timely changes. The act proposes enhanced legislative authority and stronger enforcement tools for CFIA inspectors, which would further promote compliance with federal requirements and safety standards. This would dovetail with recent CFIA initiatives to

modernize its legislative base, as was done with the passage of the Safe Food for Canadians Act in 2012.

It would also support the work under way to modernize the agency's inspection and regulatory frameworks. This new legislation would allow the CFIA to order non-compliant imported agricultural products out of the country to ensure that all agricultural products meet the appropriate Canadian requirements, no matter where they come from. Right now, at times, Canada must pay to dispose of illegal feeds, fertilizers, and seed products that are seized. Under the agricultural growth act, CFIA inspectors would be able to order imported shipments of feeds, fertilizers and seeds out of Canada if they do not meet our legal requirements. We already do this with imported plants and animals.

The act would also give CFIA inspectors the ability to allow the importer to fix the problem in Canada if it is not a matter of safety, and if they can be sure that the issue would be addressed in a timely manner. The proposed amendment in the bill would provide the CFIA with stronger tools to more efficiently fulfill its mandate to protect Canada's plant and animal resource base. Monetary penalties for infractions would also be increased to make them a more effective compliance tool for inspectors, as was done in the Safe Food for Canadians Act.

The changes proposed in the agricultural growth act reflect the ongoing needs of Canada's agricultural sector. They would align with CFIA's modernized regulatory and inspection initiatives, and they would help ensure consistency across all agricultural commodities.

● (1210)

If Canada's agricultural sector is to compete and succeed in the modern world and to maintain its competitive edge on that global stage, it needs 21st century tools to do so. That is why we listened to farmers and are focusing their financial tools so they can capture new opportunities in the global marketplace.

We consulted with farmers across Canada on how we can improve the advance payments program, which is enabled under the Agricultural Marketing Programs Act. Through this legislation, we are delivering on the direction that farmers presented to us.

Government Orders

The agricultural growth act would improve the advance payments program by making it more flexible and user friendly for Canadian producers. Making the advance payments program more flexible and predictable would assist farmers in managing their cash flows, building their businesses and driving our economy. Producers are constantly fine-tuning their operations and businesses, and they rightly expect government to do the same with the tools and services we offer to them. Responding to producers' recommendations, the legislative changes will help us streamline delivery of cash advances under the advance payments program.

The goal is to enhance program flexibility to ensure that programs remain relevant and responsive to the changing nature and needs of our agricultural industry.

The agricultural growth act also allows farmers to obtain five-year agreements with advance payment program administrators. This would reduce the burden of filling out paperwork each year.

It is a great time to be in agriculture. Many producers would tell us that they are seeing stronger returns, increased market access and opportunities for investment, and a brighter future ahead.

We will continue to work hard on behalf of farmers, because our government knows that in many cases yesterday's answers cannot meet the challenges of today and tomorrow. The time is right to put greater focus on innovation, market access, and improving government programs and services to meet the changing needs of our agricultural industry.

The agricultural growth act is consistent with our government's priorities: growing the economy and creating jobs for Canadians. One in eight Canadian jobs is agriculture related, and I see no reason why we cannot increase this number as the sector continues to prosper and grow. Agricultural growth, whether through innovation or efficiency, provides consumers with more choices for Canadian grown products, and this is good for our overall economy.

Wielding the latest science, tools and practices, Canada's agricultural sector has the potential to grow and prosper in a manner that secures the future of our agricultural industry and benefits all Canadians. There is no better way to support our farm families than to give them the new tools and better services they require to help them grow their businesses.

I ask all parliamentarians to give the agricultural growth act, Bill C-18, their careful attention and to move it forward in a timely manner so that Canada's agricultural entrepreneurs can harness innovation, add value, and generate jobs and growth right across this great country.

• (1215)

Mr. Malcolm Allen (Welland, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would have preferred that the minister's bill not be an omnibus bill, but that is the general nature from the other side, so we are quite used to having a number of things put all together.

The minister talked about it being a great time to be in agriculture. I would agree with him, except for the farmers on the Prairies looking for a train to get their grain to market. Perhaps the minister should revise his speech a little and talk about why we need a stick to hit those two railroaders to make sure that we get that great product

those great farmers grow for us in that part of the world to port so that the farmers can get paid. If they do not get paid, the part in the bill dealing with advance payments will really be necessary because they will be taking out loans to pay last year's loans, and at this rate, they will be taking out loans next year to pay off this year's loan.

Specifically to UPOV '29 and farmers' privilege, one of the questions that has come up is that under the present legislation as proposed, farmers' privilege would only last a year. Lots of farmers are saying that under UPOV '78, it lasted longer than a year. If I am correct, I heard the minister say that it actually makes no difference this way, farmers' privilege versus UPOV '78. Can he clarify that a farmer can save it for a year or is it longer than a year under Bill C-18?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Speaker, there are a number of questions and comments there, which of course are allowed. I am not sure I would classify this as a omnibus bill. He condemns those and wants us to add several more things to it, so I am not exactly sure what kind of information I am getting here.

He also called it UPOV '29. It is UPOV '91. UPOV '78 does not in any way, shape, or form allow farmers' privilege. There is no vehicle in UPOV '78 to allow farmers to maintain and use that seed and propagate it on their own farm.

UPOV '91 does have that clearly written in there. It lasts more than a year. If farmers save seed, keep it in their bins, have it cleaned and stored and then decide not to put it in that year, but carry it over to the year after that, of course it maintains that status with the farmer. They only pay an end-use royalty in that case when they sell the seed that gained from that farm-saved seed.

Yes, it is very clearly described. One farm group out there cannot seem to read the writing. I can tell them that it is on page 7 of the bill. It is very succinct in what it says about farmers being able to hold that and use it on their own facility in perpetuity, should it last that long. There was wheat stored in the pyramids; I suppose we could actually do that under the bill.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I could not help but notice that the minister wandered off Bill C-18 quite a bit and tried to put a spin on some of the decisions that the government previously made, one being the killing of the Canadian Wheat Board without any long-term planning on all the other things the Wheat Board did besides single-desk selling.

Government Orders

As a result, in western Canada we now have a crisis because there was no planning on the part of the government. We have a crisis in transportation because the railways and grain companies are taking all the profit and farmers are left paying demurrage while some 50 ships sit in Vancouver and Prince Rupert. Prices are discounted up to 40% compared to the U.S.

The minister also failed to mention the fact that he cut AgriStability and AgriInvest, and those safety nets are not there now for the farm community.

My question relates to the same question asked earlier, which is on farmers' privilege.

There is a worry out there among some farm groups: is farmers' privilege protected by way of legislation or can it be discarded by regulation later on?

I hear what the minister said and I welcome what he said related to farmers' privilege on page 7 of the bill, but how long is it confirmed to be in existence?

• (1220)

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Speaker, I completely reject the idea that somehow the old Canadian Wheat Board would have had a positive effect on this year's crop. We have 50% more crop in western Canada than we ever had before, simply because farmers stopped hemorrhaging wheat and barley acres and putting in other crops, and they reseeded some two million acres of wheat.

Farmers still have the CWB there to market through, should they decide to. It has offered several pools and has been successful in doing that. It is in the process of buying export capacity at Thunder Bay. It has that checked off its list and is now moving forward on bricks and mortar in western Canada to allow them some catchment, some gathering area, and we look forward to seeing the results of that.

That said, on the farmers' saved seed, it is right here on page 7 of the bill and it can be enhanced by regulation as we move forward. Farmers' saved seed is actually in the proposed legislation itself, but it can be enhanced by regulation.

Mr. Jasbir Sandhu (Surrey North, NDP): Mr. Speaker, a number of new provisions in the bill would require additional resources in order to be implemented. However, we have seen the record of the Conservative government with its cuts to the CFIA, and those cuts have devastated food safety for Canadians.

Can the member assure Canadians that additional resources will be available to implement some of these provisions so that they will have implementation and full effect?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Speaker, I have to begin by saying that there have been no cuts to CFIA that reflect on food safety. This government has actually added over 700 front-line food inspectors, which the member's party has decided to vote against, and that is unfortunate.

In fact, in budget 2014 there is a provision to hire another 200 inspector-level positions at CFIA to move forward on other commodities such as imports, produce, and so forth. I am sure that the member's party will stand up and support that as they always do—not.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I am tempted to ask the hon. Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food about the problems of shipping grain because farmers on Vancouver Island were three days away from having no grain to feed their livestock. However, I want to focus Bill C-18.

I note that the minister said we should be reassured as to the ability to save seed for some farmers, which is found page 7, and that he might want to make it clearer in future regulations. I wonder if the minister is open to making it clearer through amendments to this proposed act as it goes forward.

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Speaker, that is the nature of committee work. If members come forward with substantive amendments, they will be discussed. Witnesses will be called, and the bill will be stronger in the end should they want to build the capacity into the bill to serve farmers in a better way. Should they decide to remove chunks and try to break the bill apart, then, of course, we would not allow that.

Mr. Jasbir Sandhu: Mr. Speaker, I want to follow up on the minister's response to my previous question. He mentioned that the new budget contains 200 positions for CFIA. Could the member let this House and Canadians know how many you cut before you actually had to reinvest to get more members in?

In fact he is going to try to spin this, but the Conservatives cut hundreds more in the CFIA than the 200 that will now be reinstated.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Order. Before I go to the minister of agriculture, I will just remind all hon. members to direct their comments and questions to the Chair rather than to their colleagues.

The hon. minister of agriculture.

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to stand and respond to the member. The answer is simple: none.

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the minister for his thorough and in-depth presentation. One of the measures we may want to get a clearer handle on is the licensing of feed and fertilizer establishments. I wonder if he could expand on that, on what it means moving from product to product, and on the establishment of facilities and their operators.

Hon. Gerry Ritz: Mr. Speaker, it clarifies the role of the CFIA in making sure that we feed our animals, which is the first step in having a good, quality product on store shelves and on our kitchen tables. It ensures that the feed going into those animals is of top quality and that it meets all Canadian safety standards. It makes sure that any product brought in from other countries is acceptable, and we will now have a way to trace that product back.

Government Orders

With the PED situation we are facing with pork right now, there was some concern that the blood plasma that was coming in may be carrying the genetic marker of the PED virus. We have been able to test successfully that it has not transferred through in a way that affects the pigs negatively once it is pelletized. That is a great step. That is the type of work that will be ongoing after we pass this piece of legislation. Those are very positive things.

• (1225)

Mr. Malcolm Allen (Welland, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the minister for his clarification on farmers' privileges being beyond the year, and of course there is an end royalty, as he has pointed out. Therefore, it is not much different than if it was at the end of the year because they are going to pay royalties anyhow. It would seem that one is going to end up paying folks regardless.

Clearly the UPOV '91, as it suggests, is actually a treaty that was negotiated in 1991. When we refer to "78", that was 1978.

It is a long time ago since UPOV '91 was actually looked at in the sense of a treaty. Of course, as we look from place to place, there are differences in what has been done. There are some exemptions built into it in certain countries that are not present in others, so it is not holistic across the board in the sense that what was decided in 1991 is what is done in Australia, Germany, France, the U.K., the United States or a number of other places that actually enacted it.

Clearly, at some point in the early 2000s when our friends down at the end, the Liberals, were in power, they attempted then to get it enacted. Farmers at that time were pleased with it, but they had a lot of questions concerning it. What happened was the government backed away, and here we are in 2014 still looking at UPOV '91 and whether it should go forward.

Based on the minister's comments and the bill itself, and the minister's earlier comments outside of this place, the government's intent is to get this enacted by August of this year based on the belief that there is some science and innovation that will happen if this comes into force. That, of course, then means there will be a charge somewhere, because people do not do this work unless they get paid for it.

I am not suggesting folks should do it for free in the private sector. That is not what they do. They are in the business of making profits for their shareholders or the owners of their companies if they are privately owned. That is not a bad thing; that is how business survives. People who work for privately owned companies want them to survive because if the companies are not making any money, they cannot pay their employees. That is the nature of business.

Ultimately, that means customers pay for that, because it is not done for free. People do not do it out of the goodness of their hearts or for public good. They do it because they see that there is potentially a market and think that they can perhaps win over that market and charge whatever the price may be. The price could be up, sideways, or lower. It depends. It could be a number of things.

Who is the market? It will not be me, that is for sure. I do not know about you, Mr. Speaker, but I do not farm. It does not matter if I live in the country. The piece that I own takes care of itself. I do not plant anything of any significance, so I will not be paying that. It

could be down at the end, because I am the retail customer at the far end, and maybe that is where the price will slide itself along.

It is clear that farmers will pay for this innovation, and in some cases farmers may say that these innovations are worth paying for. In fact, many farmers are in check-off programs to get into innovation and new technologies to do different things, and happily so, because they want to continue to enhance their ability to grow better-quality crops. They want to grow more crops while using less land, crops that are more drought resistant or drought tolerant or crops that use less water and less inputs, because inputs are a cost to farmers. They are keenly aware of all of those things and interested in doing them. In fact, I would suggest that all farmers are involved in some form of organomics in the sense of asking how they can do it better, whether it be looking at crop rotation, looking at what they do or at the market, or trying to do things in a better way in working with their land and inputs.

Therefore, there are questions about UPOV '91. It has been around for a while, but it has been on the back burner for a long period of time. The minister is correct in saying that UPOV '78 does not speak about farmers' privilege or farmers' saving seed. It is totally silent. It does not say a word. Therefore, farmers go ahead and do it; they save seed. They just save it, because it is silent. It does not say they cannot and it does not lay out a prescription as to how they can. Since it says nothing, it is assumed that they can.

• (1230)

That is what farmers have been doing for millennia, quite frankly. Long before the seed companies came along, farmers were their own seed company, and many are to this day, in a way. It varies. They buy some and they save some; they do a number of different things. There are hybrids, of course, that they have to pay for every year, and other varieties of things that they do have to pay for. There is no question about that. Farmers say it is a legitimate thing that they have to do, but they do not see the problem when they save it. They see this as an adjunct piece and ask why they cannot continue to do that.

The minister was fairly clear, and I will look at the record when it is presented. However, I believe what he said was that they can save it for more than a year but they are going to pay an end-use royalty on it, so they are going to pay anyway. Whether they save it or not, they are going to pay. They could basically not save it and pay, or they could go to the trouble of saving it. That means they are going to condition it, or get it conditioned, get it ready to use in their fields, and then when they harvest it they are going to pay something at the end.

Government Orders

This is the dilemma. I had a quick look at page 7, clause 5, and it does not say anything as to what it would be. What would that end-use royalty actually be? Would it be greater than if a farmer simply bought the seed and did not save it in the first place? Is that going to be the regulation that we wait for and then we find out after? Or, is that going to be a negotiated piece between the companies and the farmers? Would that be individual farmers? Would it be farmers' associations? It could be the grain growers group or some other group, the oats or barley groups. Would it be them? Would it be individuals? Would they pit farmer against farmer? Would the end-use royalties be higher here and lower there, depending on the deal they could cut? That is an open question, at least based on what I can see on page 7. The minister pointed us to this, and I want to thank the minister for pointing us to that clarification, but I do not see that laid out in front of us.

Clearly there are many open question on UPOV '91 for a lot of farmers, and legitimately so, as to why we are rushing headlong at this. Some would say it has been there for a long time, but it has been silent for a long time, and a lot of folks need to get back up to speed. I know the minister will say that we will have opportunities through committee. I would hope that we would have that opportunity through the committee, in the sense that we would take the time to do a couple of things. One would be to investigate what has happened. I welcome the minister's offer that as long as we do not tear it apart and pull things out of it, the minister would be happy to take helpful suggestions.

I will apologize to you in advance for being a little skeptical, Mr. Speaker, because I know that you were not the one who is the skeptic, but I am. That is based on my previous experiences in the agriculture committee, where I had proposed some changes to a food safety bill. I did not strip anything out of the bill; I was actually adding things that I thought would be helpful. Of course, we did not get any changes.

As much as I think that there were 14 or 15 potential amendments from the opposition benches that could have enhanced the bill, we did not actually get any. Therefore, you will have to excuse me, Mr. Speaker, for being a bit skeptical about the statement from the minister when it comes to his arms being open to good ideas and our feeling free to send them his way, so that the Conservatives would take them under advisement and make the bill better. I do not have any experience around that in this Parliament, Mr. Speaker, and I apologize to you because I know it is not something you would do. You would be more than welcoming to ensure that legislation is as good as we can possibly make it coming out of this place. That is what we should be about as legislators.

I have talked to a number of individuals in the farm community, and without question, some of them are saying the bill is a good thing. They think it is a good thing, and they are saying to me that they think there is nothing wrong with it. I know the members on the other side quite often want to point at one group or another. However, quite frankly, I am talking to individual farmers who are non-affiliated; they are not saying they are with this group or that group. Some folks would be surprised to find individual farmers are from groups that the other side call as witnesses all the time. They are saying that we should think about this for a while because they are not sure how it is going to weave itself together.

● (1235)

We are told we get a privilege, but what privilege is it? Is it really a privilege, or is it that people can store it but they are going to pay for it? If that were the case, then that person would end up storing it and the person who initially sold it would collect the money at the end of the day. Some would say that is not a bad deal, and some would say it is not a particularly good one. That is problematic, and it needs to be looked at very carefully.

There are a number of issues with the bill. A number of things are changed in the bill, including the Fertilizers Act, the Seeds Act, and advance payments. There are a number of pieces, but one that is always contentious is the sense that the government is not making changes through the legislative process but through a regulatory process. Once that is handed over, it is gone.

There are good pieces in the legislation. It talks about the health and safety of handling fertilizers to make sure it is done well. Those are good things. We approve of those things. We think they are good.

However, the government then goes on to say that from now on the changes will be made through a regulatory process. It will not have to bring the legislation back because this legislation takes all of the responsibility and hands it to the minister, whoever that happens to be. It may not be this particular minister; it may be somebody else down the road. Those are difficult issues.

There are some things that can be done through regulations. The changes that have a minimal impact and need to be done quickly can be done this way. In these particular cases, these are large pieces. We are talking about turning over a large responsibility and a large amount of authority to the minister.

On this side, we have noticed that quite often the government brings in omnibus bills. I am not sure if the minister would agree that it is omnibus bill, but we actually looked at Bill C-18.

I would remind the House that there is more legislation being done on agriculture now than in recent memory. My colleague the member for Malpeque may be able to help me with this, but it seems that we have done more changes to agriculture legislation in this Parliament than probably in the last 10 Parliaments combined, which has had significant impacts on farmers right across the board.

To turn future changes that should be done through a legislative process over to a regulatory process is not reassuring for me as the critic, to be honest, in the sense that things might not happen later on. The minister said that we can change things through regulation, including the effects on farmers' privilege. That can be changed through regulation based on what happens here.

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What happens then? The minister said that we could enhance it. The problem with a two-headed coin is that when it is flipped there is another side. It might be another head or it could be tail. What it means is that the advancement that might have been done could be taken away on the other side. There is no sense that it should or would happen, but the problem is that the potential is there for it to happen. If the potential is in the wrong hands, it will affect those who will have things taken away from them.

Clearly there are a number of things we would probably say are good pieces of legislation that could be tweaked a little or we could let them go. As an omnibus bill, it needs to be studied extremely carefully. We need to study it carefully and be open to helping to make it better legislation.

We could debate the merits of the demise of the Canadian Wheat Board on a philosophical basis, and whether it was right or wrong. One of the things we cannot underscore enough is that when the Wheat Board went, the logistics piece went with it. We can see what happened with the rail system and the backlog on the Prairies. The premier of Saskatchewan and the agriculture minister in Alberta are speaking out, and, last week at the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, the president of the Alberta Federation of Agriculture asked the government to stop talking about regulation and to regulate the railroads to make sure the crops can be moved off the Prairies.

That is an opportunity for the government to act under the regulations. It does not have to be brought here. That would be an appropriate use of regulations. The big stick of regulations could be brought out to make things happen. Then we would actually get product off of the Prairies.

• (1240)

Conservative estimates are that between \$2 billion to \$4 billion is stranded out there to farmers, which affects part of this legislation when it talks about advance payments programs. It is talking about how we are going to do this and streamline it if they want multiple years, in other words, back to back payments. Well, this year farmers are going to be back to back because many of them took the advance loans last year.

The minister is already on the record as saying, “We know there's a problem. We know you haven't sold your crop and you have no money because there's no Wheat Board to send it to”. Basically, farmers are waiting for an elevator to clear its grain so they can get into an elevator, if they are not where they can get to a producer car. What happens is that they are not empty and they cannot get in, so they do not get paid. The government's response is to get another loan.

Farmers are getting a loan to pay a loan and then starting the year with a loan without selling any grain. Some of the estimates we are talking about is that the carry-out could be two years. In other words, grain that was grown last year may not hit market until two years from now.

If that is the case, the price it was worth last year will not be the price it is worth in the future; it will be worth less. Its optimum quality will diminish over time, and farmers will end up with less money for it than they would have received last year. Clearly that

would impact their ability to pay back the loan because it is of less value. The loan was based on the value in their bins.

That is today, of course. If they do not sell the remainder of it for two years, and they sell it for feed versus what used to be premium quality wheat with great protein, they are now stuck selling it for a heck of a lot less. In fact, today, the prices are running at between 12% to 15% less than they were last fall. Of course, if the grain does not move, they would not fill the contract anyways.

Clearly this legislation is talking about advance payments and those loan programs. However, this seems as if it has become a cover for a lot of things that happened last year in Growing Forward 2—and my friend from Malpeque referenced it in his questions—and what we call the suite of programs. This is business risk management programming, where the government takes out hundreds of billions of dollars worth of money. The government will say, “Hang on, the supplemental estimates will come. Just wait”.

The problem is that farmers cannot wait. There are difficulties in business risk management programming; there is no question about that. The issue is whether we fix the program or gut the program. In my view, they gutted the program.

I have talked to farmers who are asking about the sense of being in the program. The programs are not doing what they are supposed to and they feel they would not qualify for some of them anyway. They have moved the base down to such a level that they would not qualify for the programs. They do not get any money. They really want that program, but the problem is that they have to take this program with this program because that is the way they are bundled together. They end up on the short end of the stick, and therefore why would they bother doing that?

Clearly there are some sticking points in this legislation. UPOV '91, for many farmers, is a major issue that they want to see resolved. Many of them do not wish to give up their inherent right to save seed, which they have done, as I said earlier, for millennia.

Most folks in the city would assume that is how farmers do it. I recognize that is not how it really happens. There are seeds that farmers buy from companies on a regular basis, canola being one of them. There are other farmers who would prefer to buy seed every year rather than save it. That is a choice they make. The difficulty is that a lot of farmers see that they could perhaps lose their choice.

There are ways for innovation to happen. One of the things we know needs to happen, obviously, is that they need to get paid. They are not going to do the work without being paid. I think that is appropriate.

There are royalty schemes that say “If you want to participate as a broader group, perhaps that's how you'll do it”. There are check-offs in canola. There are check-offs in other programs, for other commodity groups and other livestock groups, that do different things as the money goes in there.

Government Orders

However, one of the things that is missing in all of this is the public dollars and research. The Canadian government, not the Conservative government, but the government and this country, under a lot of different administrations, was world-renowned for the type of work it did in innovation and public research in the agriculture sector. That is the piece that is missing here. We would like to see public dollars go back to the public good and to farmers. That is the way to make it profitable.

• (1245)

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I think there was a lot of meat on the bones in what the member for Welland had to say. All we heard from the minister was the bones, so the member explained a number of areas of concern in the bill and how huge the bill really is.

The Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food is coming forward with this bill, which is an omnibus bill. We are world traders, but how do we stack up as a country in terms of protecting the interests of our farmers in Canada versus the United States? We know the United States has just put in place a U.S. farm bill for more than \$1 trillion over 10 years for its farmers. It is back-stopping its farm community with actual dollars. Its bill has country of origin labelling and has made it permanent, which has already cost Canadian farmers over \$5 billion and it still exists and the Canadian government claims it is fighting that issue.

Does the bill do anything to make our farmers more competitive with the rest of the world, or are they just seeing this free market theory and leaving our producers out there in the dust?

Mr. Malcolm Allen: Mr. Speaker, I would argue that the government has retracted from its ability to support farmers over time. If we look at the business risk management program in the previous budget, before going forward 2, about \$400 million came out of the program and sort of disappeared into that great big bottomless pit of “let us balance the budget”.

Clearly, when it comes to support for farmers, we see that some members of the broader business community here talk about milk prices, for instance. They say if only we did not have supply management we would have cheaper milk, and we should look at the Americans.

Those of us who live in border communities see newspaper flyers advertising cheap milk, but if we truly understand the farm bill, we know the subsidy for a gallon of U.S. milk is about \$5 U.S. Clearly it is supporting its farmers. I am not so sure the Canadian government is, and we really should be standing up for farmers. That is why we need public research dollars from the government to enhance farmers' ability to be profitable, enhance their innovation, and make sure they are the best they could possibly be, because that is exactly what they want to be.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I have been hearing from concerned farmers who are looking at the royalty rates, that they will be set only by the plant breeders' right holder. I wonder if the member is hearing any concerns from his constituents about what these royalty rates could be and what the impact would be for farmers. We know that Canadian farmers have a very difficult time breaking even. Anything that increases their costs is a worry.

Mr. Malcolm Allen: Mr. Speaker, the royalty rates are a question not of legislation but of negotiating power. Clearly, the minister says in the House that we are going to pay a royalty regardless; so farmers can save the seed, but they are going to pay an end royalty. What is the end royalty?

In other words, if I am a breeder and want farmers to buy new seed every time and do not want them to save any, how would I manage that? I am not Machiavellian.

Well, I am a politician; maybe I am Machiavellian in a way.

I would make it more expensive on the back end. I would make the end use royalty larger than the front end, if it were bought from me. Actually I want farmers to buy the seeds from me at the beginning. I do not want farmers to save it and get an end royalty. It is too much administrative work to figure out how much crop they took in and how much it was and figure out what I should charge for that. If I charge more at the end, I will always get them coming through the front door; that way, they have to buy that seed from me all of the time.

The royalty piece is going to be set by the breeders, and if farmers do not have equal bargaining power, then it will be the breeders who get the price they want and farmers will be left basically having to pay for it.

• (1250)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean Rousseau (Compton—Stanstead, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate the hon. member, who is the official opposition critic for agriculture and agri-food.

How is it that there is nothing in this agriculture and agri-food reform about crisis management?

There was a crisis at the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. Cuts were made and there was a certain laissez-faire attitude towards health and safety. However, nothing in this legislation offers real protection for consumers.

I would like my colleague to talk some more about the provisions that could have been included in the bill, but that have been left out.

[*English*]

Mr. Malcolm Allen: Mr. Speaker, on the health and safety front, to use fertilizer as an example because it is in the bill, turning it over to the regulatory process when it comes to additional health and safety measures means it is at the whim of whomever the is minister at the end of the day, as to whether we should go that far or not. One minister might think that is good enough, while another one might think we should go further for protection, rather than it coming back here to decide that.

Government Orders

When it comes to consumers, the adage is that consumers come first, and farmers believe that. They certainly grow healthy products and want to make the best quality they can. They want to make sure people do not get ill. However, at the end of the day, in response to whether there are more or fewer inspectors, if we take 900 people out and add 200 people in, it is minus 700. That is fewer, not more.

I know sometimes some folks might think that less is more, but that is a philosophical argument. If we have half a chocolate cake, it is half a chocolate cake. We may want to have more, or the whole chocolate cake, but the bottom line is that when we cut it in half and someone takes a half, there is only a half left. In this particular case with food safety, if we take some out and do not add the same numbers back in, we have fewer. The system does not function as well as it did before, and consumers may indeed be less safe than they were before, because there are fewer resources there.

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Canadian Seed Trade Association has had a positive response to the bill right from the start. It said it actually has a letter from the European Seed Association stating very clearly that European seed companies would not send their varieties to Canada until we are compliant with UPOV '91. I say this because we often look to Europe for small grains and horticultural crops. I believe those are actually going to be the largest beneficiaries within the seed growers. Therefore, I wonder if he has some thoughts about what not allowing and holding back our producers might mean because we would not have access to them through UPOV '91?

Mr. Malcolm Allen: Mr. Speaker, I do not disagree with my hon. colleague across the way. That is why I said earlier that I did not actually oppose it. I said we need to work on this piece.

He is correct. I talked to Canadian seed growers as well. I met them in my office about a month ago and talked to them about those very issues. There is no question that seed producers in the EU who are covered by UPOV '91 are looking at us and saying they will not sell to us because perhaps they could not get the royalties they are entitled to based on the work they have put into it and how they are covered under UPOV '91.

There are some things we need to look at as to how we do not get things based on our not having signed a particular treaty or law, and how does one bargain those through? There may be opportunities that we may be losing, and we need to work on that whole piece so that it actually works for farmers as well as the seed traders and those who produce the seeds.

At the end of the day, this is an integrated industry and if we do not actually take a holistic viewpoint as to how this would actually benefit them all, then there will be losers. Our biggest fear is that, at this stage of the game, it looks as if the farmer will be the biggest loser. Many of the farmers talking to me feel that way. We actually have to make sure that is not the case, that they are all on a level playing field, so when they bargain whatever it is they end up doing around royalties and fees, they not end up being the losers in the whole scheme of things.

• (1255)

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak to Bill C-18, the agricultural growth act, which was introduced on December 9.

To begin, I will explain basically all of the areas it touches, so that people understand how big this bill is.

It would amend nine separate pieces of agriculture-related legislation, affecting plant breeders' rights, as well as affecting seed, fertilizer, animal health, plant protection, monetary penalties, agriculture marketing programs, and farm debt mediation. It appears that the bill attempts to streamline regulatory processes affecting farmers and the agricultural industry more broadly. I will speak specifically to some of those areas.

I would point out that, when I look at where Canada is going in terms of support for its farmers versus where our major competitors are at—the European community and the United States—I see that we as a country are not in any way supporting our farm community to the extent other countries are supporting theirs.

A moment ago I mentioned the United States farm bill. It incorporates country of origin labelling, which has been a disaster for our producers in Canada. The Government of Canada claims it will retaliate. However, as the Speaker well knows, because he is a farmer himself, the damage has been done with country of origin labelling. It has cost our beef industry around \$5 billion in losses and is still hurting it. We see that it has targeted price programs in which basically some American farmers just go to the mailbox and pick up money. Our producers are supposed to compete against that happening just south of the border.

I do not need to go into any great detail in terms of the common agriculture policy in the European industry. I know why the governments of the European community have done this. They have said that their people had gone hungry during World War II and will never go hungry again. Therefore, they will ensure that the farm community is supported and paid for what it produces. That is what our farmers are up against in terms of competing against these other countries. Our government is just not there with the kind of support for our producers that there should be.

I look at this bill and I see a heck of a lot more in terms of protecting corporate rights than farmers' rights. That is the basic thrust of the bill. It is more protective of the rights of corporations, global corporations mainly, than it is of the rights of Canadian farmers.

Bill C-18 would amend, among other things, the Plant Breeders' Rights Act. It would amend certain aspects of the plant breeders' rights granted under the act, including the duration and scope of those rights and conditions for the protection of those rights. It also would provide for exceptions to the application of those rights.

It would amend the Feeds Act, the Fertilizers Act, the Seeds Act, the Health of Animals Act, and the Plant Protection Act. Rather than my going through it, the summary of the bill outlines quite a number of areas where amendments would be made, for certain reasons, to all of those various acts.

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It would also amend the Agriculture and Agri-Food Administrative Monetary Penalties Act to, among other things, increase the maximum limit of penalties that may be imposed for certain violations.

• (1300)

Bill C-18 would amend the Agriculture Marketing Programs Act. The minister claims the bill would modernize the requirements of the advance payments program in an effort to improve its accessibility and enhance its administration and delivery.

I want to make a point on that. The minister is talking of using the advance payments act to assist farmers in western Canada who no longer can deliver their grain. The reason we have a disaster in western Canada at the moment is really due to the actions of the minister. He is talking about using the advance payments to assist in that regard.

Mr. Speaker, because you have shipped grain too, you very well know that the advance payments act was not originally intended to be a loan program, and to a certain extent that is what it has become. The first \$100,000 is interest-free and an individual can get up to \$400,000. This legislation may increase those numbers.

Originally, the whole purpose of the advance payments act was to assist producers when harvesting their crops in the fall so they would not dump product on the market to pay for their combine or their harvesting costs or labour and so on. The whole purpose was to give farmers advance payments so they could feed the market, over time, rather than dumping product on the market and lowering its price as a result of oversupply. It was a wonderful program in the beginning and served its purpose well. It was a marketing tool by which to hold prices up.

Under the present Conservative government, and under the previous government, to be honest, the advance payments program to a certain extent lost its most important purpose of being a marketing tool, and is now being used for the spring and fall advance as a loan program to tide producers over. All sight of its original intent has been lost.

Bill C-18 would amend the Farm Debt Mediation Act to clarify the farm debt mediation process and to facilitate the participation of the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food in the mediation process when the minister is a guarantor of a farmer's debt.

There is no question that the farm mediation process has to be improved. The intent was to bring creditors together to try to find a solution through mediation. A farmer would have some assistance through the government itself in personnel, and money as well in terms of putting together a business plan for that operation. Some of that has slid by the wayside and that mediation process does need to be cleaned up.

As the House can see from the many amendments, Bill C-18 is predominantly an omnibus bill that is causing some concerns among farmers. The committee must carefully investigate this. I am not on the committee, but my colleague from Sydney—Victoria is a member. That committee must carefully investigate each of the acts that would be affected so as to ensure that there is proper consultation. It is important to give people a look at exactly what

changes would be made so that some analysis of the impact of those changes could be undertaken.

The more broadly-based the proposed changes are, and in this legislation they cross a number of areas dealing with regulatory issues and industry standards, the more difficult is our basic understanding.

• (1305)

We have seen that the Conservative government has a tendency to push through legislation, limiting debate in the process, and farmers may be faced with dramatic changes that they were not even fully aware were in the act in the beginning.

I am going to speak for a moment about the changes that the government made to the Canadian Wheat Board Act. The minister did, so I probably should as well, because I certainly do not agree with the minister's interpretation of the results of his killing the Canadian Wheat Board.

It was one thing for the government, if it so decided, to not allow the producers to have a vote on the Canadian Wheat Board. It was another, if it so decided, to do away with single-desk selling.

Instead of taking a four-year planning period in which it would have looked at all of the other things including the logistics the Canadian Wheat Board was in charge of and the authority it had, as a result we now have an absolute crisis in western Canada. As many as 50 ships are lined up in Vancouver and Prince Rupert, and producers are paying as much as \$15,000 to \$20,000 per day per ship. That money comes out of the producers' pockets in demurrage payments. Prices have been discounted in western Canada by as much as 40%, compared to U.S. prices.

Without question, the minister himself has to accept responsibility for the disaster that is in western Canada at the moment.

I should mention, in terms of the changes to the Canadian Wheat Board that have allowed this transportation and delivery of grain crisis to exist and that have perpetuated it, producers in mainland B. C. cannot get grain rail-shipped into their operations either. They cannot get it into their mills or into their feed, whether it is for poultry or for cattle. That livestock has to be fed daily. As a result, those producers are forced to turn to trucking. Whether or not they are in supply management, their costs are higher. Now, they are non-competitive and some of them are losing money.

It all comes back to the way that the government made its decision regarding the Canadian Wheat Board, instead of looking at all of the aspects of it and rather than single-desk selling. In changing legislation, we have to be careful that we do not cause other unforeseen difficulties, which is what happened in this particular case.

Government Orders

One of the big areas of the bill about which there is a lot of concern is the amendment to the Plant Breeders' Rights Act that would align plant breeders' rights with the International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants, which is really UPOV'91. The minister talked about that. This move would update Canada's legislation from the UPOV'78 framework. These amendments would include farmers' privilege, which allows farmers to use seeds from the crops they grow.

There is a lot of debate, as the minister said and responded to in his questions and as the member for Welland talked about. There is a lot of debate on what "farmers' privilege" really means. There are some concerned organizations out there. One of them, certainly, is the National Farmers Union.

The minister, in response to questions, said that it is outlined on page 7 that the farmers' privilege is really going to protect farmers. Keep in mind how the minister answered. He said that the farmers' privilege can "...be enhanced as we move forward..." If it can be enhanced as we move forward, in other words, by a change in regulations, then it can also be that some of that farmers' privilege can be taken away from that privilege we believe may be there and may exist in the legislation.

● (1310)

We know for a fact that this particular government has always, in its decisions, come down on the side not of the producer but of the corporate sector, and that is what worries me.

I want to quote what the NFU said in terms of their concern. It stated:

The farmers' privilege provision in C-18 does not include stocking seed. Bill C-18 does not protect farmers from being accused of infringing on PBR-holders' rights for any of these traditional practices: storing seed harvested in the fall for planting in the spring; storing unsold grain in bins in the farmyard—since the grain could potentially be used to grow more wheat; cleaning three years' supply of seed to protect against crop failure, disease or frost.

It went on to state:

Worse, Section 50(4) of Bill C-18 enables the Governor in Council (ie Cabinet) to make regulations to put even more limits on the farmers' privilege provisions. These regulations can exclude classes of farmers; exclude plant varieties; exclude uses of harvested material; restrict farmers' use [of] harvested material; put conditions on farmers' use [of] harvested material; stipulate what is to be considered "conditioning" of seed.

It further stated:

We do not know the text of Canada's future [plant breeders' rights] regulations, but we can expect them to follow the official UPOV '91 Guidance Document...

There are legitimate concerns. In the answer from the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food when he was questioned about farmers' privilege, he said that they can be enhanced as we move forward. That, in fact, increases my concern as it relates to this particular bill.

As I said in the beginning, I am very concerned that this bill, compared to the way the U.S. and the EU are moving, puts our primary producers at a disadvantage because we are giving more authority to the corporate sector and taking it away from primary producers.

The bill also proposes that the Canadian Food Inspection Agency will have the authority to consider foreign reviews, data, and analysis during the approval or registration of new agriculture

products in Canada, which can allow for a more effective approvals process. The act includes a new licensing and registration regime for animal feed and fertilizer operators and establishments, increasing monetary penalties for violations, stronger controls for agriculture products at the border, and requirements for more stringent record keeping to enhance safety. Most of those are good points, and I am sure the bill has a mixture of good points and some not so good, if I could put it that way.

Let me close by summing up. Bill C-18 is an omnibus bill. The record of the government with the farm community is not a good one: the killing of the Canadian Wheat Board, which has resulted in the absolute disaster in western Canada in terms of transportation and pricing; the cutting by 50% of AgriStability, which farmers will be in dire need of if they cannot ship their grain; the cutting of AgriInvest by the government; and finally, we should be going to public plant breeding instead of private plant breeding.

● (1315)

There, researchers at Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, with years of experience, are moving to other countries and taking that knowledge with them to compete against Canadians.

The bill needs to be examined closely.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is clear that this is an important bill for the agricultural sector. It has many positive initiatives within it that will benefit our farmers in many different respects, including their competitiveness.

When I listened to my colleague and a few other speeches in the House on this matter today, it is clear that there are always ideas about changes and other things that could be added, but the member himself has admitted that there are many good things in the bill. It will go before committee. There will be a thorough review of what is in it and the proposals by the opposition on what could be added.

Could the member indicate to the House whether he and his party will be supporting this legislation?

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Speaker, it could have been a slip of the tongue and I could have said "many", but I believe I said there are some good points and some bad points.

We are not outlining our position in this initial debate. We are differing from the government. Through our agriculture critic, we are consulting broadly with organizations right across the country. We do not just consult with some and ignore others; we try to consult broadly with them to get their point of view and are still doing research.

Government Orders

As I said in my remarks, this is a huge bill. It covers a lot of different pieces of legislation. Given eight lost years with this particular government, we know that we cannot just take its word for anything, but have to examine the bill closely. That is what we are in the process of doing.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean Rousseau (Compton—Stanstead, NDP): Mr. Speaker, at the beginning of his speech, the hon. member spoke about how important agriculture is for various countries. That caught my attention. He said that those countries have plans with respect to agriculture, agri-food, processing and related transportation issues.

I would like my colleague to comment on how important it is to keep agriculture alive and to invest new money in the sector, as many family farms across the country are collapsing.

The government is just looking to help the large companies in this industry, but family farms, which built this country, are the ones that should be benefiting.

[*English*]

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and I certainly agree on how important agriculture and its spinoff industries, from farmers through the processing industry to the transportation industry, are to the Canadian economy. Agriculture is a huge contributor to jobs and the economy in this country and a huge contributor to GDP.

I have always maintained, and I am a former farm leader, that agriculture is a producer of wealth. In the agricultural community, farmers take something and grow it and produce it and create wealth. Part of the problem for primary producers is that it is often awfully hard for them to retain that wealth in their own operations, but they do a lot of good work and add to the economy of the country as a whole.

It is one of the reasons why we have to recognize that in the global community we cannot be the odd person out. If the United States and Europe are supporting their agricultural industry more than we are, by not doing something similar in our own country, we are not creating a level playing field for our producers.

All things have to tie together. We need the infrastructure, transportation, and shipping to get our products to market in an efficient and competitive way. The government could do much more than it is doing currently in that particular area.

● (1320)

Hon. Mark Eyking (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for Malpeque for leading things off for the Liberals here today. I had some travel issues getting here. The member did a wonderful job. As a former farmer he is very knowledgeable about the industry.

I met with some farmers on the weekend in the member's riding of Cape Breton—Canso, in Mabou. These farmers were very concerned about the cutbacks to AgriStability.

Could the member for Malpeque expand a little more on some of the comments he made in his opening statement about how all of these programs are being cut and how this will affect people down on the farms?

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Speaker, what we have consistently seen from the government is a reduction over time in a number of ways of its support for the agriculture community. The government talks a good line.

I mentioned the disaster that the government created by killing the Canadian Wheat Board. I know the minister says that we still have the Canadian Wheat Board and that the farmers can still go to it. They can but the government took all the authority and power of the Canadian Wheat Board away. That is why there is really no one to represent producers and challenge the grain companies and railways on the movement of farmers' product.

I hear members applauding on the other side, but I do not know how they can do that when they know about the disaster in western Canada right now because the logistics previously coordinated by the Canadian Wheat Board are no longer there. That is why there is a disaster with the movement of grain in western Canada.

The government cut AgriStability by 50%. So that safety net is no longer there to the same extent it was under the previous government.

The government cut AgriInvest as well. Farmers not able, in the good times, to invest as much money. The contribution from the government under AgriInvest is not there to the extent it was under the previous government.

Last, in terms of research and development on public plant breeding, the government has cut back so far that researchers with years of knowledge are leaving the country. They are going to Australia and the United States. They were educated, trained, and gained experienced in Canada, and now they are working for countries that compete against us, all because of the government.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I want to ask the member about Bill C-18.

It is a complicated bill. The plant breeders' rights section, as the member said, appears to tip more toward the corporate interests than the farmers'. This carved out privilege to hang onto seed for farmers, to their own plant varieties, is undermined in a couple of ways, or at least is potentially undermined. I certainly hope we can toughen this bill at committee to prevent the application of it in such a way that it prevents farmers from saving seed.

One of the pieces I picked up on in the definition section is the change in the definition of plant variety to encompass "essentially derived" varieties. In other words, there is a broader definition of a plant variety under Bill C-18 than currently in use, and that would appear to me to give greater rights to the large corporations than to the individual farmer.

I wonder if my colleague has any similar concerns.

● (1325)

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Speaker, the member is absolutely right.

There are very serious concerns, especially as the bill relates to plant breeders' rights. As I said, the minister's answer on farmers' privilege did not instill a lot of confidence in me. He said that farmers' privilege can be enhanced as we move forward. If that is the case, it can also be lessened.

There are some organizations and groups out there that are very concerned. I think it is significant, when we are looking at definition, that it is entitled in the bill as “farmers' privilege”. Why is it not called “farmers' right”?

Farmers have the privilege to save seed they have grown maybe for a little while, maybe under certain conditions. Farmers are the producers of food. Over time we have seen global corporations taking more and more control of the very essence of growing a crop, the seed itself.

I am not saying they have not done a good job in many respects. They have increased production. They have increased protection against disease and all those things. However, is there a balance? Is there too much power in the corporate sector and not enough in the farm sector?

I think we have to look at the difference between farmers' privilege and farmers' right.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the Minister of Agriculture for introducing this important bill.

Indeed, this bill on agricultural growth is one of the most important pieces of legislation that our government has introduced in this House. That is why I am pleased to rise today speak to this House.

Our government continues to ensure that Canadian farmers and food manufacturers have the tools they need to spark economic activity and to compete in world markets.

The bill on agricultural growth will modernize and simplify nine pieces of legislation, including seven that the Canadian Food Inspection Agency is responsible for implementing in order to regulate Canada's agricultural sector, and two administered by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.

The legislation in question consists of the Plant Breeders' Rights Act; the Feeds Act; the Fertilizers Act; the Seeds Act; the Health of Animals Act; the Plant Protection Act; the Agriculture and Agri-Food Administrative Monetary Penalties Act; the Agricultural Marketing Programs Act; and the Farm Debt Mediation Act.

[English]

Together, these acts and regulations are critical to the strength of our farm gate, the growth of our economy, and the safety of our agricultural products. We can see from the wide spectrum of acts the bill covers that many agricultural stakeholders have been consulted and do support this proposed legislation. These stakeholders represent farmers; seed, feed, and fertilizer companies; retailers; and end-point users. I will give a small sampling in no particular order.

The groups include, Pulse Canada, Canadian Horticultural Council, CropLife Canada, Canadian Agri-Food Trade Alliance, Canadian Federation of Agriculture, Green Growers of Canada, Alberta Barley Commission, Canadian Seed Trade Association, Canadian Private Potato Breeders Network, Barley Council of Canada, Grain Farmers of Ontario, Prairie Oat Growers Association,

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Western Canadian Wheat Growers, Canterra Seeds, and the list goes on. This list is not exhaustive, but it is illustrative of the support the proposed legislation enjoys within the farming community.

Why take my word for it when we can see what the Liberal opposition critic for agriculture told *The Western Producer* a mere 10 weeks ago: “...the bill looks very good and there is a lot I can support...”.

I only hope the member keeps his word and supports the bill.

Some of the acts that we are proposing to amend date back to the 1950s. They have served us well, but a lot has changed since those days. As new agricultural production techniques and new developments in science arrive, the legislative tools for agricultural products must keep pace, especially since other international trading partners have innovated and have modernized their approaches.

We need to keep pace with the modern world and help our farmers grow their businesses, and we need to do it now. That is why the agricultural growth act touches on a whole range of areas, from feeds to seeds, to animal health, to plant protection, to farm finance.

The agricultural growth act proposes amendments that would reduce the regulatory burden for industry; promote trade in agricultural products; and strengthen the safety of agricultural products, the first link in the food chain.

I wish to explain how this proposed legislation would go a long way in modernizing the tools and services available to Canadian farmers. What we are proposing to do with this act is to build a more effective, innovative, and nimble legislative framework, one that reflects 21st century realities. Here is an example.

The agricultural growth act would bring plant breeders' rights in line with those of our international competitors. This would ensure that farmers have the latest crop varieties they need to keep pace with their competition. The proposed changes would encourage investment in plant breeding in Canada, thereby increasing the choices Canadian farmers have in accessing high-yielding crop varieties. High productivity in the agricultural sector benefits farmers and grows Canada's economy.

Canada's farmers would still be able to save, clean, treat, and replant a variety of seed on their own land. This is referred to as “farmers' privilege” and is explicitly stated in proposed section 5.3 of the bill.

I wish to point out that the agricultural growth act already reflects extensive stakeholder consultations carried out over the past few years, and that commitment continues.

●(1330)

Any possible regulatory amendments, including farmers' privilege, would of course follow our regulatory processes, would be based on international best practices, and would include extensive consultations with Canadian stakeholders on a crop-by-crop basis.

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Here is another example. The agricultural growth act proposes new broader controls on the safety of Canada's agricultural inputs through the licensing and registration of feed and fertilizer manufacturers. To explain further, this act would provide the ability of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency to license or register fertilizer and animal feed operators and facilities that import or sell products across provincial or international boundaries. This would be in addition to the current system, in which feed and fertilizer products are registered product by product.

Licensing and registering facilities and operators would provide a more effective and timely approach to verifying that agriculture products meet Canada's stringent standards. This approach would allow for better tracking and oversight of production processes and the products being produced, a more efficient system for identifying issues early, and a faster response if and when a product recall is required. This would apply to businesses that sell their animal feed and fertilizer products across provincial and international borders and not to farmers who make these products for use on their own farms. This would also align Canadian legislation with international trading partners and would help our feed and fertilizer industries maintain their export markets, especially in the United States.

I have one more example, and it is an important one.

[*Translation*]

The agricultural growth act will enable us to implement stricter border controls for agricultural products.

I can assure the House that we already take measures to address non-compliance. We can seize illegal products related to feed, livestock, seed and fertilizer. Under the current process, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency attempts to negotiate solutions to problems or initiates court proceedings. The process works, but I will explain why we need to update it.

Illegal products that are seized may include goods that are dangerous or do not comply with packaging and labelling requirements. Right now, Canada sometimes has to pay to dispose of those illegal products. Under the agricultural growth act, CFIA inspectors can order imported feed, livestock, fertilizer and seed out of Canada if they do not meet legal requirements. We already do this for imported plants and animals. This procedure will be similar to how we can order the removal of imported plants and animals if they do not meet legal requirements.

The act also gives CFIA inspectors the power to allow importers to fix the problem in Canada if there is no safety issue and if they can be sure the problem has been corrected. The proposed amendments would provide the CFIA with tools to more effectively fulfill its mandate to protect Canada's plant and animal resources.

Once passed, these changes will help reassure Canadian farmers that imported agricultural products meet our requirements and that they can compete on a level playing field.

What we are doing is bringing the legislation into line with new science and technology, innovation, and international practices in the agricultural sector. We are making Canadian businesses more competitive and ensuring a consistent regulatory approach, and we are harmonizing our legislation with our trading partners.

•(1335)

[*English*]

Just before I sit down, I would like to inform the House that I will be splitting my time with the member for Lambton—Kent—Middlesex.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Before I go to questions and comments, I would like to remind all hon. members that if it is their intention to split their time, they ought to announce it at the beginning of their speeches rather than at the end. If this member had gone on for about another 10 seconds, he would have been over the 10-minute limit, which would have precluded his colleague from Lambton—Kent—Middlesex from the opportunity to participate in this debate. I am sure that was not his intention.

We will go to questions and comments. The hon. member for Sydney—Victoria.

Hon. Mark Eyking (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as farmers are finding out about the bill, they have a lot of questions about it. The member mentioned that some groups are for it. Yes, there are various things in it that might help farmers, but there are many questions. At committee we hope to find the answers.

One of the main concerns I hear is about the Plant Breeders' Rights Act. The bill says that it is a "privilege" for a farmer to store his or her seed for the following year. It should not be a privilege. It should be a right to keep those seeds and to continue to plant the following spring.

I am surprised that the Conservatives would come up with the word "privilege" instead of "right". They have talked about gun rights and so on, but now they are taking away the right of farmers to keep their seed.

Where are the Conservatives going with the privilege to keep seed? I would hope we would be able to change it to a right instead of a privilege.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Mr. Speaker, the member is caught up in a word when he is not actually reading the text of the bill. I pointed out that proposed section 5.3 very clearly delineates what farmers can and cannot do in terms of saving their seed.

For example, it says:

The rights referred to in paragraphs 5(1)(a) and (b) do not apply to harvested material of the plant variety that is grown by a farmer on the farmer's holdings and used by the farmer on those holdings for the sole purpose of propagation of the plant variety.

This is very clear. I would ask members of the opposition to actually read the bill and understand what it is saying. There is a lot of support for moving to UPOV '91. We are the last western democracy to take on UPOV '91. Why is the member against it? Why is he concerned about giving our farmers the competitive advantage that UPOV '91 will give them?

Government Orders

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in Bill C-18, Canadian farmers would have the availability of foreign seeds from other countries. UPOV '91, the plant breeders' rights, allows them to come in and be protected. Will it bring in investment not only for public seeds but also for private seeds?

There will be a royalty. There will be some costs that will be shared. I wonder if the member has some thoughts on whether farmers should actually be paying for any of those benefits they will be receiving should they decide to use those varieties.

• (1340)

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for the excellent input he provided on the bill.

I read out loud that farmers can save seed. That is in the legislation. However, there will be consultation with industry itself, and regulatory changes to follow, and that is what the minister spoke of.

On the one hand, if all of this were solidified right now with very little consultation, the opposition would say that we did not consult. Instead, we are encasing the farmers' right to save seed within the legislation. The response to the member's question is going to be contained within extensive consultation with industry, and regulatory changes that will follow, through the normal vetting process.

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is indeed a pleasure for me to support Bill C-18, the agricultural growth act. It is important and timely, and Canada needs it. Canada needs it so agriculture entrepreneurs can harness innovation, add value, and generate jobs and growth across our great country.

The agricultural growth act would modernize and streamline nine different statutes, seven that the Canadian Food Inspection Agency uses to regulate Canada's agriculture sector and two administered by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.

Let me explain why we need passage of this proposed legislation now. As new agricultural production techniques and new developments in science thrive, the legislative base for agricultural products must keep pace, especially since other international partners have modernized their legislation. We need the agricultural growth act because it would provide the legislative backbone for growth.

If Canada's farmers, along with the agriculture and food sector, are to maintain their competitive edge on the global stage, they need 21st century technology. We need to keep pace with the modern world, and we need to help our farmers grow their businesses. I am going to touch on some key changes outlined in the agricultural growth act to show what I mean.

First, let me touch on plant breeders' rights. The act would bring plant breeders' rights in line with international competitors. This would ensure that farmers would have the latest crop varieties they need to keep pace with competition. At the same time, the act is explicit. It recognizes the traditional practice of saving and reusing seed from crops grown on their own land, which is known as "farmers' privilege".

Let me be clear. With the proposed amendments to the Plant Breeders' Rights Act, Canada's farmers would continue to be able to

save, clean, treat, and replant seeds of protected varieties on their own land. The proposed changes would encourage investment in plant breeding in Canada, which would increase the choices Canadian farmers have in accessing high-yielding crop varieties.

The Grain Farmers of Ontario said the following about this very issue in a news release on December, 2013:

The new act will give both public and private sector plant breeders the ability and confidence to continue to develop new seed varieties needed to improve yields and keep Canada competitive on the world market. The act will also encourage new product development and research.

Now let me touch on the licensing and registration of feed and fertilizer manufacturers. The agricultural growth act proposes new broader controls on the safety of Canada's agricultural inputs through the licensing or registration of feed and fertilizer manufacturers. The proposed amendment would align Canadian legislation with international trading partners and would help our feed and fertilizer industries maintain their export markets, particularly in the United States.

The act would give the Canadian Food Inspection Agency the ability to license and register fertilizer and animal feed operators and facilities that import or sell products across provincial or international borders. This would be in addition to the current system, in which feed and fertilizer products are registered product by product. Again, we are keeping farmers top of mind. This amendment would apply to businesses that sell animal feed and fertilizer products across provincial and international borders, not to farmers who make these products for use on their very own farms.

Any licensing regime would require regulations before it could operate, so it would be developed in detailed consultations with stakeholders. As Graham Cooper, executive director of the Animal Nutrition Association of Canada told the *Western Producer* about the bill on December 13, 2013, "What it does is requires commercial feed mills to have preventive control plans, hazard identification and control plans in place".

This is something the industry wants and is a tool the government needs.

• (1345)

Let me touch on a measure that would allow for the consideration of foreign reviews and analyses in the approval process. For me, this is a personal acknowledgment, as for a long time farmers have been negatively affected by the current regime in registration.

Government Orders

Many in this House will remember my private member's Motion No. 460 in 2010, which called upon the government to allow the CFIA, the PMRA, and the Veterinary Drug Directorate of Health Canada to consider foreign science when approving new products. The Minister of Agriculture listened, and this clause in the bill is the result.

This is an amendment designed to promote innovation and cut red tape when it comes to the registration of new agriculture products. The proposed change would clarify and confirm the CFIA's authority to consider foreign reviews, data, and analyses during the evaluation for approval or registration of new agriculture products to the Canadian market. This information would be considered in addition to the ongoing Canadian reviews and analyses. This in turn allows for an efficient and effective approval process so that Canada's farmers can benefit from the latest scientific research from around the world and keep pace with our competition. This is a great example of how members of Parliament can bring forward ideas on behalf of their constituents and their producers and get them enshrined into law.

I now want to touch on new border controls for the imported agricultural products.

The agriculture growth act will give the Canadian Food Inspection Agency inspectors the authority to order imported shipments of feed, fertilizers, and seed out of Canada if they do not meet legal requirements. This is similar to the way that imported plants and animals may be ordered to be removed if they do not meet legal requirements.

Under the current process, the CFIA negotiates a solution or there are likely to be court proceedings after the seizure of an illegal product related to animal feeds, seeds, and fertilizers. Basically this process works, but at times Canada must then also pay to dispose of the illegal products that are seized. Now we can see how being able to order the products out of Canada, out of our country, would be more effective and efficient. At the same time, the act would give CFIA inspectors the ability to allow importers to fix the problem in Canada, but only if it is not a matter of safety and if they can be sure that the issue will be addressed.

The proposed amendments would provide the CFIA with stronger tools to more effectively fulfill its mandate to protect Canada's plant and animal resource base. This change will provide additional reassurance to Canadian farmers that imported agriculture products meet our requirements and that they are competing on a more level playing field.

I wish to point out that the agriculture growth act reflects extensive stakeholder consultations carried out over the past number of years, and we are committed to additional consultation. Upon the act's receiving royal assent—and it is my great desire to see that day—some of the changes in this bill would come into force almost immediately, while others would be phased in or would require regulatory amendments. However, members can be assured that before any changes are implemented, our government is committed to full consultation to determine how to best move forward.

That is what the agriculture growth act is about. That is why I am asking all parliamentarians to give the agriculture growth act their

careful attention and to move it forward so that we will have the legislative backbone to continue providing Canada's farmers and food processors with the tools they need to drive new economic growth and compete in the global economy.

In December of last year, David Hansen, vice-chair of Cereals Canada, said, "The changes being introduced through the tabling of this...bill in Parliament will truly enable Canada's agriculture industry to grow." I agree with him totally.

● (1350)

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the remarks by the member for Lambton—Kent—Middlesex were interesting, as I would expect coming from a government member supporting this legislation.

I want to ask a question on the changes the bill would make to the feed and fertilizer components. I have enjoyed sitting on the agriculture committee with the member, but I want to ask if there would be any protection for producers with proposed changes to the fertilizer act. The member and I have both sat on that committee, so we know that potash companies and fertilizer companies have joined together around the world in the past and have basically managed supply, or actually shortened supply, to increase the price of fertilizer to the farm community. I am wondering if there is any protection in the bill for producers, not just fertilizer companies. Is there any cost protection in the bill that would protect farmers from excessive pricing by potash and fertilizer companies as they get together around the world and shorten supply, to the disadvantage of producers?

Mr. Bev Shipley: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the member across the way, who is sitting with the vice-chair of agriculture. I will be looking forward to his speech a bit later.

The legislative changes in terms of the licensing of feed and fertilizer establishments and their operators are about having a safety valve in place in terms of both feed and fertilizer. If products are going to cross the border, we need to know that not just the products themselves but also the establishments and the operators are licensed to make sure that what is put into either feed or fertilizer is safe and that our producers are able to use it.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Matthew Dubé (Chambly—Borduas, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his speech.

As some of my colleagues have said, this bill certainly has some positive aspects. However, this is just another omnibus bill from this government, as always. It has some problematic aspects, and it will be extremely important to go over them in committee.

As opposition members, we are in a position where we have to choose all or nothing. This is a serious problem. I wonder if my colleague shares these concerns. Changes are necessary, but it does not work to propose all the changes at the same time.

Did my colleague also notice that there are problems because this is yet another omnibus bill?

Statements by Members

• (1355)

[*English*]

Mr. Bev Shipley: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague across the way for an interesting question.

The previous government pursued this legislation but never went anywhere with it because it lacked the stamina and did not have the interests of Canadian farmers at heart. Now we have a government that has consulted with individuals for many years, and those individuals will appear before our committee. The committee will bring in witnesses, and we will hear from witnesses across the country.

When I took part in the announcement that went out across Canada in December of this year, industry people, commodity organizations, and representatives from farm organizations thanked us for the consultation process. They were very excited about a bill like this making its way through the system.

I look forward to the day when the bill receives royal assent and we are able to start implementing this legislation.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Manon Perreault (Montcalm, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the hon. member for British Columbia Southern Interior.

Today, I rise to speak to an issue that is close to my heart and very important to the people of the magnificent riding of Montcalm.

Montcalm includes the nine municipalities of the Montcalm RCM, and nearly 80% of the land is farmed. That is the riding I represent, and I have lived there for many years. I will not say how many years so as not to give away my age.

I love Montcalm. Many people there, including many of my friends, make their living from agriculture. That is why I think it is essential to go over this bill carefully before imposing new changes that will undoubtedly have many repercussions on my constituents.

Once again, the Conservatives have presented us with an omnibus bill including many changes that should be debated more thoroughly and reviewed carefully. With the agriculture sector being so very complex, it is hard to do this quickly.

The bill proposes amendments to nine different acts. We are supporting it today because we believe that the bill at least deserves to be properly examined by a parliamentary committee. Serious questions need to be asked, and we believe that some provisions need to be carefully reviewed.

Like all of my NDP colleagues, I believe that priority should be given to a balanced approach. We are going to protect farmers and Canada's public sector researchers. We must take everyone's best interests into account. The agri-food sector should not have to pay the price for the Conservative government's ideology-based policies.

The NDP is trying to be as responsible as possible. In fact, one of our objectives is to ensure that Canadians have access to and can benefit from our agricultural heritage. We also need to understand how all of these changes will affect producers.

At first glance, the safety measures proposed with regard to seeds, plants and animals should result in additional resources for the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. Unfortunately, the bill does not seem to address this essential public safety issue.

What is more, the current government has earned a negative reputation with its many cuts to the Canadian monitoring agencies that are supposed to protect the safety of Canadian consumers. The Conservatives made devastating cuts to the food inspection system. We must ensure that such mistakes and the serious consequences they have do not happen again.

Bill C-18 does not have the unanimous support of the stakeholders affected by it. The 1991 Act, which the government signed but still has not ratified, is controversial. Some groups, including the National Farmers Union, do not want the 1991 Act to be ratified and have already spoken out against Bill C-18.

Meanwhile, other organizations, including Keystone Agricultural Producers, the Prairie Oat Growers Association, the Grain Growers of Canada and the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, have expressed their support for the bill. They believe that the government has found a good balance between producers' ability to make their research profitable and—

• (1400)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Order. The time provided for government business has now expired. The hon. member for Montcalm will have six minutes to finish her speech after question period.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

[*English*]

UKRAINE

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP): Mr. Speaker, as the member of Parliament for Parkdale—High Park, I am very proud to represent many community members of Ukrainian origin. In recent weeks, they have expressed outrage at the actions of the Yanukovich regime, sadness at the terrible loss of life during the protests, and hope as Ukraine undergoes dramatic transitions and forms a new government.

As a three-time election observer in Ukraine, I know that what most Ukrainians aspire to is a normal democracy, free of corruption, where there is respect for human rights and the rule of law.

Today, that dream is at risk. New Democrats believe that all parties in Parliament should stand together in condemning the aggressive actions of the Russian Federation, which are in clear violation of international law. Canada must work with the international community toward a peaceful outcome to the current conflict and remain steadfast in its support of a free, independent, and democratic Ukraine.

Ukrainians deserve no less.

*Statements by Members***UKRAINE**

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon (Mississauga East—Cooksville, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is with great sadness that I rise to speak today about the recent developments in Ukraine. Like so many others, I have watched the seriousness of this situation continue to escalate, and I am truly concerned for Ukrainian citizens in their homeland.

On Saturday, I joined Ukrainian Canadians and many others in front of the Russian consulate in Toronto to demand that Russia stop the invasion of Crimea, withdraw its troops, and give the people of Ukraine the freedom they so richly deserve.

As our Prime Minister stated, President Putin's military intervention and actions in Ukraine "...are a clear violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. They are also in violation of Russia's obligations under international law."

Canada will stand firmly with Ukrainians, as it did when Canada was the first western country to recognize Ukraine's independence. Our allies should join us and not allow history to repeat itself and relive the dark days of the 1930s that led to the Second World War.

Slava Ukraini.

* * *

CHILDREN

Ms. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in any emergency, children suffer most, and no child should ever face what the children in four level 3 emergencies around the world are facing.

In the Central African Republic, 2.3 million children are at risk of becoming victims of horrendous attacks, including being subject to sexual violence or decapitation. More than 6,000 children are being forced to serve as child soldiers. In the Philippines, devastated by Typhoon Haiyan, children need to leave makeshift structures and return to schools, and they need psycho-social supports. In South Sudan, 1.3 million children are threatened by malnutrition, a number that will rise in the coming months if people cannot plant before the rains come. Of the 9 million displaced people in Syria, half are children who face grave danger.

We risk a lost generation. Let us stand with these children, put vulnerable children at the heart of our work, and fight for children in crises.

* * *

STATUS OF WOMEN

Mr. Rick Norlock (Northumberland—Quinte West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Northumberland United Way will receive over \$165,000 over the next 2 years for a Status of Women Canada program called opening doors: economic opportunities for women. This project will bring together local women and partners to examine services now available in Northumberland County and invest strategically where needs exist.

The Northumberland United Way will develop a community action plan for immigrant women, to address the challenges hindering immigrant women's economic prosperity. In addition to new strategies, a community action plan will build on existing strategies that several local agencies developed for women and girls.

Furthermore, an immigrant women's council will be established to sustain the project into the future.

Our Conservative government is proud to partner with the Northumberland United Way and Northumberland County to help all women in my riding seize economic opportunities, enhance their prosperity, and strengthen the economy.

* * *

● (1405)

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan (Scarborough—Rouge River, NDP): Mr. Speaker, this International Women's Day I look forward to attending events in my riding and celebrating the contributions of the women of Scarborough to our community.

It is also important to raise awareness about the barriers that women continue to face. Since 2006, when the Conservative government came into office, we have seen the slashing of funding for local women's organizations, no funding initiatives for child care, the closure of 16 Status of Women Canada offices, and the abolition of the court challenges program.

Some of the women hardest hit by the Conservatives are immigrants, who bear the lioness' share when caring for children and older loved ones. Backlogs at Citizenship and Immigration Canada continue to keep families separated, adding strain to new Canadian women caring for loved ones at home, here in Canada, and around the world.

With the Conservative government, we are not seeing any fair plan to eliminate the backlogs in both citizenship and immigration. There are no plans to make life better for new Canadian women.

This International Women's Day, I am proud to work with the women and men of our caucus to continue the NDP's fight for gender equality and to break down barriers for all Canadian women.

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ROYAL CANADIAN LEGION NO. 275

Hon. Deepak Obhrai (Calgary East, CPC): Mr. Speaker, recently I met with members of the Royal Canadian Legion No. 275, Forest Lawn, in my riding. Joined by the hon. Minister of Veterans Affairs, we held a productive round table, discussing the needs of our veterans and how to further enhance services to those who have served Canada.

Legion 275 works hard for our local veterans, providing community and support to those who served our country, and keeping the memory of their achievements and sacrifices alive for all Canadians. I would like to thank them for hosting this constructive round table and for their ongoing work.

Our government has made great strides toward supporting our veterans and their families, yet our work will never be done and must always continue. With partners like the Forest Lawn Legion, we will ensure that the best interests of our veterans are looked after.

* * *

UKRAINE

Mr. Bernard Trottier (Etobicoke—Lakeshore, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to share the outrage of the Ukrainian-Canadian community in my riding of Etobicoke—Lakeshore at the recent actions taken by the Russian military in the Crimean region of Ukraine.

Our government strongly supports the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine and the rights of Ukrainians to choose their own government free from outside influence or coercion.

President Putin's action are a clear violation of international law. Russia's aggressive moves are stirring memories in many of the oppression suffered by Ukrainians prior to independence in 1991. This brinkmanship-type politics, quite reminiscent of that employed by the former Soviet Union, only aims to destabilize the legitimacy of the newly formed Ukrainian government.

We call upon the government of Russia to immediately withdraw its troops and cease any further infractions of Ukrainian sovereignty. We stand shoulder to shoulder with Ukrainians as they strive toward their goal of a democratic Ukraine, and we will continue to support those who value peace, freedom, and the rule of law.

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[Translation]

STOKE AND COATICOOK

Mr. Jean Rousseau (Compton—Stanstead, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the municipalities of Stoke and Coaticook are both celebrating their 150th anniversary this year. I will be participating with great pride in many activities to highlight their history, their success stories and also their future.

The municipality of Stoke covers an area that is even larger than its jealous neighbour, Sherbrooke, and its majestic landscape includes the lake and mountains. The pork industry generates many economic activities in the area, while the Miellerie Lune de Miel and the Canadian biathlon training centre provide a number of opportunities in this municipality headed up by Mayor Luc Cayer.

Coaticook is definitely the seat of the Coaticook regional county municipality. It drives the economic development of this region of pioneers and builders. The agricultural sector needs no introduction, in part because it is a model of co-operation unique to Quebec and one of the most prosperous in Canada. With jovial Mayor Bertrand Lamoureux at the helm of this municipality, we will certainly be hearing more about innovation and growth from this tourism jewel in the Eastern Townships.

Long life and prosperity to both.

Statements by Members

JEAN-MARC VALLÉE

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lotbinière—Chutes-de-la-Chaudière, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the 86th annual Oscars, a celebration of American cinema, were held in Hollywood yesterday. I am proud to rise in the House to pay tribute to a Quebecker, director Jean-Marc Vallée, who was honoured at the awards. This brilliant artist, who brought us such films as *C.R.A.Z.Y.* and *Café de Flore*, once again charmed us with *Dallas Buyers Club*, which was nominated for six Oscars. The movie won three of the top categories: best actor, best actor in a supporting role and best makeup and hairstyling.

Jean-Marc Vallée obviously has a gift for directing actors, which he proved yet again last night.

I am very proud to congratulate Mr. Vallée, one of the many brilliant Quebec artists who are thriving abroad and who are a great source of pride for us.

* * *

● (1410)

[English]

CANADA POST

Mr. Craig Scott (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Canada Post went ahead and announced its plan to eliminate home delivery without serious consultation. My constituents are furious. I have heard from so many in Toronto—Danforth describing how they will be affected by these changes. Seniors, disabled individuals, and home-based small businesses will be particularly hard hit.

Romeo and Lunesa wrote to me to say the following:

Being both seniors ourselves and starting to have mobility issues, we heavily rely on door-to-door mail delivery. Instead of cutting postal services, expanding its services as proposed by [the] NDP is a more viable and sensible option.

Instead, Canada Post, backed by the Conservatives, refused to consider postal banking's great promise as a revenue stream and, indeed, it seems they are trying to hide an 800-page report that almost certainly discusses how viable postal banking would be.

Canada Post is a cherished public institution. Let us keep it that way.

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VETERANS AFFAIRS

Mr. Parm Gill (Brampton—Springdale, CPC): Mr. Speaker, June 6 marks the 75th anniversary of the historic Allied invasion on D-Day.

Yesterday, the Minister of Veterans Affairs proudly announced Canada's effort to recognize and support the men and women who bravely fought on the beaches of Normandy. Our government will provide a maximum of \$2,000 in travel assistance for up to 180 D-Day and Normandy veterans wishing to go to France in June. The application forms are available online, by email, or simply by calling Veterans Affairs Canada.

We are committed to helping make it possible for these great Canadians to be recognized for their service and sacrifice.

Lest we forget.

*Oral Questions***HALIFAX WEST VOLUNTEER**

Hon. Geoff Regan (Halifax West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate Michael Covert, a constituent who has been recognized by the Queen Elizabeth II Health Sciences Centre Foundation for his generosity. Mr. Covert has made donations to the QEII Foundation in honour of 422 friends, colleagues, and loved ones.

Like countless others, I admire his dedication to volunteerism and philanthropy. He supports a number of non-profit organizations in my riding of Halifax West. Mr. Covert sits on the board of Bridgeway Academy and supports students with learning disabilities through his Mary Jane Covert Bursary. He also sits on the board of Callow Wheelchair Bus, a non-profit that assists veterans and people with disabilities.

I ask the House to join me in congratulating Michael Covert on this well-deserved honour.

* * *

ANTI-SEMITISM

Mr. Jeff Watson (Essex, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise to condemn recent anti-Semitic vandalism at the University of Windsor and its Students' Alliance's one-sided resolution to endorse and participate in the misguided and hateful boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement.

BDS singles out the only Jewish state for condemnation, while turning a blind eye to the world's most grotesque violators of human rights. The deceitful BDS movement has no place on Canadian campuses. In fact, it is against everything our universities stand for and creates an environment of intimidation for Jewish students and Jewish staff.

While I denounce this new anti-Semitism poisoning our Canadian campuses, I am proud that our government stands against anti-Semitism at home and abroad and has consistently stood up for Israel on the world stage. As the Prime Minister said in his historic address to the Knesset:

Israel is the only country in the Middle East which has long anchored itself in the ideals of freedom, democracy and the rule of law.

* * *

DEMOCRATIC REFORM

Ms. Irene Mathyssen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives are having a hard time selling their radical and unfair changes to the Elections Act. Canadians just are not buying it, and now even their own friends are questioning it.

This weekend, Preston Manning added his name to the growing list of Canadians deeply troubled by this unfair act. He said Conservatives should be "...strengthening rather than reducing the role of...the Chief Electoral Officer with respect to promotional and educational activities...".

Then there is Harry Neufeld, B.C.'s former elections chief, who drafted a report on problems following the 2011 election. He warned that the unfair elections act is going to make things even worse. He said changes on how polling supervisors are selected are "...completely inappropriate in a democracy".

Canadians are tired of the Conservative government rewriting rules to benefit itself. Canadians want a government that will listen to their concerns and strengthen democracy, not undermine it.

* * *

• (1415)

UKRAINE

Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity must be respected. Russia's provocative military intervention in Ukraine is completely unacceptable. Its escalation of a naval threat and its ultimatums today are absolutely abhorrent.

Our government calls upon Russia to withdraw its forces and respect its international obligations, as outlined in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum. In response to this incursion, our government has taken real leadership. The Prime Minister has recalled Canada's ambassador to Russia for consultations and suspended Canada's engagement in the preparations for the G-8 summit in Sochi.

Our government will continue to work and coordinate with like-minded partners to de-escalate the current situation. The people of Ukraine can count upon this government, as they strive to pursue a free and democratic future.

Ukrainians have the right to self-determination, free from intervention. The future of Ukraine must be decided by Ukrainians.

ORAL QUESTIONS

[Translation]

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Ms. Megan Leslie (Halifax, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Russia's military intervention in Crimea violates Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. This intervention violates international law and is threatening stability in the region.

Can the Prime Minister tell us what message the Government of Canada sent to President Putin and the Russian authorities?

[English]

Hon. Deepak Obhrai (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs and for International Human Rights, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs have spoken out quite clearly and very strongly. We join our allies in condemning, in the strongest terms, President Putin's military intervention in Ukraine. Canada's Prime Minister is in close communication with his like-minded counterparts and has had emergency meetings here at home.

Canada is actually participating with various multilateral institutions to coordinate the international response.

Ms. Megan Leslie (Halifax, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we on this side of the House stand with the government and with Canadians who are condemning these very troubling actions—

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Speaker: The hon. member for Halifax.

Oral Questions

Ms. Megan Leslie: Mr. Speaker, the Russian Federation's unacceptable and aggressive military intervention in Crimea violates the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine. It is against international law, and it threatens regional stability.

Can the government tell us how many Canadian citizens are in Ukraine and Crimea, and what is the government doing to help them?

Hon. Deepak Obhrai (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs and for International Human Rights, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as is normal in these cases, we have contacted all Canadians in Ukraine. I will provide the numbers later on today to the hon. members. We are asking them to contact our embassies and to call our international lines in case they need to tell us about their whereabouts and their well-being.

Canada takes seriously the concerns of citizens in that region, and we will continue working with them to ensure their safety if they wish to return from Ukraine.

* * *

DEMOCRATIC REFORM

Ms. Megan Leslie (Halifax, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Reform Party founder Preston Manning is expressing serious concerns about Conservative changes to the Elections Act. He is concerned about the attack on Elections Canada's ability to educate and engage voters. Former B.C. election chief Harry Neufeld, who wrote a report on the problems in the last federal election, is warning about the potential for increased abuse at polling stations because of changes in this bill.

With so many concerns from so many Canadians, will the government now agree to cross-country hearings on this bill?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, of course, we welcome Mr. Manning's comments, also in their entirety, which I will read.

This legislation, which is a commendable democratic initiative, seeks to eliminate those practices—robo-calling, misuse of...vouching..., misuse of election contributions, etc.—which discredit elections and parties associated with them. It also seeks to strengthen the enforcement of electoral law by separating that role from Elections Canada and making it the sole jurisdiction of the Independent Commissioner of Elections under the Director for Public Prosecutions.

We certainly agree with Mr. Manning on that.

● (1420)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nycole Turmel (Hull—Aylmer, NDP): Mr. Speaker, there is growing opposition to the bill to reform the Canada Elections Act. This weekend, it was Preston Manning, the founder of the Reform Party, who expressed his concerns. He said that the Conservatives should be increasing rather than decreasing the Chief Electoral Officer's role in educating people about and promoting elections.

Does the government plan on following Mr. Manning's advice?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will repeat what Mr. Manning said.

[*English*]

I have them here in front of me.

This legislation, which is a commendable democratic initiative, seeks to eliminate those practices—robo-calling, misuse of the vouching provision, misuse of election contributions, etc.—which discredit elections and parties associated with them. It also seeks to strengthen the enforcement of electoral law by separating that role from Elections Canada and making it the sole jurisdiction of the Independent Commissioner of Elections under the Director for Public Prosecutions.

Sharper teeth, longer reach, a freer hand, better law enforcement.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nycole Turmel (Hull—Aylmer, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it has now gotten to the point that the Minister of State for Democratic Reform is sitting in his Ottawa bubble and refuses to listen to criticism from Conservatives out west.

In addition to Mr. Manning, Harry Neufeld also spoke out against the reform this weekend. Mr. Neufeld said that the bill would give an advantage to incumbents and create completely inappropriate conditions in a democracy.

Why does the minister refuse to listen to citizens, think tanks, the Chief Electoral Officer or experts—anyone who urges him to improve his reform?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, according to the current elections act, the first and second parties have the power to nominate election officers in all ridings across Canada.

[*English*]

For example, the revising agents, in section 33; deputy returning officers, in section 34; poll clerks, in section 35; registration officers, in section 39, are appointed on the recommendation of the first- and second-place finishing parties.

As it relates to central poll supervisors, they will be appointed on the recommendation of the first-place party from the previous election. However, under clause 44 of the bill, Elections Canada would have the ability to reject unreasonable recommendations.

* * *

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Wascana, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Canadians are deeply worried about the worsening situation in Ukraine. We all stand in solidarity with Ukraine's thirst for freedom, democracy, human rights, and the civilized rule of law, both domestically and internationally.

Given Russian actions and threats in relation to Ukraine, which clearly violate specific treaty obligations and multiple principles of international law, what is the exact current status today of Russia within the G8 group of countries? Does a G8 actually exist at this time?

Oral Questions

Hon. Deepak Obhrai (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs and for International Human Rights, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I have stated, our Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs have spoken out quite clearly and very strongly. We join our allies in condemning in the strongest possible terms President Putin's military intervention in Ukraine.

Canada has suspended its engagement and preparation for the G8 summit, currently planned for Sochi, and the Canadian ambassador in Moscow has been recalled for consultation. We will continue working with our international partners to see what the international response will be.

* * *

INFRASTRUCTURE

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Wascana, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, municipalities across Canada are concerned about arbitrary new rules imposed by the Conservative government on community infrastructure, and even more so, municipalities are worried about the deep cuts in the building Canada fund over the next five years. At the end of this month, the building Canada budget is being slashed by close to 90%, and federal funding is not due to be replenished, even to this year's levels, until 2019. That means an immediate and lasting gap in federal infrastructure support of some \$4 billion. Why?

• (1425)

Hon. Denis Lebel (Minister of Infrastructure, Communities and Intergovernmental Affairs and Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the premise of the question is completely false. Our government has tripled the average annual infrastructure investment since 2006. Economic action plan 2013 announced \$70 billion for Canada's infrastructure over the next decade, including \$53 billion—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order. The hon. Minister of Infrastructure, Communities and Intergovernmental Affairs has the floor.

Hon. Denis Lebel: Mr. Speaker, the economic action plan announced \$70 billion for Canada's infrastructure over the next decade, including \$53 billion for provincial, territorial, and municipal infrastructure. That is the biggest agreement we have ever had, and we hope to sign that very soon with the provinces.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in just 29 days, cities and communities will see the building Canada fund cut by 90%. Mayors are saying that key projects are at short-term risk. What is worse, next year will be no better, and neither will the year after that. In fact, funding will not return to this year's levels until 2019.

Why do the Conservatives think that Canadians can afford to wait until 2019 for assistance with their municipal infrastructure?

Hon. Denis Lebel (Minister of Infrastructure, Communities and Intergovernmental Affairs and Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that question is based on completely false premises. On November 5, the provinces and territories received the gas tax fund renewal agreement. We doubled the gas tax funding,

made it a permanent feature of the act and indexed it. I invite all of the provinces and territories to move swiftly to sign this agreement because cities have many projects to pursue.

* * *

[*English*]

DEMOCRATIC REFORM

Mr. Craig Scott (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, this weekend, people I spoke with about the unfair elections act expressed deep concerns that Conservative changes could make it less likely that new Canadians will vote. Instead of empowering immigrant communities, the proposed changes in Bill C-23 to remove the ability of Elections Canada to educate risk disenfranchising these Canadians.

Why will the minister not listen to these kinds of concerns and abandon his plan to gut the ability of Elections Canada to educate and engage?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, our schools educate. Our parents educate their kids on politics and discussions around the dinner table. The media regularly keeps people informed. However, the education role that Elections Canada is supposed to play is to inform people where, when, and how to vote. According to Elections Canada's own data, it is failing in that role. That is why we are focusing the promotional campaigns of Elections Canada on the basics of voting: where, when, what ID to bring, and the special tools available to help people with disabilities cast a ballot.

Mr. Craig Scott (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Have no doubt, Mr. Speaker, the government is steamrolling changes that are going to make it harder for Canadians to vote. That is why experts like Harry Neufeld are speaking up. In Mr. Neufeld's report, he recommended improved—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order, please. We are off to a shaky start with not allowing members to put their questions without undue noise.

The hon. member for Toronto—Danforth has the floor.

Mr. Craig Scott: Mr. Speaker, that is why experts like Harry Neufeld are speaking up. In his report, he recommended improved recruitment and training for Elections Canada election-day workers, but, according to Mr. Neufeld, Conservatives have actually done the exact opposite in the unfair elections act.

Oral Questions

Why is the minister using this bill to make it harder to vote instead of helping Elections Canada to better recruit and train election-day workers?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I know what the member is referring to but is backing off from actually saying out loud: the issue of vouching. Mr. Neufeld's report demonstrated that there were over 50,000 irregularities with vouching in the last election. These were serious errors that could potentially lead to a judge overturning an election result. The NDP thinks that someone should be able to show up without any form of identification whatsoever and cast a ballot, which potentially leads to multiple voting or voting in the wrong riding. On this side of the House of Commons, we expect that people will use one of the 39 approved pieces of ID.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse (Louis-Saint-Laurent, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Harry Neufeld is the former chief electoral officer for the Province of British Columbia, and he wrote the report on some of the problems with the 2011 election.

Now he is adding his voice to the flood of people criticizing the electoral “deform”. He has stated that clause 44, which stipulates that the incumbent shall appoint the central poll supervisors, is completely inappropriate.

Can the minister tell us why he included such a partisan measure in his electoral bill?

• (1430)

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I already said, for many positions, people are appointed by the first- and second-place parties in each riding across Canada. In fact, the current Canada Elections Act sets out four such positions.

[*English*]

The same principle will apply with central polling supervisors, who will be appointed on the recommendation of the leading party from the previous election in that riding. If Elections Canada believes that recommended appointment is inappropriate, it can just reject it.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse (Louis-Saint-Laurent, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the minister thinks he knows what is best for Canadians, while he sits in his ivory tower here in Ottawa.

However, he would do well to listen to these criticisms, rather than simply brush them off. We are talking about an elections expert, an authority in the field, who is saying that this change in how central poll supervisors are appointed could give the incumbent an unfair advantage.

Can the Minister of State for Democratic Reform return to his Reform Party roots and listen to what people on the ground are saying?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, the NDP members suddenly want to listen to Mr. Neufeld, but when I talked about the 50,000 serious mistakes related to vouching that were made during the last election, the NDP members did not want to listen.

Those mistakes were serious, which is why we will eliminate this approach and replace it with 39 forms of identification, while requiring that Elections Canada inform Canadians of the types of identification required.

* * *

ETHICS

Ms. Ève Pécelet (La Pointe-de-l'Île, NDP): Mr. Speaker, a new book about the Mike Duffy saga and the Senate scandals will be released in the next few days.

Well, we already knew that Mike Duffy and Nigel Wright met on February 11 and 12, 2013, to talk about their so-called secret agreement. However, this book reveals that these meetings were held in the Prime Minister's private boardroom, room 204 in the Langevin Building.

Can the Prime Minister confirm this information?

[*English*]

Mr. Paul Calandra (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and for Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister told Senator Duffy that he to repay any ineligible expenses, and he told that to the entire caucus. The report issued by the RCMP also quite clearly indicates that the Prime Minister did not know of the scheme that was being put forward by Mr. Wright and Mr. Duffy. As the Prime Minister said, had he known, he would have put a stop to it immediately.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Conservatives insist that the Prime Minister was not aware of the meetings between Mike Duffy and Nigel Wright, but we now learn that those meetings did not take place in some dark corner. No, they took place in the Prime Minister's own “private high-security boardroom”.

Will the Prime Minister tell us whether or not he was aware that, on February 11 and 12, 2013, his private boardroom was being used by the four conspirators: Mike Duffy, Nigel Wright, David Tkachuk, and Irving Gerstein?

Mr. Paul Calandra (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and for Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister has already confirmed the fact, and said to the House, that he told Senator Duffy, in fact all of caucus, that any ineligible expenses should be repaid immediately. It is a standard that we expect on this side of the House. It is a standard that Canadians expect.

When that was not done, we went further to make sure that these senators were suspended from the Senate without pay. Again, I think that was the right decision. That was the decision that Canadians expected.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I think the right thing would be to find out whether or not a crime was committed in the Prime Minister's boardroom. Dan Leger's book has now moved the issue of these conspirators right into the Prime Minister's private boardroom. Even after the scandal became public, are we to believe the Prime Minister was not briefed about what happened in those two days?

Oral Questions

Mike Duffy states that if he faces trial, he will bring down high-ranking members of the Conservative government. Will the government tell us today, who are those high-ranking Conservatives?

Mr. Paul Calandra (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and for Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, again, the documents released by the RCMP quite clearly indicate that the Prime Minister did not know of this. At the same time, these very same documents outlined quite clearly the extent to which the Prime Minister went to make sure that all information was made available, including waivers from all of the staff. All emails were turned over.

We are working with the RCMP to make sure that all the facts on this are known. We went even further, by making sure that these three senators were suspended and that there are new accountability measures in the Senate. That is the type of action Canadians expect, and that is what they will continue to get from this government.

* * *

• (1435)

[Translation]

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Mr. Robert Aubin (Trois-Rivières, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the main estimates usually contain employment insurance estimates. Oddly enough, the most recent main estimates do not include this information. We are talking about tens of billions of dollars, and the Conservatives are refusing to provide details about how this money will be spent.

Why did they omit details about employment insurance this year? What are they hiding?

[English]

Mr. Scott Armstrong (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Employment and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the changes we have made in the EI program are to support people actually connecting to jobs that are available. We worked very hard to make sure that all Canadians can find a job that they are qualified for. I am very pleased that we announced on Friday that there was an agreement reached on the Canada job grant. This will provide thousands of Canadians with the ability to get training that actually leads to a job. That is good news.

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP): Mr. Speaker, public accounts come out after all the spending is done, but the estimates are about providing oversight for the government's planned spending. Clearly the Conservatives hate fiscal accountability. They even forced the Parliamentary Budget Officer to take them to court over missing financial information. Now there is a hole in their estimates where EI should be.

Can the minister tell us how much will be paid out this year from the employment insurance operating account, and will it be more or less than \$20 billion?

Mr. Scott Armstrong (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Employment and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we continue to focus on connecting Canadians to available jobs. That is what Canadians really care about. We are going to make changes to all of the job grant programs. We are going to make changes so that all Canadians can connect with jobs that are available. We have a

problem in Canada today. We have too many Canadians without jobs and too many jobs without Canadians. We are making changes to fix that.

* * *

MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, manufacturing employees are still bearing the brunt of the recession, in spite of what the parliamentary secretary says. Sales dropped more than \$2.9 billion last year alone, and that is down from the year before that and the year before that.

From Caterpillar and Kellogg's to Heinz and Westcast, jobs are being lost, yet the long-promised government strategy is missing in action. Four years ago today, the government promised a digital economy strategy, and Canadians are still waiting.

Will the minister acknowledge that his lack of action has failed Canada's manufacturing sector?

Hon. James Moore (Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member has mixed up two things. First she talked about the digital strategy, and then about industrial policy. I will answer the part of the question on the digital policy strategy.

Of course, it was this government that put forward and created a Canada media fund. It was this government, through our economic action plan, that had our first real substantive pan-Canadian effort to have rural broadband connecting all of Canada together, and we are going further in budget 2014.

It was this budget that put forward the Copyright Modernization Act, which protects the rights of people who put their wares into the digital world. It is this government, moving forward, that will continue to lead when it comes to protecting Canada and ensuring we are not just in the game but leading in the digital world.

* * *

[Translation]

FINANCE

Hon. John McCallum (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Finance used to be for income splitting. Now he is against it.

The Minister of Transport and the Minister of State for Small Business and Tourism, and Agriculture seem to agree with him. However, the Minister of Employment and Social Development, the Minister of State for Democratic Reform, and now, the Prime Minister have clearly contradicted him.

With all this chaos, how can the Minister of Finance hold onto his job?

[English]

Hon. Jim Flaherty (Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, rather well.

There are a couple of provincial budgets this week, one in Alberta. I hope they have the advice of the leader of the Liberal Party who says that budgets can balance themselves, so they will not have to worry about all the details and expenses.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Hon. Jim Flaherty: Once the budget—

Some hon. members: More, more!

• (1440)

The Speaker: Order, please. I suspect he will have another chance because I see the hon. member for Markham—Unionville asking another question.

The hon. member for Markham—Unionville.

Hon. John McCallum (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, while the Liberals' style is to balance ten budgets in a row and pay down debt, the Conservatives' style is that they have given us eight deficits in a row.

However, I want to congratulate the Minister of Finance for his enlightened position on income splitting, including the view that he is not “sure that overall, it benefits our society”. Well, he is right. According to the C.D. Howe Institute, 80% of households get no benefit at all. However, given that his whole caucus disagrees with him, how can he hold on to his job? How can he maintain the confidence, not only of—?

The Speaker: Order, please.

The hon. Minister of Finance.

Hon. Jim Flaherty (Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am still in Finance, unlike the member for Markham—Unionville.

We are all agreed on this side of the House that once the budget is balanced our government is committed to granting further tax relief to Canadian families. That tax relief, so far, averages \$3,400 less for each Canadian family in 2014.

* * *

STATISTICS CANADA

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, after cancelling the long form census and having previously slashed the Stats Canada budget, the Conservatives are now moving ahead with another \$15.6 million cut, saying that they will try to find “alternative data sources”. Can the minister explain to Canadians what exactly are those alternative data sources? More important, what programs will be cut as a result of this drastic reduction to the Stats Canada budget?

Hon. James Moore (Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, everybody has to do his or her part in order to arrive at a balanced budget and, in speaking with Wayne Smith and the folks at Stats Canada, that department has the funds necessary to fulfill the mandate that this Parliament has given it.

Indeed it does seem odd to everyday taxpayers to have two, three, and four branches of the Government of Canada collecting the same information. Certainly, in answer to a question from the Liberal Party on digital economy, part of a digital strategy for the government is to actually have agencies of the government sharing information, one

with another, so that we do not have to duplicate these matters and put a further burden on Canadian taxpayers. It is called making government efficient, not invading the privacy of Canadians, and having good government.

* * *

[Translation]

TAXATION

Mr. Guy Caron (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives have done nothing but pay lip service to the issue of tax evasion. The main estimates foresee cuts of over \$400 million to the Canada Revenue Agency. How do the Conservatives think the agency will be able to step up the fight against tax evasion with an even smaller budget?

[English]

Hon. Kerry-Lynne D. Findlay (Minister of National Revenue, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I mentioned last week in the House, we are not taking any measures to reduce CRA's compliance resources. In fact, there are about 400 more tax auditors today than when we took government.

Further, we have increased the size of our international audit program by over 40% and we have identified nearly \$4.6 billion in unpaid taxes.

The Liberals and NDP, of course, have opposed our over 75 measures to increase and improve the integrity of the tax system. We have heard nothing but empty rhetoric from that side of the House.

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RAIL TRANSPORTATION

Ms. Olivia Chow (Trinity—Spadina, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Canada came together as a nation when our railway was completed from coast to coast, but through neglect and millions in budget cuts, the government is stripping VIA Rail of its ability to deliver services to Canadians. People in Gaspé and New Brunswick are losing vital rail services.

How can the government justify tabling estimates with another \$4 million cut to VIA Rail?

Hon. Lisa Raitt (Minister of Transport, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as we know, VIA Rail is responsible for its own operational decisions. Regardless, there is one truism here. Our government does support a passenger rail network, but that passenger rail network has to meet the needs of today's travellers as well as be fair and not burden the taxpayer. We expect VIA Rail to operate in that manner. Indeed, that is exactly what it is doing.

We are concerned that it does continue to post significant losses regardless of how much money we are putting into the system.

Oral Questions

●(1445)

[Translation]

CHAMPLAIN BRIDGE

Mr. Hoang Mai (Brossard—La Prairie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, this morning the Minister of Infrastructure, Communities and Intergovernmental Affairs presented an uncosted business plan for replacing the Champlain Bridge. I repeat: an uncosted business plan.

There is no dollar figure for the need to replace the toll or for the consequences of imposing a toll on just one of the bridges linking Montreal to the south shore. Instead of holding pointless press conferences, will the minister sit down with his provincial and municipal counterparts in order to agree on a detailed game plan for replacing the Champlain Bridge?

Hon. Denis Lebel (Minister of Infrastructure, Communities and Intergovernmental Affairs and Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my colleague is two months behind. The business plan was tabled on January 15. My colleague should be congratulating us because the matter—

The Speaker: Order. I think there is a problem with the interpretation.

It is working now.

The hon. Minister of Infrastructure.

Hon. Denis Lebel: Mr. Speaker, we announced the business plan on January 15. This morning, contrary to what my colleague is saying, we announced that we would move forward with the process and that on March 17, we would issue requests for qualifications so that companies could apply to build the bridge. While the members opposite keep talking and telling us what to do, we will be building a bridge and not imposing a \$21-billion carbon tax.

* * *

[English]

MINING INDUSTRY

Mr. Rob Clarke (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government understands the importance of the mining industry and the significant role it plays in providing over 400,000 good jobs for Canadians. Canada is a global leader in this sector, with the mining and minerals accounting for over 20% of Canada's exports.

The mining sector in my riding of Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River is very important to both aboriginal and non-aboriginal mining workers. Mining workers and communities across Canada know they can count on the government's support. Can the parliamentary secretary please update the House?

Mrs. Kelly Block (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Natural Resources, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government is proud to support Canada's mining industry. I am pleased to share that the minister joined the Prime Minister at the Prospectors and Developers Association of Canada's annual conference to meet with stakeholders and announce our government's plan for increased transparency for the extractive sector.

Unlike the opposition, we will continue to support Canadian jobs in this vital sector of our economy.

* * *

[Translation]

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Mr. Jonathan Genest-Jourdain (Manicouagan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in 2007, the Prime Minister announced that he was committed to resolving the some 800 specific claims that were gathering dust on a shelf. However, that was just another promise for the Conservatives to break. As of April 2014, significant budget cuts will be made to the organizations that are researching the specific claims, which means that first nations people will no longer be able to finalize outstanding claims. How can the minister justify these cuts?

Hon. Bernard Valcourt (Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we launched the Justice at Last initiative in 2007 to streamline and improve the specific claims process.

As a result, our government has cleared up the huge backlog of specific claims left by the previous government. Since 2007, we have settled over 100 outstanding land claims, and we will continue in that direction.

[English]

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, justice will not be achieved if these funding cuts to vital research go through. Only 15% of the claims that the minister referred to have actually resulted in settlements. The vast majority have been rejected or closed by the government. Groups like the AFN and UBCIC, and even the specific claims tribunal, are criticizing the Conservative government's take it or leave it approach.

Settling historical claims with first nations should be a priority. Would the minister now recognize that specific claims are lawful obligations and reverse his decision to this crucial funding?

Hon. Bernard Valcourt (Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I know that the NDP likes to play politics on the backs of aboriginal people. We announced the Justice at Last initiative in 2007 to streamline and improve the specific claims process. As a result, we have cleared up the huge backlog of specific claims at the assessment stage. As a matter of fact, we have settled over 100 outstanding land claims in Canada and we continue to make substantial progress. We will continue in that direction.

Oral Questions

●(1450)

NATIONAL DEFENCE

Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, HMCS *Protecteur* is on a perilous journey back to Hawaii after a serious engine room fire left the ship adrift with nearly 300 aboard. Our first concern, of course, is the safety of the crew and families and the well-being of the 20 crew members injured in bravely fighting the fire. Bravo Zulu.

This ship was built in 1969, and the Conservative delays in ship procurement have left our navy without the capacity it needs. Now the minister wants to further delay \$3.1 billion in procurement spending. Have the Conservatives learned nothing from their past mistakes?

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, no government has done more to make sure our men and women in uniform have the equipment they need than this government.

Since he raised the question of the HMCS *Protecteur*, the men and women on there did an outstanding job containing and putting out this fire. They deserve a vote of thanks from all Canadians.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Élane Michaud (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, NDP): Mr. Speaker, this serious accident reminds us of just how vulnerable our aging fleet is. The Conservatives' indecisiveness with respect to military procurement has delayed the replacement of our 1960s-era supply ships by 10 years.

It is up to the government to ensure that our navy has the equipment it needs to do its job safely. Unfortunately, because of the Conservatives' poor management, Canada may have to go 18 months without a functional ship. It is time to act.

When will the supply ships be delivered?

[*English*]

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that is a bit rich coming from the NDP. Again, no government has done more to invest in the Royal Canadian Navy than this particular government. What is consistent, and what we can all agree on, is that these measures have all been opposed by the NDP, every single one of them.

* * *

DEMOCRATIC REFORM

Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as time goes on, academics, experts, and now polling show that even the average Canadian feels that the changes to the elections act benefit only the Conservative Party of Canada and not the average voter.

I want to go back to what Preston Manning said and I want the minister to directly address exactly what Preston Manning had to say. He said "...most worrisome for me personally and calls for, I think, immediate and serious attention".

He goes on to say "...to constantly affirm and reaffirm our commitment to extending, rather than limiting, the democratic expression".

He want serious amendments. Will the minister do it? Maybe he would like to point out why Preston Manning is so wrong.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, in fact we are extending Elections Canada's ability to get people out to vote by focusing those efforts on the information Canadians actually need. Those are the basics of voting: where, when, what ID to bring, and what special tools are available to help disabled Canadians cast their ballot. Elections Canada's own data demonstrate that the agency has done a poor job of informing Canadians of that basic information. The fair elections act will ensure that it improves.

* * *

NATIONAL DEFENCE

Ms. Joyce Murray (Vancouver Quadra, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, amid the glamour of last night's Oscars, Canadians were dismayed to see the Conservatives squandering millions on ads promoting programs already around for years, this when soldiers with PTSD and their families suffer today with not enough support thanks to government budget cuts and hiring freezes. The price of just one ad could pay the salary for a PTSD doctor for an entire year.

Why does the government choose partisan self-interest over the health of injured soldiers?

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member has it completely wrong. No government has done more to care for our ill and injured men and women in uniform and for our veterans than this government. We have hired almost 400 full-time mental health professionals. We have increased the budget to unprecedented levels. This for once should have the support of the hon. member.

* * *

AGRICULTURE AND AGRI-FOOD

Mr. Malcolm Allen (Welland, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the grain backlog plaguing western farmers is costing them billions of dollars. On the weekend, former Conservative minister Chuck Strahl said that he warned rail companies years ago that their excuses were not fooling anyone and that he had told them to shape up and stop abusing their duopoly or face regulation, but here we are again: farmers are suffering while the rail companies offer up the same old excuses.

What is the minister going to do? Hopefully it will not be to have another meeting. Will the minister now commit to the House that he will take action so that the rail companies will move that grain to port and get our farmers paid?

●(1455)

Hon. Gerry Ritz (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are working on exactly that. We are exploring all options. Everything that can be done will be done in a timely way.

However, let me quote Dennis Thiessen, a farmer and a director of Grain Growers of Canada:

Oral Questions

We want to thank [the Minister of Agriculture] for continuing to recognize the rail capacity needs of grain farmers and the urgency of the current situation.

I could not have said it better myself.

Ms. Linda Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, perhaps the minister should listen to the Alberta grain growers instead of making the same old tired excuses.

Canadian grains are simply not getting to market. As the weeks go by, grain prices plummet and our farmers face greater losses. The fact, and I know it is hard for those members to take it, is that the rail companies have had ample opportunity to provide fair rail service to farmers. It is clear they will not change without government intervention.

Farmers have been clear in their demand for enforceable performance standards, accountability, and penalties. Why the delay in the regulations?

Hon. Gerry Ritz (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this government takes these types of situations very seriously. These challenges create opportunities to get the job done, but done in the right way.

Those consultations continue on with everyone involved in the grain logistics situation in western Canada predominantly. At the right time and the right place those answers will be unveiled.

* * *

PUBLIC SAFETY

Mr. Garry Breitkreuz (Yorkton—Melville, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in the last few days unelected bureaucrats in the RCMP Canadian firearms program have turned thousands of Canadians into criminals. At the stroke of a pen and without any oversight by Parliament, individuals who owned a number of popular sport shooting firearms had their previously non-restricted firearms reclassified as prohibited. This means that there is a chance that law-abiding gun owners, through no fault of their own, could be charged with unauthorized possession of a prohibited firearm.

What will the Minister of Public Safety do to ensure that no Canadian faces consequences as a result of this unacceptable decision?

Hon. Steven Blaney (Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, CPC): Mr. Speaker, let me first pay tribute to the member for Yorkton—Melville for standing up for the long Canadian opinion of this country.

I will bring forward an amnesty to ensure that individuals in possession of these firearms can continue to possess their property without threat of criminal charges.

[Translation]

Our Conservative government will continue to ensure that Canada is one of the safest countries in the world without penalizing honest citizens.

[English]

RAIL TRANSPORTATION

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, farmers out west know that the Minister of Agriculture has failed miserably at getting prairie wheat out to the west coast.

My question is for the Minister of Transport. When will the government force the railways into service level agreements that would meet the needs of farmers or force them to pay farmers directly? Will the Minister of Transport stand up and answer the question?

Hon. Gerry Ritz (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am happy to answer that on behalf of my good friend and colleague, the Minister of Transport.

We are unlike the former Liberal government, which studied this issue for years and years with the Estey report and the Kroeger report. They went on and on about studies. All of those manuals of study are stored in the basement of Transport Canada.

Having said that, we have been consulting directly with industry and directly with the railways. At the right time and place, the results will be revealed, to the benefit of Canadian farmers.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order, please. It is getting noisy once again. I am going to ask members one last time to refrain from heckling each other while either members are asking the question or the ministers are answering.

The hon. member for Chicoutimi—Le Fjord.

* * *

[Translation]

NATIONAL DEFENCE

Mr. Dany Morin (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, NDP): Mr. Speaker, two weeks ago, we obtained information that the Conservative budget would result in significant cuts at the Bagotville military base, which is in my riding. Although questions have been raised in the House, the Conservatives have refused to confirm or deny this information.

Could the Minister of National Defence show at least a minimum of transparency and tell me whether the Conservatives' budget will actually result in a 19.2% reduction in the operating budget of the Bagotville base? What impact will this have on jobs and the economy in my region?

[English]

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member has not got it right at all with respect to this budget. This government has made unprecedented investments in its defence budget, to the support of the men and women in uniform, and in its procurement and bases across this country.

That will continue under this government.

Oral Questions

●(1500)

STATUS OF WOMEN

Mr. Terence Young (Oakville, CPC): Mr. Speaker, all Canadians are invited to celebrate International Women's Week, this year from March 2 until March 8, with the theme, "Strong women. Strong Canada. Canadian women—Creating Jobs One Business at a Time". This theme recognizes the contribution of women entrepreneurs to our economy and allows Canadians to consider the challenges women face when starting and growing their business.

Would the Parliamentary Secretary for Status of Women please inform the House of how economic action plan 2014 would benefit women?

Mrs. Susan Truppe (Parliamentary Secretary for Status of Women, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for Oakville for his question and for his work on the status of women committee.

Our government is proud to support Canadian women in the workforce and encourage them to lead successful careers. That is why, since 2007, Status of Women Canada has provided more than \$53 million for projects that focus on improving women's economic security and prosperity, including over \$9 million to address women's entrepreneurship. In economic action plan 2014, we would commit \$150,000 to Status of Women Canada to increase mentorship among women entrepreneurs.

This government knows that, when women prosper, Canada prospers.

* * *

[Translation]

CANADA POST

Mr. Alain Giguère (Marc-Aurèle-Fortin, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Canada is the only G7 nation that will not have home mail delivery. In Rosemère, Lorraine, Bois-des-Filion, Charlemagne and Repentigny, the Conservatives are abandoning seniors, people with reduced mobility and small businesses without consulting anyone, be it the municipalities, experts or even the public.

Instead of slashing services to the public, why are the Conservatives not looking at options that would save home mail delivery? I would really like an answer.

[English]

Hon. Lisa Raitt (Minister of Transport, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in 2012, Canada Post delivered 1 billion fewer pieces of mail than it did in 2006. It clearly has a problem with respect to dropping revenue levels. It recognized it and it developed a five-point plan. This is part of its five-point plan that it will be implementing to make sure there is not going to be a burden on the taxpayer.

* * *

[Translation]

CHAMPLAIN BRIDGE

Mr. Jean-François Fortin (Haute-Gaspésie—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the federal government was not fooling anyone with the pseudo business plan it revealed today, especially since the plan did not contain any numbers. The

Government of Quebec, the mayor of Montreal and the mayor of Longueuil have every reason to be disappointed.

The federal government continues to refuse to create a joint office for the project and to guarantee that Quebec will receive its share of infrastructure funding based on merit—\$1 billion—to finance the light rail project that all the partners have requested.

How did the minister manage to present a document that is in as bad a state as the Champlain Bridge?

Hon. Denis Lebel (Minister of Infrastructure, Communities and Intergovernmental Affairs and Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I said earlier, the business plan was presented in mid-January. The member has it all wrong.

The business plan contains privileged information. We will hold a competition on a multi-billion-dollar project. I understand that when people do not have a budget to manage, they can disclose privileged information and make costs go up. That is not how this government works.

We will continue to carefully manage the project to build a new bridge over the St. Lawrence and we will disclose information at the appropriate time.

* * *

HEALTH

Mr. Jean-François Fortin (Haute-Gaspésie—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives, Liberals and NDP are constantly coming up with new ways for the federal government to interfere in health care. They are opting for public servants instead of doctors and nurses.

A report that was just released clearly shows that "these federal intrusions are disrupting how Quebec's health care system functions and, in particular, how it is governed".

What is worse, Quebec is not getting its fair share and is being denied \$103 million each year. That has real implications for Quebec patients.

When will the federal government stop meddling in the health care provided by Quebec and transfer all of the money that rightfully belongs to Quebec patients?

[English]

Hon. Rona Ambrose (Minister of Health, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as the member knows, we are transferring the highest reported health transfer dollars in Canadian history to the provinces and territories.

This record funding will reach \$40 billion by the end of the decade and provide stability and predictability to the system, so that provinces can manage their health systems.

Routine Proceedings

Health transfers in Quebec alone have increased by over \$2.3 billion since 2006, and we now provide over \$7.4 billion annually, so Quebec can manage its health system.

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CANADA-U.S. RELATIONS

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I rise to ask a question today of the Minister of Finance relating to the Foreign Account Tax Compliance Act, FATCA.

On the U.S. side of the border, there are concerns raised that because the treaties have not been ratified through the U.S. Senate, these may not be legally binding treaties in any case; and on the Canadian side of the border, no less a legal expert than Peter Hogg, former dean of Osgoode Hall Law School, has written the advice that this very likely will violate section 15 of the Charter by treating some Canadians differently from others.

More than 30 years ago, I learned constitutional law in a textbook he wrote.

What will the minister say to its constitutionality?

• (1505)

Hon. Jim Flaherty (Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I was taught by Peter Hogg as well. I got an A in the tax course.

The question is an important one. It is important for about a million Canadians who also happen to be citizens of the United States.

The Americans initially proposed that there would be a 30% withholding tax and there would be direct reporting by Canadian banks to the IRS. We got rid of that. They have agreed that we will use our existing framework under the Canada-U.S. tax treaty, which has been successful.

No new taxes will be imposed. The CRA will not assist the IRS in collecting U.S. taxes.

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

[*English*]

SITUATION IN UKRAINE

Mr. Ted Opitz (Etobicoke Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, there have been consultations among all the parties, and if you seek it I believe you would find unanimous consent for the following motion, which I have here in both official languages.

I move, seconded by the member for Parkdale—High Park and by the member for Wascana:

That this House strongly condemn Russia's provocative military intervention in Ukraine; call upon Russia to withdraw its forces and respect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine, as per the commitments in the 1994 Budapest Declaration and under international law; reaffirm the legitimacy of the Government of Ukraine and Ukraine's territorial integrity; support the Government's decision to recall Canada's ambassador in Moscow for consultations and to suspend the Government's engagement in preparation for the G-8 Summit; encourage the Government to work with like-minded partners, including through multilateral forums, to de-escalate the current situation; affirm the Ukrainian people's right of self-determination, free from intervention; and stand with the Ukrainian people as they pursue a free and democratic future.

The Speaker: Does the hon. member have the unanimous consent of the House to propose the 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)

* * *

PETITIONS

PUBLIC TRANSIT

Ms. Olivia Chow (Trinity—Spadina, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to present petitions from people in Toronto.

The petitioners say that Canadians deserve fast, reliable, and affordable public transit, and that since the 2014 federal budget does not include dedicated transit funding, it is estimated that there is a \$32 billion investment gap in transit infrastructure needs across Canada.

The road congestion is costing the GTA economy \$6 billion a year in lost productivity. The average daily commute time is over 80 minutes.

The petitioners are calling on the federal government to provide long-term, predictable, and non-partisan funding for public transit now.

[*Translation*]

VIA RAIL

Mr. Philip Toone (Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have in my hands one part of a petition signed by 24,000 people who are calling for improved VIA Rail service in eastern Canada. The service is in a pitiful state and is at risk of being lost within months. I hope that the government will take note.

• (1510)

[*English*]

IMPAIRED DRIVING

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to present several petitions today.

In the first two petitions, the petitioners acknowledge that the current impaired driving laws are too lenient and call for stiffer penalties.

SEX SELECTION

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in the next petition, the petitioners are calling on the House to condemn discrimination against females occurring through sex selective pregnancy termination.

RAIL TRANSPORTATION

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour of presenting a petition on the electrification of the air-rail link from Union Station to Pearson airport, recognizing it is in the national interest of Canada to have clean, efficient, quiet, modern rail transportation for Toronto, between its major rail and air links.

The petitioners are calling on the federal government to urge the Government of Ontario and Metrolinx to alter their current plans and to express strong preference for full electrification of the service rather than running diesel trains from the beginning.

NAVIGABLE WATERS PROTECTION

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have a second petition to present.

The petitioners are calling on the Government of Canada to protect the Humber River, and to pass Bill C-502, which would re-list sections of the Humber River that are no longer protected by this act.

AGRICULTURE

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present a petition from a number of petitioners.

The petition is entitled, “The Right to Save Seeds”. The petitions recognize the inherent rights of farmers to save, reuse, select, exchange, and sell seeds.

The petitioners are calling on Parliament to refrain from making any changes to the Seeds Act or to the Plant Breeders' Rights Act through Bill C-18, which would take those rights away.

NORTHWEST TERRITORIES DEVOLUTION

Mr. Dennis Bevington (Western Arctic, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise to present a petition signed by many Gwich'in people from the Northwest Territories, who request the House of Commons and Parliament assembled not to approve Bill C-15 or amend the Mackenzie Valley Resource Management Act, as they feel this is an infringement on their comprehensive land claim agreement.

[Translation]

GATINEAU PARK

Ms. Nycole Turmel (Hull—Aylmer, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have yet another petition calling for protection for Gatineau Park. This petition has been signed by many people from my area and from outside the region as well. They support my bill.

[English]

ASSISTED SUICIDE

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to present two petitions.

The first is on a very sensitive and ethically difficult topic, and that is on the question of dying with dignity and Canadians having the right to make their own end-of-life decisions. The petitioners are all from Salt Spring Island and they urge the House to find a way forward on this difficult issue.

Routine Proceedings

LYME DISEASE

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): The second petition, Mr. Speaker, is signed by over 2,500 Canadians from across Canada: within Ontario from Bolton, Ajax, and Toronto; in Alberta, Calgary, and St. Albert; in British Columbia, Victoria, and Penticton; and Prince Edward Island. I will not keep reading the places for all these petitioners, but they call for the House to pass Bill C-442, which went to second reading this morning, my bill for a national Lyme disease strategy.

CANADA POST

Mr. Mike Sullivan (York South—Weston, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to present a petition from residents of Toronto in my riding of York South—Weston, who are concerned that the government is breaking its promise to better protect consumers, that between 6,000 and 8,000 Canada Post workers will lose their jobs, and that the reduction of service could lead to the privatization of Canada Post, an essential public service, according to the government. Therefore, they call upon the Government of Canada to reject Canada Post's plan for reduced services and explore other options for updating Canada Post's business plan.

CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION

Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have a petition from Londoners who are very concerned about a recent tragedy in London, Ontario, that involved the deaths of three members of the same family. Their concern is with regard to the government's practices around citizenship and immigration. They would like the Government of Canada to ensure that CIC is properly staffed in order to ensure that fair and appropriate decisions are reached in a timely fashion with regard to applicants, and that in all of the decisions, humanitarian and compassionate grounds are considered in the applications that are presented.

● (1515)

IMPAIRED DRIVING

Ms. Linda Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am tabling today petitions from a great number of Albertans across the province who are concerned about current impaired driving laws. They are concerned that they are too lenient. They wish the government to consider a number of avenues, including tougher laws, consideration for mandatory minimums, and to re-designate impaired driving causing death as vehicular manslaughter.

Speaker's Ruling

[Translation]

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Mr. Pierre Jacob (Brome—Missisquoi, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have here a petition from my constituents about employment insurance reform. They pay into this insurance all of their lives. It was originally created to support our workforce. Now, six out of every 10 workers are ineligible for benefits. The government is further restricting access to benefits. The recent changes will hurt families, disrupt regional economies and drive wages down. The signatories are calling for the employment insurance changes to be repealed.

DRUMMONDVILLE STATION

Mr. François Choquette (Drummond, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have three petitions to present today.

The first is from my constituents in Drummond who oppose the fact that Drummondville's station was automated. The service is poor as a result, and there are dozens upon dozens of people who are opposed to it.

VIA RAIL

Mr. François Choquette (Drummond, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have another petition signed by people who are opposed to the cancellation of VIA Rail's daily service between Montreal and Halifax.

CANADA POST

Mr. François Choquette (Drummond, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my last petition is from dozens of my constituents who are very upset about the changes coming to Canada Post. Canada will be the only OECD country that will no longer have home mail delivery. Dozens of my constituents are speaking out against that.

[English]

Mr. Matthew Kellway (Beaches—East York, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am rising to present two petitions to the House today.

The first concerns the elimination of door-to-door mail service in Canada. The petitioners are drawing the attention of the House to the fact that the elimination of door-to-door mail delivery will have a particularly adverse impact on seniors and the disabled, who will be forced to travel to their local community mailbox in order to get their mail. They call upon the Government of Canada to reject Canada Post's plan to cut mail services and increase prices and, instead, explore other options for modernizing our postal service delivery.

TORONTO ISLAND AIRPORT

Mr. Matthew Kellway (Beaches—East York, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the second petition has to do with the planned expansion of the Toronto Island airport. The undersigned call upon the Government of Canada to block any changes to the tripartite agreement that would allow jet airplanes or extensions of the Toronto Island airport runways.

[Translation]

VIA RAIL

Mr. Matthew Dubé (Chambly—Borduas, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to table a petition that I worked on with my colleague from Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine. The petitioners

want to save the train that links Montreal and Halifax. This is extremely important. A railway is only as strong as its weakest link. These people recognize the importance of maintaining this service. This is yet another example of how people take this important network for granted.

Thank you.

* * *

[English]

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.

* * *

REQUEST FOR EMERGENCY DEBATE

UKRAINE

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, while the world is watching, the crisis in Ukraine is escalating. I suggest that we take the time to once again deal with that crisis.

In fact, members will recall that back in December, we had a take note debate because of what was taking place regarding the EU trade association agreement. The president of Ukraine at the time backed away from it, which resulted in the people of Ukraine making it known how they felt about that, which ultimately led to a take note debate.

Through the month of January, we saw significant events take place, which ultimately saw us have an emergency debate on the issue. Then, just last week, we had another take note debate.

It is important that we recognize what has taken place over the last 48-plus hours in Ukraine, and since the last time we had a take note debate. The deployment of military personnel from Russia will have, and is having, a very profound impact affecting not only Ukraine and Russia but also, I would argue, the entire world.

Financial markets throughout the world are responding to this crisis. There is also a social crisis situation in Ukraine, and 1.2 million-plus Canadians of Ukrainian heritage from coast to coast to coast are watching what is taking place. They want to see more clarification.

We are asking that the House once again allow for a debate, given what has taken place over the last 48 hours with the deployment of military personnel from Russia and what is happening in Ukraine now.

● (1520)

SPEAKER'S RULING

The Speaker: I thank the hon. member for Winnipeg North for raising this question again and for enumerating the most recent occasions when the House was able to debate the issue. I do note that tomorrow is a supply day and so I will not grant a debate at this time.

Speaker's Ruling

[Translation]

PRIVILEGE

BILINGUALISM IN CANADA'S LEGISLATIVE PROCESS—SPEAKER'S RULING

The Speaker: I am now prepared to rule on the question of privilege raised on February 6, 2014, by the member for Sherbrooke regarding a technical briefing offered by the Minister of State in relation to Bill C-23, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act and other Acts and to make consequential amendments to certain Acts.

[English]

I would like to thank the hon. member for Sherbrooke for having raised this matter, as well as the Minister of State for Democratic Reform, the hon. House leader for the official opposition, and the members for Ottawa—Vanier, Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, and York South—Weston for their interventions.

[Translation]

The member for Sherbrooke explained that, at the technical briefing he attended on Tuesday, February 4 on Bill C-23, the interpretation provided was often inadequate and, as he described it, “[a]t times, there was little or no interpretation or it was of poor quality.” This, he felt, had the effect of preventing parliamentarians from participating fully in subsequent debate on the bill.

The member went on to note that the protection of official languages in the House is fundamental to ensuring equality among all members.

[English]

For his part, the Minister of State for Democratic Reform recognized that no professional interpreters were present for the briefing, but claimed that parliamentarians had been provided all information in both official languages, including the presentation, information sheets, press releases, and the bill itself.

[Translation]

As has been pointed out by the member for Sherbrooke, the guarantee of access to and use of both official languages in parliamentary proceedings, in the record-keeping of those proceedings and in legislation is no less than a constitutional requirement—a cornerstone of our parliamentary system. As your Speaker, it remains one of my principal responsibilities to ensure that members are not impeded in their ability to carry out their parliamentary functions and that their rights and privileges are safeguarded.

[English]

In the case of official languages, the House has a long-standing practice of ensuring the availability of professional interpreters during House and committee proceedings. Indeed, this practice extends to many other activities, such as caucus meetings, briefings or any number of parliamentary activities and events. In such cases, if interpreters are not present, the activity is delayed until they arrive, or, if they are not available, the activity is rescheduled. Likewise, if a technical problem arises with the equipment, proceedings are suspended until the issue is resolved. Members will be familiar with this as it has sometimes happened here in the House.

To the Chair's knowledge, during government-sponsored activities, similar norms are observed. This is illustrated in a case brought

to the attention of the House on October 23, 2013, when a technical briefing on a budget implementation bill was organized but cancelled when it became apparent that no simultaneous interpretation was available. In the *Debates* for that date, at page 303, the government House leader apologized to the House, and stated that:

...arrangements have been made to reschedule this meeting and to hold it properly in both official languages with that capacity available for everyone. It is certainly the expectation of this government that all business be properly conducted in both official languages.

Clearly, in that case, the government viewed the absence of professional simultaneous interpreters as a serious matter.

[Translation]

When a situation is brought to the Chair's attention, it must be assessed within the somewhat narrow confines of parliamentary procedure and precedents. In this case, the member for Sherbrooke is asking the Chair to find that problems with interpretation prevented members from being able to access departmental information and that this constitutes a *prima facie* breach of privilege.

To arrive at such a conclusion, the Chair must assess whether the member has been obstructed in the discharge of his responsibilities in direct relation to proceedings in Parliament.

House of Commons Procedure and Practice, 2nd Edition, at page 109, states:

●(1525)

[English]

In order to find a *prima facie* breach of privilege, the Speaker must be satisfied that there is evidence to support the Member's claim that he or she has been impeded in the performance of his or her parliamentary functions and that the matter is directly related to a proceeding in Parliament.

In addition, at page 111, it indicates that:

[Translation]

A Member may also be obstructed or interfered with in the performance of his or her parliamentary functions by non-physical means. In ruling on such matters, the Speaker examines the effect the incident or event had on the Member's ability to fulfill his or her parliamentary responsibilities.

[English]

The question before the Chair is simple: does attending a departmental briefing that was delivered without full interpretation meet that litmus test? Speaker Parent's ruling of October 9, 1997, is very instructive, when he states at page 688 of the *Debates*:

[Translation]

...activities related to the seeking of information in order to prepare a question do not fall within the strict definition of what constitutes a “proceeding in Parliament” and, therefore, they are not protected by privilege.

*Speaker's Ruling**[English]*

Today's case is analogous in that, whether a member is seeking information in order to prepare a question or to participate in debate on a bill, the same fundamental definitions and principles apply. Whether a member who is preparing to participate in proceedings—whether through a technical briefing or some other means—is not participating in the proceedings themselves. While such preparation is no doubt important, it remains ancillary to, rather than part of, Parliament's proceedings.

Furthermore, in this case a government department is responsible for the situation which the member decries. On this point, Speaker Bosley stated on May 15, 1985, at page 4769 of *Debates*:

I think it has been recognized many times in the House that a complaint about the actions or inactions of government Departments cannot constitute a question of parliamentary privilege.

My own ruling of February 7, 2013, reached the same conclusion, when at page 13869 of *Debates*, I stated:

It is beyond the purview of the Chair to intervene in departmental matters or to get involved in government processes, no matter how frustrating they may appear to be to the member.

[Translation]

The Chair must respect the strict confines of parliamentary privilege in reaching its decision. Therefore, while it appears that the hon. member for Sherbrooke has a legitimate grievance, the Chair cannot conclude that this situation constitutes a prima facie breach of privilege.

That being said, this decision does not diminish members' need for full and equal access to information about legislation nor does it discount the value placed on the provision of such information in both official languages.

While I cannot provide the member for Sherbrooke a privilege-based parliamentary remedy to his grievance, he may wish to explore other means at his disposal by direct discussions with the minister or raising the matter with the Commissioner of Official Languages.

[English]

I thank the House for its attention.

STATEMENTS BY THE MEMBER FOR MISSISSAUGA—STREETSVILLE—
SPEAKER'S RULING

The Speaker: I am now prepared to rule on the question of privilege raised on February 25, 2014, by the House leader of the official opposition regarding statements made in the House by the member for Mississauga—Streetsville.

[Translation]

I would like to thank the hon. House Leader of the Official Opposition for having raised this matter, as well as the hon. Leader of the Government in the House and the hon. members for Winnipeg North and Kingston and the Islands for their comments.

I also want to acknowledge the statements made by the member for Mississauga—Streetsville.

[English]

In raising this matter, the hon. House leader of the official opposition claimed that the hon. member for Mississauga—

Streetsville had deliberately misled the House on February 6, 2014, during debate on Bill C-23, the fair elections act, when he stated that he had witnessed evidence of voter fraud firsthand. He further argued that the matter was not resolved by the statements made by the member for Mississauga—Streetsville on February 24 and 25, where he admitted that, contrary to his original claim, he had not actually witnessed what he had originally claimed to have witnessed. In his view, this was not a simple case of someone misspeaking; he argued rather that it was a case where the member deliberately chose to take something he knew not to be true and present it as eyewitness evidence—something so egregious, it constituted contempt.

The hon. leader of the government in the House noted that the member for Mississauga—Streetsville had fulfilled his obligation to correct the record so that no inaccuracies persisted. He suggested that in and of itself this should be sufficient to "...rebut any concern that there has been a contempt".

• (1530)

[Translation]

This incident highlights the primordial importance of accuracy and truthfulness in our deliberations. All members bear a responsibility, individually and collectively, to select the words they use very carefully and to be ever mindful of the serious consequences that can result when this responsibility is forgotten.

In calling on the Chair to arrive at a finding of prima facie in this case, the hon. House Leader of the Official Opposition cited my ruling of May 7, 2012, where at page 7650 of the *Debates*, I reminded the House that, before finding that a member had deliberately misled the House, three conditions had to be met:

[English]

...one, it must be proven that the statement was misleading; two, it must be established that the member making the statement knew at the time that the statement was incorrect; and three, that in making the statement, the member intended to mislead the house.

Arguing all three of these conditions had been met, he concluded that a breach of privilege had occurred.

It was with these criteria in mind that I undertook a thorough review of all relevant statements made in the House on this matter, focusing particularly, of course, on the statements made by the hon. member for Mississauga—Streetsville.

Originally, on February 6, he stated:

I have actually witnessed other people picking up the voter cards, going to the campaign office of whatever candidate they support and handing out these voter cards to other individuals, who then walk into voting stations with friends who vouch for them with no ID.

Later that day, he added, "I will relate...something I have actually seen."

It was only on February 24 that he rose to state:

...on February 6...I made a statement...that is not accurate. I just want to reflect the fact that I have not personally witnessed...[fraudulent activity]...and want the record to properly show that.

On February 25, he returned to the House, characterized his February 6 statement as “an error on my part” and apologized “to all Canadians and to all members of the House”, adding that, “It was never my intention, in any way, to mislead the House”. The Chair takes due note that the member for Mississauga—Streetsville has admitted that his February 6 statement was not true and that he has apologized for his mistake.

[*Translation*]

As was noted by the hon. Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, we all recognize that there is an enduring practice here of giving members the benefit of the doubt when the accuracy of their statements is challenged. It is often the case that questions of privilege raised on such matters are found to be disputes as to facts rather than *prima facie* questions of privilege, primarily due to the high threshold of evidence that the House expects.

Speaker Parent stated on page 9247 of *Debates* on October 19, 2000:

[*English*]

Only on the strongest and clearest evidence can the House or the Speaker take steps to deal with cases of attempts to mislead members.

From what the member for Mississauga—Streetsville and other members have revealed, it is quite clear that the House has been provided with two narratives that are contradictory statements. At the same time, the member for Mississauga—Streetsville stated that he had no intention of misleading the House.

[*Translation*]

Speaker Milliken was faced with a similar set of circumstances in February 2002 when the then Minister of National Defence, Art Eggleton, provided contradictory information to the House. In ruling on a question of privilege raised about the contradiction, Speaker Milliken stated on February 1, at page 8581 of *Debates*:

I am prepared, as I must be, to accept the minister’s assertion that he had no intention to mislead the House.

[*English*]

In keeping with that precedent, I am prepared to accord the same courtesy to the member for Mississauga—Streetsville.

At the same time, the fact remains that the House continues to be seized of completely contradictory statements. This is a difficult position in which to leave members, who must be able to depend on the integrity of the information with which they are provided to perform their parliamentary duties.

Accordingly, in keeping with the precedent cited earlier in which Speaker Milliken indicated that the matter merited “...further consideration by an appropriate committee, if only to clear the air”, I am prepared in this case for the same reason to allow the matter to be put to the House.

I therefore invite the hon. House leader of the official opposition to move the traditional motion at this time.

Privilege

● (1535)

REFERENCE TO STANDING COMMITTEE ON PROCEDURE AND HOUSE AFFAIRS

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I move:

That the question of privilege related to the statements made in the House of Commons by the member for Mississauga—Streetsville be referred to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

Mr. Speaker, thank you for the ruling you just delivered to the House of Commons. I will read it in detail later, but I wanted to make some introductory comments based on what I have heard today and the debate that preceded this.

We have just now moved the motion of contempt that has been found in the House against the member for Mississauga—Streetsville. As you noted in your ruling, the criteria or threshold that we use in the House of Commons to find a *prima facie* case of contempt is a very high one. It is in fact not easy to do. Canadians might be surprised by this, but the rules that govern the House, as pointed out by the Conservatives and you, is to give members the benefit of the doubt. In many instances, and it is in the nature of healthy debate, that there are differences of opinion and differences of interpretation of fact, and if every time a member of Parliament were called out in contempt for a variation of evidence, then we would be here all day.

The three criteria that you have laid down are very specific and very difficult to accomplish, as the member for Mississauga—Streetsville has somehow managed to do. It has to be proven that the statement was in fact misleading; that the person who gave the misleading statement knew at the time that it was misleading; and that in giving that misleading statement, the member of Parliament knowingly attempted to mislead the House of Commons and Canadians. To accomplish all three, as the member did not once, but twice, in referring to so-called evidence that he had personally witnessed with regard to the unfair election act, is quite an accomplishment, not one that anyone in the House should seek to do, and yet he has managed to.

The reason we take time in the House this afternoon, and here I suspect some of my colleagues will do so and I would hope that members from the government side would do so as well, to address this issue is that it is now being referred to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. As to when that committee will take this up, I would suggest that it will be informed not only by your ruling but also by the contributions that have been made to the debate to this point.

I wanted to point out the following very specifically. I know that the government House leader will be very attuned to this, because in defending the Conservative member for Mississauga—Streetsville, he made a number of points that the committee will have to grapple with in relation to his defence of the member. I will cite this because it has some bearing.

He said the following in response to our question of privilege:

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As everyone is, I am sure, aware, the presumption in this House is that we are all taken at our word, that the statements we make are truthful and correct. That we are given the benefit of that doubt brings with it a strong obligation on us, in the cases where a member misspeaks, to correct the record....

In this particular instance, the member for Mississauga—Streetsville, has done exactly that. Having misspoken in this House and having realized his comments were in error, he has come to this House and corrected the record.

...The fact that we are even discussing this point of privilege, the fact that it has been raised, is only because the hon. member has taken that duty and obligation seriously, has come to this House and corrected the record.

I have two points on this. One is that it seems that the government's frame of reference on this is to congratulate the member for Mississauga—Streetsville for having knowingly misled the House, to say “way to go”, having misspoke, having misled—and here we are not allowed to use the term “lie”—having done these things, he then came back and said that he maybe misspoke, and then tried to move on.

It seems to me that to congratulate members for having done such a thing, and then to stand for 30 seconds and try to dismiss it, would send the absolute wrong signal to all members who participate in debates, that all someone has to do is to make a big speech and show so-called evidence, and not tell the truth, and then come back two weeks later in this case, and say “I misspoke, let us move on”. It does not work. It does not work for the nature of Parliament, for the nature of this House of Commons.

He suggested in his statements that he does not want to encourage any kind of a chilling effect. Here, let us get the three conditions right: if members are proven to have misled the House, if they knew it at the time that they were misleading the House, and that they intended to mislead the House.

If he does not want to create any chilling effect for anyone doing those things, I have an idea. Do not mislead the House in the first place. Do not knowingly go about spreading mistruths about something as fundamental as our Elections Act. Do not say we should congratulate him, well done, for having spoken about something as fundamental as our election laws in an untruthful manner, and then his coming back and having the courage—a word that I will use carefully—to attempt not once, but twice, to correct the record in some off-handed way.

● (1540)

The reason I come back to this is that we will explore how it was that this sudden, new-found love of the truth came to be. I hope the government will encourage this exploration. The Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, in his intervention in the debate, said that the member should be congratulated, because he had the ability to come back to try to correct the record, saying that he misspoke. Why did he misspeak?

There have been several media reports, which we have to verify at committee. We would hope to call the member for Mississauga—Streetsville so that he can defend his actions. In the accounts we have since had in the media, such as in *The Globe and Mail*, Elections Canada was notified, because this is a grievous thing he talked about. I have a few citations from the media, if you seek them, Mr. Speaker.

He said that he witnessed electoral fraud. He said that he watched people take the identifications of other Canadians and take them to

some party's headquarters, where it had its volunteers take them and vote with that identification, which actually confuses the different kinds of identification that are mailed to Canadians. I believe that my colleague from Toronto—Danforth may explore this a bit.

The member for Mississauga—Streetsville said that he watched all of these things take place. He then used this so-called evidence, which he later admitted was not true, to support the government's unfair elections act. That is the evidence they used.

Perhaps the only reason he came back was that Elections Canada said that a sitting member of Parliament watched electoral fraud take place. It wanted to know more, because it sounded like a problem. Maybe there was a problem with voter ID cards and it should get into this. Maybe it should ask the member to come forward to Elections Canada and to Canadians to explain, first of all, why if he witnessed a crime, he did not report it. That seems to be an interesting thing for a tough-on-crime party.

Second, if he witnessed electoral fraud, why would he not have gone to Elections Canada to say that he saw something terrible happen, that he had watched people being disenfranchised, votes being rigged, and ballots being stuffed into boxes? He did neither of those things. He just used it as evidence in a place we call the House of Commons. One would think he would have used more discretion.

In terms of contempt, it is important to understand that the bar is very high. It has been set by you, Mr. Speaker, and previous Speakers, to guide us as members of Parliament.

There are other instances. You referred to one in your ruling. The former minister of defence, Art Eggleton, was found in contempt after talking about the transfer of Afghan prisoners. He was found in contempt, having knowingly misled the House about something as grievous as that.

Members might remember the infamous memo in which the minister at the time, minister Bev Oda, inserted the word “not” and then later said that it had never happened and was not true, when it was in fact completely true. She denied funding for a group as important as KAIROS. That was the effort there.

We now have the member for Mississauga—Streetsville misleading the House, and knowingly doing so, about something as fundamental as our Elections Act. It is not commendable that the member was forced to come back and admit that what he said was not true. It is serious.

I was somewhat taken aback, as I looked over the government House leader's comments, at how celebratory he was of this moment. We seek the motivation behind this. This is something we will be exploring in the committee. It will be of interest to all members of Parliament and to all Canadians.

The word “contempt” is an interesting notion. It is the frame we use when a member of Parliament goes so far. I thought I would look up the definition, because sometimes we throw these words around somewhat casually. I thought I would seek out the definition. Contempt is:

a feeling that a person or a thing is beneath consideration or worthless, or deserving scorn....

What we are talking about is not the member for Mississauga—Streetsville. We are talking about Canada's Parliament. When we say that someone has been found in contempt, it is the feeling that a person or a thing, in this case it is the House of Commons, is beneath consideration. It is worthless or deserving of scorn.

We, on this side, do not believe that. We believe that this is, in fact, a sacred place, where we seek the truth. We seek to hold the government to account on its spending measures, its policies, and its laws. The law we are considering right now goes to the heart of all of our efforts to serve the public. All of us here stand in free and fair elections.

We just heard another plea for an emergency debate and much consideration.

● (1545)

I heard my friend from Halifax commend the government for its work and efforts in Ukraine, where there are people fighting and struggling, in a struggle that has left many people dead, to sustain and support the idea that people can have democratic governance. We are debating that very issue when we are debating the government's unfair election act.

To have a member of Parliament who is duly and fairly elected come forward and claim electoral fraud in defence of and justification for that bill, then to have him caught out not having told the truth, then to have the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, who, as I am, is meant to respect and hold up the fundamental democratic principles of this place, say that the member is not deserving of condemnation but of praise, having been caught somehow and made some half-apology and then had slightly more contrition, is contempt. That is contempt for this place and for all of us as members of Parliament.

The conditions have been met. I will remind the members of the House of where they and their team take this ruling. On page 75 in Erskine May's *A treatise on the law, privileges, proceedings and usage of Parliament*, "parliamentary privilege" is defined as the following: "...the sum of the peculiar rights enjoyed by each House collectively... and by Members of each House individually, without which they could not discharge their functions,..."

Without these particular rules in place, we cannot do our job. We have found out that this one piece of evidence the government has been using that actual electoral fraud took place, and therefore we need this bill, and therefore members of Parliament should vote for it, is not true. We take members' word as members of Parliament in good faith, and yet we found it not to be true.

Let us take the words directly from the member for Mississauga—Streetsville. He said, in his alleged apology:

...I rise on a point of order with respect to debate that took place on February 6...

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

Here is what the member was correcting. He said:

...I want to talk a bit about this vouching system again.... On mail delivery day when the voter cards are delivered to community mailboxes in apartment buildings, many of them are discarded in the garbage can or the blue box. I have

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actually witnessed other people picking up the voter cards, going to the campaign office of whatever candidate they support....

How the member witnessed them going to other campaign offices is a fascinating bit of evidence to me, but so be it. That will be for him to rationalize. He is visiting other campaign offices, I suppose, or maybe he only had access to one. He continued:

....going to the campaign office of whatever candidate they support and handing out these voter cards to other individuals, who then walk into voting stations with friends who vouch for them with no ID.

Does the minister not believe this kind of thing will get cleaned up properly with this bill?

There it is right there: "Does the Minister not believe this kind of thing will get cleaned up properly with this bill?" He said that he had cited a problem of voter fraud. He said that he believed that voter fraud was happening, because he watched it happen, so we needed this piece of legislation to clean up that voter fraud, yes? No. It is not true. This is one piece of evidence the government has used.

We have heard the Minister of State (Democratic Reform), a term I use loosely, time and again on questions put by us, to criticisms placed before him by the Chief Electoral Officer, by experts in voting, and by Preston Manning, for goodness' sake. When we have asked this democratic reform minister about these particular problems with his bill, what did he say? He cited evidence of voter fraud. He cited concerns and conspiracy theories that this is a problem, and that is why we need the bill.

This is a solution looking for a problem, and if they cannot find the problem, they invent it. They mislead the House on the so-called fraud they have seen.

Here is the member's other comment. The member for Mississauga—Streetsville said:

Earlier this afternoon I asked the Minister of State for Western Economic Diversification a question. I think my friend from York South—Weston will appreciate this because, just like the riding I represent, there are a lot of apartment buildings in his riding.

He has had a lot of time to reflect on this. Does he continue down this path? Did he misspeak earlier, or does he double down on this? It is such a good piece of evidence. A sitting member of Parliament actually watched voter fraud go on and people cheat during elections. Well, he doubled down.

● (1550)

He continued:

I will relate to him something I have actually seen. On the mail delivery day when voter cards are put in mailboxes, residents come home, pick them out of their boxes, and throw them in the garbage can. I have seen campaign workers follow, pick up a dozen of them afterward, and walk out. Why are they doing that? They are doing it so they can hand those cards to other people, who will then be vouched for at a voting booth and vote illegally. That is going to stop.

This would stop with their bill. What is going to stop? It is this thing that did not happen. Why would we have the legislation?

If *a* is not true and we raise concerns *b*, *c*, and *d*, then suddenly, *b*, *c*, and *d* start making a lot more sense. If there is not actual voter fraud going on, if the problems the minister keeps citing and the member for Mississauga—Streetsville keeps mentioning are not going on, then there is something else.

Privilege

What we see from Neufeld, who wrote the report the minister likes to cite, from Canadians, when asked, and from experts in the field who actually deal with this is that this is a partisan piece of legislation.

It is unprecedented in Canadian history. When reforming our election laws, it has always been the fact that whatever the party, whatever the historical situation, political preference, or debates of the day, the government has always engaged the opposition and Canadians broadly. Why? It is because it is not about the Conservative Party of Canada. It is not about its chances of holding onto its slim majority.

It is about the Canadian people. It is about the democratic society we have built and fought for over generations. That is what this should be about, and it is not in this case.

What do we have here? What has this debate become? What is the House of Commons if, when debating something so critical as our electoral laws and the very legitimacy of governments to make law and pass budgets, MPs mislead the House? They come back a couple of weeks later and say, “Never mind that. I misspoke. Let us move on”, to try to persuade members of Parliament and people watching and listening. These are people who care, who do not become cynical. Lord knows, they have enough reasons to be cynical. They have watched the government destroy the census, fire and muzzle scientists, and ignore facts time and again. If the facts do not fit the argument, the Conservatives switch it around and twist logic to the point of breaking.

We have it here again. It is not easy to do what the member for Mississauga—Streetsville accomplished. He somehow managed to do something that only a few members of Parliament in the history of our country have been able to do, which is to be found in contempt of Parliament.

I do not know how he goes back to his voters and says that he represents them well. That is for him to answer. I do not know how the government House leader, the Prime Minister, and all the people who support him on that side feel good about this situation or feel that they have not stepped a little too far this time and been caught.

Who knew that what we say in this place actually mattered? Who knew that people were actually listening, like Elections Canada, like people who participated in the election where he said he watched fraud happen. Who knew that they were watching, and when they heard that there was electoral fraud in that campaign, they felt that they had better do something about that, because if that was true, it was a problem?

Lo and behold, it was not true. Lo and behold, our words do matter when Elections Canada or whoever it was from the Conservative Party contacted the member and said, “I know what you said, and we bend the truth all the time in the Conservative Party, but you actually may have misled. You may have lied. You have to get back in there and apologize and try to cover this over”.

That is because what it does is discredit all the rest of the arguments being made by the government, by the democratic reform minister, and by the Prime Minister as to the necessity of this bill.

As to the alleged problems it is looking to correct, and we have to say “allegedly”, because it has now been proven that one of the government’s central arguments, which was made in the House not once but twice, was not true. It was rumour. It was invented.

The member for Mississauga—Streetsville has a lot to answer for. He will do so at the procedure and House affairs committee. We will call other witnesses who can shed some light as to how this was found out. Did he have a moment?

We see this as grievous. We see contempt for Parliament as one of the worst things a member of Parliament can do to this place and its reputation. We need to restore it, not bring it further down.

● (1555)

Mr. Ted Hsu (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, earlier, the Chair, at the end of the ruling, said that there were too many contradictory statements in this House.

If every time a Canadian went to read the record of this House of Commons they had to check to see if something an hon. members said was corrected later on, would Canadians think of us as hon. members? Things cannot be that way.

I have a question for my hon. colleague from Skeena—Bulkley Valley. Does the member think there should be a system put into place so that the official record of this chamber may be corrected? If anybody read a statement or looked at a video where a statement was later corrected, that person would see that the statement had been corrected, or would see in the video when a member stood up to say something that it was later retracted.

Then we would not have to worry about whether something we are reading which was said in this House of Commons was true or not.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Mr. Speaker, I am not sure what the specific proposal would be.

The member is right. Canadians cannot check the record, nor should they be expected to check the record every time an MP gets up and says something. What is the sense of this whole thing if we doubt everything and then have to go and fact check it?

The ideal would be not to lie in the first place, to come in with evidence that is true, and when a member says they have seen something, that they have actually seen it. That is the ideal. That is why we were afforded these privileges that you and I share, Mr. Speaker, as well as all of our colleagues.

When we stand in this place and say something, we try to trust one another. That is perhaps hard for Canadians to believe, that there can be an ability to have vigorous debate and to dispute the facts of whether the government is telling the truth about a program, for instance. However, when somebody says they saw something, we are all under the rules that guide us in this place that we are meant to trust one another, at least that much. When these kinds of things happen, when members are found in contempt in this place, that trust is eroded just a little bit more. There is not that much territory left to us.

This has to be corrected. The government has to realize its ways. It has to allow for cross-country hearings on this bill, to allow Canadians to have their say and have the truth about how our elections ought to work in Canada.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I listened with great interest to my hon. colleague. It is indeed a sad day.

The decision that will be made by this committee will be studied, and it will have an impact in the Westminster systems around the world. That is how the parliamentary system works.

Contempt of Parliament is about the interference and obstruction in the making of laws in a country. In Australia, that is a crime. If members obstruct Parliament in their duty, they go to jail.

I would like to ask my hon. colleague a question. Even though we have a Conservative-dominated committee, and because we are part of a much larger system of parliamentary democracy that goes back centuries, what does he think about the importance of the decision that will be made on this deliberate interference and undermining of the creation of a law in Canada? What significance will it have to the overall credibility of the parliamentary system worldwide?

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Mr. Speaker, as has been famously said, it is a terrible system but it is great when compared to the alternatives.

I will not speak specifically to what measures the committee might take. I do not sit on this committee. I have great confidence in the New Democratic members who do.

The fact is that in Australia the repercussions are more than a slap on the wrist: one faces jail. That would certainly give pause to members when debating a bill, when bringing forward evidence and facts. Members would not want to get caught out like Bev Oda did, or like the member for Mississauga—Streetsville did, or Mr. Eggleton.

While they may be impassioned about a certain debate one way or the other, it does not justify lying. It does not allow the member of Parliament, somebody who makes this their service, their occupation, something they would hopefully hold pride in, to think of Parliament as a contemptuous place, somewhere they have no duty-bound honour.

In terms of the effect on other Westminster systems, Mr. Speaker, you would know that we are constantly relying on the rulings and the guidance of other Westminster-style Parliaments, in the U.K. and around the world.

The fact is that this is going on here in Canada. It started small, but the effects of it linger. If one were to bring forward a proposal in which contempt was then to lead to more serious consequences than they do right now, I would expect the Conservative tough-on-crime Party to be the first one in line. However, it has been in power for eight years and has not made the suggestion. That may offer more insight into the way it puts its talking points together than its true interest in making this place less contemptible.

• (1600)

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I will tread carefully here. I happen to count the member for Mississauga—Streetsville as a friend, and I know him to be a good

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person. However, I see these statements as being at incomprehensible odds. I commend the official opposition for raising this, and I thank the Speaker for allowing us to dig into it.

As I probably will not be allowed to say anything in committee, I would like to propose an alternative explanation and hope that my friends and colleagues will look in that direction, and that is in the direction of the Prime Minister's Office that writes all the speeches for Conservative members.

I do not happen to believe that Bev Oda lied, by the way, at least she did not lie when she initially said she did not put the word “not” in there. I can use her name as she is no longer in this place. It is clear to me from the chronology of events on the signing of those documents that she signed the document to approve funding to KAIROS, and that subsequently the Prime Minister's Office told her she was not allowed to do that because “we do not like those people”. That office put in the “not”, and she covered for it. That, to me, is the chronology that makes the most sense.

As a somewhat objective observer, the chronology that makes sense in this instance is that an over-torqued speech was handed to a member who then read it and realized that he could not live with having said something he never saw.

I hope that when this goes to committee we will seek out the truth, and not just seek to destroy one member's reputation. As I said, I know the member to be a good person.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Mr. Speaker, I think my friend is misguided on the motivation for this. She talked about destroying people. This is about maintaining Parliament's dignity, or what shred of it is left after we hear the contemptuous comments from across the way on a daily basis.

Her question is about torqued-up speeches, as she calls them, by the Prime Minister's Office. The Prime Minister's Office is famous for, and takes great credit and pride in, the fact that the control is near absolute. Conservative backbenchers rallied against this control, seeking to make their own statements prior to question period. They wanted to be allowed to use their own thoughts and words as members of Parliament while also existing in the Conservative Party of Canada. What a fascinating idea that would be. Two worlds collide.

I do not know if the member perhaps received these comments directly from the Prime Minister's Office in a pre-prepared speech. I read through *Hansard*, the official record of this place, and some comments appear to have been made, and perhaps they were made in a speech and then they were reinforced. As I said in my comments, individuals double-down when something seems to sound pretty good to justify a bad bit of legislation. However, I do not know.

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I cannot speak to the motivation, but I can speak to what this effort is about. The Speaker's ruling is not seeking to destroy somebody. We are not seeking to destroy somebody with our attempts on this question of privilege. We are seeking to empower the House of Commons and provide it with the dignity that it was designed to have in the debates we have, so that members can speak truthfully here and be understood to be speaking the truth, from their interpretation of it, to allow rigorous debate to take place, and even occasionally to find common ground. Heaven forbid that Parliament would do what it was actually meant to do under a Conservative government.

The fact remains that this is more than about the member for Mississauga—Streetsville. This is a pattern of language. This is a problem. This is a serious debate because it is about our election laws. It is about that foundation of our democracy. To be so free with the truth and so at ease with whether something like electoral fraud did or did not happen is reprehensible, regardless of the individual and his qualities. It matters. Lo and behold, it matters.

This is a good day. This is a good day over a very bad thing. Let us correct this. Let us make sure that the punishment and the consequences meet the crime, as Conservatives are so often happy to say. I am talking about other people. I am not talking so much about Conservatives, but we will find out.

It is a Conservative-dominated committee, and that is a concern. We hope that it will be public because that would allow a free and transparent view of this case. Everyone could see the motivation, not only behind the misleading in the first place, but the correction after the fact. Questions could be answered, such as: Why did it take two weeks? Who talked to the member? Who talked to Elections Canada? Was it notified? Were other people who participated in the election notified? The committee can call whomever it deems right to call.

•(1605)

[*Translation*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): It is my duty, pursuant to Standing Order 38, to inform the House that the question to be raised tonight at the time of adjournment is as follows: the hon. member for Louis-Hébert, Quebec Bridge.

[*English*]

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I consider this to be an extremely important motion that has been brought forward. The topic we were discussing this afternoon is the responsibility of members of Parliament to speak truthfully and accurately in this place. In fact, any time an MP speaks, even outside this place, we all hope he would be speaking with a great degree of accuracy. A few things have been said this afternoon that I think have not been accurate, and I want to try to set the record straight.

My friend the opposition House leader has mentioned several times in his intervention that the member for Mississauga—Streetsville was lying. That is simply not true.

The Speaker's ruling, and an earlier ruling by former Speaker Milliken, in the Eggleton case, both stated that the respective Speakers did not find that the member in question had deliberately

misled the House, merely that he was referring this issue to committee for further clarification and examination. I take issue with my colleague opposite, who is trying to characterize the comments made by the member for Mississauga—Streetsville as lying, because that simply is not what the Speaker has found.

The other thing I want to point out, and I do not think it really needs to be pointed out to members, particularly any member who has been here for any length of time, as my friend from Saanich—Gulf Islands said, there are opportunities when all members, and I emphasize all members, tend to torque their language a bit, perhaps to embellish or to exaggerate. Is that something we should encourage? Certainly not. Does it happen regularly? Yes, it does.

I would point out that even today in question period, I only noticed one instance, there may have been more, but certainly in one instance, a Liberal member, the member for Markham—Unionville, with a prepared question, when he was questioning the Minister of Finance he misspoke about how many budgets our government has run in deficit.

The Speaker mentioned, as did my hon. colleague, that there are three thresholds to be met to find whether there should be a question of privilege. The member for Markham—Unionville was a former member of cabinet. I believe he was a minister of Revenue Canada. I believe he also has serious bona fides when it comes to economics and finance. I would suggest that the member knew full well what our record was and that we did not run eight consecutive deficit budgets, as he suggested in his question. That is simply not the case, and I suggest that the member for Markham—Unionville knew that.

Second, I believe he knew his statement was wrong when he made it. Third, he was aware that the statement was wrong as he presented it.

My point is, should we then bring down a question of privilege on the member for Markham—Unionville? I do not think that will happen because statements like that are made routinely in this Parliament.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: I am not defending them. I am not suggesting that it was wrong. My friends from the Liberal side are heckling because they do not like it. The truth hurts. If they want to have a serious debate about this, I would encourage my friends to listen.

I am suggesting that this happens perhaps all too routinely in this place, but should it then be considered contempt? My friend opposite continues to make the point that it was contempt. Again, that is simply not accurate. The Speaker has merely referred this to committee for an examination.

There are two or three points that we already know. We know that the member for Mississauga—Streetsville did misspeak. He admits it freely, but he also came back to this House and admitted that what he said on February 6 was not accurate. He has corrected the record. He has apologized, and now all facts are known in this case.

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•(1610)

The members opposite think that was a matter of contempt and that the member for Mississauga—Streetsville deliberately misled the House, when in fact the Speaker, in his ruling, suggested that this was simply not the case.

The problem we now have before us is that because the member for Mississauga—Streetsville came back to this place and corrected the record, he is now facing possible sanction. What the consequence or the net result of this may be is that the truth begins to be pushed underground.

I would suggest, and I doubt that I would have any opposition from members across the floor, that had the member for Mississauga—Streetsville said nothing and had he not come back to this place and admitted that he spoke in error, nothing would have been done. In fact, Mr. Speaker, I would point out to you, and I have not heard this yet in debate, that prior to the member coming back to the House, he corrected the record at the procedure and House affairs committee. When the Minister of State for Democratic Reform appeared before the committee, the member for Mississauga—Streetsville stated, on the issue of voter ID cards and vouching, that he had heard many times from people who had worked for him in his prior business that they had seen people would go into blue boxes and garbage bins in apartment buildings to withdraw voter ID cards. However, he said that was anecdotal and that he had not seen it personally. I believe that alone speaks to the fact that the member for Mississauga—Streetsville was not deliberately trying to mislead the House.

I would also point out one other fact. My friend the opposition House leader had spoken of whether the comments from the member for Mississauga—Streetsville were said deliberately in a prepared text. I would point out that they simply were not.

When he made those comments, which were inaccurate—and I will not defend that, as they were certainly inaccurate—they were said when he was making extemporaneous comments. They were not part of his prepared text, which means to me, most certainly, that he was not deliberately trying to mislead the House. Had he done so in a prepared text, then I would probably have to agree that this was indeed a deliberate misrepresentation of the facts, but he did so in the heat of debate and speaking extemporaneously.

However, now, if we are to believe members opposite, by correcting the record, he should then be punished with a finding of contempt. I do not know how many times members opposite have also met this threshold of knowingly saying something that was untrue, something that was not accurate, yet contempt rulings have not been brought forward when members opposite torqued the debate, whether in questions in question period or in general debate on a piece of legislation.

Should it happen? Absolutely not. Would I like to see everything said in this place said in a reasoned, sensible manner, devoid of the partisanship that we see all too often? Of course.

Members opposite, particularly the one for Timmins—James Bay, who is laughing and heckling—

Mr. Charlie Angus: Laughing at you.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, he is probably a poster boy for people who can torque issues, yet I do not think we have ever seen—

Mr. Matthew Dubé: He's not a liar. That's the thing.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, anyone bring forward a question of privilege or try to find that member in contempt.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Because you couldn't.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, is it distasteful from time to time? It certainly is. Is it personal? Many times it is. Do the members on our side do the same? Yes, we do.

•(1615)

Since the Chair has not found the member to have lied, even though my colleagues opposite keep trying to tell that tale, they perhaps should stand up and set the record straight, because the Chair did not find the member for Mississauga—Streetsville to have deliberately misled this House; in other words, he did not find that he had lied, merely that the committee should take an examination and try to clarify the comments surrounding his statements of February 6.

While I know the opposition wants to convince Canadians that there is some nefarious reason behind the comments of my colleague from Mississauga—Streetsville, I would purport to you and everyone else in this place that he merely did what so many of us have done previously: in the heat of debate, he had simply gone overboard.

There is no excuse for that. We do have a responsibility to speak accurately. However, if there is anyone who can stand in his or her place today and say that in his or her entire career in politics he or she has never torqued a comment, never exaggerated a claim, never perhaps gone a little beyond the pale when it comes to making comments during debate, let that person speak now, because that will be the first person that I have found who could make that claim, and I have been in politics an awfully long time.

That is how we are conditioned. That is what we do. It is not right to do so. The member for Mississauga—Streetsville recognizes that, first and foremost. No one else had brought this forward before my colleague stood in his place in this chamber and admitted to the House that what he said on February 6 was not accurate. He apologized for his comments. He set the record straight.

My friend the opposition House leader said that he should not be congratulated for that. I agree. However, at the very least, he should not be condemned for setting the record straight. He did what every responsible member of Parliament should do, which is that when one misspeaks in this House or says something that is not accurate, the member has an obligation to come back and correct the record. My colleague did that. As I pointed out, he did so earlier at committee, when the Minister of State for Democratic Reform appeared.

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How can we talk about motivation? My friend opposite talks about motivation. He wants to explore motivation. It is quite simple. We work, live, act, and react in a hyperpartisan environment. There is certainly enough blame to be thrown around on all sides of the House. The opposition will obviously say that this partisanship, this mean-spirited environment and culture we seem to live in these days, is caused by our government. Arguments can be made to the opposite. Again, the members opposite who seem to be doing most of the heckling seem to be the ones who are most prone to making these personal, vitriolic, sometimes hyperpartisan attacks during question period. That is the environment we live in. It is unfortunate.

As a bit of an aside to this, I recall when Jack Layton, the former leader of the NDP, first came to this place as the official opposition leader. He pledged that his party would bring a new sense of decorum and respect to this place. Unfortunately, that did not last very long. I had great admiration for Mr. Layton, as did most of us in this place, and I wish that spirit of decorum and respect that he talked of was evident today. I think this place would be a better place for debate.

However, on the issue that is before us today, I simply state once again what we know. The member misspoke. He came back to this place and admitted that he had not spoken accurately on February 6. He apologized for his comments and not speaking accurately. All of the facts are now known and before us.

• (1620)

This has happened many times in the past in this place, and there have not been findings of contempt in all of the times that I have been here when a member has stood in this place and apologized.

Apparently that is not sufficient for member of the opposition. I can understand that. Opposition parties are trying to score some political points here, and I do not begrudge them that. It is what opposition parties do. They opposed Bill C-23, the fair elections act. We understand that. We understand that they are trying to do everything in their power to delay, obstruct, or perhaps even kill that piece of legislation. I get that. However, that is what I believe is truly behind the motion we are debating today.

If we want to talk about motivation, let us ask what the motivation is for the question of privilege that was first raised, which is to delay discussion of the fair elections act at committee as long as possible.

Mr. Speaker, as you well know, we have here a debate that is procedurally unlimited. No legislation will be brought forward as long as we are debating this question of privilege.

I was somewhat surprised, frankly, that when the motion was made to refer this matter to committee, the opposition did not put a deadline on it, because that would have perhaps forced this question of privilege to be dealt with immediately at committee, which would then further delay any attempts at examination of Bill C-23. Perhaps they will bring an amendment forward to try and do just that. However, that is the motivation that I see, and that is what is driving this debate today.

In conclusion, I agree, and I believe my colleague the member for Mississauga—Streetsville would also agree, that if one does not speak accurately in this place, records should be corrected. If one does not speak with accuracy on any point, whether it be legislation

or during debate, it should not be tolerated. However, when is it right to punish someone for correcting the record? When does one become a victim for speaking what one needed to say, which was to correct the record?

I do not think we will be getting much reasoned debate from members opposite on this point. However, I think it is imperative to at least put on the record what we do know: there was no deliberate misrepresentation in the eyes of Chair; the reference to committee was simply to try to clarify and determine exactly what the member said and why he said it.

On that we agree. However, for anything else to be said or to say that there was a deliberate attempt to misrepresent is simply not the case.

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my friend for his comments.

First of all, the reason for this debate is that the Speaker did find a prima facie case of contempt.

My friend says that there is some problem of accuracy. However, that is not the problem here. It was not that member for Mississauga—Streetsville was inaccurate, but that he attempted to mislead the House.

The Speaker of the House of Commons found that the member for Mississauga—Streetsville managed to satisfy all three criteria for showing contempt of Parliament: that he knowingly misled the House, that he was aware of it at the time, and that his attempt to mislead the House was intentional. These are not easy things to do.

However, the member seems to dismiss it as if there was some point of fact that was inaccurate and the member for Mississauga—Streetsville just corrected it, so what is the big deal, since it happens all the time?

It happens all the time—really? It happens all the time that members walk into this House, knowingly mislead the place, and attempt to contort the debate?

The member says that it is “torquing up” the debate. This is not torquing something up; that is rhetoric. This is not about rhetoric, and that is not what the Speaker said.

I am not sure if the member is actually challenging the ruling that came down. It seems that way. It is as though there were no prima facie case of contempt found, as though that is just what the NDP believes.

No, no, my friend. The Speaker also agrees with us. If the Conservative member would like to challenge the Chair, then he is able to make that kind of point. However, that is not what is happening here.

The member also said that “all of the facts are now known”. Wow, that is great. I would like him to leave some of those with us this afternoon as to what the facts of the case are. He said that the member for Mississauga—Streetsville had a moment of conviction, which is why he came back, and that he is the product of his environment. I wish the Conservatives thought that about all Canadians. I wish they thought that when misdeeds happen, they are all just products of their environment.

My question is this: is the member challenging the Chair? Is he suggesting that only NDP members have found a prima facie case of contempt, or is it in fact the Speaker of the House that I heard make that ruling this afternoon?

● (1625)

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, again, my friend opposite is trying to contort my words. What I said was an accurate reflection of the Chair's ruling. That is, the Chair found the member for Mississauga—Streetsville did not deliberately mislead the House. Check the blues. I am afraid my friend opposite does not understand what the Chair said.

However, let me point out again what I said in debate. I am glad to see the member for Markham—Unionville joined us, because this happens often. It happens frequently. I used the example today of what happened in question period.

My friend opposite asks if I think this simply happens routinely. It happened routinely today. The member for Markham—Unionville stood in question period with a pre-ordained, pre-planned question and did not tell with any accuracy his question on deficit budgets. I point out that he must have known this when he stated the question. He is a learned man. He has a background in finance and economics. He was a member of the former Liberal cabinet, so he knew what he was saying was incorrect. He knowingly knew it and yet he still spoke it.

Does that mean we should bring a question of privilege against comments from the member for Markham—Unionville? I do not think so. It happens in this place. Is it right? No, it is not, but it happens. That is the point I was making, that is the point that my friend opposite conveniently ignores.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I will be afforded the opportunity to address the issue in more detail in a few minutes. I have a specific question for the member, when he talks about the issue of misspeaking. I have been a parliamentarian for over 20 years, the last few years here in Ottawa, and I have seen many opportunities when individuals were challenged in terms of speaking or not speaking the truth. We know it is against our rules to intentionally mislead the House. Very rarely do we get as far as we have in regard to the Speaker affording the opportunity to have further debate on the motion. This is not simply a misspeak.

Does the parliamentary secretary know if the member for Mississauga—Streetsville was actually approached by Elections Canada or the commissioner and asked about his comments? There are very serious allegations that this might have been a motivating factor. Has the member actually asked his colleague whether or not that was the motivating factor for him to come before the chamber to apologize? Does he know whether or not Elections Canada or the elections commissioner was in contact with the member for Mississauga—Streetsville?

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, a simple answer to the question is that, no, I do not know; but I have spoken with my colleague, who said that when looked at the blues and saw the comments that he made on February 6, he decided to come back here and set the record straight. That is pure and simple.

If we think about everyone who has spoken in this place over the years, and again I point out that if we asked every single member

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who has ever served in this place if they had ever at any time perhaps either crossed the line by embellishing, by exaggerating, or as I pointed out today with our friend the member for Markham—Unionville, that they said something that was not completely accurate, I think the answer would be yes. That does not make it right, but it happens.

I would point out that to prevent that from happening would be nigh on impossible. Do I think we need to encourage people to be extremely considered in their comments, in their questions? Absolutely, I do, but from time to time, mistakes happen. What needs to be done is that those mistakes should be corrected, and that is what my colleague did.

● (1630)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Matthew Dubé (Chambly—Borduas, NDP): Mr. Speaker, some of the comments made by my colleague, the parliamentary secretary, are intriguing.

As the House Leader of the Official Opposition said earlier, my colleague is speaking about rhetorical tools. We do use words that are sometimes inflammatory, and we can have a debate about their use. However, whether our colleague got carried away in the heat of the moment or he really thought about it and wrote down what he said, the fact remains that he spoke with confidence and he knew what he was saying.

This is such a sad state of affairs that I have to defend a Liberal colleague. The member for Markham—Unionville was talking about the budget deficit. Of course, when a member talks about numbers, he may make a mistake. Sometimes, I forget a friend's birthday, but no one is going to accuse me of lying. However, when a member rises in this place and says with confidence that he saw a crime being committed during an election, there is a serious problem.

That was clearly stated in the Speaker's ruling. The parliamentary secretary should think about his comparisons, which are rather dubious.

[*English*]

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, I completely reject the premise that any comments I was making were devious.

I would point out, however, that when he speaks about forgetting his friend's birthday, I can assure the member opposite that if I ever forgot my wife's birthday—and I have at times—it would be considered a crime.

Let me again point out the example I used here. The member referenced it in his question. The question posed by the member for Markham—Unionville today in question period stated that our government had come in with eight consecutive deficit budgets. He knows that not to be true, yet he said it anyway.

Does that mean we should find him in contempt? This happens all the time. I am not defending it. I am not suggesting it is right, but it happens. I certainly encourage my colleague from Markham—Unionville, perhaps even as early as tomorrow, to set the record straight. I doubt that he will, however.

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What should happen in cases like this is the exact action taken by my colleague from Mississauga—Streetsville. Members should come in to this place, apologize, and set the record straight. He did the right thing. The NDP wishes to punish him for it. I find that, to say the very least, unfortunate.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I do believe right from the get-go that it is very important to recognize that to intentionally mislead the House of Commons is against our rules and to do so would be in contempt of Parliament.

It is very important that we make it clear what the member stated. I go back to February 6, and this is what the member for Mississauga—Streetsville stated:

Mr. Speaker, I want to talk a bit about this vouching system again. I know the minister represents an urban city. I am from a semi-urban area of Mississauga, where there are many high-rise apartment buildings. On mail delivery day when the voter cards are delivered to community mailboxes in apartment buildings, many of them are discarded in the garbage can or blue box.

I am about to read the important part that needs to be highlighted. This is exactly what he said on February 6:

I have actually witnessed other people picking up the voter cards, going to the campaign office of whatever candidate they support and handing out these voter cards to other individuals, who then walk into voting stations with friends who vouch for them with no ID.

That is what the member stated. That is not a misspeak. This is during very important legislation, Bill C-23, in which the government speaks right from the Prime Minister's Office, as much as possible. Things coming from the Prime Minister's Office are consistent, and this particular member perhaps fell a little bit outside of the speaking notes, and he gave what was at that time, he believed, an accurate statement.

Let there be no doubt that it would have misled individuals if it turned out not to be true. He said that back in early February. I found it very interesting that a few weeks later he stood up to apologize to the House. That was on February 24. He stated at that point:

...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 wanted to reflect that 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.

On the following day, a matter of privilege was raised. On behalf of the Liberal Party, I had the opportunity to respond. I will go to exactly what I said when I addressed the issue of the matter of privilege on behalf of the Liberal Party. I said then:

We should get more clarification from the member on why he waited so long to apologize. Is it because Elections Canada approached the member after reviewing what he said? It is a very serious allegation. Did the member share his concerns with Elections Canada prior to raising them here in the House?

It seems to me that the reason the member stood yesterday is he felt that his statement in the House was going to be looked at seriously by Elections Canada and other stakeholders because the accusation that he made during second reading was serious. There was illegal behaviour within that election which the member would have been aware of, if we believe what he said actually took place.

That is what I said in response to the matter of privilege.

The following day, a story appeared in one of the media outlets. I believe we should give credit where credit is due. I will take this as allegations or concerns raised through a media report. It comes from

Stephen Best, the chief agent of the Animal Alliance Environment Voters Party of Canada. He complained to Canada's Chief Electoral Office, Marc Mayrand, about Mr. Butt's claim and was told the case would be referred to the Commissioner of Elections Canada.

• (1635)

I have a quote from that particular article. He said:

"I have asked that EC's records to be searched to see if the matter of possible fraudulent voting had been brought to our attention either here at HQ or at the Returning officer office for Mississauga—Streetsville. I have also forwarded your information to the Commissioner of Canada Elections for his review and independent consideration of any possible action that may be warranted", Mr. Mayrand replied, according an e-mail provided by Mr. Best.

Mr. Best made the complaint on Feb. 7, the day after Mr. Butt spoke in the House of Commons.

I posed the question to the parliamentary secretary. Straight up, did Elections Canada, the commissioner, or anyone from within Elections Canada, contact the member in question? The parliamentary secretary had indicated that he was not aware of it and that he did not talk about it.

The member for Mississauga—Streetsville should come clean on this issue. We should afford him, as much as possible, the opportunity to approach the PROC committee, on which I sit, in an open fashion and come forward. It would be good to have Elections Canada come before the committee as a witness. It might even be appropriate to ask Mr. Best to come before the committee. What we are interested in is getting to the truth of the matter at hand, which is whether the member for Mississauga—Streetsville intentionally misled the House.

When I look over the information provided to me, with the experience that I have acquired over the past number of years as a parliamentarian, I believe that there are grounds for us to have a thorough look at the matter and ultimately come up with some consensus. I want to underline the word "consensus". We recognize that the government has a majority. We need to achieve consensus in the procedures and House affairs committee in a manner in which we can deal with this in order to come back to the House.

There is so much more that I could talk about. There is the whole issue of the lack of confidence that Canadians have in what we are currently debating at committee today, regarding the fair elections act. That is the legislation that the member was talking about.

We have some very serious issues. We trust and have to have faith that when members stand in their place, they are in fact reporting accurately. I know that, at times, innocent mistakes will be made. I would suggest that this goes far beyond some sort of innocent mistake. That is what it would appear to be. That is why we in the Liberal Party support the motion going to the PROC committee. We would like to ultimately see this issue dealt with as quickly as possible.

• (1640)

Mr. Mike Wallace (Burlington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have been here listening to the debate this afternoon on this question of privilege. My question to the member from the Liberal Party is simple.

Privilege

I recall being here in 2010, when the member for St. Paul's, which I believe is a Liberal riding, posted on her website details of a bill that had not yet been presented in the House. That is against the privileges of everybody in the House. The member for St. Paul's understood that she had made that mistake and came to the House to apologize. That apology was accepted by the House.

As for the eight and a half years that I have been here, people do make mistakes. Members of Parliament make mistakes. We are human, by the way. We do make mistakes and when we do, we come here, we apologize, and we correct the record. That is what the member for Mississauga—Streetsville has done.

If we accepted the apology from the member for St. Paul's for violating everybody's privilege by posting information about a bill that had not yet been presented to the House of Commons, why should we not also accept the apology and the correction of the record from the member for Mississauga—Streetsville?

• (1645)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Speaker, one cannot compare apples to oranges in this situation.

What makes this issue unique is that we actually have the Speaker of the House recognizing that there is something wrong. There is no doubt that if we were to rise on every piece of misinformation, whether intentional or not, which is sometimes the challenge in that whole area, we would probably be rising quite a bit in the House. We question the government in a lot of things that it says. The issue before us has crossed a line, and even the Speaker has recognized that.

To that end, I would suggest that this issue needs to be discussed in the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, and that is why I would encourage swift passage of the motion, so we can do just that.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am finding it very concerning that the Conservatives across the aisle—though I guess I am not surprised at their behaviour—seem to forget that we are here to make laws. This is a place of law. When one walks into the House of Commons and attempts to mislead the House on a bill that would set the laws about the democratic rights of this country, that is a serious issue. What we see across the aisle is a clown act by the Conservatives. If someone comes into the House and lies to Parliament, that is contempt, because contempt means the interference of the work of the House of Commons.

The Conservatives are saying they embellished and they torqued. They are now victims over there. They are always victims when they get caught committing criminal acts and other misbehaviour. I want to ask about the motivation. It was the motivation of the member to mislead the House, claiming he had witnessed crimes.

I want to ask a question of my colleague, who has been a parliamentarian for 20 years. Has he ever seen a parliamentarian stand in the House and claim to witness crimes that never happened?

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Speaker, it underlines the fact that it is a very serious allegation that was made on February 6, which begs the question of what the member would have done after witnessing that sort of voter fraud.

There must have been something that caused the member to come back to the issue several weeks later. There are two people that we should be very interested in hearing from at committee. One is the member himself, to provide details on what he said and the motivation for him to apologize. I suspect that the motivation might have been that he found himself in a bit of awkwardness, to put it nicely, or trouble, quite possibly. We understand through at least one media report that, in fact, Elections Canada had been made aware of the allegation he made here on February 6. If that was the motivating factor that caused him to apologize, that is quite different and it is very serious.

[*Translation*]

Mr. François Choquette (Drummond, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have been listening to the debate and the speeches on this issue for a little while now, and I am stunned by the subject we are discussing.

I think we need to start by saying that what happened and what the member did, what we are talking about right now, is absolutely unacceptable. No one can deliberately lie to the House, then say it was an error in judgment and just apologize. No, this is very serious. We need to understand how something like this can happen in the House of Commons.

It all goes back to the Conservative government's ill intentions. This electoral “deformation” bill, a bill that is very hard to justify, an indefensible bill, is causing problems because the government is using false arguments in an attempt to convince people.

That is the comment I wanted to direct to my hon. colleague about the issue that was raised today.

• (1650)

[*English*]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Speaker, last Tuesday I was in the PROC committee. The member for Mississauga—Streetsville is a member of that committee, and that is one of the reasons why I believe it is fairly important that we allow the motion to get dealt with today. It is important for us to clear the air on this particular issue.

I appreciate the member's comments. I hope that we will deal with this issue as quickly as possible, in fairness both to the member and to the PROC committee, which has a great deal of work on its current agenda.

Mr. Murray Rankin (Victoria, NDP): Mr. Speaker, whether one characterizes the conduct as lying or misleading or prima facie contempt, really the question for the member is, if a member knowingly misstates something, with the intention to mislead, and then comes back in a subsequent sitting of Parliament to correct that statement, I would invite my much more experienced parliamentary friend to comment on the implications for parliamentary debate if that were not, in fact, contempt of Parliament.

Privilege

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Speaker, the key here is whether the member intentionally misled the House. Many mistakes are often made inside the House during debate, and often members will stand in their place and apologize. What makes this unique is that there is so much evidence giving the impression that there is just cause to believe that there was an attempt to intentionally mislead the House, which ultimately is a contempt of Parliament. By allowing this debate, the Speaker has recognized just how important this issue is.

The other thing that members have to be reminded of is not only is it an important ruling for the House of Commons but we also must think of the ramifications on other jurisdictions, whether it be provincial legislatures or even other Commonwealth jurisdictions that have a parliamentary system.

We witnessed a very important ruling here today. It is important that we ensure that the matter gets dealt with in a timely fashion.

Mr. Craig Scott (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I do not rise with a light heart to participate in this debate.

The member for Mississauga—Streetsville is a member of the committee on which I sit. I do want to make sure that I am as fair as I can possibly be.

I think it is important that we know a couple of things about the chronology, and that will help explain why the Speaker felt it was important that we actually have this matter go to committee.

The first thing is that the misleading statement was made twice on the same day, in more detail the first time and in general terms the second time.

The second thing is the retraction. I am not going to call it an apology because that is not the way it was phrased. It was a statement that what he had said before was not accurate. That is the way it was framed. It was 19 days later, on February 25.

We have 19 days and something that was said twice. It really does lead us into the territory of needing to know more from our hon. friend from Mississauga—Streetsville, which is why I think it is entirely appropriate that the Speaker believes this should be remitted to committee.

We do need to know because, to be fair to us, the member for Mississauga—Streetsville did not offer any serious explanation as to how it is that he could have made that kind of mistake. It clearly was misleading the House, so the impact is there. However, I think we have a right to know what was behind that, by way of a fuller explanation before the committee.

This is why I do take a different tack from my hon. colleagues across the way when they ask why we do not let water flow under the bridge and not pursue it any further. This is very important.

I do want to say that I was personally misled. I was not actually there for that part of what was said, but it got to me quite early on. I spent a little bit of time sending out emails, asking researchers to start looking for the real world evidence that what had been described in the House could have happened, asking if there had been reports to Elections Canada of this kind of behaviour, or if there was any social science evidence that what my colleague had said was true.

I believed him, in the sense that that was my presumption. It was only that evening when somebody, who was maybe paying more attention than I to exactly what had been said, wrote something as a journalist that let me know there was something wrong. Whatever the motivation was, this could not be right. That is simply because what was said did not make sense.

I am referring to an article by Justin Ling that was written the night of the two statements by my hon. colleague from Mississauga—Streetsville. It is called “Building Poilievre's Electoral Fraud in the Sky”. It is not about—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Craig Scott: Mr. Speaker, it does not refer to the minister engaging in fraud. It is how the minister is imagining fraud on the part of ordinary citizens.

• (1655)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): For the hon. member and all others, I just want to remind members that they cannot do indirectly what they cannot do directly. I did not quite follow the argument, but the bottom line is that members cannot use the names of other members in the House during their speeches.

Mr. Craig Scott: Mr. Speaker, I do apologize. I thought the concern was that I was using the rest of the title. I was simply trying to get it on record for the sake of the translators. It was not intentional. I was unfortunately too clear.

I was referencing Mr. Ling in this piece just for accuracy's sake. It basically said the minister has yet to explain why he feels there is a danger of citizen fraud. He said that the minister had not explained, and then he said:

...[the] MP for Mississauga—Streetsville, made an attempt during the debate. He told the House that he's seen campaign workers scoop up piles of voter identification cards and then hand them out to dummy voters, and then take them all to the polls.

...unless...[the member for Mississauga—Streetsville] is a superspy, and was stalking those campaign workers (or, unless it was his campaign that was doing it) that's entirely absurd and made up.

You still need a second piece of ID to use those voter identification cards... It has not been, nor can it be, the sole piece of identification for a voter.

The government should get props for expanding the list of usable IDs, but they've utterly failed to explain why these two changes are necessary.

It was only in reading this that I realized there were some internal contradictions, because the voter identification cards can be used, and have been in recent times in 2008 and 2011, along with another piece of ID. They are a second piece of ID, and they are there primarily to show the address, but they also have the person's name on them.

Therefore the idea is that all of these cards are coming into some, say, apartment buildings; and people receiving them, living in an apartment where it is addressed to a previous tenant, cannot do anything with it because they would then have to say, “I have just been mailed this. It has Joe Smith's name on it and my name is Jim Brown, and now I'm going to have to go and forge some other piece of identity in order to use that card that I just received randomly in the mail, not addressed to me, and put those two together so I can go vote and commit fraud”. It is just completely implausible. So Mr. Ling has picked up on that.

Then the rest of what my hon. colleague was referring to in a couple of his statements, including later on February 13 in PROC, was speculating, because at that point the hon. member was talking about how this was an anecdote. He had heard this about others. He was no longer referring to it as something he had seen. He was talking about how these people must have been taking the voter ID cards in order to go and vouch.

They are two different things. In fact, the minister in his testimony, in response, maybe to this question or maybe to another person's question, made it clear that there are two different things going on. Voter identification cards would be prohibited by Bill C-23. They need a second piece of ID; they are part of formally identifying oneself. Also, vouching is something that occurs without ID; one person is entitled to vouch for another under certain conditions.

So when our friend from Mississauga—Streetsville was, in both his original statements and later statements, linking voter identification cards to their being used to vouch, it just struck me that none of it was accurate, quite apart from whether the eyewitness part was correct. Therefore, I stopped running around, as I had been doing that afternoon and early evening, trying to figure out how much evidence there was of what our colleague had said. I want to make clear that, in a very real-world way, I was misled because I believed the member.

What I believe is going on is probably best captured by my colleague from Saskatchewan, the parliamentary secretary, when he said something about our all going overboard and then, "That is how we are conditioned". I have only been here for two years, but I honestly do not believe everybody in this House is conditioned to torque, if that is the verb we are now going to use from our friend from Saskatchewan.

● (1700)

We can make mistakes. We can exaggerate, but when we go to the level of telling an eyewitness tale twice on the same day and not thinking the second time that the first time was not right and asking ourselves why we are saying it the second time, then we are in another universe. The universe we are in is that, one way or the other, the minister sponsoring the bill has a severe deficit of evidence when it comes to his professed concerns about fraud, by way of risk or some actuality, because of the use of voter identification cards and the practice of vouching, he would have us believe. He has not been able to come up with one piece of evidence other than a comedy stunt from Montreal.

Therefore, some of his colleagues came to the rescue and said that we need evidence. What better evidence than anecdotes? If it is not them doing this on their own, it could have well have been that there was some kind of a situation where folks were told that they had been around for a while and if they could not prove it, they should just say it anyway and call it anecdotes. That is what we have been getting. If we go through the record of the very short debate at second reading on Bill C-23, it was not simply my colleague from Mississauga—Streetsville who told his anecdote. That is what I am going to call it now. It is an anecdote that he misrepresented initially as an eyewitness account and later at committee indicated was an anecdote.

Privilege

At some level when we are told to help create an evidentiary basis where there is no evidence, it creates the conditions for someone to step over the line. I went on record before the media a couple times saying I am not prepared to say this was a lie. It was a clear misleading. It was untruthful. I was being fairly harsh, but I said maybe he was just hallucinating, just fantasizing. However, one way or the other he was being stoked by the need somewhere to help the government provide evidence for the fact that it turned Bill C-23 into a bill that makes ordinary citizens a source of fraud in our elections and puts in deep second place organized fraud such as the sort that we do know has happened in our recent history through the activities or databases of at least one political party.

It is indisputable that Bill C-23 has turned everything on its head. The huge focus in it is on somehow cleaning up this problem of irregularities that then get spun as creating the risk of fraud. Initially the minister would have had people believe that irregularities were fraud until he realized that people caught on early that it was not a good connection to make.

My view of the statement that we are all conditioned, from my colleague from Saskatchewan, who I do really respect, is that I will accept that we are conditioned to act in a partisan and sometimes overly partisan way, but I have a very hard time accepting that there is some kind of universal conditioning of us as the elected representatives of Canadians to come anywhere close to uttering the inaccurate words of our friend from Mississauga—Streetsville.

It is very important to know that this is not a minor misleading. I am not here to just talk about the fact that I set off on a path to try to figure out how much truth there was in it. It was partially corrected, 19 days later, because the retraction did not retract everything he said. I will come to that if I have time.

● (1705)

The fact of the matter is that this statement single-handedly would have created the impression, once it was reported, and it was reported among many Canadians paying attention, that there was that kind of problem he presented.

He was an eyewitness, a member of Parliament, to people taking voter cards that had been discarded, probably because they were mis-addressed or someone was so upset with our political system that they had no intention of voting, or something along those lines, and somehow ending up at unnamed campaign offices and handing those out to unnamed individuals. Then, at that point, the eyewitness stuff stops and there is some supposition that they are then used to vote, with the mistaken association between that and using the card for vouching, which I have already explained would be a mistake.

Huge confusion was created by that statement.

I realized this only because I happened to read Mr. Ling's paragraphs that told me that this did not work internally and that it was therefore probably not true. For some 19 days, journalists and Canadians were paying attention to this and wondering how true or not it was. It was serious.

Privilege

I have to add that it does not make it a whole lot better that two weeks later, 17 days later, our colleague in PROC transformed what had been an eyewitness story into an “I have heard” story. It was really just a matter of saying, “Okay, I’m going to stand my ground. I should have told this as an anecdote. However little evidence there was for it, I am now going to tell it as an anecdote.” He did not just give it a rest and say he had said something extraordinarily inaccurate and step back and not keep digging with his example, especially as a member of PROC, which was considering the bill. He did not.

I think it actually helps to circle back on the fact that, on the government side of House, one way or another, MPs are being encouraged to live in a world of anecdotes to try to give some evidentiary foundations that are not there for a decision by the current government to prohibit the use of voter identification cards and vouching.

It is not a small thing. The figure that everyone in the House probably can recite by heart is that there were 120,000 instances of vouching in 2011.

People may not know there were over 800,000 uses of the voter identification card by seniors and residents of long-term convalescent homes, and by something like 75,000 by aboriginal persons on reserve. Moreover, of the students who were given the opportunity, in a whole series of campus experiments, 62% of them used that opportunity to use the voter identification card as a second piece of ID.

In no instance that I am aware of, and I would love to hear the evidence to the contrary, was there any hint that in any one of those virtually one million there was any fraud. There was not one hint or instance of the one million Canadians using voter identification cards having somehow been involved in fraud.

That goes to what I was saying earlier. Unfortunately, the words of our colleague, the member for Mississauga—Streetsville, did have an impact because they made it look as if that enfranchising practice by Elections Canada was subject to fraud. Elections Canada had determined that it would start using, on an experimental basis, in 2008, which it then expanded in 2011, voter identification cards as a second piece of ID because it was the easiest way, in some instances, to show an address.

However, the member, in one fell swoop, undermined that whole system and indirectly created confusion because the average person had no idea that a voter identification card could not be used on its own. He created confusion, as well, when he somehow indicated that the single card had something to do with vouching, which it had nothing to do with.

● (1710)

I will end there by just going back to my original point, which is that the Speaker has made a correct ruling that this does need to go to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. We are all owed a more fulsome explanation than we have received.

Mr. Erin O’Toole (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Trade, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for Toronto—Danforth, who has clearly taken the time both to read the bill and pore over the Neufeld report.

My question is a deeper one based on his comments apparently recognizing the error rates. He quoted some of the error rates involved in vouching. Whether those error rates are a result of fraud or just error in the system is not ascertained in the reports, but the error rates are there nonetheless. What he is referring to is the voter ID card, which has been a pilot in recent years. It has not been a staple of elections in Canada for the last generation, but as a pilot in the last two elections, and the cards themselves have a one-sixth error rate.

The bigger question I would like to ask the hon. member is this. In the modern age, there are multiple forms of voter identification, 39 different types of identification. Vouching comes from an age when there was no such photo identification, when there were no such measures. Is it not time we recognize that those inherent error rates, whether fraudulent or not, are not appropriate in a democracy?

Mr. Craig Scott: Mr. Speaker, with great respect to my colleague, the question really goes to the substance of Bill C-23.

My colleague cited a statistic that is part of the tapestry of the lack of evidence. The idea is that one-sixth of voter identification cards are in error. It took us ages to figure out exactly what the minister had been referring to when he used that figure. Apparently, 84%, according to Elections Canada reports, are up to date and accurate in the sense that when those cards are sent out, they reach 84% of the people they are intended to reach.

However, what is the significance of the other 16%? It is that people who would have been alerted to the fact that there is an election do not receive them. That is a problem in the sense that it might mean there is much less of a chance that they are going to vote. However, it has no relationship to the potential for fraud, no relationship whatsoever, because the person receiving it has just moved into the house or apartment and does not know who was living there before until maybe seeing this card. What is he or she going to do with it? Is he or she going to somehow turn into a citizen fraudster because Elections Canada sent the wrong card and the person is going to forge a second piece of ID to use that with? No. That is why the one-sixth figure coming from the minister is itself inaccurate. It is a figure, but it is deliberately not helping people understand the reality. I will not use another word.

● (1715)

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, what has been very disturbing today is the position taken by the Conservative Party that the NDP has somehow broken the old boys system that we all torque or embellish things—nudge-nudge, wink-wink—that this is what we are conditioned to do. However, we are talking about lying in the House of Commons. I do not believe that should be considered a common thing.

Privilege

There is a very high threshold for contempt and one of the key elements for finding contempt is an attempt to mislead the House. Here I would like to ask my hon. colleague a question, given his background in constitutional law. When a member walks into the House when the legislation being discussed actually impedes the rights of Canadians to vote, and then that member claims to have witnessed a crime that never occurred, does my hon. colleague believe this is something we should consider an everyday occurrence, that if we just make up crimes we say we witnessed but did not see, it is an ordinary action in the House? Or does that meet the threshold for misleading the House and interfering with the work of legislators in creating the laws of this country?

Mr. Craig Scott: Mr. Speaker, it is important to go back to my opening comments about how this is serious in terms of its content and who was potentially misled, and that includes all Canadians.

Anyone listening to the debate and hearing this being associated with conditioning or a common political acculturated condition is not going to feel much better about their political classes. The question is bang on in the sense that I would ask that we please not be included in this characterization, that people please not include me, and I am assuming my colleague, with the idea that we have been acculturated and conditioned to somehow or other saying these sorts of things. Canadians would be shocked if that were the case.

We have enough problems with the nature of our political discourse, how incredibly oversimplified, dumbed-down, and sometimes nasty and distorted it can be, without the idea that we are conditioned to engage in making misleading statements.

Mr. Mike Wallace (Burlington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my understanding is that the hon. member for Mississauga—Streetsville apologized to the House and voluntarily corrected the record. This is not the first time a member has had to correct the record and apologize to the House.

I am very concerned about our creating an environment in the House of punishing members. I am concerned about punishing a member of Parliament on any side of the House if that person comes forward and corrects the record and apologizes for making a mistake. Is that the environment of co-operation that the NDP has been talking about for many years?

• (1720)

Mr. Craig Scott: Mr. Speaker, it is very important that my colleague know the exact retractions made by our colleague on February 24:

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.

That was not an apology. We must keep in mind that our colleague said it twice. If this had been phrased as an apology, we might be in a different universe. We might not have had a question of privilege. It was simply a matter of, "I want to correct the record".

Saying "I want to correct the record" is not an apology.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is a great honour, as always, to rise in the House and represent the people of Timmins—James Bay.

I have to say that this is not a happy night because it represents yet another lowering level within the House under the Conservative government in its abuse of the Westminster system that we certainly hold dear.

When I say that it is an honour and a privilege to rise and represent the people of Timmins—James Bay, it is because they choose to have me here and they will choose some day if I am not to be here. I respect that. I understand that I have certain obligations to fulfill while I am here.

There are certain words we use. We use the word "privilege". It is an interesting word. We have privileges as members of Parliament. For example, we have privileges that protect us from libel so that in certain instances, when a question or comment is heated, within the House we are able to debate that. Sometimes, questions have to be asked that may later turn out to be unfounded, but our role as parliamentarians is to question and to find out whether the people of Canada are being represented. We have to have certain privileges to keep us able to do that job.

However, with privilege comes a clear responsibility. My hon. colleagues on the other side may not realize it, but we are legislators. Our job is to create the laws of Canada. We are part of a larger legislative system, the Westminster tradition. What is decided here, in terms of precedent, is looked at in other parliamentary democracies.

One of our key responsibilities as members of Parliament is to speak truthfully in the House, meaning not to lie. That does not mean to use embellishment, to exaggerate, to zigzag, or to avoid. That all happens within the House, but the obligation to not lie is a fundamental principle because to lie is to mislead the work of parliamentarians.

We have to look at this situation and put it in context. The threshold for finding someone in a prima facie case of contempt is very rare. People apologize in the House for saying all manner of things, all the time. After they make their apology, that is considered the end of it.

I think back to 2006 and Jim Prentice, who was also from Timmins. I think I used colourful language about certain human behaviour in a washroom when I thought of his response. I later said that it was not appropriate and I apologized. That was colourful, but that is different from attempting to mislead the work of Parliament and attempting to undermine it.

If we look up the word "contempt" in the dictionary, parliamentary contempt is interference with the work of Parliament.

The three criteria found against the member for Mississauga—Streetsville are as follows. First, he made a statement that was false. In fact, he did not say it once; he said it twice. Second, he knew that it was misleading. Third, he did it in an attempt to mislead the House.

Privilege

Let us look at what he did. We are dealing with a bill, this voter suppression act, which is a very disturbing piece of legislation because what the government has decided to do does not deal with the issues that came out of the 2011 election, of widespread issues of voter suppression and voter fraud through robocalls. It was judged in the Canadian court system and it was found that there were numerous cases of interference in the right to vote, traced back to the Conservative database. Elections Canada was not able to identify the actual perpetrators because the Conservative Party interfered by not putting up any witnesses and interfered with Elections Canada's attempt to find witnesses. All we know from that court finding was that across Canada, in key ridings, attempts were made to deny Canadians their right to vote, and the Conservative database was used.

One would think that clearing up the Elections Act would be to ensure that Elections Canada has the power to subpoena witnesses and to go in and examine who had access to the database where actual fraud occurred.

• (1725)

However, the bill does not deal with that at all. What it does is to flip the issue. We are not talking in the House any longer about known cases of voter suppression and voter fraud by unknown Conservative operatives. Now the onus is on average Canadians. The government is telling us that it is average Canadians who are defrauding the system. There has not been one case brought forward that the Conservatives could point to. That is a problem, because we have numerous instances, and I could name the ridings, where we know that voter fraud happened through robocalls. However, they cannot give one instance of a Canadian citizen interfering, undermining, or voting fraudulently.

This gets to the issue of motivation. The member for Mississauga—Streetsville stood up in the House and claimed to have witnessed a crime. That is an extraordinary thing. My colleagues on the other side are telling us that this is perfectly okay. They say we all torque or embellish, and that is how they are conditioned. I do not know how it is seen as perfectly okay to walk into a legislature, where laws are being decided, and claim to have witnessed a crime that never occurred. That is what the member for Mississauga—Streetsville said. He said that he witnessed people picking up voter cards, going to the campaign office of whatever candidate they supported and handing out the voter cards to other individuals, who then walked into voting stations with no ID and with friends who vouched for them. He said that he personally witnessed this crime.

He then said later that he would relate something that he had actually seen. He claimed to have witnessed a crime. He said he had seen campaign workers pick up a dozen of these cards and walk out. What were they doing? When one stands up and attempts to mislead the House by claiming to have evidence when no evidence exists, claims to have witnessed crimes that never occurred, one has shown absolute contempt for the work of this Parliament and for the people who elect them.

Our Conservative colleagues are saying that we are all conditioned to do that. I do not believe we are all conditioned to do that. They say that we all torque and embellish. I do not believe that we are here to lie to Canadians. I do not believe that lying has

any place in the House of Commons, and it certainly does not. This is what the parliamentary tradition tells us. However, the Conservatives are telling us that this is the way things are done and that New Democrats are being mean for having pointed it out.

This is not the first time that they have made up these kinds of claims. The present Minister of Heritage, on May 3, 2012, claimed to have witnessed a crime because she was under the gun for allegations that robofraud had happened in her own riding against the other parties. She claimed, "...Hey, I got a live call and was told to go to another polling station". That is serious. If she knew voter fraud was occurring it would be incumbent upon her to call the authorities. When she was pressed about where that voter fraud from other parties happened in her riding then she retracted and said she was sorry, that maybe she had misspoken. This is serious. We are talking about whether or not crimes have occurred.

This is about a larger issue of abuse of our parliamentary system. It is about undermining the work of committees, which has gone on since the government received its majority mandate. It is about creating reports based on evidence when there is no evidence. We saw recently, with the conflict of interest study, where the government completely gutted the basic principles of the accountability act and put recommendations into the report that were never heard. Witness after witness said we needed to strengthen the Conflict of Interest Act, and the Conservative government members came to the committee and made up recommendations out of thin air and then passed them at committee. That is what is happening in terms of undermining.

Why is this serious? It is because in the Westminster tradition we do not have all the checks and balances that they have in the U.S. legislative system. There is an understanding that people will act with a certain degree of honour and that it is within committees where we are supposed to work together.

• (1730)

We see now Bill C-520, with which the member for York Centre would bring in power so that Conservatives who were under investigation could demand investigations of the Auditor General and Conservatives who were under investigation for abusing the Lobbying Act could demand investigations of the Lobbying Commissioner.

There is not a Parliament anywhere in the western world where those under investigation get to write laws to allow them to open investigations into the people whose job is to hold parliamentarians and lobbyists to account. However, in this topsy-turvy Conservative world, Conservatives believe that this bill is imperative.

I asked the member for York Centre the other day if he had one example to back up this bill and claims about agents of Parliament such as on the Auditor General, who was investigating his friends in the Senate, or the Ethics Commissioner, who has investigated his friends on the Conservative front bench, or Elections Canada, which is under attack from the Conservative government with the false claim that it is wearing a team jersey. I asked the member if he could give me one example, but he could not.

Privilege

This is about creating a pattern of governing without evidence. That is a serious breach, because if we do not base the rule of law on evidence, then there is no proper rule of law.

I ask you, Mr. Speaker, to consider what happened to the party over there that promised accountability. I think of the minority response from the Canadian Alliance to the case of contempt found against the Liberals. This is what the Canadian Alliance said at the time said. I am holding up a moral mirror for those members to look into, but I do not think any of them want to look up.

This contempt cannot be dismissed as mere forgetfulness that might occur in the heat of questioning. It is instead a deliberate attempt to mislead....

Parliament cannot exercise that vigilance when it is misled or lied to. To mislead Parliament shows contempt for Parliament. It must not be tolerated at any time....

This is what we are talking about today. We are talking about a member who came into the House, not once but twice, and lied about witnessing crimes that never occurred. He then waited 19 days to correct the record. He never apologized. The honourable thing to do when one makes a mistake is to apologize, but he never apologized.

If a member stands in the House and claims to have witnessed crimes and does not follow through, then that member is certainly culpable. I still call my hon. colleague “honourable”, even though what he has done is very dishonourable. If the hon. member for Mississauga—Streetsville claimed to have witnessed a crime and was emphatic that he saw fraud being committed, then he had a legal responsibility to report it. However, he did not, because he was making it up. He put himself in a very difficult position as a spokesperson for the Conservative government on a bill that would take away basic rights from Canadians to vote, because he did so on the premise that he witnessed crimes that had never occurred.

According to the Westminster tradition, the decision that will be made by the committee will have to look beyond the narrow interests of the Conservative war machine. I am very disturbed about their willingness to do this, because we have seen time and time again that the Conservatives put their narrow interests ahead of the larger obligation that we all have as parliamentarians. We saw it with Bev Oda, a disgraced minister who was found in contempt of Parliament for lying. Were there any consequences? No, there were not.

We found that the Conservative government prorogued Parliament, shut it down, to stop an inquiry into abuse of Afghan detainees. That report has never really been dealt with, and it still remains a black mark on Canada because it was not dealt with. The Conservatives actually shut down the work of Parliament rather than get to the bottom of whether or not this happened.

We remember the other prorogation, when the Conservatives shut down the work of Parliament in order to avoid a non-confidence vote. It is a larger contempt for democratic privileges that we are seeing here.

If we see the Conservative government attempt to shut down debate in this House about whether or not it is okay to come in and lie while a proposed law is being debated, it will set a precedent that will show other countries in the parliamentary system that Canada holds the parliamentary tradition very cheap. I think members would agree with me that we need a higher standard.

● (1735)

I have heard all manner of prevarications from the Conservatives tonight about how we are all supposed to get together and show respect for one another. I would love to believe that, but it is like being invited to a picnic with alligators. I just do not believe it.

I have seen in committee work that every good amendment brought forward is routinely rejected. The basic work of Parliament is always in camera so that the Conservatives can abuse their majority. Conservative members do not show any interest in working with the other parties.

To Conservatives, colourful is the same as lying. It is not. Passion is not the same as misrepresenting the truth. They say that everyone embellishes and everyone torques. That is simply not true.

Mr. Gerald Keddy: A lie is a lie, Charlie. It does not matter how you say it. A lie is a lie. What are you talking about? If you lie because you have the protection of the House, it is still a lie.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Stand up. Tell me I am a liar.

Some hon. member: Clearly if you are, because you have the protection of the House, it is still a lie.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Are you saying I am a liar?

Mr. Gerald Keddy: I said if you lie because you have the protection of the House, it is still a lie. You want me to stand. I am standing.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Order, order. The hon. members will take a seat.

Just a word to all hon. members. Certainly we are aware of the context of the question that is before the House. Nevertheless, in reference to the use of the word “lie” in the context of that debate, “lie” is still considered unparliamentary language, even in this context. Members are aware that this is a question that will be referred to the committee if the House so decides when this debate is finished. It will then be taken up under consideration.

Drawing conclusions as to what the committee may find on that question may be getting ahead of ourselves if we are choosing to use that type of language in the course of the debate.

I would ask all hon. members to perhaps measure their words in that respect and not pre-conclude what the committee may decide. The hon. member for Timmins—James Bay.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Mr. Speaker, I really appreciate that. I think you are an excellent speaker and are very judicious. It is unfortunate that my colleagues on the other side will say anything off camera to divert attention from what we are dealing with here.

They might want to act like a clown act in a sports bar, but we are dealing with the parliamentary tradition here and the question of “if”. If someone walks in to deliberately mislead this House, that cannot be taken cheaply. If someone is dealing with legislation and claims to have witnessed a crime that never occurred, that is an attempt to undermine the work of fellow legislators, because they are claiming that they have evidence. If they cannot bring evidence, and they decide to make up evidence, that is mendacity of the worst sort.

Privilege

If we decide that simply because the Conservatives have a majority, it is okay to misrepresent, that simply because they have a majority it is okay to make up facts, that if they have a majority it is okay to say whatever they want whenever they want, as long as if they get caught, they come in and correct it, it is not okay.

We can look at the Westminster tradition around the world, and nowhere is such a cheap standard allowed.

I am not asking for what the committee will find. Again, I would actually be very surprised if a Conservative-dominated committee would ever take on the issue of parliamentary work and the obligation to the Westminster tradition above their own narrow self-interest.

However, in Australia, it is a crime. People go to jail. It is a serious issue. What happens here is serious. For members to come in, make things up, misrepresent, and claim to have witnessed crimes that never occurred, there have to be consequences. Shame would certainly be a strong consequence, but I have not seen any shame over on that side tonight.

I look forward to the committee's work.

• (1740)

Mr. Mike Wallace (Burlington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I enjoy the entertainment of the member opposite who gave his soliloquy on misrepresentation and telling the truth. He also suggested that we needed a mirror.

I suggest that the member look in the mirror on the other side, say in Timmins—James Bay. When the member of Parliament for Timmins—James Bay told his constituents, the actual voters, that the member was going to support the removal of the gun registry, but when it came to a vote changed his mind and voted to keep the gun registry, was it a misrepresentation?

When the member for Timmins—James Bay puts out a pamphlet saying “Look at all the good things the government has done for the north”, but voted against every single item on the page, was that misrepresentation?

Mr. Charlie Angus: Mr. Speaker, I apologize to Canadians back home for that. We are talking about people misleading the House of Commons, and that member says it is entertaining. I am sorry, but this is not drunks in a sports bar; this is Parliament.

Large amounts of investment have come into Timmins—James Bay, and I am proud of it. That has nothing to do with the issue of contempt of Parliament. What is contemptuous is that group over there who refuse to deal with the issue of whether that member for Mississauga—Streetsville knowingly misled this House while a bill was being debated. That is the question, not the—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Order, please.

In the same vein as my earlier comments, references to knowingly misleading, by practice and convention, have been in the same category of unparliamentary language as the previous word, as I mentioned earlier, with respect to lying. They fall in the same category. I urge members to keep their language measured in reference to the debate.

Questions and comments, the hon. member for Western Arctic.

Mr. Dennis Bevington (Western Arctic, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I do not like having to stand here and talk about the honesty and dishonesty of parliamentarians. This is actually a noble debate, which has real significance to us all, and we should all learn a lesson from it. I do not want to hear the comment that we should all take the opportunity to misrepresent the facts in Parliament. We need to understand what the debate is about.

Unfortunately, one member has been clearly shown to have said something in Parliament that was not the case. We are debating this now. However, what we learn from it is more important than what happens to the member sitting across the way. What we learn about our Parliament and about each individual and their relative honesty when they speak in this Parliament is the important part of the debate. That is why this is a debate about privilege. It is a privilege to speak in this House, but it is only a privilege if we tell the truth.

I say to my colleague that this is not a hanging exercise. This is an exercise to restore the faith of Canadians in our Parliament. When I hear comments from the other side that we all lie, that we are all stretching the truth, this is something we should all take to heart. Is it not the case?

• (1745)

Mr. Charlie Angus: Mr. Speaker, for people watching back home, they will notice that we have traditions that are based on the concept of honour. I am not supposed to use the word “lie”, and I am not supposed to use the word “mislead”, but it is based on the sense of honour.

We are honourable members because we have certain privileges, and the privilege that is given to us is because we are obligated, at the bottom of all of our other obligations, to tell the truth. This is like a court of law. We cannot, and I will not use the word “lie”, in a court of law. We cannot make up facts in Parliament while legislation is being decided because it is an attempt to mislead. However, for us to say that we would never use that language because it is unparliamentary, but that we would accept that behaviour, is certainly not acceptable. We have to take a position.

Mr. Murray Rankin (Victoria, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I understand that the statement made by the member that is at issue was something like, “I personally witnessed certain things”. That was repeated, and then some 19 days later was at least partially retracted.

The member has referred to parliamentary traditions in other countries. He has talked about the crime of contempt of Parliament in our sister democracy, Australia. I would like his comments on what the implications are for parliamentary debate if this were to be left unsanctioned.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Mr. Speaker, I am glad my hon. colleague raised this because we are attempting tonight to remind the members on the other side that we are part of the Westminster tradition. This is a parliamentary system where precedents are looked at around the world. Therefore, for a member to walk in and claim he has witnessed a crime and that is not true is serious. For him to say that he would relate something he has seen and then go on to claim to have witnessed a crime in order to influence a debate that changes the rights of Canadians to vote is serious. If that level of misrepresentation is deliberate, knowing, and attempting to mislead, it is found in the three steps in the prima facie finding. If the committee turns around and states that is just the torquing and embellishment of party members and the Conservatives who are conditioned to this, then that will be looked at in the U.K. and in the other parliamentary systems. I would imagine that they would look at Canada and think that this a country that holds its parliamentary privileges very cheaply, if one could make such an egregious statement.

The hon. member never apologized. He came in and attempted to correct the record to protect himself legally but he did not apologize. That is not honourable.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean Rousseau (Compton—Stanstead, NDP): Mr. Speaker, this is in fact a question of legitimacy.

Is it legitimate to give a speech, to exercise a privilege in fact, and to do so in a partisan or non-partisan manner? It is a privilege to be able to rise and debate matters in the House. When one uses the House to make a mockery of democracy, all legitimacy is lost.

Respect in this place is crucial. However, because of the cynicism shown by the parties—especially the party across the aisle—in our discussions and debates here in the House of Commons, Canadians have begun asking themselves whether the Conservatives have the legitimacy to govern and to make decisions and whether voting for them is the right thing to do; they are wondering about how the Conservatives will represent the population. I would like to hear my colleague's thoughts on that.

In light of the debates and all the heckling we often hear in this place, one wonders whether we are even worthy of doing this job, namely representing Canadians. Are we worthy of representing Canadians?

[*English*]

Mr. Charlie Angus: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my hon. colleague for putting it in this context. When we talk to average Canadians, they say how cynical they are with the behaviour of the House of Commons because they believe that the issue of facts and truth are continually thrown aside. That is a serious undermining. It is a legitimacy crisis for faith in the democratic system. We are dealing with a bill that may deny Canadians their right to vote in certain instances. That has to be looked at carefully and prudently. That is our obligation.

My hon. colleague is correct that we have been given certain privileges to do this work, to be able to examine law, change law, and debate law. However, if we use those privileges to subvert the rule of law, and it is known and it is found, then to shrug it off or simply use a Conservative majority to shut down debate, sweep it

Privilege

under the rug, prorogue, and carry on is a subversion of the notion of democracy. This is not about a witch hunt. Rather, it is about whether an attempt was made to undermine the development of a new law in this country. That is serious. It must be dealt with because we have a larger obligation to the Westminster system, not just here in Canada.

* * *

• (1750)

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in light of this afternoon's debate, I did want to make a short statement with respect to the business of the House.

First, the sixth allotted day will not be tomorrow. I will return to the House at a later time to designate a new date.

Second, the first item to be considered tomorrow under government orders shall be Bill C-8, the combating counterfeit products act, at third reading.

Finally, I give notice that with respect to the consideration of the privilege motion of the hon. member for Skeena—Bulkley Valley, at the next sitting a minister of the crown shall move, pursuant to Standing Order 57, that the debate be not further adjourned.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): I am sure the House appreciates the notice that was given on behalf of the government House leader.

* * *

PRIVILEGE

STATEMENTS BY THE MEMBER FOR MISSISSAUGA—STREETSVILLE—
REFERENCE TO STANDING COMMITTEE

The House resumed consideration of the motion.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Resuming debate, the hon. member for Charleswood—St. James—Assiniboia.

Hon. Steven Fletcher (Charleswood—St. James—Assiniboia, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have been listening to the discussion this afternoon. I usually do not get involved in these types of proceedings. In fact, this is the first time in 10 years that I have presented my point of view on this type of issue, which comes up from time to time. This is my observation.

I hope the people at home watching this will see it for what it is. Somebody made a statement that was not correct. That person corrected the statement, and we move on. That is how this place works. Many people, except for maybe you, Mr. Speaker, and myself, have misspoken during their time here and have regretted what they have said. In that case, members can stand and say they are sorry or stand and just correct the record, and we move on like adults.

However, what we have witnessed here today was a lot of finger-pointing and exaggeration. If people live in glass houses, they should not throw stones. If we really wanted to nitpick what the opposition members have said over the years or over the last hour, we could find all sorts of flaws.

Privilege

We could do that. We could go to committee and go through all this. We have an important—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): I do not wish to interrupt hon. members, but the hon. member may not have been in the chamber when I addressed this point a little earlier. Despite the context of the question that is before the House, we are still staying away from references specifically to lying or references to any indications around misleading the House. That is language that is traditionally considered to be unparliamentary, so I would ask the hon. member to steer clear of those kinds of characterizations.

The hon. member for Charleswood—St. James—Assiniboia.

• (1755)

Hon. Steven Fletcher: Mr. Speaker, I am going in a different direction. What I was going to point regarding the quite irrelevant comments made by a member of the House is that in the big picture, what else could this Parliament be doing? We could try to represent the people who sent us to Ottawa by passing laws or debating issues that matter to Canadians. There are many people outside of this room or, I will bet, even half the people in this place, who are not paying attention to what is happening here because the debate is insignificant. It is not worthy of this chamber because it is not important enough.

A member made a statement and realized it was not correct. He corrected the record, and we should move on. However, the opposition wants this to go to committee and use valuable committee time to debate this correction. If we were to do this every time, we would have committees only examining what other members of Parliament say. This is a slippery slope that we are on. We have to accept one another's apologies when we misspeak. Again, Mr. Speaker, you and I do not do that, but when others do, it is a parliamentary custom.

We have the fair elections act, which I sometimes call the awesome elections act, which needs to be dealt with. However, rather than dealing with that, members of the opposition would like to debate an apology from a member on a relatively minor issue. There are other things going on in the world, like the economy. Canadians would like us to focus on the things that matter to them and their families, such as their security and the sovereignty of our nation. Thank goodness we live in Canada. As we all know, there are some nations that are presently having their sovereignty violated, and there are some nations violating the sovereignty of other nations.

We in the House of Commons have all agreed that what Russia has been doing in Ukraine is wrong and very serious. What does the opposition want to talk about? It wants to talk about whether someone corrected the record within a certain period of time. That is what opposition members want to talk about. They should look outside or watch cable news. They will see—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The hon. member for Laurentides—Labelle is rising on a point of order.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc-André Morin: Mr. Speaker, I think the debate is getting a bit off topic. I do not really see what Russia and Ukraine have to do with this except for the fact that our system here in Canada is starting to resemble theirs.

I would like the minister to get back on topic.

• (1800)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): I think this issue pertains to the debate; this likely does not constitute a point of order. There will be time provided for questions and comments at the end of the member's speech. Perhaps the hon. member could raise his question then.

[*English*]

The hon. member for Charleswood—St. James—Assiniboia.

Hon. Steven Fletcher: Mr. Speaker, my point is that there are more important issues to discuss.

If the translation is correct, the member just compared our democracy to the totalitarian regime in Russia. The member should apologize. What he said is a condemnation of everything we hold dear. How could the member stand up in this chamber and compare our system of government to that of the totalitarian regime of Mr. Putin? It is a disgrace. That is the very country that is invading other countries and that has abused the human rights of individuals.

The fact is that the member completely dismisses our democracy and the men and women who fought and died for our nation to protect the rights in this place. Is it not ironic that, on this trivial point of order, the member gets up and denigrates this nation? I hope the member will apologize for that when he has the opportunity. When he apologizes, we will move on, as we should.

This place has more important things to talk about, like the economy and public security. Today, we were going to talk about food safety, but now we cannot, because the opposition has decided to throw stones. If the opposition really cared about this institution, about our democracy, and about our ability to present and debate ideas, it would focus on legislation or supply day motions that make our democracy great.

Of course, the only comments we have heard so far from the opposition during the time I have been speaking are that we are just like Russia. How arrogant. How naive. How disappointing.

It does a discredit to all those in Russia who have their human rights violated. I am talking about everyone from people in visible minorities to individuals in the gay, lesbian, and transsexual community who fear for their rights in Russia. The member says that Canada is just like that. It is just outrageous.

The member should be ashamed and he should apologize as soon as the opportunity arises. When he apologizes or corrects the record

[*Translation*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The hon. member for Laurentides—Labelle on a point of order.

Mr. Marc-André Morin: Mr. Speaker, I am not rising to apologize but to remind the minister that he is supposed to address his comments to you, rather than keep picking on me. That does not get us anywhere and it is becoming more and more ridiculous.

Privilege

• (1805)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): I appreciate the member's point of order. Members normally address their comments and speeches to the Chair and not to other members.

[*English*]

I would ask the hon. member to direct his comments through the Chair, as members normally do.

The hon. member for Charleswood—St. James—Assiniboia.

Hon. Steven Fletcher: Mr. Speaker, is that not grand? The member gets up, has an opportunity to apologize or to correct the record, and he does not do it. Now it seems that he actually believes what he said. It was not a mistake; he actually believes that Canada's political system is just like Russia's system. The member had an opportunity to correct the record but he did not take it. That is the NDP's hypocrisy on this issue.

It is just ridiculous that we are being forced to spend time talking about this when there are so many more important issues to be discussed. I would like to thank the member for his interruption because it illustrates the ridiculousness of this situation. The member made a statement. Through his body language, I think he may be regretting what he said but I do not know. If I played the NDP game that those members are playing with us today, I would pursue that member relentlessly until he started to cry to mommy. I am not like that.

Mr. Scott Simms: What the Hell? I am definitely crying.

Mr. John McKay: Where is my mommy?

Hon. Steven Fletcher: Mr. Speaker, there are some people who are starting to cry. I am not sure why, but it might be because they believe in Canada and they believe in our democracy. It might be because they cannot believe that a member of the House would compare our country, our democracy, our freedoms, to those of Russia, especially when Russia is violating the sovereignty of another country. It is just outrageous that the member said so during a debate in which the NDP is refusing to accept a member's correction of what was said earlier.

I really hope that the member does the right thing. He does not even have to apologize. He could just stand up and say that Canada's political system is far superior to Russia's system. That is all I would need, but he probably will not do that. If we used NDP logic, we would rise on a point of order and bring forward a motion for contempt of Canada because he thinks Russia's political system is better than Canada's. Everyone can read that in the blues. People will be really disappointed that the member said that. I hope he does not believe it but maybe he does. He will have an opportunity to correct the record.

We could be having a discussion about public policy, things that affect Canadians, but instead the NDP wants us to talk about this.

• (1810)

They want us to go to a committee and spend committee time talking about a non-issue, and that really would be a waste of time. We have already wasted this afternoon on this, thanks to the NDP. To

waste the committee's time on top of that not only shows disrespect for this place but also disrespect for the Canadian taxpayer.

What is more NDP than that: no respect for the taxpayer. Nothing costs anything, and we can do and say anything, as long as we are the New Democrats. We did not really mean it, or we did mean it but we did not really say it. We want to nationalize everything and move on. Maybe that was the root of that member's Russian comment; he wants to nationalize everything.

Let us accept the member's apology and move on. He corrected the record. Let us get to business. That is what Canadian taxpayers, Canadian citizens, have sent us here to Ottawa to do. It is not to play these juvenile games we see across the floor.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc-André Morin (Laurentides—Labelle, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I do not want to get into a long, pointless exchange. Earlier, the minister said that it was time we started acting like adults, apologized and moved on. That implies that it is okay to do just about anything, as long as one apologizes.

I take my work seriously because I know that Canadians are paying me to be here to debate serious issues such as bridges that are crumbling, wheat that is rotting under tarps in the fields, mail that is not getting delivered, planes that are not flying and boats with an unknown delivery date. There are plenty of issues that need debating.

I heard a member on the other side of the House say that everyone, deliberately or not, twists the truth sometimes. That is not a very strong defence.

I alluded to Russia because I am seeing a shift here in Parliament, and I feel that Canada's democracy is deteriorating. We do not resemble Russia now, but we may eventually. I would like to hear my colleague's thoughts on that.

[*English*]

Hon. Steven Fletcher: Mr. Speaker, that is interesting, coming from that member. What the member said was that Canada was like Russia. He kind of moved away from that statement. If I were an NDP member, I would bring forward a motion to sanction him and then use up committee time, and then debate his comments for hours in the House of Commons. That is what I would do if I were an NDP member. However, I am not. I am a Conservative, and I want to get the job done. I want the Canadian taxpayers to get value for their dollar. I am not going to make a complaint against this member, because there are more important things to worry about and they should—

• (1815)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Order, please. Questions and comments. The hon. member for Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor.

Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I agree with the member. I do have tears in my eyes. I have to ascertain whether it is because of laughing or crying. I am not really sure.

Privilege

Honestly, as a roomful of political actors that we are, and we are a room full of political actors, this is quite frankly some of the worst theatre I have ever seen in my life.

Let us take a look at the timeline of some of this logic that is coming around here.

A statement was made that was not true. The member admitted that two weeks later. It is one thing for him to say that someone told him that this was happening or that he knew of someone who witnessed it and within that two-week period that person came to him and said, "I may have misspoken". However, the member said that he witnessed it with his own eyes. It does not take two weeks for him to readjust his vision.

Therefore, I would like to ask the hon. member this. How is it that this two-week period goes by and all of a sudden one realizes that what one witnessed was not necessarily as it appeared?

Hon. Steven Fletcher: Mr. Speaker, I think those are crocodile tears I see. The member is from Gander. I just want to do a shout-out for the airport at Gander. It is a great piece of infrastructure and the people there are really great. The Nav Canada facility there is truly awesome.

With respect to the member's comment, this whole thing is a waste of our time. The government wants to be serious. Once a member has set the record straight, we move on, because if we held everyone to the standard of not accepting apologies, this place would be non-functional.

Hon. Gordon O'Connor (Carleton—Mississippi Mills, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rarely stand up and speak. However, I will speak to this.

The truth is that this is all part of a filibuster on the Elections Act. First, a motion was brought against the member. In the next few days, we can probably expect concurrence motions and everything else because the NDP has declared that it would filibuster on the Elections Act.

I ask the member for Charleswood—St. James—Assiniboia whether he agrees with me.

Hon. Steven Fletcher: Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for his comment and his great lifetime dedication to our country through his military service and as a member of Parliament. In his own way, he has a way of cutting through everything and calling it as it is. That is indeed what is happening: the NDP members are using a political procedure to delay dealing with real issues because they know they are on the wrong side. From their perspective, anything is better than having the government move forward with some really great ideas.

• (1820)

Mr. Glenn Thibeault (Sudbury, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for his speech. I have a couple of questions I would like to put to him, through you of course.

First, how can it be a filibuster if the bill is already out of the House and in committee? It makes us scratch our heads on that.

Second, right now we are talking about someone misleading the House. I know we want to be cautious about the words so I will be careful with that. What I am finding appalling is that we are saying this is a waste of time. The debates we have in the House are not a

waste of time. When we talk about bills that the government brings forward and we present evidence in our speeches, it is not a waste of time. When we are trying to persuade one side or the other, depending on which side we are on, using evidence that may not necessarily be accurate and then is retracted, does not do anyone on any side of the House any good.

Therefore, this is not a waste of time. Rather, we are trying to ensure that all parliamentarians continue to respect this House. What seems to be missing is respect for this House.

I would like to hear my hon. colleague's comments on that.

Hon. Steven Fletcher: Mr. Speaker, let me first of all say that I think the member is very fortunate to represent Sudbury. It is a great community, and I have been there many times. It is a great mining community, with a great university and great people.

The reason why this can be considered a filibuster is because if the motion were successful, it would go to committee, and that committee is the same one that is dealing with the awesome elections act.

However, we have spent hours talking about a trivial matter when there are so many more important things going on in the world. I wish the opposition would agree. Let us talk about things that matter.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Before we resume debate and the member for Parkdale—High Park, I would let her know that there are about seven minutes remaining in the time provided for government orders today. We will get started, at least, and the remainder of the 20 minutes will be taken up when the House next resumes debate on the question.

The hon. member for Parkdale—High Park.

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP): Mr. Speaker, with the remaining time that I have after the House adjourns today, I will be splitting my time when the debate resumes.

I would like to focus us back on what we are actually debating, which is the question of privilege. The motion we are debating that was introduced by the House leader for the opposition, the member for Skeena—Bulkley Valley, reads:

That the question of privilege related to the statements made in the House of Commons by the member for Mississauga—Streetsville be referred to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

I hear members opposite saying that this is trivial and not worth the time of debate, but I want to make the case in the very few minutes I have that we are fundamentally talking about questions that are very foundational to our democracy. That is the ability of members elected to speak in the House to speak with privilege. Privilege means that we have the trust of other parliamentarians, and in fact, of all Canadians, that when we speak we are speaking with honesty and with our best attempts to make statements that are accurate and true. Therefore, when we might occasionally make mistakes, we still have the privilege of immunity in the House.

Adjournment Proceedings

The comments we are discussing today refer to the elections act bill. I heard it referred to by a member opposite as “awesome”. I prefer to call it the voter suppression act. The comments of the member for Mississauga—Streetsville pertain to the vouching system. I want to read his comments about the vouching system and talk a bit about that. On February 6, he said:

Mr. Speaker, I want to talk...about this vouching system again. I know the minister represents an urban city. I am from a semi-urban area of Mississauga, where there are many high-rise apartment buildings. On mail delivery day when the voter cards are delivered to community mailboxes in apartment buildings, many of them are discarded in the garbage...or the blue box. I have actually witnessed...people picking up the voter cards, going to the campaign office of whatever candidate they support and handing out these voter cards to other individuals, who then walk into voting stations with friends who vouch for them with no ID.

This is not some random reference. This is very specific. One imagines a very vivid memory in the member's mind when he makes this statement. I should also say that he made this statement when the bill was under time allocation. In other words, the time for debate of the bill had been restricted by the government, for a record number of times, which itself challenges our democratic system. Then we had this statement by the member. It kind of defied belief in the sense that one would imagine the member opposite trotting after people who had picked up these random voter ID cards, following them to opposition campaign offices, and then seeing these distributed. One would wonder how the member himself would be able to do this. Nevertheless, we operate with this notion of trust, this notion of privilege, which the member is entitled to.

Then, lo and behold, a couple of weeks later, on February 24, he rose again in the House and said he was not exactly accurate. He said in fact he had not personally witnessed individuals retrieving the voter notification cards. He did not apologize for his statements.

The question here is whether he was deliberately misleading the House. I would argue that, yes, he was. Others, including our House leader, have outlined in detail how he deliberately misled the House.

• (1825)

He said himself that he had misled the House, and we believe that was deliberate. This was the rationale for one of the key changes to the voter suppression act, which would deny thousands of people the ability to vote because far too many voters need to have somebody to vouch for them at the polling station. There were 100,000 of such people in the last election, and Elections Canada had not determined that there was fraudulent activity.

There was activity that the government side was responsible for—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The hon. member for Essex is rising on a point of order.

Mr. Jeff Watson: Mr. Speaker, I know the hon. member has precious few minutes, but she should probably at least talk about the question of privilege rather than Bill C-23.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): I appreciate the point of order with respect to relevance. As the member may know, there is plenty of freedom for members to explore different ideas in the course of their remarks and, of course, bring that all to relevance to the question before the House as they feel fits.

The hon. member for Parkdale—High Park.

Ms. Peggy Nash: Mr. Speaker, given that we have gone around the world, to democracy in Ukraine, Russia, and various countries, I would think that we could talk about democracy here in Canada and the ability of Canadian voters to get to the polling stations. That is what this debate is about. It is about whether this member, through his so-called vivid memories of voter fraud, as he is calling it, were accurate, and whether his memories, which have now been proven to be untrue, were the justification for the changes that are being brought forward in the bill that will lead to voter suppression and the inability of voters to cast their ballots.

To me, that is a fundamental issue that his misleading has got us to. In my riding of Parkdale—High Park, there are many vulnerable people who are challenged in terms of getting their voter ID.

Mr. Speaker, I am out of time. I am very sorry about that. To me, this debate is not a waste of time. This debate is fundamental to our work in Parliament, and that is why the NDP is insisting that we have this debate. It is very important.

• (1830)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The hon. member for Parkdale—High Park has twelve and a half minutes remaining when the House next returns to debate on the question, and, of course, the usual 10 minutes for questions and comments.

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

A motion to adjourn the House under Standing Order 38 deemed to have been moved.

[*Translation*]

QUEBEC BRIDGE

Mr. Denis Blanchette (Louis-Hébert, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise this evening because when I asked the new minister responsible for the Quebec Bridge a question a few months ago to see whether she would bring a new dynamic to the problem that Quebec City is having with this bridge, I was sorely disappointed.

The Quebec Bridge is one of two iconic Quebec City structures. The other is the Château Frontenac. They are postcard-worthy. That is where the similarity ends, however, and I will explain why. The Quebec Bridge is, above all, a feat of engineering. It is the longest cantilever bridge in the world. The structure was designated a national historic site of Canada on November 24, 1995. In 1987, the bridge was also designated an international historic monument by both the American and Canadian societies for civil engineering. That is quite significant.

Adjournment Proceedings

Every day, 35,000 vehicles cross the bridge. There is a pedestrian walkway and a railway. Most of the people who use the bridge, which connects Quebec City's north and south shores, are people from the south shore. I am an MP from the north shore. These people live in ridings like Lévis—Bellechasse and Lotbinière—Chutes-de-la-Chaudière, which both happen to be Conservative ridings.

However, I never heard these members speak about the bridge and the need to maintain it, and I never heard them standing up for the interests of their constituents. In fact, they are going against public opinion in the Quebec City area, and I find that very unfortunate.

A number of studies have been conducted on the bridge's maintenance requirements. There was the Delcan report in 2008, which indicated that there would be problems one day if we were not careful. What is more, the Government of Quebec recently published a study on the bridge deck, which needs major work because it is full of rust. I will get back to that.

I am concerned because the government has been talking about legal proceedings for nine years and not taking any action. Meanwhile, the condition of the bridge is deteriorating every day. The way the Conservatives are dealing with this issue makes me think of the F-35s. The Conservatives wanted to follow in the Liberals' footsteps so badly that they have already succeeded in surpassing them.

To conclude the first part of my speech, I would like to remind hon. members that, in 2005, the future prime minister at the time, since this was during the election campaign, gave a speech before the Quebec City chamber of commerce in which he mocked Liberal transport minister Jean Lapierre. The Prime Minister said that Mr. Lapierre was not even capable of painting a bridge and that, on election day, he would take the paint brush away from him. The Prime Minister must have lost that paint brush because nothing has been done for nine years.

It is a bit like going to a car dealership to buy a new car and being presented with a shiny, new car without any paint on it. Would we buy the car without any paint even though it was new? I do not think so.

In nine years, the government has spent \$400,000 in legal fees. How long will this case go on and how much will it cost in legal fees?

• (1835)

[English]

Mr. Jeff Watson (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have this opportunity today to speak in the House about the Quebec Bridge. The Quebec Bridge is an impressive structure of historical importance and a prominent landmark in the community. The Quebec Bridge is a vital link for transportation. CN and VIA trains use the rail lines on a regular basis, and thousands of vehicles cross back and forth daily. Thus, the Quebec Bridge supports the local and national economies as well as contributing to social vitality in the region.

I would like to briefly provide some context for my comments today.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the Government of Canada divested itself of various transportation assets as part of removing itself from the direct management and ownership of transportation services. In this context, just prior to CN's privatization in 1993, the Government of Canada and CN agreed to the transfer of a number of valuable rail properties to CN for \$1. In exchange for the properties, CN assumed certain liabilities, including the Quebec Bridge. In 1995, CN became the full owner of the Quebec Bridge and assumed responsibility for the bridge's safety, maintenance, and operation.

Upon assuming ownership, CN committed to a major maintenance program for the bridge. To support CN in meeting these restoration obligations, the Governments of Canada and Quebec agreed to contribute toward a 10-year, \$60 million restoration program. The Government of Canada's commitment was \$6 million.

When this 1997 tripartite agreement ended in 2006, CN had depleted the funds but had not completed some of the maintenance work, and about 60% of the bridge surface had not been painted. These procedures were to be finished as part of the 1997 agreement.

Despite several months of negotiations with CN to complete the restoration, the painting was not completed. As such, the Government of Canada initiated legal action in 2006. Specifically, a motion was filed by the Attorney General of Canada requesting that the Quebec Superior Court declare that CN has failed to meet its contractual obligations, including completing the restoration of the bridge. I understand the trial will be under way in May of this year.

I would like to reiterate that the Quebec Bridge is owned by CN and that the restoration, operation, maintenance, and safety of the Quebec Bridge rests with CN as its owner. The legal action undertaken by the Government of Canada seeks to hold CN accountable for its responsibilities as owner of the bridge and to protect taxpayers. Our government recognizes the importance of CN's completing the restoration of the Quebec Bridge and ensuring its long-term viability.

[Translation]

Mr. Denis Blanchette: Mr. Speaker, I spoke briefly about a report released in the past few days.

The report has 515 pages. We only counted how many times certain words are repeated in the report: "rust" appears 2,511 times; "corrosion", 1,090 times; and "perforation", 834 times. Do these figures inspire confidence in the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness?

To conclude, I would like to read an excerpt from an open letter written by Mr. Luc Paradis, former president of the Quebec City chamber of commerce, published in *Le Soleil* on February 24:

The solution? What do we usually do when a heritage structure is in danger of collapsing or a property at risk could cause damage? Those responsible are served with a formal demand to take the required action and, if they do not, the initiator of the demand carries out the work and claims the costs from the owner of the structure. In the event of irreparable damage, or if the work is urgent, an injunction is the appropriate recourse. The bridge cannot wait for the outcome of the legal proceedings under way.

It is important that we have a complete report on the situation and that the government take action.

Adjournment Proceedings

•(1840)

[English]

Mr. Jeff Watson: Mr. Speaker, let me be clear for the member. CN owns the bridge and is responsible for it. The federal government's jurisdiction extends to the inspection of the rail line portion of the bridge. We have met our obligations to inspect it, and the track is fine. The province is responsible for the inspection of the roadway portion of the bridge, and it has undertaken those responsibilities.

However, let the record show that in criticizing the \$400,000 that has been spent on legal fees, the member opposite would let CN entirely off the hook for its obligations, and that is absolutely shameful. We will not do that to our taxpayers and we will ensure that CN meets its obligations.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The motion that the House do now adjourn is deemed to have been adopted. Accordingly the House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 10 a.m. pursuant to Standing Order 24(1).

(The House adjourned at 6:40 p.m.)

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