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Chair

Mr. Joe Preston

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•(1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC)): We will call our meeting to order, meeting number 17.

We are here on the orders of the day of Bill C-23, which is before the committee.

I will remind the members that we are televised today and we are doing committee business of course. Mr. Christopherson has the floor, but before he takes it I would like to ask if we can get to committee business today, please. We are here as a steering committee trying to plan our study of Bill C-23, and I ask Mr. Christopherson to start but remember we'd like get to this piece of legislation one day.

Mr. Lukiwski, on a point of order, we're starting early today.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Regina—Lumsden—Lake Centre, CPC): Very briefly, I raise this because I noticed you submitted a witness list to us. Several of those witnesses were ones I had previously submitted, Mr. Chair. I have a revised list, we've added one name to that, Mr. Harold Neufeld, who wrote a report that is contained in the Elections Canada documents that we've been quoting widely in our interventions on this bill in the House.

I would also take this opportunity to try to encourage my friend and colleague Mr. Christopherson to stop his filibuster so we'd be able to start getting these witnesses to provide testimony on the bill. I see many of them here have indicated they are available by teleconference, others all have email addresses, which means they'd be available via Skype. While we're wasting valuable time on this filibuster we should be examining the bill.

The Chair: Mr. Lukiwski, I thank you but it's not a point of order.

Your chair is at a loss to suggest that a witness list during the thoughts of a study is out of order, but at this moment it is, we're still on Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): I have a point of order from this side of the table. Fair is fair, I guess.

We have not submitted our witness list because we believe it is premature. We believe ultimately that we should be going outside Ottawa. We would like to see organizations such as Elections Manitoba and other independent election authorities able to contribute. So I think it's premature to submit a list until we have had the opportunity to discuss where we should be going and we should not be conceding that we're not going outside Ottawa. I think we have to approach this with an open mind.

The Chair: Mr. Lamoureux, that's exactly the motion before us. I'll certainly take witness lists at any time knowing that any party can also add to them at any time. I'd like to be ready to go when it's time to get there and I'm sure Mr. Christopherson is going to tell us that today.

Mr. Christopherson, you have the floor.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

If I might, just as a matter of business also, before I continue. Chair, I am looking to you and Mr. Lukiwski, on Thursday when we would normally be meeting, the Aga Khan is addressing Parliament and I'm assuming that we would want to show the respect that's deserved to an international guest coming to our House and that this committee would not sit. I seek your guidance, Chair.

The Chair: That is what your chair would share with you, if we ever get to a steering portion of this meeting, that we would be in the House listening to the Aga Khan on Thursday at our normal committee time so we would not be having a committee meeting that day.

Mr. David Christopherson: Okay, thank you, Chair; I appreciate that.

I would like to start out on a harmonious note. Who knows, maybe at the end of two hours we'll be right back to a harmonious note. I have my doubts, but hope springs eternal.

Chair, you stated at the outset that you were hoping we could get to business today. I want you to know that the official opposition shares that desire. But, sir, what is not going to happen is any backing away from this motion, unless and until the government comes to its senses and agrees to negotiate.

I want to state again, as I have said at this televised committee, have said on the floor of the House of Commons, and say again to the government representatives across from me, that this is not the fight we want. Process is not what we think we should be spending most of our time on; we should be focusing on the bill. But in a democracy, process matters. It matters in terms of who gets a say and when they get that say in the process. The rules of the game: that's where we are right now.

To continue with our analogies of these days, the government wants us to just hit the ice and start playing, but we haven't determined what the rules of the game are, so how can that be?

Chair, I might just acknowledge that Leadnow is walking into the room, a leading civics group who have serious concerns. Today, they've tabled with us almost 54,000 signatures of Canadians who also care about this issue, who want their say in their laws and their elections. I want to commend Leadnow for their news conference this morning and for their efforts and for being here representing those so far almost 54,000 Canadians—that's a beginning—who are indicating, now that the Olympics are over, that this is important.

We know it was not a coincidence that the government introduced the budget during the winter Olympics—earlier than usual—and a major overhaul of our election laws and a major overhaul of our immigration laws, all while the winter Olympics were on.

There is not a Canadian out there gullible enough to believe that this was a coincidence. It was not a coincidence; it was deliberate. It was an attempt to have the important issues that are now before us distracted by the Olympics. The government plan was that by the time people returned to everyday issues and got a sense of what was happening, this would have been rammed through. We saw that in the House.

I remind members that the government was making speeches in the House on their motion to shut down debate—think about it: to shut down debate, in a democratic country, on a bill that deals with democracy, and the first thing they do is muzzle democracy. The arguments they used, Chair, as you'll recall, were that the House stuff is not that important; that what really matters is when we get to committee, because that's where we roll up our sleeves and get to work and do the work.

We didn't buy that and we voted against the notion that the House of Commons should stop debating the bill. But the government has a majority, so they got their way. Now here we are at committee, and the first thing the official opposition asked, with the support of the third party, is that we have public hearings that go outside the safety and security of the Ottawa bubble. It looked as if the government might be interested—there were some discussions—but then that iron curtain came down, and I was told that those conversations are over. So here we are.

• (1110)

I say again to the government that in 30 minutes I think we could resolve this; we could negotiate an agreement. I don't expect, Chair, that we would get everything we asked for; neither should the government expect that they would get everything they asked for. But with both parties putting a little water in their wine, we can get there. I don't know how much more reasonable an official opposition can be to the government on a major bill than to suggest that there are negotiations that could be had that would allow us to get off the process debate and start dealing with such things as witnesses and what cities we will go to and who we will hear there and how long we will meet here.

The government is already at “push, push, push”; everything is a panic. Now it's a big rush. They were supposed to come back with this bill months and months ago—

An hon. member:—18 months ago—

Mr. David Christopherson:—18 months ago, my friend Mr. Scott, our lead critic on this file, reminds me. Now, all of a sudden,

there is a big problem with time, “Oh, we don't have time to consult. We can't go out travelling; we don't have time. We have to get this in place—the election is coming.”

Well, the government sets the agenda. They have the majority; they are the executive council. They decided to wait. Not only that: before they start screaming that the sky is falling in terms of time, I would remind my colleagues on the government benches that our motion calls for public hearings in Ottawa and across the country during the months of March and April. We're still in February; there's lots of time, if the government is truly interested in, at the very least, giving Canadians a say on their own election laws.

It's disgraceful that we even have to have this kind of debate. This is a democracy that's held up as an example around the world, and the government is making a mockery of it. I have said, as I'm sure many colleagues have too, for many years that if having a Canada were easy, everybody would have one. It's not easy. It's certainly not easy for the government. I've been in government in our largest province. I get it.

It's too bad, but it goes with the territory. Those who get to drive around in limos and have the big offices and all the big entourages—and I've been there too.... Those who get all those things also have the responsibility to treat Canadians with respect and to treat the power they have been given—even though they got it with less than 40% of the vote but got 100% of the power.... They have an obligation to use that power in the right way, in the interests of Canadians.

The government can say, “Well, our bill does that”. Fair enough; let's go out to the country and ask Canadians what they think. If we go out there and the arguments are overwhelming that the government is right, then we in the official opposition are going to have to sit back and ask where we are and wonder whether we need to revisit this thing. I have a sneaking suspicion that may not be the way it goes, but it could. We don't know.

And that is the point, Chair. This country is vast—the second-largest land mass in the world—and for those of us who, like most of my colleagues, have had a chance to travel from the far-flung corners of this great country, the one thing that comes at you is how many different pieces make up Canada. I don't mean just divisions by provinces and territories.

Chair, I have the greatest respect for you personally, sir, and I know your job, as I'm a committee chair too, and know that your only priority is the agenda and the rights of the members. That is pretty much your focus.

• (1115)

I understand that, sir. I understand that you'd very much like to see us get off process and get on to substance. I share that with you, sir. I say to you with all sincerity that the official opposition feels the same way. But, sir, there are certain fundamental principles that are worth fighting for, and this is one of them. We won't do anything that's against the rules. There will not be any kinds of circuses or gong shows. But what there will be is a concerted effort to do everything we can to force this government to at least give Canadians a say.

Here we are watching what's going on in Ukraine, a country, by the way, to which we sent the foreign affairs committee in 2012. Tens of thousands of dollars were spent to send Canadian MPs to Ukraine. Why? To study their democracy. That's wonderful. And as a Canadian, I feel really good that we did that, especially in light of the struggle that's going on there right now.

The vice-chair of this committee and I have been to Ukraine. I've done three election observation missions there. I was there in 2004 during the Orange Revolution when they thought they'd turned the corner, when they thought their national nightmare was over and that they finally had their country back. For those of us who have stood in Independence Square, in the midst of those celebrations in 2004, and seen the hope in the eyes of the parents, the young people, and the old people who understood what life was like before and knew what it could be in the future.... No one can go there and not come away from that kind of experience without being deeply moved.

Did Canada do the right thing by spending tens of thousands of dollars of Canadians' hard-earned money to go and study democracy in Ukraine? You bet. That was exactly what Canadians wanted us to be doing in terms of our international outreach. We are not the biggest military; we're not even one of the biggest. We're not the biggest economy; we're not even one of the biggest economies. But we are one of the countries with the biggest and best international reputation. At least we were until this government started fraying the edges of it.

Why did we go there? Was it just to give MPs a trip to Ukraine? No. We went there because Canada's voice on the international stage particularly when it comes to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law is respected. We are considered a leader. The fact that Canada sent that delegation over there, the fact that we consulted with the leadership and the people of Ukraine, and the fact that we came back and wrote a report that became part of the international dialogue, were all important.

When I see what's going on in Ukraine now, it makes my heart feel good to know that as Canadians we have done and continue to do every single thing we can to help the people of Ukraine get the kind of democracy that they see over here in Canada. It would probably break their hearts to realize that here we are struggling to get our people heard when they look at us as the gold medal.... It's Canada. It would shock them to find out that here we are having a debate, trying to force the government to take a bill that changes our election laws out into the country to give people their say.

You see, Chair, that's the kind of thing they're looking for in Ukraine. Democracy's not perfect. Canada's not perfect, but it sure can look that way when your own government is shooting at you.

By the way, I don't want to make too big a deal of this, but we really do need the leader of the third party to come out and clear up this matter and make it go away. It is too important to leave that out there. I'm hoping that's going to happen today. I really believe that every Canadian wants democracy in Ukraine and that we want to do everything we can to stay united. To leave out there the impression that we take it as anything less than one of the most serious things would just not be acceptable.

● (1120)

I don't believe that it meets the standard that the leader of the third party has for himself.

Having said that, Mr. Chair, just to end my thoughts on that is to say to you again that we share those at any time day or night as we go through that. I mean it, 24/7. I'm ready to respond to an outreach from the government to find a resolve, and I believe that parties of goodwill can sit down and that in 30 minutes we could find an agreement. Will it satisfy us in totality? I doubt it. Will it make the government happy that they have been forced out of the bubble at all? I doubt it, but therein lies the compromise. So that's where we are, and unless and until the government signals that there's a change, that's where we remain.

I thought I would just to refresh everybody's memory, Chair, to keep us all properly focused, because we wouldn't want to get off the point.

The Chair: You've got me, but I'm not sure you have the rest.

Mr. David Christopherson: Well, sir, all I need is you.

The Chair: All right.

Mr. David Christopherson: My notice of motion, tabled on February 6 of this year, states:

That the Committee, upon receiving an Order of Reference from the House concerning C-23, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act and other Acts and to make consequential amendments to certain Acts, initiate a study on this legislation, which will include the following:

—wait for it, here comes the radical part—

That the Committee hear witnesses from, but not limited to, Elections Canada, Political parties as defined under the Canada Elections Act, the Minister of State who introduced the bill,

By the way, let it be noted that the official opposition was very cooperative to allow the minister to come in—no circus, no gong show—and in a dignified way make his case. That should be noted, especially when the government starts ranting and raving about how irresponsible the opposition is being.

To continue:

representatives of First Nations, anti-poverty groups, groups representing persons with disabilities, groups representing youth advocates and students, as well as specific groups which have been active in society on elections rules, including Fair Vote Canada, SAMARA, Democracy Watch and the BC Civil Liberties Association;

That the Committee request to travel to all regions of Canada, (Atlantic Canada, Quebec, Ontario, Northern Ontario, the Prairies, British Columbia and the North), as well as downtown urban settings (such as the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver) and rural and remote settings, and that the Committee request that this travel take place in March and April 2014; and

That the Committee shall only proceed to clause-by-clause consideration of this bill after these hearings have been completed, with a goal to commence clause-by-clause consideration for Thursday, May 1, 2014.

Chair, it's important for me to underscore the fact that most opposition parties do not include that kind of a start date for the last part of clause-by-clause consideration for two very good reasons. One is obvious, that you politically box yourself in because you've set that deadline.

The second thing is that once we get into clause-by-clause, it's mostly voting, and if the government is voting as a government, they win every vote ten times out of ten. That's why opposition parties don't put in that sort of thing.

But our leader made it very clear that we weren't going to play any games and that we were going to offer the government a serious proposal, and a modest one. I can tell you, as a former house leader at Queen's Park, about some of the motions I came up with. This wouldn't even be a starting point. The point was more the exercise and the politics. To draw attention to it, you'd load it up with everything. It was a political strategy.

This is not a political strategy. This is a sincere effort to get the issue of process out of the way. Canadians really don't want us fighting about process. I get it. We get it. But Canadians also, from what I'm hearing back, like the idea that we're holding the government to account on the issue of giving Canadians a say, in the communities they live in, on their election laws. That's the crux of it. History will show, if they continue this line, that the government that ran on a platform of democracy and accountability and transparency refused to let Canadians have their say on their election laws, in the communities they live in, because the government's afraid of them.

That's the only conclusion: they're afraid. Why do you think they said something like "gong show"? What are they worried about? They're worried that, heaven forbid, Canadians might come out and express their opinion about a public matter. Oh, my; whoa; another revolution.

• (1125)

Give me a break....

A lot of my time at Queen's Park was spent under Mike Harris, the former premier. If anybody is familiar with protests, hearings, and citizens expressing themselves, it's those of us who served in the Ontario legislature during that period of time. Given that some of the members of the current government are from the Harris government and actually sit right across from me at the House of Commons, sometimes during voting when we're kibitzing back and forth it's almost like being back at Queen's Park. For that matter, when I listen to the finance minister give his speeches about finance, or I listen to the Treasury Board minister talk about the Treasury Board, I can close my eyes, just transpose Canada for Ontario, and it's the same speech—

Yes, Chair?

The Chair: Just for fun, I'm going to say let's keep it relevant to the motion. I understand that you're going to try and push the bubble on that, but I got tired of just sitting here, so I thought I'd jump in.

Mr. David Christopherson: That's fine. I appreciate that. It gives me a chance to have a drink of water.

Your point is well taken, Chair. I expect that everything I say I'm going to have to be able to tie and make it germane to the point. That's fair. I think the point that I'm making, Chair, is that the government in my view is afraid to go out into the public because they don't want to face criticism.

In the largest province of Ontario, where they had one of the most tumultuous times in our history, I went to all kinds of committee meetings across Ontario where there were protests. I can tell you that I'm not aware of one Conservative who even had one little scratch, not a single little boo-boo. Nobody got hurt. Maybe their sensitivities were a little bit assaulted because they didn't like some of the things on the signs or the things that people said to the media, but gosh, it's starting to sound a bit like a healthy democracy, minus the guns.

That was the point I was making, Chair. While they may not want to go, there are certain things you have to do as a government in a democracy. One of them is to talk to your own people or at the very least, give them their say. That's the key point we're making here today. I'm submitting that the government has no rational argument for not going out of Ottawa's secure safety bubble that we have here with lots of guards, posts, gates, and all that stuff to protect the poor little government members who might be upset if somebody said something they didn't like. The fact of the matter is that democracy doesn't just live here in this committee room or in the chamber, the House of Commons, on Parliament Hill, or even in Ottawa. Our democracy is also out there because that's where the people are.

It's not unreasonable. It's not radical. It's not obstructionist. In fact, I think it's the right thing that the opposition would make a federal case out of public hearings across the country in the places where people live. That's the issue. This government doesn't want to do it. Our job is to make them. I say straight up that we don't have the power to do it, but there are folks out there and there are folks in this room who can. The highest authority in a democracy is always the court of public opinion.

I say to those who care about this issue that I've been in politics a long, long time. Some would argue too long. I know what happens when government backbenchers get overwhelmed with complaints from their constituents that they're not happy. I'm not aware of too many government MPs who would be willing to put their seat on the line defending their government's decision to not let their constituents have a say on their election laws or at the very least, a sampling across the country. That will change things, let me tell you, especially as there's disarray going on in the government backbenches.

They've been in government for a long time. Some of those backbenchers are starting to realize that the only way they're going to see the inside of the cabinet room is if there's a public tour. They're getting a little restless. They're not as quick to just salute and say, "Yes, I'll do whatever you say, no matter how stupid it is or no matter how much it inflames my constituents".

●(1130)

As you get close to the E day, that possible appointment and ascension to cabinet gets further and further off into the distant dreams of some backbenchers who go back to their ridings with their tails between their legs realizing that they really aren't making a big mark here yet. They go back to their ridings where everybody's a hero. You're an MP. You're the only MP in your riding, and everything's fine, and you kind of forget about Ottawa. "I'm relevant. I matter, okay." You go back to your office and suddenly all you've got is a stack of emails and phone messages, and your staff is reporting that virtually every person who's coming in the door is angry. Oh, that's going to get the attention of those backbenchers a lot faster than the whip's office saying, "Heel".

So I want to thank Leadnow, because you are. What I'd like to do is underscore the way that tens of thousands, and I predict it will be hundreds of thousands, if not millions, by the time this process is concluded, particularly if the government stays on this position where Canadians don't get to say they'll decide.... Their 39-point-something percent of the vote deems that they will decide what the laws will be. In three or four years you can get a macro say of how you feel about it all, but leave the details to us. Don't worry about it; we'll take care of it.

Well, Leadnow does not believe that's the way we should be changing our elections, and neither do we, and there's a whole lot of other groups. This is gaining some tracks. The government has lost the cover of the Olympics. I'm not sure what other shiny bauble they'll come up with to try to distract folks with, but the fact remains that more and more people are concentrating on this. I was proud to be there along with my colleagues at the news conference about an hour and a half ago.

Mr. Shedletzky is a co-founder, and I want to say I thought he did an outstanding, extraordinary job this morning. That's nerve-racking. It's not easy to stand in the glare of the national media and know that you're speaking to the entire country. He did an outstanding job. I was very proud to stand there with Adam.

He said, and I'm quoting because the government doesn't seem to think that people are all that interested. Mr. Shedletzky and his 54,000 friends tend to disagree. What he said today is relevant, Chair, because I'm bringing to the committee the views of outside to hear in order to show the government that their position is wrong, it's undemocratic, and it is not supported by the Canadian people.

What did Mr. Shedletzky tell us this morning? He said:

My name is Adam Shedletzky. I'm a co-founder of Leadnow.ca. Leadnow launched before the 2011 federal election and has since grown to include over 330,000 Canadians. Our mission is to help people across Canada deepen our democracy, to create a more open, just and sustainable society.

Funny, you know that really does sound like what they're fighting for in Ukraine.

Continuing the quote, sir,<http://www.leadnow.ca/en/about>:

Our priorities for campaigning and action are driven by our community, and we are not affiliated with any political party. We are here today because Canadians across the country—including over 50,000 who have signed this petition in just a couple of weeks—want to be able to participate in creating a new election law that impacts our democratic rights.

●(1135)

They're outraged that the long-awaited "Fair Elections Act", introduced without any consultation with opposition parties or Elections Canada, does little to combat real election fraud and instead suppresses the vote of marginalized groups. Let me explain briefly.

Following the proven election fraud that happened in the 2011 election, our election watchdog requested that Parliament provide it with the power to compel witnesses to testify during an investigation. Just like the Competition Bureau can. This was partially because political operatives refused to testify, significantly hampering the ability of Elections Canada to quickly get to the bottom of things. Yet this elections act does not give them this power. Nor does it provide penalties for political parties whose databases are used for unauthorized purposes. The robocall registry and new penalties for impersonating election officials does not adequately incentivize political parties to protect their databases, nor will they assist Elections Canada from catching political operatives playing dirty tricks. Minister Poilievre does not appear to have any answers for why our elections watchdog was not provided with the single most important power that they requested.

Instead, despite a complete lack of evidence that any actual fraud has occurred through the "vouching" process that 120,000 Canadians used in 2011, or the use of Voter ID cards, the Conservatives have decided to make it harder for Canadians to vote. This effort to increase the complexity of voting requirements is eerily similar to what has happened in the United States over the past decade where dozens of bills have had the documented effect of reducing voter turnout by millions of people.

Minister Poilievre points to the Neufeld Report for evidence that voter fraud needs to be tackled in Canada. Yet this report does not present one iota of evidence that there was even one case of fraud. Moreover, it makes no recommendation whatsoever to eliminate vouching or the use of Voter ID Cards. Instead, the report's first recommendation was to widen the use of Voter ID cards as a valid piece of address identification for all voters because it proves to be very popular amongst students, aboriginal people and seniors, with between 36% to 73% utilizing this option in a 900,000-person pilot program in 2011. This is not surprising as demographics such as youth and low-income people often do not have stable permanent residences, making it more difficult to provide the required ID.

If I might just end the quotation there and mention that this is a thoughtful presentation....

●(1140)

The Chair: It is a thoughtful presentation. It is the type of evidence this committee would love to hear when we get to the actual piece of legislation. I will challenge you that you are a bit off relevance again because you're not on your motion. You're on a great piece of evidence, but not quite on the motion. I'll bring you back to the motion.

Mr. David Christopherson: Very well, sir. I appreciate that.

The motion does call for Canadians to be heard—

The Chair: The word "the" in it, but it doesn't mean that's all that it's about.

Please, on the motion....

Mr. David Christopherson: On the motion, I am making a case that Canadians want public hearings, which is the focus of the motion. This delegation represents 54,000 people who also believe that. I would just submit, sir, that it's well within my rights to make the point of what they said this morning at the news conference. If I was reading stuff that wasn't relevant, I would take your point, sir. I'm making the case that this reflects the very point we're making, and we're trying to get Ottawa outside the bubble. If we can't do that for now, let's at least reach outside the bubble and bring some voices in. That's what I'm doing.

The Chair: David?

Mr. David Christopherson: Yes?

The Chair: I have a point of order.

Mr. David Christopherson: Good.

The Chair: Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC): My point of order, Mr. Chair, is that I actually do think the case of students is relevant to the question of whether we should hold public meetings across the country or not, because what Mr. Christopherson has just identified is that their very mobility, the very fact that they're away from home, indicates that students are capable of coming to a committee such as this one without us going to them.

The Chair: Again, that's a great piece of evidence that I hope this committee gets to when we get to studying the piece of legislation. It's not a point of order, though.

Back to you, Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you, sir.

Thank you for the intervention, Mr. Reid.

I'm returning now to the quotes, to the news conference this morning supporting our motion. By the way, that support is not partisan; it's based on the substance of the.... I want to make that for their best interests. Again, I'm quoting in saying that "The crisis in Canadian democracy is voter turnout, not fraud by individual voters." May I say that I thought the leader of the Green Party this morning was very effective at the news conference in making that very point, which is that it's not a question of people. I'm giving her attribution. This was her comment this morning, and it's an excellent point. The problem is not people voting too many times; it's not enough people getting out and voting once. It's an excellent point.

I will continue. "Yet not only does this bill actively suppress the vote of marginalized groups, it also appears to prevent Elections Canada from educating our youth on democracy or conducting innovative experiments to increase voter turnout." Again, if I may, in departing from this, that is another one of our concerns: the muzzling of the Chief Electoral Officer. Elections Canada is not supposed to be out there promoting that people vote. This really has people scratching their heads and saying: "Really? If Elections Canada is not supposed to be promoting the notion that good citizenship involves voting, then whose mandate would it be?"

I digress. I'm just about done with my quotes, Chair, and that will end that controversy. "The reality is that with many Canadians turned off of both the political process and political parties"—ouch—"and the documented success of non-partisan voter engagement

campaigns abroad, we need to give Elections Canada more resources, not less."

"We could be having a conversation about bold strategies for increasing participation— like combining electronic and mandatory voting, or placing more polling stations in areas that would target lower-voting populations—instead this law forces Canadians to defend the democratic voting] rights we already have."

"This is a bill that is fundamental to our democracy. If the Conservative government is serious about improving our democratic process, why are they so afraid about talking about their Act in communities across the country? Canadians nationwide should be given the time, and opportunity, to meaningfully participate in the creation of a new elections act."

"I am now going to turn it over for one member from each party to make a short statement, starting with the Official Opposition Critic for Democratic Reform, Craig Scott."

● (1145)

The Chair: Sorry.... Are you turning it over to Craig?

Mr. David Christopherson: No. I was just ending with the quote from Mr. Shedletzky—

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. David Christopherson: —and his reference was "I am now going to turn it over for one member from each party to make a short statement, starting with the Official Opposition Critic for Democratic Reform, Craig Scott." An election is coming and it never hurts to mention a colleague's name, Chair.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): It's a point of order.... I'm not making a point of order; I'm not a member of the committee

The Chair: I was hoping we were going there—

Mr. David Christopherson: Well, hope springs eternal all round.

So my point, Chair, in raising this is that this is the kind of thoughtful, considered, important dialogue that Canadians should be having. I defy any member of the government here today to make the case that this submission by Mr. Shedletzky and Leadnow constitutes a circus or a gong show. All they're asking for is the right to have their say in the places where they live so they can give us their thoughtful input into our election law. And yet here we are, fighting, just to get the government to get out of the safety and security of the Ottawa bubble and give people a chance to have a say on their election laws in the communities where they live.

This is the dialogue Canadians want. I know there's some kind of cartoonish vision that they all have on the other side, Chair, about what happens when you go out into the country, and—ooh—what happens, what if there's somebody there with a picket sign? What if somebody says something that's not polite? One can see why they're afraid. You should see the delegation. They're just terrifying. I'm just so glad I'm over here and there are security guards who could save me from them really quickly, because I think at any moment they're going to do all kinds of violent damage to me and I'm worried. So it's good. I could see maybe why the government wants to stay here. I mean, look, look. Look how terrifying they are. Oh, my God. Oh, my gosh. It's terrible.

You know, that's the silliness of this, and we're reduced to mocking the government's responses because they are so flimsy, when the reality is the reason they don't want to go outside this security safety bubble in Ottawa is they are afraid.

And you know what? I think these government members—this is just my opinion, Chair— really are the ones who are sort of saying, “I don't want to go out there and face all that. I have a hunch this may not be popular, so I really don't want to be on that committee and do that.”

But that's not what's really driving this. What's really driving it is people in the PMO. They're not worried about circuses or gong shows. The committee members are. I think they're worried they might have to walk by somebody holding a sign that says, “Democracy Now” or “Yay Canada”. I think the smart people in the PMO are worried about people like Mr. Shedletzky who are bringing in insightful thoughtful concerns about the bill. That's what they're really afraid of. The members are a little worried about what will happen between the bus and the committee room, but the PMO is not. They're worried about this kind of messaging, the kind of messaging that says, “Wait a minute—you're proposing what? And this law says what? And that's going to affect me in what way?”

That's what they're really afraid of. Not the gong show. Not the circus. They're worried about smart Canadians seeing through what they're doing. That's what they're afraid of, and that's why we're here, because fortunately this is still a democracy and even though they have a majority, in a democracy in a parliamentary system, opposition members have some rights.

• (1150)

One of them is to slow the government down when they're about to run over democracy and Canadians' rights to have a say about their democracy, and that's what we're doing. That's why I was so pleased to join Leadnow.

There's an example. That's just one stack—Adam had lots of them. That's just one stack; there were many. We all got one, and there were lots left over. This has to be the government's nightmare right here—54,000 Canadians. Everybody in here gets credit for being one part of the government's nightmare, which is, Canadians are paying attention. That's what the government doesn't want. That's why they rammed it through the House, obviously not because they expected any work to be done here at committee, even though that's what they said. The whole goal is to ram this through and get it in place for the next election because in our view, and in the view of

many other Canadians, this advantages the Conservatives—the party in power and the party with the most money.

Chair, this is how bad the bill is, that the political calculation is thus. It is better to take the hit when it comes, now and then, in the media, for refusing to take this bill on a cross-country tour outside the safety and security of the Ottawa bubble, rather than face the wrath of an informed Canadian citizenry that sees through it. That's the political calculation. This is generating bad news. The average person might ask, why are they doing this? Why are they taking all these negative hits? And why are they allowing so much focus to go on their refusal to be democratic? It's a good question. That answer is because that hit is better than taking the one for the way they're trying to rig the elections.

That's why Mr. Shedletzky and every other Canadian who thinks the way he does is the real fear that this government has. If Canadians actually understood even a fraction of the damage these changes would do to our election laws as well as my friend Mr. Scott—who has the advantage over all of us, of not just being an amazing MP, but happens to be a law professor—one begins to understand why the government is prepared to take the hit for not going out there.

Where is it we're asking this committee to go that is so terrifying? Most of the major regions of the country are, in large part, represented here at the table, so some of us would be going home. I'm not sure why home is a scary place for them to go to. It's just the fact of our geography alone.

Chair, you and I had a chance to do some travel together early in our years. We both got elected in the class of 2004. We went on an international trip together, and you know how much we learned from that and how much we understood. We also saw how very different the world is when you get out there and start understanding it.

I've also had the opportunity—and you maybe have, Chair, and I'm sure others here have—to go to places like Nunavut and Iqaluit, the capital. There's not much doubt that once you land there at the airport you're in a very different place than you were when you just left Ottawa—because I think that's the only direct flight. It is very, very different.

• (1155)

But you know, Chair, here's the interesting thing, that's only the beginning of it. If you then go further north.... If you're in Iqaluit you certainly get a sense that wow, this is not Kansas anymore, this is very different. Everything about life is different. They're still Canadians, with Canadian laws, but nonetheless their life is so different because of their geography and therefore in large part because of their weather, and isolation.

But, as I said, that's just the beginning of the story. If you're lucky enough, as I've been, to then go from Iqaluit to Pond Inlet for instance, now you're into the High Arctic. You're in the Arctic Circle. Let me tell my fellow MPs that when you get to Pond Inlet you really know you're in a different place. It starts with just seeing glaciers in front of you.

Then you can still go one more step. There are actually two more; I went the one, I didn't go to the final one, to Resolute Bay, which is in the Northwest Passage.

I'm from Hamilton. The way we vote in Hamilton—with the mechanics of it of getting up every day, getting your ID, finding out where you're going to vote, the whole election process in a major urban centre, one of the largest cities in Canada, my hometown Hamilton—is so different in Iqaluit, not to mention Pond Inlet.

●(1200)

What we're asking for is a chance to let the people in Iqaluit, Pond Inlet, and Resolute Bay to show us and tell us where they live, how this impacts them. They deserve that. The people of Pond Inlet deserve to be heard, or other communities that represent their dynamic. It doesn't have to be that one. But Canadians like those who live in Pond Inlet and Resolute Bay, their vote is just as damned important as a vote that's cast in Ottawa, Toronto, or Hamilton. Yet, this government refuses to respect that.

Let's take a little trip further west in our great country, Downtown Vancouver Eastside. Not a place the government tends to talk about much or the circumstances therein, but you know what, Chair, they're Canadians too. Their vote is just as important and deserves to be respected as much as the citizens in Pond Inlet, Ottawa, Toronto, and Hamilton.

Part of the concern, for instance, in Vancouver Downtown Eastside is ID, vouching, not having a permanent address but still wanting to exercise their right—not option—their right as a Canadian to vote. I guarantee members of this committee that voting is very different in Vancouver Downtown Eastside than it is in downtown Calgary. But the people in downtown Calgary have got issues too with some of the changes in here.

So what do we do? It's a dilemma with this big change, this big country. There are all these different points of view. It affects people differently depending on where they live. Why don't we go there and ask them? I guess that's pretty revolutionary. It's worth a try though. We could just sort of try asking people what they think about their own laws that affect their own country.

Through this whole thing, Chair, I really do have a hard time getting the image of what's going in the Ukraine out of my mind. The reason I went there and many others....In fact, one of the first ones I did in '04, and I'm referencing this because we've been talking here about the money we spent to go to Ukraine, and study their democracy and help them. The reason it stays is that in '04....I stand to be corrected but I think there were over 500 Canadians. I think Mr. Opitz was part of the '04. I know you've been to many since. You weren't at the '04 one, okay, but many since with the same intent and done great work there, sir.

There were over 500 Canadians who gave up their Christmas in 2004. We boarded planes, left our families behind, left all our

Christmas trees and presents, and others of different religion. All that was left behind. We all got on a plane and flew to Ukraine in December. Anybody who wants to suggest that was some kind of a junket, go ahead.

●(1205)

I'll tell you what it was. It was heartwarming—heartwarming to be there as one of the most important delegations among representatives from around the world, from democracies everywhere.

Who paid for that? We paid with our time, our families paid by not having us there with them, but the dollars were paid by Canadians. I did not have and have not ever had one of my constituents say to me that Canada should not be spending money on supporting democracies, in particular emerging democracies around the world.

Sometimes the government likes to say they don't want to spend the money on this travel; that it's going to cost them thousands of dollars. Yes, it will. One thing about democracy is that it can be expensive and can be slow. But of course, to paraphrase Winston Churchill—poorly, I might add, because I don't know the quote exactly—“As bad as our system is, it's still better than all the others.”

Ms. Elizabeth May: It's “except for all the others”.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you, I appreciate the help from the leader of the Green Party, who helped me with the quote.

Mr. Brad Butt (Mississauga—Streetsville, CPC): It's a good thing you came today.

Mr. David Christopherson: Yes, it is a good thing she came today. She added a significant contribution to the news conference.

I'm glad you did. It gave me a chance to take a breath.

The reason Canadians were willing to pay that money was that it's about democracy—not even ours, but it was about democracy. I can't say that Canadians are unique among peoples of the world—that would be a bit large for me to say—but I can't imagine another country caring more deeply about democracy, and because we are a generous, compassionate country, to paraphrase J.S. Woodsworth, “we want for others what we want for ourselves”. We want a democracy.

I don't think there's a country in the world that isn't represented by some Canadian somewhere in this country. It is not just an ideal; many Canadians—in this case many tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of Canadians—have a personal attachment to Ukraine. For them, it's not just Canada helping an emerging democracy; it's Canada helping “my home country”.

I can tell you, Chair, that the plane that flew those 500-plus Canadians all the way to Ukraine.... Many of them—their themselves, or their parents, or their grandparents—came from Ukraine. For them, they were continuing their fight for democracy in Ukraine as Canadians, and it made them very proud. There was much credit given to Prime Minister Martin at the time, as there should have been.

We spent tens of thousands of dollars to send the foreign affairs committee to Ukraine in 2012. We have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars sending election observers to almost every election they have had in Ukraine. Yet the government would argue that it's not appropriate, acceptable, or an appropriate expense of Canadian taxpayers' money to study our own democracy. How absurd, to spend hundreds of thousands....

And that's just one country. Canada, has sent probably, I'll bet, hundreds of delegations in the long run to study various aspects of various things in various countries. But it's too sweet to let this go, to not continue to focus on how much money we spent on Ukraine and on how, at this moment, we're glad we did. And if it takes more money spent to help Ukrainians get the democracy they deserve, I believe Canadians want that money spent.

If that's the way Canadians feel about democracy in Ukraine, guess how they feel about it right here? Pretty strong. It really does stretch a modern democracy, when you suggest that it's democratic to bring in election law changes and not give the people who do the voting a chance to have their say in the places in which they live.

• (1210)

That's the part we just can't get past: how the government believes they can get away with it, and thinks they can muster logical arguments against it.

Here's what John had to say. This was also sent in to the Prime Minister's office, copied to Mr. Craig Scott, our lead critic on this. John said:

The "Fair Elections Act" threatens Canadian democracy. A signal of threat is the government's move to truncate debate on the Bill.

In an area as sensitive and complex as electoral reform, the failure to consult (Elections Canada, the public) is deeply worrying. The attempt to rush the legislation to approval during a period when news media and the public are distracted by the Sochi Olympics smacks of deliberate manipulation.

You see? It's not just me.

John continues:

Any measures which weaken the authority of Elections Canada to protect us from fraud and manipulation, which muzzle its voice whether regarding basic electoral practices and regulations or regarding investigations and possible prosecutions injure the public's right to information, to adequate protections and are likely to delay and obscure effective prosecution of those who would undermine clean and transparent elections.

He doesn't sound like a clown to me. He doesn't sound like the participant of a gong show.

Yes, Chair.

The Chair: Again, many of us have received briefs like the one you're reading. They are evidence for this committee in the study of the bill.

Since we're not at the study of the bill—we're still discussing your motion—could you hold yourself to discussion on the motion?

Mr. David Christopherson: Yes. Thank you, Chair. I will jump to the part that I think is absolutely, 100%, clearly germane.

I will continue my quote with the last paragraph:

I urge you to take the time in committee and by active consultation across Canadian society, to hear from diverse voices, particularly those whose rights have been threatened by problems at the polls, robo-calls and other attempts to manipulate and misinform, illegal financial operations by candidates, campaigns and parties, etc.

Chair, the reason I'm reading these is that the government is suggesting that everything can be taken care of right here inside the safety and security of the Ottawa bubble. We're making the case that there is a desire on the part of Canadians to be heard in the places where they live, and this is evidence of that.

There's more, Chair. There's more.

This is from Patricia to Mr. Scott:

I just listened to the Current this morning regarding the Fair Elections Act. I thought you made some really good points regarding the act favouring the Reform/Cons.

Minister Poilievre made a comment that struck me as strange, with regards to voter ID he mentioned that aboriginal peoples could use their status card as ID. Funny thing about that, the Department of Northern and Indian Affairs has more than a two year back log on issuing status cards. The head of the Western Chiefs was interviewed a couple of weeks ago and he was explaining that they were unable to get replacement status cards and new cards for babies. My husband is currently trying to get his status, and has been waiting over a year now. When he first sent the paperwork he received a letter stating the ministry received the information and that it would take about six months to process. He hasn't heard anything since that letter. Sounds strange to me.

Regards, Pat.

That's another—

• (1215)

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson?

Mr. David Christopherson: Yes, sir.

The Chair: I know you're not out of things to say about your motion, but you are travelling into evidence that this committee could possibly hear during the study of the legislation. I would like to save it so that all parties could be part of that instead of just one. So please keep to your motion.

I know you're not out of words.

Mr. David Christopherson: You're right, Chair, I'm not out of words. It's probably my biggest strength and biggest problem.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Some of us agree.

Mr. David Christopherson: Yes, well, that's fine. I have great respect for your rulings. I do sense that as you've done in the past, you're trying to be fair, but you're also trying to make sure that everybody colours within the lines. Understood.

The Chair: It's in the job description.

Mr. David Christopherson: It is in the job description. Having a similar job on another committee, I do understand your dilemma. I'm glad it's you dealing with me, not me dealing with me.

The Chair: I'd like to watch that show for a little while, if you'd like to do that?

Mr. David Christopherson: How much more could people take?

No, it does bring us right back to the core issue, which is once again is the government going to allow Canadians to have their say or not?

I was going to mention earlier, and this is probably my best chance to do it, that we're always assuming here, at least the government is, that everything could be done here from Ottawa. All we have to do is Skype people in and electronics will do everything. Yet one of the dilemmas we have is that access to the voting system is not available to everyone in the same way. This idea to just go over to your local video conferencing centre and you can hook up with the committee, or just go ahead and use your Skype application and you'll be fine, that just underscores how little the government is willing to think about Canadians who don't live in those kinds of places like downtown Ottawa.

Some of the first nations reserves—I don't know how often government members go there, I'm assuming they do—you only have to go there once, like these other places I mention, and you realize that things are done differently for cultural reasons, geographical reasons, historical reasons, and all kinds of reasons.

But a Skype presentation, should we have one, from one person is not going to reflect the challenges, not in a way that this committee could truly understand, embrace, and then interpret the new changes to the election laws to determine whether that helps or hinders those Canadians from voting.

The government contends for the most part, tough. Tough luck. Too bad. They're just going to stay right here. They're going to stay right here hiding in plain sight and afraid to go out and listen to Canadians tell them what they think about their bill.

There's a lot of focus on vouching and other issues, Mr. Chair, and I know that this is not the time for those debates. I respect that. I think it is fair, however, to at least mention the fact that vouching affects people differently depending on where they live. Those 120,000 Canadians who have been identified as using the vouching system are worried that they're at risk of losing their franchise.

How many struggles have we had in this country over the decades for the right to vote? Going way back—and not being a learned person myself and being in the presence of Mr. Reid who is, I watch for him to see if I am stepping into grounds that are making me look foolish—it started with nobility getting a vote, and as parliamentary democracy took hold then moved on to landowners. Eventually the struggle was passed and ordinary men got the vote. Then it took how many more decades of fighting and struggling before women were allowed the vote?

I think, Mr. Reid—and I defer to you, sir—that aboriginal women would be among—

• (1220)

The Chair: You just gave up the floor to Mr. Reid.

Mr. David Christopherson: No.

Mr. Brad Butt: Can we get the blues on that?

The Chair: We're all a bit excited.

Go ahead, David.

Mr. David Christopherson: It was metaphorical and I only know that word because he just said it. I'm not trying to claim to be anything I'm not here.

Mr. Ted Opitz (Etobicoke Centre, CPC): You're getting tired.

Mr. David Christopherson: No, I'm not at all. I'm just warming up, just warming up. I hope to go on for many more hours over many meetings.

And so the struggle was for that vote. I was making the reference—not to get Mr. Lukiwski's heart all aflutter—and suggesting that Mr. Reid would know better than I, but I believe one of the last groups of Canadians would be aboriginal women. That wasn't until.... It was within the lifetime of our parents.

Mr. Scott Reid: Are you talking about getting the vote?

Mr. David Christopherson: Yes.

Mr. Scott Reid: That's a status issue that was resolved recently.

Mr. David Christopherson: Right.

Mr. Scott Reid: But you're right that aboriginal people were denied the vote, as were a number of racial minorities, especially in the provinces, until quite recently.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you, I appreciate that. And thank you, Chair, for the latitude in letting him....

An hon. member: Hear, hear!

Mr. David Christopherson: What I'm pointing to, Chair, is that this struggle is not just about this one isolated thing. This is about the struggle of democracy.

I grant you we are not Ukraine, but nothing at all is etched in the physics of the universe that says Canada remains a democracy forever. Nothing guarantees that, except the will of the Canadian people to hang on to their democracy and not let go. That's what keeps democracy alive in Canada, and that's what we're talking about here. The struggle continues.

Now we're at the stage, here we are in the second decade of the new millennium, and we're still fighting for people to get their right to vote. And we know where a lot of the 120,000 people live who are affected by vouching. We know where they're affected. Why are we not going there and saying that we understand there are problems? We understand they have some problems. Here are the suggestions that are being made. What do they think?

I guarantee, Chair, the views of the changes to this law are very different, depending on where you live, what your circumstances are, and how much money you have. That's scary. That's why we're getting this reaction, as people become aware that this might not just be politics as usual, there may be something going on here that they should be paying attention to. As they're paying attention to it, without even concluding they're in favour or opposed, because Canadians are fair-minded people, their starting point is, could they have a say?

That request is not that far from Ukraine burning because that's what they want right now. They want peace, they want democracy, and they want their say. When your government, your own government, directs the armed forces to point weapons and fire live rounds and kill your own citizens there's not much doubt that's a democracy in crisis. But when we look at the history of democracy and what it really means to ordinary working stiff, ordinary people, just plain Canadians, and the struggle for democracy, and we look at sitting here today with a major reform of our election laws, the foundation of our democracy, and people can't get a say in the places where they live and we're supposed to be the ultimate goal of countries like Ukraine and others? It's serious. It's serious because we're talking about 120,000 people who may lose their right to vote. Somehow that doesn't seem to be a big deal to the government. Hmm, you know, 35 million, a few voters give or take. Like, really?

All these struggles over history for the right to vote. Look what our friends to the south have gone through to try to give all their citizens just the right to vote. That certainly doesn't guarantee you a perfect democracy because we're not perfect, far from it. The UN has pointed out on enough occasions when we've been criticized for the way we treat the first nations people of this country. So we are far from perfect. Democracy doesn't guarantee you anything except that you're safe and secure and you get a say.

• (1225)

And that's what this is about. Give Canadians their say. Don't just sit in here and hide in plain sight.

We have lots of time. So if it's not the money—because we've already talked about how much money we have spent as a country studying democracy around the world and our willingness to spend money to study democracy right here in Canada. It's not the money, so it must be that they don't want to face the Canadian people. Otherwise I would expect somebody will use this perfect opportunity that I'm giving them. I'm laying it right in front of them. I'm making it so easy my leader is going to be patting me on the shoulder saying, "What are you doing?" This is how easy it is.

These are the kinds of concerns I read from Mr. Shedletzky. This is exactly the kind of input that Canadians want to have. And I defy and challenge the government to suggest that this is somehow part of a circus or a gong show, which is the way the government describes the idea of taking democracy out on the road. Democracy is only theirs, it seems. They get lots of democracy. It's just the people who don't get any.

Hmm, speaking of Ukraine....

So you want to make your gong show comments and your circus comments, "have at 'er". There you go. You tell Adam, you explain to Adam how this is all just for the purpose—

• (1230)

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Is he inviting us to speak?

Mr. David Christopherson: Pardon?

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: I was wondering if you were inviting me to speak on that.

Mr. David Christopherson: I will in time.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: You have several times.

Mr. David Christopherson: I will in time. Make your notes.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: You're getting closer.

The Chair: I have you on my list.

Mr. David Christopherson: I remind my honourable colleagues there are statements in the House, there are debates in the House, they can call a news conference....Anytime they want to suggest that Mr. Shedletzky is part of a circus or a gong show, I'd love to be there and I can guarantee you Mr. Shedletzky will be there also to respond to the notion that ordinary Canadians giving their comments on an election law is a circus. So there you go. There's your chance because this is what Canadians are saying.

I don't know, maybe they'll be uncovering some big plot to show that there's some group somewhere in Canada that's planning the overthrow of our democracy. I worry maybe that there's a secret terrorist plot to kidnap you, and hold our committee and the bill hostages until such time....I'm worried that maybe that's there because I'm trying to find a reason why the government won't travel. They seem to be afraid. I'm concerned about that. You might want to check and see if they have security information that they're maybe not sharing with you that they should in terms of your personal safety because the government is just so frightened to go out there. There must be some real reason.

We've already established that it's not the amount of money involved; it's not like we don't do this, and other committees have travelled. I actually have a note that reminds me of that and I'll make that point in a moment.

It's not the time because as we speak right now we haven't even begun the suggested study period that we put forward. We have ample time to work through this process, this idea of whether Canadians get their say or not.

I'm reminded that committees have travelled in the past, this is not breaking new ground, although it's not something we do every day. It's not that unusual and I'd be shocked if it was. Taking a bill out to the people to let them have their say, one would have thought it could have crossed somebody's mind before now.

I'm reminded that there's a current study on Bill C-15 on the Northwest Territories. I don't know this. It's risky to do this and my law professor colleague will probably smack me one, but I'm willing to bet that they might be going to the Northwest Territories—

Mr. Craig Scott: I think they've been.

Mr. David Christopherson: They've been to the Northwest Territories, well, how about that. A shot in the dark, million to one odds that a committee studying the Northwest Territories devolution bill went to the Northwest Territories. What a concept, imagine that.

Now, Bill C-10, minimum penalties for offences involving firearms, well this is subject that will get the heart aflutter. They're out there; they're going to Toronto.

A voice: They went to Toronto.

Mr. David Christopherson: They went to Toronto for Bill C-10 and for Bill C-15 they did go to the Northwest Territories, look at that. If I'd looked further, I would have known ahead of time, but I figured I could take that risk that they might have gone.

They could have gone, I suppose, to Ukraine, Pond Inlet, North Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, but given that the bill affected people who live in the Northwest Territories, I guess you could see why they had this strange idea that maybe they would give the people affected by the bill....Let's see, how does this go? The people affected by the bill get a chance to say something about it and give their opinion, yes.

Wow, that's pretty radical. I'm surprised that didn't make headlines, that Bill C-15 has a committee studying it, and it's about the Northwest Territories devolution and they're going to the Northwest Territories. Wow.

I guess by extension there's a bit of an argument. I know it's a stretch, but there's a bit of an argument that....Let me see if I can follow this, it's complex.

●(1235)

There's a bill affecting the people in the Northwest Territories. So the committee studying that bill actually went to the Northwest Territories and heard from the people affected by the bill. I think that's how it goes. It's complex, but I tried to stay with the bouncing ball.

This is where it gets really crazy, Mr. Chair. It's so stupid. I can't believe I'm going to say it, but here's the thought. Perhaps by extension, if we went to the Northwest Territories to study a bill that affected people who live in the Northwest Territories, we might take a bill that affects all Canadians and their ability to vote out to Canadians to give them their chance to have a say. How's that for a radical thought?

An hon. member: You could teach logic.

Mr. David Christopherson: My colleague is telling me I could teach logic. That makes my heart sing. I hope my mom is watching. She'd be thrilled to know that someone like you would think that, because she still hasn't gotten over the fact that I left high school in grade nine. Well, it's my mom, and I don't blame her. It's a good thing my daughter wasn't that stupid.

However, back to the point. I have to stay on the point. I want to play, Scott, but the chair is going to keep me on the point.

I think the point was, if I can remember that complex formula again.... I'm not very good at this stuff. There was a bill about the Northwest Territories. The committee studying the bill went to the Northwest Territories to give the people who live there and who are affected by it a chance to have their say. By extension, we're suggesting that Bill C-23, being studied by PROC, should actually go out into the country and give the people who are affected by the bill their say. I think that was it. That was the complex, radical, over-the-top, obstructionist idea that those maniacs over in the official opposition came up with. I think that connection can be made. Then again, I could be wrong. But it seems to me that there is a direct connection.

Where does that leave us, as we get down to less than the last half-hour of this fun meeting? Where does that leave us? Maybe it's time for a recap, Mr. Chair.

A recap would suggest that we have a motion in front of this committee. The witnesses we've asked for—I'd be shocked if that's controversial. I may eat those words, but my assumption is that if we can get a process nailed down, then that's the toughest part. Usually, at this committee, and at most committees I've been on, Mr. Chair, under your leadership, once we've crunched where, when, and how long, who is usually fairly straightforward. Reasonable people come to a reasonable conclusion, and fairness guides it. It works. Imagine that—Canadians, eh?

That really is not the key part. I put it in there because I worry about what they might do if we don't. But that's really not the key focus today. It's not the controversial part. It's the next part.

Just to remind us all, what was that request again? This is in the motion:

That the Committee request to travel to all regions of Canada, (Atlantic Canada, Quebec, Ontario, Northern Ontario, the Prairies, British Columbia and the North), as well as downtown urban settings (such as the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver) and rural and remote settings, and that the Committee request that this travel take place in March and April 2014.

If we were to do that, Mr. Chair, here's what could happen. I know you've been putting the pressure on me as the spokesperson for the process on this, with my colleague Mr. Scott being the key lead on the bill. You've asked me to get us to the business part as quickly as possible. You're doing everything you can within the rules to cajole and encourage. I know that if you could, you'd reach out and bat me one on the ear, just to try to get me to....

I respect that, Mr. Chair. I understand where...except the bat on the ear. I wouldn't respect it that much. But it was a nice turn of phrase, I thought.

Mr. Brad Butt: Metaphorically.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you. Metaphorically. Mr. Reid is such a help.

To help you, I want to restate, for probably the umpteenth time—but I'd rather be restating this offer than my version of hammering my shoe in my hand to get the attention of this government—that I, or another representative of this party, am available 24-7 to respond to an overture from the government to sit down and try to negotiate a fair compromise.

●(1240)

Now, when I say the word compromise, as someone who is an old—you know, that used to be just an expression, now it's more descriptive—negotiator from way back, I get the fact that we're not going to get everything we're asking for because that would be a different approach, and we could have taken that one: we're going to stand on this, and it's this or nothing. But, no, my leader was very clear. My marching orders were to do everything possible to get a fair process in place. We were not only to do that, but were to be seen to do that, which is why I have put every card on the table along the way, no games. I haven't spun anything.

When the parliamentary secretary and I began our discussions off-line, as people knew we were doing, they started very positively. I've done other negotiations with the parliamentary secretary and I can't think of a time we didn't find a way through a dilemma, a compromise we could both live with, and the other parties as well. Then it stopped. I don't know why. Obviously I wasn't told, but it certainly felt like the iron curtain of the PMO coming down and saying, "This is over". So in negotiations, I entered those negotiations and I didn't think I'd come out of here with everything. I had no expectation at all that I'd be going back to my leader and saying, "There you go. Got it all signed, sealed, and delivered. Won everything." No, I didn't expect that at the beginning of those discussions. Neither should the government, however, believe that a negotiation means that they get their way and we stay here, hidden in plain sight in the capital. No. The purpose of negotiation is that everybody gives a little bit.

Would we get all that we wanted, even though we're fighting for Canadians' rights everywhere? Any time you make a compromise, you run the risk that one of the opposition parties is going to come after you because they accuse you of not staying the course, and not being strong enough, and strident, and principled, yada, yada, yada. Been there, done that, got the T-shirt.

It's not as important as this bill. We are prepared to take that hit, if you will, by not getting all that we're asking for. But, Chair, that kind of an approach requires two parties, not just one. So the government would have to accept, for at least some of the time, that this committee studying Bill C-23 would be outside the safety and security of Ottawa and would be in the communities where people live.

What is that number? How many? That's what we would negotiate, Chair.

This is my dilemma for you, Chair. Unless and until the government indicates that they're prepared to be reasonable, it's hard for me to give you the reasonableness, as you see it from your perspective, that you would like from me, which is to just shut up, stop talking, and let things go on. But you see, Chair, the problem right there is that the government is insisting that it's their way.... I was going to say, "It's their way or the highway", but actually they won't go to the highway, so maybe you can think of something more clever than that. But it's their way or no way.

You want me to hurry? Are you serious?

• (1245)

The Chair: No, I was hoping you'd get to a joke there, and you didn't.

Mr. David Christopherson: I think the serious point, Chair, is that I didn't come here to Parliament Hill to spend two hours doing this any more than I pity the poor rest of all of you who had to listen to it. It's not fun. It's not really getting us all that far. I get that, but here we are. With so few tools available to an opposition party in a majority situation, we can only use the tools we have. One of them, sir, is that a motion is not finished with at this committee until everyone who wants to speak to it has spoken.

That's where we are. If we want to break this logjam, the government has my email. Just send me a little note saying, let's talk.

I can do whatever circumstances they want. We can do a *Get Smart* cone of silence for those of you who are old enough to get that. If not, don't worry about it. There are many going, "What? *Get Smart?*" The rest of us get the cone of silence. What I'm saying is if you need it to be confidential because you want to just try it out, that's what diplomats do. That's why we have the diplomatic corps, the ability to do things that you can't do out front, which is for instance begin a discussion to see if there's enough willingness on both parts to get you somewhere before you make it public. If the government wants that kind of a discussion, they've got it. If they want to do it in the middle of the floor of the House of Commons, they've got that too. If they want to do it during a news conference, they can have that. They can do anything they want. You want to do it by phone....

The point is not how it gets done but that we recognize that Canadians have a right to be heard, not just this Canadian and not just those Canadians but all Canadians. Thirty minutes. Thirty minutes and this could be over and we could start focusing on timing, details, witnesses. Get down to the work. That's what we want. We're not standing petulant, holding our breath, and stamping our feet saying it's got to be our way or no way. We're not doing that either. But we're facing a government that's doing exactly that, that refuses to consider even the notion that Canadians would get a say in the places where they live.

Chair, we don't have a lot of options. What else could we do? The second we let go of this motion, it probably gets voted down. If we came to a straight vote right now, I suspect we'd lose. It's just fundamental math. I will always come back to this.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Just give her a shot.

Mr. David Christopherson: No, no. The thing that still blows me away in terms of voting and numbers is that you can get less of 40% of the vote in this country and get 100% of the power. That's the part that still blows me away. There are presidents in the United States who have said publicly they'd love to have the power of a majority government prime minister in Canada. We give all that power with less than 40% of the people who voted. That's not even a percentage of the people who are governed because we go by who has voted, but of the people who voted, they got less than 40%. It was wrong.

I have said that before, Chair. We're hearing from the infamous Mr. Butt now. I wondered when we'd start hearing from him.

More stories today, Mr. Butt? Maybe we can give you the floor. I can give you two spots to speak: one to make a statement, and the other to retract it. How's that?

• (1250)

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson, relevance please.

Mr. David Christopherson: Yes, sir.

The Chair: Not across the table.

Mr. David Christopherson: No. You interrupted me, Mr. Butt. I didn't go looking for a fight, but you know, I'm here.

I still have a great deal of difficulty with the notion that 40% of the vote gets you 100% of the power. That's why we strongly believe in proportional representation, but I won't go on.

That's as far as I can go there, Chair. I see you getting ready and rightly so. I get it. I have to colour within the lines. That's fair enough.

Nonetheless, you would think a little humility from a majority government with less than 40% of the vote would not necessarily be out of order.

Not only that. At its core, it's just so darn un-Canadian. We don't use that term a lot, but there are certain Canadian values that we stand by and that we're proud of and that we think identify us. One of them is our sense of fairness. That's an important word to Canadians, that no matter what the circumstance, if there's a decision to be made, especially if it impacts more than the people who are doing the debating, that there be some fairness to that process. That's all we're trying to bring here, just an element of fairness. If the government would indicate that they're interested in x number of hearings outside the safety and security of the Ottawa bubble, we'd consider that, and we would consider that a starting point for negotiations.

The Chair: Thank you.

Yes, Mr. Lukiwski.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Just for David's benefit more than anyone else's, I know, Mr. Chair, you had said that you wanted to get to some committee business or new business before we ended the meeting. I just want to give my assurances to David that if he allows you to go to committee business, we would certainly have no objections to returning the floor to David at the start of the next meeting or the continuation of this one or whatever. I understand the need sometimes to have new business discussed here for the benefit of all, so we're not trying to interrupt David's dissertation, long as it may be, but if he would agree to allow you to deal with new business when you think it's appropriate, we would agree to return the floor to David.

Mr. David Christopherson: I'm not opposed, but I need to hear a little more detail before I let go of the floor. I think you're being sincere, but I was consulting with my colleague when you were kind enough to bring your point of order. So, again, the offer or suggestion?

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: The chair said he wanted to deal with some committee business before we adjourn in about six minutes. I'm saying if you would give up some of your time to let him deal with committee business, even if it took us right to one o'clock, we, the government, would agree to allow the floor to go back to you. I'm the next one on the speakers list, and I would allow you to go back. I'm just trying to see what the committee business is—

Mr. David Christopherson: That's fine, however—

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: I'm not trying to—

Mr. David Christopherson: —once you have the floor, you can move a motion. If this motion is set aside, you can move a motion and use your majority to put something through, so I'll ask the chair, what business are we talking, sir?

The Chair: Some of the business of the committee I had not shared with the committee. We weren't going to meet Thursday because of the visit of the Aga Khan, but there's also a request from another government committee coming to visit Ottawa that we would normally meet with, and I wanted to get the committee's approval or disapproval whether we do that. That type of committee business, so...

Mr. David Christopherson: I'm sorry, sir, I have no problem with that if you give me an itemized list of what we're going to do. I just want to be sure, you can appreciate, I don't want to just be outmanoeuvred here. But if we've got some motherhood business to take care of, we are not unreasonable, so you can continue—

The Chair: I'll suggest I'll keep the floor, if that would make you feel better. If you were to do this and we go to committee business, I will keep the floor and only take comments from the floor about committee business and not relinquish it to anyone else. It would go back to you when we're done.

Mr. David Christopherson: Let me just check with my staff, because I don't want to make a mistake here.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: When did you become so cynical? David, you lost that—

Mr. David Christopherson: When I was first elected.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. David Christopherson: I like your offer. Let me just make sure I understand it. If I relinquish the floor right now, then you will have the floor, sir, and no one else will have the floor. There will be no motions, no voting. It's just business that would be by consensus and the understanding is at the beginning of the next meeting, which won't be Thursday, it would be the meeting after—

•(1255)

The Chair: Tuesday.

Mr. David Christopherson: —that my motion would be back on the floor, and I would have the floor?

The Chair: Absolutely. You're 100% correct.

Mr. David Christopherson: That's not just the letter, but the spirit of the intent, because if I have to I'll stand on spirit.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: No, no.

Mr. David Christopherson: Okay, I hear and I trust you, Mr. Chair, and I trust Tom when he tells me that he's being “that Tom”, and I will be “that Dave”, and agree.

Let's hope this works, Chair. I defer the floor to you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I had a couple of issues. One was that the Aga Khan is addressing Parliament this Thursday, and so this committee will not be sitting, because we'll be in the House for that.

There are a couple of other pieces about submitting witnesses and amendments for this bill, but we won't talk about those today, because we're not at that point yet. I know that my clerk would not be happy with that.

There's a request from the South African high commission. A group of delegates or members of Parliament is visiting from Gauteng province and their legislature. Their privileges and ethics standing committee is coming looking for some advice. I know they're visiting Toronto also, but often, when a group like this comes to Ottawa, we're the group they spend a little time with.

They're requesting to meet on March 27 or 28. I would like to ask this committee, since we will hopefully by then be into the review of this legislation, that we take not our committee time but maybe half an hour before or after to meet with this visiting delegation on March 27.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Could it be half an hour before?

The Chair: Would you rather it was before? Is that the—?

Mr. David Christopherson: As long as it doesn't interrupt the flow of the political dynamic here, if it's a matter of giving them—

The Chair: You will recognize that one of the last times this happened, your chair had the great opportunity of entertaining the group by himself, because we made it optional for the members. This chair is not making it that optional.

We will have supplementary estimates (C) before us at some point—and in the next little while, too. Again I'll need some consensus from the group. I haven't seen them, so I can't tell you, but perhaps we will need to take a look at them to decide whether this committee will spend time with them.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: When do they have to be passed?

The Chair: It's by some time like the end of next week.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: What happens if—?

The Chair: If we don't touch them, they are deemed reported.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: If we don't touch them, they're deemed to be reported?

The Chair: That's right.

Other than that, there are a couple of other private members' bills before the committee, but they won't get to us—

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Let me speak to that, Chair, maybe just to give Kevin a better sense.

Many supplementary estimates—and I'm not saying it's right—are deemed reported. Many committees don't deal with them, frankly; if anything, they give them a cursory glance. However, if the committee feels that it wants to deal with them, we certainly have no problem going over the supplementary estimates; it's probably a wise thing to do anyway. But I don't know how long it would take.

David is right. Regardless of the dynamics that are going to go on, this is still legislation before us, and I think it takes precedence over anything else, regardless of what shape or form we're in.

I'll let the opposition consult with one another as to whether they want to do a full examination of the supps or not. Then we can maybe talk off-line and get back to you, Chair.

The Chair: Great. Often we have the Clerk and the Speaker. Our supplementary estimate would be for Parliament, usually. I haven't read the supps, so I can't tell you for sure what it is this time, but it usually is that.

That's the best advice I can give you at the moment. I look forward to your talking with each other and coming back.

That's pretty much all of the committee business I wanted to get out there. We will return the floor to Mr. Christopherson on Tuesday, after we return from this weekend, and we'll hopefully get to scheduling this committee's work on Bill C-23 at that time.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Chair: In that case, we're adjourned.

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