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OFFICIAL REPORT
(HANSARD)

Thursday, June 2, 2016

—

Speaker: The Honourable Geoff Regan

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Thursday, June 2, 2016

The House met at 10 a.m.

Prayer

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

•(1005)

[*Translation*]

OFFICE OF THE AUDITOR GENERAL OF CANADA

The Speaker: I have the honour to lay upon the table the 2015-16 annual reports of the Office of the Auditor General of Canada on the Access to Information Act and the Privacy Act. These reports are deemed permanently referred to the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics.

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[*English*]

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO PETITIONS

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 36(8), I have the honour to table, in both official languages, the government's response to four petitions.

* * *

PETITIONS

PALLIATIVE CARE

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have a petition from a number of my constituents in northwestern British Columbia calling upon the government to initiate a national palliative care strategy.

The petitioners have great concerns about the physician-assisted death legislation that, since the induction of this petition, has now passed through many stages of Parliament and in the Senate. They are concerned about the dignity of life. They are concerned that Canada still lacks a palliative care strategy so that we may care for our aged in their time of need.

41ST GENERAL ELECTION

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

The first is from petitioners across Canada calling on the government to pursue investigations to determine the illegal use of live calls or robocalls that interfered with Canada's electoral process in the 2011 election.

INSECTICIDES

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, the second petition is from people across Canada who are calling for our government, in the interest of protecting pollinators on this continent and elsewhere, to ban the use of neonicotinoid insecticides.

* * *

QUESTIONS ON THE ORDER PAPER

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I ask that all questions be allowed to stand at this time.

The Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

•(1010)

[*Translation*]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL REFORM

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP) moved:

That a Special Committee on electoral reform be appointed to identify and conduct a study of viable alternate voting systems to replace the first-past-the-post system, as well as to examine mandatory voting and online voting;

that the Committee be directed to issue an invitation to each Member of Parliament to conduct a town hall in their respective constituencies and provide the Committee with a written report of the input from their constituents to be filed with the Clerk of the Committee no later than November 1, 2016;

that the Committee be directed to take into account the applicable constitutional, legal and implementation parameters in the development of its recommendations; accordingly, the Committee should seek out expert testimony on these matters;

that the Committee be directed to consult broadly with relevant experts and organizations, take into consideration consultations that have been undertaken on the issue, examine relevant research studies and literature, and review models being used or developed in other jurisdictions;

that the Committee be directed to develop its consultation agenda, working methods, and recommendations on electoral reform with the goal of strengthening the inclusion of all Canadians in our diverse society, including women, Indigenous Peoples, youth, seniors, Canadians with disabilities, new Canadians, and residents of rural and remote communities;

Business of Supply

that the Committee be directed to conduct a national engagement process that includes a comprehensive and inclusive consultation with Canadians, including through written submissions and online engagement tools;

that the Committee be composed of twelve (12) members of which five (5) shall be government members, three (3) shall be from the Official Opposition, two (2) shall be from the New Democratic Party, one (1) member shall be from the Bloc Québécois, and the Member for Saanich—Gulf Islands;

that changes in the membership of the Committee be effective immediately after notification by the Whip has been filed with the Clerk of the House;

that membership substitutions be permitted, if required, in the manner provided for in Standing Order 114(2);

that, with the exception of the Member for Saanich—Gulf Islands, all other members shall be named by their respective Whip by depositing with the Clerk of the House the list of their members to serve on the Committee no later than ten (10) sitting days following the adoption of this motion;

that the Committee be chaired by a member of the government party; that, in addition to the Chair, there be one (1) Vice-Chair from the Official Opposition and one (1) Vice-Chair from the New Democratic Party, and that, notwithstanding Standing Order 106(3), all candidates for the position of Chair or Vice-Chair from the Official Opposition shall be elected by secret ballot, and that each candidate be permitted to address the Committee for not more than three (3) minutes;

that the quorum of the Committee be as provided for in Standing Order 118, provided that at least four (4) members are present and provided that one (1) member from the government party and one (1) member from an opposition party are present;

that the Committee be granted all of the powers of a standing committee, as provided in the Standing Orders, as well as the power to travel, accompanied by the necessary staff, inside and outside of Canada;

that the Committee have the power to authorize video and audio broadcasting of any or all of its proceedings; and

that the Committee present its final report no later than December 1, 2016.

He said: Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to share my time with my colleague from Beloeil—Chambly today.

[*English*]

It is also a pleasure for me to speak to the motion. It is lengthy, but it is important, for many reasons. It is because of all of the issues that parliaments and governments face. Whether it is the economy, the environment, first nations, international relations, or war and peace, they all rest upon the foundation of our democracy, which is how Canadians vote governments in and out.

The motion that New Democrats have put forward today is to begin a process, in a fair and constructive way, to allow us to come to a fair and constructive result for Canadians, to modify it in an historic fashion. We have not to this point ever altered our democracy or changed the way that Canadians go forward and express their hopes and wishes to this fundamental nature.

The commitment from the Prime Minister after the last election was that it would be the last one run under the unfair first past the post system. New Democrats have long advocated for this position, as have our colleagues from the Green Party. We believe this is an opportunity that we must take and we must get right.

The essence of what New Democrats have proposed, and we put this to the government and to the public back in February, was to construct a committee that is charged with this historic task based essentially on the will of Canadians. It was to take the results of the last election, which was just eight months ago, and construct the committee based on how Canadians expressed their desire for how Parliament would look.

May I be so bold as to suggest that a good electoral system would also be somewhat proportional, in that it would reflect the will of Canadians. This is the case in most successful democracies around the world. They use some element of proportionality in their voting, so that when a party acquires approximately 20% of the vote, their parliament is made up of about 20% of people from that party. If the party gets 40%, then it is 40%, and so on.

What we have right now under first past the post is a system whereby this majority government, the previous majority government, and many in our past, were able to essentially obtain 100% of the power while acquiring less than 40% of support from Canadians, and that is of those who participated. When we look at the broad section of Canadians writ large, it can actually come down to 25%, or less, of voting-age Canadians voting in a government that then acquires 100% of the ability to pass whatever legislation it wants. It can do that sometimes in a draconian manner, by instituting closure on debate, shutting down committees, or by using quite a bit of force in the Westminster parliamentary system that we have adopted.

At its core, the idea for us is to include a notion of sanctity in what we are doing. It is that no one party in this place can act unilaterally when changing our voting system. We think that would be a very bad thing. There were some precedents in Canadian history that the government would never change the voting system in any fundamental way without the support of another party in Parliament. We do not want those changes to be partisan in nature, in a sense favouring one party over another. Canadians would look upon that with suspicion. When the previous government moved what it called the fair, we called it unfair, elections act, it moved it without the support of any other party in the House. In fact, in our view and in the view of many Canadians, it sought to disenfranchise very particular groups of Canadians from voting by requiring new voter identification, which Elections Canada said was not necessary. That was an unfortunate breaking of precedents. We do not want to repeat that.

The new government has said it does not wish to go down that path. The committee, as we proposed it, would ensure that would not be possible. The original proposal from the Liberals in striking this committee would have allowed them to have a majority of seats on the committee, and therefore a majority ability to pass any reforms they want without the support of any opposition party.

The committee, as we have constructed it, based upon the will of Canadians, would require the parties to work together. I know that might be a radical concept. There is often a lot of division and partisanship. Partisanship is a part of the House of Commons. It is a part of electoral politics, and, if done well, with passion and integrity, it can be of benefit to the country.

Business of Supply

●(1015)

However, partisanship for its own sake often undermines good ideas. It often undermines the integrity of this place. What we hope for, and what we have constructed in this committee, is to allow other parties to require other parties to seek support from one another, to say that no one party in this place has all of the right ideas for the problems that we are seeking to fix, and that the challenges that are in our electoral system will be fixed by us collectively, together. That is what Canadians want, that is what we believe Canadians need. The committee system that we have put forward allows us that, because if the process is fair it greatly improves the chances that the outcome will be fair, but if the process is skewed and biased, then unfortunately there is too great a chance that outcome would also be skewed and biased.

There are so many groups across the country that have been working diligently, some of them for decades, on improving our electoral system in Canada. I am thinking of Fair Vote Canada, Leadnow, the Broadbent Institute, the Dogwood Initiative, and Avaaaz. Even columnists from *The Globe and Mail*, to Andrew Coyne, to other left wing radicals as the Conservatives like to say, have been long urging us to evolve our electoral system into this century, even evolve it from the last century.

It seems to me that there is an opportunity in front of us to do something novel, to be innovative, and to be courageous about the way we go about this conversation, while recognizing our own interests in this conversation, to put the interests of Canadians first, and to allow Canadians to have a greater voice in this. The committee would seek to hear from traditionally unrepresented and under-represented groups, such as first nations, women, young people, people living in poverty, and people with disabilities, who have almost in all cases in every election been dramatically under-represented at the polls and in the representation that we have in the House of Commons.

There is no silver bullet in this conversation. There is no perfect voting system out there that will achieve all things for all people. We understand that. However, certainly we can improve on a voting system that was invented before we invented the lightbulb and on a voting system that allows 39% of voters to produce 100% of the power. Certainly we can diminish that when voters go into the ballot box they are told they simply have to vote strategically, that they should not choose their first choice but their second or third choice in order to stop the thing they fear most. We believe that when voters step into the ballot box it is an expression of hope for the future, it is their will for the future, that they want to express to themselves, to their neighbours, and to their family what they want to see in the world, what kind of government they would like to see. A good electoral system and a good voting process allows that connection to be much stronger than what we have here today.

I represent northwestern British Columbia, an incredibly beautiful and powerful place. One of the great advantages I have in this honour of representing Skeena—Bulkley Valley is I often get to attend first nations events, ceremonies, and traditions. At one event, I was with the Haisla in Kitimat. During the course of this very long, important naming feast when a number of Haisla were acquiring important names, one of the elders got up to speak. Slowly, as he was progressing through his comments, one after another Haisla from his

house group got up to stand very quietly and respectfully behind him. After a certain amount of time there must have been more than 100 or so folks standing behind this elder. I turned to a friend of mine who is Haisla and said, “I don't understand fully what's happening here, what this represents.” She said, “In our tradition, when his house stands behind him, what they're saying is that all of the words he speaks, it is as if they have spoken. The commitments he is making, they also make.”

I often think what if we held that type of tradition here in this place, that first and foremost we always sought to represent the voices of those who stand behind us from all of the parts of this country that we represent, with the divergent views that we represent, those of us wishing to express the best of ourselves, the best of this country? I think that would allow us to avoid some of the traps we fall into as politicians, as members of Parliament, where that high road is so hard to maintain, that road of speaking with integrity as our friends, our families, and neighbours would like to speak with and do speak with, because that is at the heart of what this country is: a conversation about respect and about differences. The committee process we have put forward today, and the eventual result in a better electoral system, is an effort to honour that, to respect the very best of this country.

●(1020)

Mr. Mark Holland (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Democratic Institutions, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member opposite for his comments and for his efforts in bringing forward the opposition motion today.

In his comments he talked about the need for parties to work together on this issue. I could not agree more. I think when we are working on modernizing our electoral system and taking advantage of this opportunity to bring our electoral system into the 21st century, it will require the input and participation of all parties to get there. I commend the efforts of the member today to try to move this process forward.

I am interested in his comments. He talked about the importance of the committee reaching out to constituencies that are not traditionally engaged, people who feel disenfranchised currently within the existing system. He talked about seniors, the disabled, aboriginal people, people who were not seen voting in large numbers, young people.

What are his thoughts about how the committee might reach out to some of those groups, engage them in this process, and ensure their voices are heard?

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Mr. Speaker, I thank my friend from Ajax, the parliamentary secretary, for his comments and his efforts over the last number of months in trying to work with parliamentarians, as I do with my colleagues in the Conservative Party, the Green Party, and the Bloc Québécois to move this forward.

One of our challenges is that it has been a number of months. The electoral reform needs to work with some sense of urgency, simply because Elections Canada needs to have in place, well before the next election, any changes that are coming to the voting system in order first to inform Canadians and also to conduct the vote fairly.

Business of Supply

To the specific question of the hon. member about those groups that are not often reached by parliamentarians in traditional politics, I think of social media. I think there should be reaching out and certainly the committee has to travel. The committee has to get out of Ottawa, get out of the bubble and hear from Canadians, and not just those with a vested interest in the voting system, but those who care to participate more fully in our democracy, a number of the groups that he and I both just mentioned.

Ms. Rachael Harder (Lethbridge, CPC): Mr. Speaker, during the hon. member's speech, he said, "the heart of this country is conversation". In his answer now he said that we need to get out of the Ottawa bubble and we need to hear from Canadians. I could not agree with the member more. We absolutely need to hear from Canadians.

In my estimation, the best way to hear from Canadians would be through holding a referendum. This seems like a way that we would be able to hear the voice of every single Canadian across this country from coast to coast to coast.

I am curious to hear whether or not the member would agree with me. Would he see the value in holding a national referendum?

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Mr. Speaker, I very much appreciate the sentiment for what many Conservatives and many others have called for, around the referendum. I think at its core it is a question about validity. Is what is produced valid and is it seen by Canadians as valid? A referendum is one instrument that can be used to validate or reject a proposal that is put forward by Parliament.

The challenge is that there is a notion of mandate. When governments get elected, as the previous Conservatives were elected, whenever they moved forward on a promise that was made in the election, they would say they had a mandate to do this and did not take it back to a referendum. Nor did the Conservatives go to a referendum when they moved their changes to the Electoral Act, so it is a little strange now that they are asking for a referendum.

I think if the process is sound, if Canadians see it and feel it is valid, then the energy around a referendum may shift. I have mused about this at various times because a referendum often faces the challenge of the fear of the unknown. People will reject an idea when they do not understand fully or are worried about what its consequences might be.

However, there could be a notion, as New Zealand did, for example, of running a new electoral system for a couple of elections and then giving people the option at that point to say they do not like what this has done for our Parliament, for the way we work, and they would like to return to what they had before. I think it is a valid option that other countries—

• (1025)

The Deputy Speaker: Questions and comments, the hon. member for Saanich—Gulf Islands.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my friend from Skeena—Bulkley Valley for bringing forward a motion today that allows us to talk about how we can begin a process as we intend to continue a process in a non-partisan way, seeking what is best for all Canadians.

In his motion he suggests we will be looking at research. There is an astonishing amount of research that allows us to understand that changing our voting system is not a matter of opinion, that there is solid empirical evidence.

Arend Lijphart is a professor at the University of California, San Diego. In his research, 36 democracies were surveyed and he came to a conclusion. This conclusion was that those democracies that have consensus-based, such as proportional representation, voting systems, actually have a stronger, better record with "regard to effective policy making" and the quality of democracy compared to majoritarian systems.

I put to the member, can we bring such experts to the committee?

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Mr. Speaker, many members of Parliament have come to this place with some of their own experience and opinions, and that we have to value. There have been 10 major studies by the law society on down in Canada looking at electoral reform in this place. All 10, the most significant ones, have all recommended systems that require proportionality. One came out STV, others had a mixed proportionality system.

One thing we have also learned from that research, both globally and looking at countries that would be comparable to Canada, is that despite rumours, the facts show that there is actually an increase in stability when moving to a proportional system.

I believe in a direct link, by the way, between constituents and members of Parliament. That is a principle that we want to maintain. That way people can always rely on who to call to complain or to congratulate, as happens from time to time, when seeking out their members of Parliament. That is an important element that we should maintain.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Matthew Dubé (Beloeil—Chambly, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague from Skeena—Bulkley Valley for moving this motion and sharing his time with me.

I would like to begin with a confession. When I first got involved in politics, I did not really think that democratic reform was of much interest to regular people. That is true some of the time. As MPs, we knock on doors and listen to people talk about the economy, health, education, and other issues. Sometimes they even talk about issues that, while not within federal jurisdiction, concern them nonetheless.

In 2013, I was pleasantly surprised when the Conservatives introduced Bill C-23, which made significant changes to our electoral system. Unfortunately, the changes sometimes caused serious problems for our system. Local people outside the Ottawa bubble took an interest. Constituents came to see my colleagues and me in our riding offices about this because they were concerned. People also sent us letters and petitions.

It became clear to me that it was not always the top priority. Still, when a government proposes major changes in the area of democratic reform, people realize that these are significant changes to how they vote for their MPs.

Business of Supply

The same thing is happening now. Since the Liberals came to power following the 2015 election, they have been proposing to change the status quo. The electoral system is fundamental to our democracy, and people are concerned about the changes that are being proposed to the system. They want to know how this is going to happen. Unfortunately, what the government has proposed so far is not what Canadians were hoping to see. If the proposed changes were to be accepted, this would allow the party in power to unilaterally decide how to go about changing something that is so important to our democracy.

What we are proposing today is very interesting. The minister repeated several times that what is important is hearing the opposition's proposals. She also said that she is open to those proposals. That is good, because here we are with a proposal that I hope will be supported by the minister and her party. The proposal aims to change how the committee is formed in order to require that any changes made to our democracy have the support of at least one opposition party.

At this time, the Liberals have a majority on the committee. They can go ahead with a unilateral change and come back to the House with a proposal that would very likely pass with the Liberal majority here.

Obviously, the Liberals still have the majority of the seats in the House of Commons, but they should also get the support of an opposition party. As proposed in the motion by my colleague from Skeena—Bulkley Valley, the committee's composition would reflect the percentage of votes, based on how Canadians voted in the last election. That way, our Bloc Québécois colleagues and our Green Party colleague would have a vote.

As a result, we believe that the way the committee is composed would help in achieving consensus and making changes to our electoral system that are acceptable to Canadians. They would know that a parliamentary consensus was reached on the changes. The composition of the committee would be more proportional and more representative of how Canadians voted in the election.

The committee's work will be very important. It is an opportunity for us to break out of the Ottawa bubble.

The minister is proposing that every member hold consultations in his or her riding. I am not saying that consultations are not important. In fact, consultations on various issues are at the heart of an MP's work. Holding consultations, going door to door, and collecting signatures for petitions are central to an MP's work. However, this could never replace the work of Parliament or a committee.

●(1030)

The Standing Orders generally establish the makeup of the other existing House of Commons committees. The government's reasoning was that it was using the normal proportions. However, the normal proportions are based on what they themselves called a false majority. If the government truly wants to reach a consensus and hear from the opposition parties, it should not use that false majority to determine the committee's makeup. That is very important.

Unlike individual members, a committee has the ability to call witnesses and benefit from the expertise of all parliamentarians. Earlier, my colleague from Saanich—Gulf Islands spoke about the

findings of an expert study. That is the essence of what a committee does.

My constituents and I have our own knowledge, opinions, and expertise. However, that can never replace a consensus. We must consult Canadians, experts, and parliamentarians from the other parties to reach a consensus that reflects what Canadians want and need in a 21st-century electoral system.

This is an interesting conversation to have, since the first past the post system is several centuries old. It is not bad just because it is old, but we must always keep an eye on how our electoral systems are designed.

For example, many people are following the primaries in the United States. It is very interesting, since this process dates back to a time when people like farmers, for example, sent delegates because they did not necessarily have the time, resources, or ability to travel to a political party's convention.

Delegates were therefore sent to choose Republican and Democratic candidates for the presidential election. However, because technology has advanced and travel has become easier, cutting travel time between states, some Americans think it is time to reconsider this system.

That is exactly what we are doing here in Canada. Our system dates back to when there were just two parties. Now there are several more. Three parties are recognized in Parliament, and five parties are represented here, so we can and should be asking ourselves this question.

I know what the government members mean when they say that 65% of Canadians voted for parties that want to revisit the status quo, even though they do not always say it in good faith. Let us have that conversation.

In closing, I know that some of my Conservative colleagues will say there is nothing wrong with the status quo. All the more reason for them to participate in the conversation and support our proposal to give them a greater voice in the committee, a voice that reflects the number of people who voted for them. That is exactly why this proposal is so important. It is designed to ensure that all MPs in the House have a voice and that we engage in this very important conversation.

We must not fear change, but if we proceed, we must do so properly. We must not exclude those whose voices may not be as loud but are nevertheless just as valid. That was the challenge with Bill C-23. The Conservatives' changes had a negative impact on people who tend not to vote or who find it harder to do so.

When making such a major change, we have to listen to people and ensure that we find the right solution. We have to do it properly. If we do it thoughtlessly, we will realize later on that we made mistakes. This is about our democracy.

I am proud to support my colleague's motion, and I invite all members to join me. Their voices are at stake.

Business of Supply

• (1035)

[English]

Mr. James Maloney (Etobicoke—Lakeshore, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the comments from the two members opposite. I have read the text of this motion. In principle, I agree with the concept. My concern is this. Both of the speakers have talked about listening to Canadians, doing consultation, making sure we express Canadians' interests. One of the speakers said that members need to work together, which is a novel idea. I have only been here for eight months and I am still sort of idealistic; I think we do work together.

My concern is that this motion is essentially to change the structure of the committee. We cannot forget that the NDP campaigned on a very specific reform, which does not require consultation. My question is this. Are the New Democrats now prepared to entertain other alternative systems rather than the one they specifically campaigned on in the election?

[Translation]

Mr. Matthew Dubé: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for his question.

I want to reassure him that I have been here for five years and I am still a bit idealistic. There is a chance that he will not lose his idealism. I can reassure him of that.

The motion before us today does not predetermine the outcome of the committee's work. Yes, the NDP has a position on this. It is based on what we think is the best system for making sure that Canadians' voices are heard.

However, if my colleague is concerned about other parties' proposals, whether it be the NDP, the Bloc Québécois, the Green Party, the Conservative Party, or even his own Liberal Party, it is important to understand that all we are trying to do with this motion is not to ensure that the outcome of the committee's work is predetermined, but rather to ensure that any proposal brought forward requires the support of at least one opposition party and that the composition of the committee allows parliamentarians to be heard and reflects the percentage of votes won by the various parties in the House.

Let us do this work and make sure that we find the right solution, a solution that is obtained through consensus.

• (1040)

[English]

Mr. Jim Eglinski (Yellowhead, CPC): Mr. Speaker, for the member who just spoke, I find it kind of ironic that a couple of days ago we were discussing Bill C-7, and the members of the NDP were very emphatic that the RCMP could not have a secret vote. Yet one of the first parts of their motion is that they have a secret vote to elect a chair. I do not understand why it is good for them and bad for our government agencies, which are recognized worldwide, to have a secret vote. Maybe their learned members could answer that question for me.

[Translation]

Mr. Matthew Dubé: Mr. Speaker, I do not want to bring workers' ability to seek union representation into this. It has nothing to do

with the motion before us today; it is like saying that we vote by secret ballot during an election. We are talking about a different situation here. The member is really clouding the issue and that is unfortunate.

The important thing is to ensure that the composition of the committee is such that a consensus can be reached, that all members from all parties in the House of Commons can be heard, and that the Liberal Party has the support of another party.

In my opinion, that is at the very heart of democracy, and I would even venture to say that the right of workers to seek union representation is too.

Mr. Louis Plamondon (Bécancour—Nicolet—Saurel, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I have a brief question for my colleague. I listened very carefully to what he said. He is quite interesting.

Once the committee completes its work and reaches a conclusion, should that conclusion be put to a referendum so that all Quebecers and Canadians can weigh in?

Mr. Matthew Dubé: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his question.

We certainly hope that the membership of that committee will allow for a consensus to be reached so that Canadians will be prepared to accept what is proposed. Nevertheless, the question of whether to go ahead with a referendum or not would be an excellent thing for the committee to examine and determine whether that is the best way forward.

Although, to start with, we hope that the consensus reached by the committee will justify not choosing that way forward, we are nevertheless open to anything.

What matters today is that a committee be able to study these questions, that a decision be made with the consent of at least one opposition party, and that his party have the right to vote along with his colleague from the Green Party.

[English]

The Deputy Speaker: Before we go to resuming debate and the hon. parliamentary secretary for democratic institutions, members have noted that there is a lot of interest in participating in the questions and comments period today. I suspect perhaps that is because of the subject that is before the House. We will do our very best to get as many members included in that as possible. I might just add to hon. members that if they could keep their arguments succinct that will give more members the opportunity to participate.

Resuming debate. The hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Democratic Institutions.

[Translation]

Mr. Mark Holland (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Democratic Institutions, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the Minister of Democratic Institutions.

I rise today to speak in favour of creating a special committee on electoral reform.

Business of Supply

[English]

It is an important occasion, because if we are going to move forward on the issue of electoral reform, then as I mentioned earlier in the question I posed, it is essential that we work collaboratively, that we listen to one another in this place, and that we find room to move together.

There really is a historic opportunity for us to modernize our electoral system. We have had the same electoral system since Confederation and while the world has changed around us, the way in which we vote has not.

Leading up to the last election Canadians increasingly said that they want to ensure there is a better way for their voices to be heard, that they are better enfranchised in our system, and that they are given a stronger voice in our democratic process. In the last election, more than 60% of Canadians voted for parties that said that the next election in 2019 must be under a new system and that the last election should be the last one we have under the existing system.

This opportunity to create of a better system is informed by a world of choices. The reality is that Canada is one of the few nations in the world that continues to exist on a first past the post system. Most of the world has evolved to other systems and have demonstrated there is a greater way to engage citizenry in the electoral process and ensure they have a voice.

I am struck, as I am sure all members are, when I get an opportunity to go into classrooms and talk to students about our voting system and about their rights as voters, by the enthusiasm of grade 5 students in particular. There is probably no one more excited in this world about our democracy than a grade 5 student. As they get older they unfortunately seem to lose that. When I talk to grade 10 students, they are not as tuned in. They do not believe as much in their ability to impact change in the world around them. Fundamentally we have to change that. We have to ensure the enthusiasm of younger students carries forward and is felt by the entire citizenry. That is why this issue is so important.

Whether or not we are talking about the economy, national defence, the environment, or any issue that is germane to this institution, what underpins it is that we represent the people who sent us here. What underpins it is that the people who vote feel that the system that they are participating in reflects their will, that they are given a proper and fair voice in that process. That is why it is so important that we take this opportunity to modernize this institution.

The work of the committee specifically is going to be challenging. The committee is going to have to travel across this country. It is going to have to engage with every corner of this country. It presents a really incredible opportunity to ensure that Canadians are included in this dialogue in a meaningful way.

I talked earlier about many of the groups that have been traditionally disenfranchised in our process: young people, seniors, the disabled, aboriginal Canadians. Many different groups have found that the current system does not give them a voice, and they are disconnected from it. As the committee works and listens to Canadians and to these groups and engages them, there is an opportunity to not only change our voting system but to look at other issues, whether or not those issues be mandatory voting or electronic

voting, or other means that might meaningfully engage Canadians. I hope in the process of dialogue that we also take an opportunity to look specifically at those groups that are disenfranchised and ask them hard questions about how we can ensure they are better included in our process, even if that change does not necessarily always reflect a differing policy but simply a differing approach.

The role of the minister who has been leading this file, and my own role, will be to reach out to those groups as well and to engage them on a pan-Canadian basis, to work and to listen with the committee. One thing I cannot emphasize enough is that it is going to require the participation of every member of the House not just in conducting town halls or listening to constituents, but also in the debate that is going to occur, either directly in committee or in the House. We are excited that all parties are going to be represented at the table, not just recognized parties in the House but those that are not recognized as well, and given the opportunity to have a voice in that process and participate. That input process will be essential to us getting the result that Canadians want to see and that will demonstrably improve their system.

● (1045)

I also think there is an opportunity through this process for parties to be able to form exactly what the outcome is, and frankly, today is an example of that. I commend the member for Skeena—Bulkley Valley for bringing forward the motion and for seeking a way for the parties to work collaboratively to try to move this process forward.

If we are going to be successful, then compromise, working together, and finding middle ground will be essential to getting us there. This is the type of goodwill that is essential to demonstrate in this process. As we move forward, it is this type of work and collaboration that is going to make change possible.

We are entering into the 150th anniversary of this country. I can think of no better time than now to seize this opportunity to modernize our institutions and give Canadians a stronger voice in their democracy.

I am excited for the debate ahead, I am excited to work with all members of the House, and I am very excited to see what this committee is going to do.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, one of the arguments I want to get back to is something I have heard before in the House, that 60% of Canadians voted for parties that wanted to do this. I think it is important to recognize that the NDP have 38 pages of promises in its policies, and the Liberals had more than 20. Therefore, I would say that it is not really accurate to assume that people voted specifically for those promises.

From a fact and evidence point of view, we would have to take into account that in many of the other referendums that have happened in this area, people have not voted to abandon the first past the post system. I wonder if the member could comment on that.

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•(1050)

Mr. Mark Holland: Mr. Speaker, I am not sure how to respond to the notion that people do not vote for the policies that the parties put forward. The reality is that in an election campaign, parties posit what changes they are going to make. The changes specifically with respect to the electoral system were made very clearly, certainly by our party and by others, that the last election would be the last run on a first past the post system.

I reflect on the types of ways that changes were made to our electoral system previously. For example, in the so-called Fair Elections Act, we saw broad and sweeping changes made without any sort of consultation, without engaging other parties, without engaging Canadians, which is what we have to move away from.

Today, the spirit of co-operation in working with other parties, of being able to find that commonality, is exactly what Canadians are seeking.

I hear from my constituents that they have the expectation that I will keep the promises I make to them. This was certainly a significant one in the last election.

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is somewhat passing strange when I hear Conservatives saying that Canadians voted for a party on this but not that. It is the idea that what a party, any of us, puts into its election platform should not become a mandate if we are fortunate enough to win an election or become members of Parliament.

My belief is that politics is a relatively simple matter. One runs on a set of promises and if fortunate enough to get elected, one then seeks to enact those promises. Therefore, with more than 60% to 64% of members of Parliament who ran on the promise to change our voting system, to then suggest that there is not a mandate in Parliament to change our voting system is more than highly selective; it almost borders on cynical.

However, I have a question for my friend.

One of the concerns that has been raised is about the full participation of all members who sit on the committee. Certainly the member from the Bloc will be there and the member for Saanich—Gulf Islands. Participation is good, but one of the things our motion would do is allow them to vote. Commenting and asking questions are good and are things we all do as members of Parliament when we sit on committees. However, the real truth of the matter, the real test of the matter, is whether when a proposal comes up to do this or that, a member of Parliament sitting on a committee can actually vote.

This is something we hope the government is open to, because to simply include members without the notion of their being able to cast a vote seems a lesser position for any member of Parliament who takes a seat on that committee.

Mr. Mark Holland: Mr. Speaker, maybe it would be helpful if we could get from the Conservatives a list of promises that they feel constituents were listening to when we made them, and a list when they were not. We can then know which ones we will be criticized for keeping and which ones we should not keep that we made. It is a little confusing.

However, on the issue that the member for Skeena—Bulkley Valley raised, absolutely, there is an imperative need to hear from all parties in the House and to ensure that they are given a proper voice in this process.

The minister will be speaking after me and she has some comments on this. However, I think the spirit of what the member said of ensuring that all parties have a voice and are heard at the table is an important one, and I thank him for the motion he proposed today.

Hon. Maryam Monsef (Minister of Democratic Institutions, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. parliamentary secretary. I am pleased to rise on debate in the House on the opposition motion put forward by my hon. NDP colleague from Skeena—Bulkley Valley.

I have been speaking in the House on this traditional territory of the Algonquin peoples for some time now about the importance of listening to Canadians and working across party lines to find solutions to the challenges that we face. Despite the skepticism expressed by some, I do believe that it is possible to be both partisan and to find common ground. I do believe that respectful co-operation is possible.

It is in this vein that I wish to congratulate my hon. colleague on the motion. I believe it can allow us to move beyond a discussion about process and begin a debate on the substance of electoral reform. The motion before the House contains the key elements of the motion the government previously placed on the Order Paper. It confirms that the most appropriate way to consult Canadians is through the establishment of a special all-party committee with representation from all parties in the House. As elected representatives, it is our responsibility to give a voice to our constituents in general and more specifically to those who have been unwilling or unable to participate in the past.

The NDP motion is also consistent with a number of the fundamental components of the motion I placed on the Order Paper on May 10. There are consistencies in terms of mandates, the nature and the scope of national consultations, an engaging of the entire House, which means all members regardless of political stripes, and an emphasis on inclusivity, especially to under-represented groups, by reaching out across our diverse society. I welcome so much common ground on these issues.

The NDP motion, however, suggests that the membership of the committee deviate from the Standing Orders in two fundamental ways. First, it seeks to provide a vote on the committee for both unrecognized parties in the House, the Green and the Bloc. It has always been the government's intention that both parties be included in this national consultation and this was outlined in our motion on May 10. I believe that members of these parties have a great deal to contribute to the debate and I have been persuaded that an additional way to demonstrate our commitment to inclusivity is to break with tradition and have both the Bloc and the Green as full voting members. Such an approach means that the government will not have a majority on the committee and hopefully this will assure members that the government comes to this process with an open mind.

Second, the NDP motion seeks to shift the committee from having a majority of government members to having a majority of opposition members. Some may argue that replacing a government majority with an opposition majority puts us no further ahead. The fact is that such an argument misses the point. The issue is that every member, regardless of party, must combine their partisan perspective with meeting the important need that Canadians have to improve the electoral process.

As I have said many times, we need to do politics differently. Who has the committee majority has never been my key priority; ensuring that Canadians have the opportunity to participate meaningfully in the electoral reform process is. The proposal before us will take us beyond a debate on process and begin a discussion of the substance of electoral reform. In that spirit, the government will support the motion's provisions for the party distribution on the committee.

• (1055)

There are two items, however, that are missing from the motion which I believe must be included.

The first is the set of principles outlined in the motion I placed on the Order Paper on May 10. I believe our discussion of electoral reform must be guided by fundamental principles and they need to be part of shaping the final proposal.

The second is the importance of dealing with the issue of ensuring that the proposal put forward is seen to be legitimate by Canadians. This is consistent with my view that the government will not proceed without the broad support of Canadians. In that respect, the mandate of the committee needs to include recommending to the government the best method of ensuring that any proposal has the full or broad support of Canadians.

With all of this being said, I would like to move the following amendment. I move:

That the motion be amended by:

(a) adding after the words "online voting", the following:

"and to assess the extent to which the options identified could advance the following principles for electoral reform:

1) Effectiveness and legitimacy: that the proposed measure would increase public confidence among Canadians that their democratic will, as expressed by their votes, will be fairly translated and that the proposed measure reduces distortion and strengthens the link between voter intention and the election of representatives;

2) Engagement: that the proposed measure would encourage voting and participation in the democratic process, foster greater civility and collaboration in politics, enhance social cohesion and offer opportunities for inclusion of under-represented groups in the political process;

3) Accessibility and inclusiveness: that the proposed measure would avoid undue complexity in the voting process, while respecting the other principles, and that it would support access by all eligible voters regardless of physical or social condition;

4) Integrity: that the proposed measure can be implemented while safeguarding public trust in the election process, by ensuring reliable and verifiable results obtained through an effective and objective process that is secure and preserves vote secrecy for individual Canadians;

5) Local representation: that the proposed measure would ensure accountability and recognize the value that Canadians attach to community, to Members of Parliament understanding local conditions and advancing local needs at the national level, and to having access to Members of Parliament to facilitate resolution of their concerns and participation in the democratic process;"

(b) replacing the words "November 1, 2016" with the words "October 14, 2016";

(c) adding after the words "engagement tools" the following:

"that the Committee be directed to study and advise on additional methods for obtaining the views of Canadians;" and

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(d) replacing the words "notwithstanding Standing Order 106(3), all candidates for the position of Chair or Vice-Chair from the Official Opposition" with the words "all candidates for the position of Chair or Vice-Chair".

I urge all members to support this amendment and I look forward to the debate in the House moving forward.

• (1100)

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mr. Anthony Rota): It is my duty to inform hon. members that an amendment to an opposition motion may be moved only with the consent of the sponsor of the motion. Therefore, I ask the hon. member for Skeena—Bulkley Valley if he consents to this amendment being moved.

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I not only consent to the motion being moved, but welcome it very much and thank the minister for her hard work on this file.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mr. Anthony Rota): The amendment is in order. Questions and comments, the hon. member for Skeena—Bulkley Valley.

• (1105)

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Mr. Speaker, again, I would like to thank the Minister of Democratic Institutions for her work, and my friend from Ajax, the parliamentary secretary for his engagement and close contact on this.

In is my fundamental belief that this is how Parliament ought to work, where there are proposed ideas, there are opposition ideas that then merge with what the government has suggested, and perhaps, from time to time, is an improvement over the original proposal.

I would also like to recognize the member for Elmwood—Transcona, who first came to me and suggested making up the committee based upon the views of Canadians in the past election, an intuitive and fair way to go about the process of changing our electoral system. First, it would be valid, because it would not be the views of any parliamentarian or any party, but the views of Canadians that constructed our committee. Second, it would allow the process itself to be fair, and then hopefully the results to be fair as well. I thank him very much for his innovation. We should always look to new members of Parliament for their views on things.

Specifically for the minister, I very much appreciate her comments about not having to talk about the process of getting to the process, so we can actually get to the substance of the matter about our electoral system that lies at the very heart of our democracy, the heart of this institution, and the heart of our country. The conversation we can have is about how to best and most fairly represent Canadians in their hopes for the future.

We have heard some comments and concerns from my Conservative colleagues. We have also heard some comments from my colleague from the Bloc Québécois, and my friend from Saanich—Gulf Islands in the Green Party. It is my sincere hope that we can arrive at a consensus here today, and that we can achieve some sort of step in the right direction.

Such an indication and sign to Canadians would be one that would be quite hopeful. The debate to this point has been about the process. It has been somewhat, and naturally, antagonistic, which is okay. That is what politics is sometimes.

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However, what is her hope at arriving at such a similar consensus, so that the very first step this committee takes, this historic opportunity we take, starts on the right foot, starts in a way that the partisanship is lessened, that the collaboration and collegiality is enhanced, and that Canadians can have a renewed faith that what comes out of this process will be something representing their hopes and views for the future as well?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for his work. We were elected by Canadians to listen to their needs and to co-operate in this place. This is how we govern. He is right. Up until now the conversation of process has taken away from the substance of electoral reform. It is time for us to combine our partisan interests with the needs of Canadians and work together to ensure their ideas, their aspirations, and their needs are reflected in the reforms we eventually introduce in this place.

• (1110)

[Translation]

Mr. Gérard Deltell (Louis-Saint-Laurent, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have a brief question and I expect a brief answer. Is the minister open to a referendum, yes or no?

[English]

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Mr. Speaker, today is about beginning the process of bringing the parliamentary committee together and having it review the options available. The next step will be to review the proposal, based on what we have heard from Canadians while the committee has been doing its work. The third step will be finding the appropriate way to engage Canadians' buy-in for the process. That aspect is now included in the motion so the committee may determine the best way to gauge the support of Canadians.

I look forward to working with the party opposite to ensure that all Canadians have an opportunity to be part of this important dialogue.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I do not want to take very long, because there are a lot of questions. However, I want to thank the hon. minister and the member for Skeena—Bulkley Valley from the bottom of my heart for putting Canada above partisanship and working so hard to craft a committee that can earn the legitimacy and trust of Canadians.

I look forward to working on that committee. Assuming we can get this motion through as quickly as possible, could the minister indicate when, in her mind, we can begin work as a committee?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Mr. Speaker, I believe the contribution of the hon. member for Saanich—Gulf Islands to the committee will be invaluable, as will all members of the committee.

The hope is that today we engage in a constructive and respectful dialogue about this motion and that we take the opportunity to think constructively, contribute meaningfully, and vote on the motion. We are hoping for unanimous consent on this.

As for when the committee can begin its work, as soon as the respective parties have put forward names for the members they wish to see on the committee, the committee can begin the exciting and important work of reaching out to Canadians and hearing their ideas about what electoral reform the House could introduce.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will not be splitting my time. There is so much wrong with what is going on today that I will need the full 20 minutes.

First, will there be unanimous consent? Absolutely not. There was not unanimous consultation. The minister, who makes a fine line about the need to work together, did not work together with us. She made a deal unilaterally with the New Democratic Party. Maybe it was not unilateral; I do not know. Perhaps the Bloc and NDP were in on it. I have no idea, because the Conservative Party was not involved. So, it is “Let us all work together on a deal that we worked out behind their back”. In all honesty, that kind of disrespect is not the way to begin a discussion.

As well, this motion, as it was originally worded and as it is changed, is fundamentally flawed. I do not blame my colleague from the New Democratic Party for that. I blame the government for that, and I will explain what is wrong with the motion as I go through my comments.

The first thing to say here is that the mandate of the committee is in practice identical to what it was under the original government Motion No. 5. Its timeline is varied only slightly, and it is one of three consultation processes—a very important fact.

There are three consultation processes. One is this committee. The second one is town hall meetings, which are to take place in some unspecified way, produce results that will be collated in some unspecified way, and dealt with by the government in some unspecified way. Finally, there will be a third consultation process, not yet announced by the minister, although she announced that she would be announcing it way back in the middle of last month. The government will then take all this information and will do with it as it sees fit. The minister has not moved an inch from her position that once this committee is finished acting, the cabinet will exercise its monopoly over making a decision.

All right, the purpose of this committee was and is to put in place a part of the Liberal election promise, which I will quote, although I scarcely need to as the Prime Minister quotes it every single day in the House of Commons. The election promise stated, “We are committed to ensuring that 2015 will be the last federal election conducted under the first-past-the-post voting system”. It goes on to state:

We will convene an all-party Parliamentary committee to review a wide variety of reforms, such as ranked ballots, proportional representation, mandatory voting, and online voting.

This committee will deliver its recommendations to Parliament. Within 18 months of forming government, we will introduce legislation to enact electoral reform.

The problem with this promise is that it was a promise that the Prime Minister was not entitled to make. No one summarizes these things better than Rex Murphy. He said the following:

[The Prime Minister's] dramatic declaration before the election that it would be the last under first past the post was not a pledge he was then or now entitled to make... But changing how Canadians vote is not within the competence of a candidate or a prime minister.

Rex Murphy goes on to say:

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The power of the citizens' vote is the DNA of our democracy. It is not then in the Liberals' power...to alter the mechanism, play any parliamentary games to choose a [new] system without consulting the voters in a referendum with clear language on what they, the voters, prefer. No referendum, no change.

Because this is not a legislative committee—we are not dealing with a piece of legislation—the real purpose of this committee is to fritter away time. I came to the conclusion in mid-May, following the minister's announcement, that its sole purpose was to fritter away time so as to preclude other options. Let me read what I wrote in an op-ed in the *Ottawa Citizen* on May 18. I said:

Naturally, the structure of the committee was widely panned. But the real problem has nothing to do with whether or not [the member for Saanich—Gulf Islands] gets a vote on committee.

By now it is clear that the purpose of the committee is not to find conclusions, but rather, to run out the clock. The longer the Liberals delay, the narrower the range of options for electoral reform.

First to vanish will be the ability to move to any system that involves riding redistribution. This will remove from the table the electoral systems that were proposed to voters in Prince Edward Island in 2005, in British Columbia in 2005, and in Ontario in 2007. Only the single-member, preferential ballot system, which [the Prime Minister] has indicated to be his favourite all along, will be left as an alternative to the status quo.

● (1115)

Then, with a bit more time, the option of holding a referendum on [the Prime Minister's] preferred option will also disappear.

Nothing that I said on May 18 is changed by the current proposal. I am very much regretful that my hon. colleague from the New Democratic Party did not see that he is falling into this Liberal trap.

If we go back to the minister's May 10 press conference, we see she is very explicit. Whatever the recommendations are from this committee, they will be sent to cabinet and cabinet will decide. I did not write it down, but I believe the direct quote is that the cabinet will decide. Therefore, the decision will be made not by this committee, not by Canadians at town hall meetings, not by this mystery process that the minister has not announced yet, and not by any combination of things. It will be made by Liberals in a room where only Liberals are present and where no minutes of those meetings are available. They will be made available in the year 2046, after the 30-year cabinet secrecy rule falls away. Therefore, a secret group, a non-inclusive group, will be making a decision, and of course it will be in that group's partisan interest. It will have total discretion in this regard.

Since last December, I have been maintaining that the fix is in. Nothing here changes that. Nothing takes away from the ability of the Liberal government to create a version of what occurred in Australia in 1918. It is a wonderful country. I used to live there.

I want to read this to the House. It is from a paper I wrote in 2005, in which I warned of the dangers of pursuing this kind of legislated change or parliamentary-based change to an electoral system without having a referendum as a safeguard.

Here is what I wrote:

Australia provides the best example of how this can happen. Here is how the Australian Electoral Commission describes that country's shift from FPTP to AV for elections to its lower House:

“AV” is the preferential system that the Prime Minister prefers.

I will now quote directly from the Australian Electoral Commission.

It states:

The *Commonwealth Electoral Act* was comprehensively rewritten in 1918...and the new Act among other things introduced alternative (“preferential”) voting for the House of Representatives;

That is Australia's equivalent to the House of Commons.

It continues:

...this was in response to the rise of the Country Party in the aftermath of the First World War, and the consequent prospect of loss of seats to Labor through a split in the non-Labor vote.

I will return to my paper, which states:

In short, a governing party with a majority mandate realized that a clearly-defined change to the electoral system would suit its own partisan interests, and therefore it enacted that change.

I will now depart from my text and add that it won the Liberals the next election.

Returning to my text, it states:

Australia repeated this process when it introduced STV to its Senate in 1948. This time, it was Labor that was in power but facing imminent defeat. Recognizing that the existing electoral system would exaggerate its decline in popular support, and not believing that it could win the coming election, the Labor government enacted changes to the electoral system that it concluded would help to “consolidate its parliamentary power base in the Senate”.

In the last part of my quote, I am quoting from a paper on how Australia wound up with its current electoral system in both the Senate and the House of Representatives.

The argument being presented as to why this is okay in the absence of a safeguard like a referendum, which was initiated by my colleague from Skeena—Bulkley Valley and has now been accepted by the government, at least for the purpose of this committee, is that we have legitimacy if we have the support of at least one other party. Those are words that I think my colleague from Skeena—Bulkley Valley will live to regret.

● (1120)

That one other party, in the end, I think is unlikely to be his party. I predict that it will be the Green Party, that the Liberals will cut a deal with the Green Party member. That still will not give them a majority of votes on this committee, but who cares who has a majority of votes in this committee? Its purpose is just to rag the puck for six months before the decision gets made by cabinet. That is what will happen. To say it is a travesty of democracy is an understatement. Let me make the point that the support of one other party is insufficient to legitimize a profound change, an epoch-making change, a de facto constitutional change to the way a country operates.

In 2008 we had an election that the Conservatives won. The Liberal Party, New Democrats, and the Bloc Québécois got together to form a coalition government, and we got to watch how the people of Canada reacted to that. In the end they backed off—and they could have defeated the government—because of the massive public opposition to changing our government without an election, a de facto constitutional change from the Westminster system to the kind of system we see in some countries that have proportional representation, like Israel, for example, where governments change regularly without there being an intervening election.

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Canadians did not want that kind of change. I am not sure how we could have a referendum on that kind of change, but maybe if we had done that, had a referendum, people would have said it was legitimate, but that never happened. They simply tried to impose it on Canadians, and Canadians did not want it, and there was the support not of one other party but of two other parties.

The fact is that having the support of some of the parties, even having support of all of the parties is insufficient. There have been cases where everybody, all the parties, agree to something and it is still voted down in a referendum, or at least where no party is in opposition and it still gets voted down in a referendum, indicating that the people are not on side.

The only answers we ever hear from the government on this issue is that the people are wrong, the people are too stupid, the people are too ill-informed, the right people are not turning out at elections, and referendums are not inclusive enough. This has been the minister's answer all along: referendums are not inclusive. Apparently she just chooses to ignore, for example, the referendum in 1995 in which a high turnout, a 92% turnout, is what saved this country. The reason this country still exists is because of a high turnout in a referendum, but she does not care about that. She cares about the inclusiveness of a decision being made in a cabinet room where only Liberals are present and only Liberal partisan interests will be considered. That is what she cares about.

Returning to the issues. Given that this issue is effectively all about how to rig the next election so Liberals can win, I want to explain exactly how this will work—

• (1125)

Hon. Wayne Easter: What about the Fair Elections Act? Did the member ever hear of that?

An hon. member: It was the highest voter turnout.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mr. Anthony Rota): I just want to remind both sides that I am getting on in years and my hearing is not what it used to be, so the distraction is making it hard for the Speaker to hear the hon. member and his speech. If you do not mind, whisper among yourselves if you can, and do not scream across the hall.

The hon. member.

Mr. Scott Reid: Mr. Speaker, preferential ballot and single member districts is the system that the Prime Minister has preferred from before the last election. He has, I think I can accurately say, dissed every other system. He condemned MMP as being too confrontational. He has condemned first past the post repeatedly. I am not sure, though I have not looked to see, if he has dissed STV in the same way. Anyway, he has talked about the wonders of single member preferential balloting, and well he should.

Éric Grenier, a young pollster in this country who publishes some very interesting stuff, produced a report indicating that in the last election the ranked ballot system would have given the Liberals 224 seats. To be clear, the complaint about the current system is that with 39% of the vote, the Liberals had 54% of the seats. Under a ranked ballot, in a similar number of districts, if we assumed that the second preferences of voters, as stated by another pollster, Nik Nanos, are

accurate, the Liberals would have translated 39% of the vote into 73% of the seats.

However, let me be clear about this. That is not the reason that the Liberals want this. They want this because they anticipate, and well they might given the way they are managing the economy, that they will not win 39% of the vote in the next election. They anticipate that they will win less. The question is how they translate 35% of the vote into a majority of seats. It would be done by a means of preferential ballot. It only works for the Liberals because they are the party at the centre and they attract second preferences from other parties. They would design a system so that with 35% of the vote, it could still win a majority. If this system goes in and they get 35% of the vote, they will win a majority. Better yet, because the votes are not being counted as percentages anymore, that will all be hidden.

Seeing that we are giving ideas to the Liberals, who claim they have no opinions of their own on this subject—it is disingenuous, but they claim it—let me suggest a further thought. Let me point to the Manning conference a couple of months ago. There are different kinds of preferential systems. There is what is known as optional preferential. That is where voters can mark as many numbers as they want on the ballot. If there are six candidates running for, say Speaker of the House of Commons, to use a preferential system that exists and that I in fact designed, voters can rank one, two, three, and then just stop. That ballot is alive as long as one of the preferences is still on the ballot.

Another system is called mandatory preferential. This one is even better from the Liberal point of view. This one says that if voters do not mark off every single choice, the ballot is considered what is called informal or invalid. If we have that system, anyone who fails to fill out every choice, even the ones they do not like, has their first preference tossed in the garbage.

This is thanks to Nik Nanos, another pollster, who on election day asked voters who their first, second, third, and fourth choices were, or if they had no second choice. He found that 16% of Liberals had no second choice; 10% of New Democrats had no second choice; 13% of Greens had no second choice; for the Bloc, 15% had no second choice; and 46% of Conservatives had no second choice.

Now, we can engage in a massive advertising campaign trying to explain that people have to vote for everyone. However, if even 10% of those people did not get the message and we spread that 10% across the parties, the effect would be that many Conservative candidates who win a majority of first preferences with more than half the vote will still lose. That is a very realistic scenario, and I do not think it is unrealistic to assume that only 10% would fail to get the memo.

If the Liberals are looking for ways to steal the next election, optional preferential does the trick. If they are looking for ways to steal every election, then I would seriously recommend to them the mandatory preferential that I just described.

Turning to a referendum, what is the reason for having a referendum? I want to make this quite clear, and one can check my writings on this subject to see that I have not been a defender of first past the post. I have been a defender of democracy, of a referendum for deciding this issue.

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Let me now read from a paper that I wrote in 2001 on this subject. I said, in advocating a referendum, “just to be on the safe side, the existing first-past-the-post system [should] be included as one of the alternatives which voters could select on a preferential ballot”. I was actually saying that we should have a preferential referendum in which one chooses between all of the different options.

• (1130)

This would ensure that even if the designers of the system had done their job poorly and selected a range of entirely unacceptable options, the worst that would happen would be that Canadians would return to the status quo.

This is not the worst option available under this system. The worst option is that the governing party steals the next election, just as the Australian government did in 1918. That was an outrage. It did not destroy Australia as a country, but it reduced its stature as a democracy. That is the danger that we are facing here.

Do I think that the Liberals are going to try to steal every future election, as one reporter asked me? I think they just care about the next election, frankly, but they are trying to steal the next election.

Anyone who thinks that it is constitutional to design a system that would have the exclusive purpose, the primary purpose, or even a partial purpose, of disenfranchising Canadians, because that is the point—it is not about which party will benefit—is very naive. It is about which voters will be effectively disenfranchised through the choice of a system which has predictable results. Anyone who thinks we can do that and not violate section 3 of the charter, the part of the charter that says we all have the right to elect members of Parliament, is very naive indeed.

I hope that the government has thought through the constitutional implications of the road it has been going down since it adopted this idea a year ago next week in its election platform. The government is moving to very dangerous, very unconstitutional, very undemocratic ground, and it will discover that the Canadian people will not stand for it. It will not matter whether it will have the support of one other party and it is accomplished.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault (Sherbrooke, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his speech.

I am pleased to ask him a question on referendums, since that is the focus of the discussion he is trying to have here on electoral reform.

Under the Referendum Act, the legislation that allows the Government of Canada to hold referendums, the government can hold a referendum to make a change to the Constitution of Canada.

Does the hon. member believe that a referendum on the electoral system would meet the requirements of the Referendum Act, which clearly specifies that referendum questions have to relate to the Constitution of Canada? Does the hon. member think that the government even has the authority to hold a referendum to change the electoral system?

[*English*]

Mr. Scott Reid: Mr. Speaker, under the current wording of the Referendum Act, the government would not be able to hold a

referendum on this question. In other words, it would be appropriate for the government to update the Referendum Act, which needs updating for other reasons too. For example, there is no financial constraints on how much can be spent on either side in a referendum. It would have to be changed. I have been recommending that for some length of time, so I am glad my colleague raised that point. The Referendum Act needs to be updated. According to the Chief Electoral Officer, we need to have six months in order to ramp up for an actual referendum. Both of these things should be on the government's agenda right now.

The minister left, and it is a shame, because I wanted to ask her a question, but perhaps—

• (1135)

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mr. Anthony Rota): The hon. member has been here long enough, and he knows that we do not refer to whether members are present or not.

Mr. Scott Reid: Mr. Speaker, I genuinely forgot that because I was so incensed. I take the Speaker's point that I was quite wrong to make that point.

Let me make this point. There is some sort of vague language in the new mandate of the committee, which sort of implies but does not imply that it could say a referendum is one way of doing it, or it could say a referendum is not on the plate because Canadians do not want it. I would have liked to ask the minister that question.

If the government is implying that referendums are potentially a way of dealing with this, which the minister has said in the past, then it needs to update the Referendum Act, or else it reveals that what the minister has been saying has been disingenuous from the start.

Mr. Vance Badawey (Niagara Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have to preface my comments by saying that after 18 years in public service as a mayor and as a regional councillor, I have always taken full responsibility for, and I have an appreciation for, listening, learning, and reacting accordingly to the residents I represent. That is our job. To make decisions based on a referendum does not allow us to do our job. It is imperative that we stand up, that we listen, that we learn, and we act accordingly.

We can govern by referendum with any decision we attempt to make, but does the member not think that instead of governing by referendum, it would be more appropriate, simply put, to do our job, to listen to the people we represent, and communicate their concerns and thoughts on any issue, including this one, to the House and set policy for the future of this great nation of ours?

Mr. Scott Reid: Mr. Speaker, Canada held a referendum in 1898 on prohibition. We held one in 1942 on conscription. We held one in 1992 on the Charlottetown accord. I am suggesting that we hold one in 2016 or 2017 on electoral reform. If the member thinks that four referendums over the course of more than a century is too much, then he and I just disagree.

I will add that 73% of Canadians, according to a poll taken a couple of weeks ago, also disagree with him. They believe that this question should go to a referendum.

Business of Supply

To finish this thought, Canadians currently believe that there are certain issues that are of a de facto constitutional nature, that they change the way our country operates and affect our fundamental rights, such as the right to vote. It is clear, as a consequence of the Charlottetown accord vote, and the referendums that have occurred in Quebec on separation from Canada, that there has developed a culture in Canada, a widespread belief—it is part of our political culture now to believe this—that on constitutional or de facto constitutional issues, a referendum is the only way of conferring legitimacy upon the changes that are made.

Therefore, I would respectfully disagree with my hon. colleague.

Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague for his incredible knowledge of this issue and his articulate way of expressing the needs of the House, and in fact the needs of all Canadians.

One thing we keep hearing over and over again from the government, and even from NDP colleagues, is that we need to find a way to engage with those who have been unwilling or unable to participate in the past. I am having trouble identifying who that might be. I wonder if my colleague would have any input into what could be behind the idea of trying to engage more with people, who they say are unwilling to or have been unable to participate.

In the last election, there was an incredible increase in people who were able to engage, willing to engage, and wanted to engage. I wonder if my colleague could comment on that.

Mr. Scott Reid: Mr. Speaker, when people think an issue is important enough, they vote on it. That was evidenced by the 92% turnout in Quebec in 1995 in the referendum on secession. Clearly, at that point people were highly motivated. They were so motivated that people were trying to vote from their hospital beds. These were people who would normally not make that attempt.

However, in answer to the question about higher levels of participation, it is always a legitimate goal to look at those who, for one reason or another, are left out, such as people who are disabled. There are so many different kinds of disabilities, for instance, visual disabilities and mobility issues. I could take up a lot of time describing them all. They all need to be dealt with. That is the kind of businesslike manner that ought to be carried out by means of looking at the Canada Elections Act.

In all fairness to the government, one of the three items, along with electoral reform, is electronic voting. Mandatory voting is the third one. Electronic voting might prove to be a way of having higher voter participation, which I am sure we will have a chance to find out. However, that is the way to deal with getting more people involved and voting.

This is an important issue. If the government puts forward a good proposal and there is a referendum on it, I would be very surprised indeed if there is not a higher turnout than in the last election. I guarantee that if it puts forward a bad proposal, there will be a really high turnout in this country as it is rejected.

Let me suggest that it is exactly the bad proposal that I worry the government will try to ram through in the absence of a referendum giving the citizens of Canada a safeguard against the misuse of its mandate.

• (1140)

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, my hon. colleague for Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston has written extensively on this topic, and I commend the fact that historically he has always opposed first past the post, the system that the Speech from the Throne commits Parliament to eliminate before the 2019 election.

I will quote from the member's article of 2005, where he wrote, “the perverse results of [first past the post] in Canada are so widely known that they scarcely bear repeating”. Since I have not heard them repeated from the Conservative benches in some time, I wonder if he would mind repeating the perverse impacts of first past the post, so we know what we want to eliminate.

Mr. Scott Reid: Mr. Speaker, I am glad that the member was consulting my website. I assume that is where she found that article. I thank her for that. I want to encourage her to read this passage as well. It is not from the same article, but from one I wrote in 2001. It says:

And just to be on the safe side, the existing first-past-the-post system would be included as one of the alternatives which voters could select on their preferential ballots. This would ensure that even if the commission had done its job poorly and selected a range of entirely unacceptable options, the worst that could happen would be that Canadians would return to the status quo.

I am no defender of first past the post, and I have made that clear to my caucus. My job is not to defend or advocate any system. It is to advocate the sovereignty of the Canadian people, to say that Canadians are the ones who have the right to decide whether to keep the current system or replace it with a new system.

It is perverse to suggest that we should have a decision-making apparatus in which we say that only the status quo is forbidden, that only the status quo can get rejected, because while it is true that first past the post is not in my estimation the best system out there, there are systems that are far worse.

I have been suggesting all along that the government intends to ram through the very worst of those available options in order to rig the 2019 election. That is a scandal, and it is probably unconstitutional.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Aubin (Trois-Rivières, NDP): Mr. Speaker, opposition days go by so quickly that I will be sharing my time in order to allow as many members as possible to have a say, especially considering that the topic we are discussing today is of capital importance.

As we all know, politicians have a bad habit of overstating the historic nature of what they are discussing. When I look at my short career in politics, this being my fifth year, during this year alone I have spoken to bills on subjects as important as medical assistance in dying and electoral reform.

It is not an exaggeration to say that what we are talking about right now, the future we are trying to carve out for our country, could be historic. I want to qualify that by saying that I will give the process some time to move forward and see how things unfold. However, I must say that I welcome the government's openness this morning to ensuring that the committee is more collegial.

Business of Supply

Before I was an NDP member, in my previous career as a teacher I had many discussions with my students about the electoral system and how Canadians are represented in the House.

We obviously know that in direct democracy, we cannot bring together 34 million Canadians and get them to debate. We therefore chose to elect representatives to debate and propose solutions.

We must ensure that the plurality of the ideas presented today, which is reflected by the plurality of the parties present in the House, no longer echoes the era during which everything was either red or blue and was viewed accordingly.

We need to move as quickly as possible to ensure that our representation in the House starts to reflect Canadians and to ensure that all Canadians who go out to vote are assured that their vote will count and that they will be represented in the House. That is less and less evident, and that probably partially explains voter turnout, which is always questionable. Although turnout increased slightly in the last election, it is far below what we should expect from a democratic society that would strive for the involvement of the vast majority of its citizens.

If, at the end of the process, we want to be able to propose a solution that Canadians feel was the result of a job well done, then Canadians need to be included in that process. That is why I thought my colleague's proposal was so well-thought-out. The committee that he is proposing, which would be made up of five Liberals, three Conservatives, two New Democrats, a member of the Bloc Québécois, and a member of the Green Party, is already a step toward the objective that we are trying to reach because it reflects how Canadians voted in the last election.

We have two choices. The first is to stick with tradition in order to keep the structure of the committee as it has always been, where the governing party has a majority. I was going to say that this tradition has been around for thousands of years, but it has not. The other option is to set up the committee in a way that reflects what we are trying to accomplish with the election reform, in other words, representation where there is a place for the ideas of all Canadians and Quebecers and where everyone can express their opinion.

I am particularly pleased that the minister recognized the Bloc Québécois's and the Green Party's right to vote on this committee. It did not make any sense to me to work together to reform our electoral system in a way that clearly demonstrates how important each vote is, while preventing two parties that were elected by Canadians from voting. That did not make much sense to me, particularly since the representation proposed in the NDP motion reflects the results of the last election quite well.

• (1145)

Just to give you an idea, since the people listening to us may not remember the figures, let us recall that the Liberal government was elected with 39.5% of the vote. It would be somewhat surprising for the government to grab 60% of the votes in a committee that strives to be part of a change. The Conservatives had 31.9% of the vote, while the NDP, the Bloc Québécois and the Green Party had 19.7%, 4.7%, and 3.4% respectively of the vote.

The minister has agreed to this representation on the committee, for which, by the way, I thank her. I think this is a step in the right direction, and it lends credibility to the work that must be done.

If we reach the broadest consensus possible, which is clearly what I would like to see, that will significantly change how the Canadian electorate votes. For many years, we have seen a strong trend in voting to defeat a government. People go to the polls and most often vote against a government, instead of voting for a government that they want to see in power. I think that is a sort of perversion of our democratic system.

If, through an electoral reform, we are able to come up with a solution that has consensus and encourages everyone to go to the polls, having decided that they will vote according to their values and convictions, that may well significantly reduce the so-called strategic voting. Basically, that type of voting always reflects the idea of voting to defeat a government, rather than voting to elect a government that reflects our aspirations.

I hope that the work of the committee and all the consultations with experts, the public, and all those interested in this system will help us reach the broadest possible consensus to show that the direction or change to be proposed to all Canadians seems to us to be clearly the most representative.

Unfortunately, I think time is of the essence. To be able to implement a new electoral system, the Chief Electoral Officer told us that he would have to establish a timeline consistent with the scope of the change. My hope therefore is that the work will proceed smoothly, and that it will start as soon as possible, given that we have already lost some eight months.

I therefore welcome the minister's response this morning as a breath of fresh air, an opening, but I cannot forget that all this could have been done much sooner. We have to get down to serious work starting today in order to put in place a system that will do away with false majorities. This is in fact the fundamental problem with our first past the post system. Governments elected with around 30%, 38%, or 40% of the vote are being brought to power, legitimately, under the rules of the current system. However they are clearly not representative of the people's will, since 60% of population is expressing a desire to be led by a party other than the one in government. It seems to me that this statistic alone is sufficient to demonstrate that the electoral system we now have does not reflect the desire of the people of Quebec and Canada to have a system where they can be sure that their vote counts.

There are a few different proposals for getting rid of these distortions. I do not think that preferential balloting, which seems to be the route advocated by the Liberal government, is one of those systems. As I often say, from the shock of ideas the light will shine forth. This is something that the new makeup of the committee will probably make possible. I hope that everyone will report to the committee with their ideas and be able to demonstrate them and that there will also be this open-mindedness to the ideas of others, so that together we can find the best system, one in which Quebecers and Canadians can see themselves reflected.

Business of Supply

• (1150)

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the main comments from the member.

When I reflect on what has taken place over the last hour and a half, we have seen a significant gain. We can appreciate that there has been a good opportunity for the opposition parties to be working with the government in recognizing that we do need to see a change in the system. I say that, because now the majority is not going to be a Liberal or government majority on the committee. I see that as a positive thing.

Would the member not agree that Canadians as a whole in the last election, based on the multitude of parties that were engaged in the last election, collectively made a commitment that we would be changing the system, that the need for change is there and it is very real, and now with the makeup of the committee that this is a positive step forward?

• (1155)

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Aubin: Mr. Speaker, I admit that even after five years in Parliament, I have preserved my ideals, and it is my hope that we will find the solution together. However that does not mean I wear rose-coloured glasses.

Indeed, many voters have long dreamed of changing the electoral system. However it must be acknowledged that not all of the parties necessarily took a stand on this issue during the election campaign and the parties that did often had differing proposals.

My dearest hope is not that we will arrive at a majority decision on this committee, but that we will succeed in achieving the broadest possible consensus.

Of course, the new makeup of the committee does not allow any one party to hold the majority on its own. However, we will need more than one party plus one vote. We are really looking for the broadest possible consensus, and if the committee does not have this credibility, it will be difficult for it to produce a proposal that the public will find credible.

Mr. Gérard Deltell (Louis-Saint-Laurent, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague from Trois-Rivières for his presentation. I have a fondness for archaisms.

Of course, to the people of Quebec, Trois-Rivières is Maurice Duplessis country, and as we know, Maurice Duplessis had a very particular understanding of democracy.

That being said, what is in question here is essential and directly affects our most precious institutions, namely the election of the MPs who form the government, Parliament, and the House of Commons. This type of change cannot be made by politicians agreeing with and talking to each other. Even if a consensus is reached, it will still be discussion among politicians.

We have to go straight to the people, as legislatures have done in three provinces. British Columbia has done it twice, Prince Edward Island once, and Ontario has done it as well. Canadian legislatures

that have tried to make changes on an issue as sensitive as the one before us have consulted the people by referendum.

Does the hon. member for Trois-Rivières agree that for any potential change of this nature, the referendum route should be taken?

Mr. Robert Aubin: Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for his question and for his allusion to Maurice Duplessis, whose offices were just beside the current location of my own.

To respond to his question more seriously, one cannot be from Quebec and be allergic to referendums, for our history is dotted with them.

However, to speak of a referendum at this time would be to put the cart before the horse. There are different ways of consulting the population.

Obviously, I hope that the House has authority over the matter, since we are the representatives of that population. However, there are also ways to set up a citizens' committee that would be charged with doing parallel work on this reform and could also consult experts and its respective populations.

There are various ways, and if one day we should take the referendum route, which is not allowed by the Constitution at present, I must point out, we will also be able to consider what the subject of the referendum should be.

Should the referendum be on a proposal? If we actually attained this much-coveted broad consensus, could we not introduce this electoral reform and then organize a referendum a few elections on so that we have had the experience and can talk about the subject in full knowledge of the facts?

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault (Sherbrooke, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure for me to speak to the motion that has been slightly amended by the government. It seems to have the support of at least four parties in the House. I hope that as many members as possible can be rallied around this proposal, so that the committee charged with studying and proposing a change to the voting system has the support of all members of the House. Then we will really be able to get down to work.

However, I was hoping that we could begin the substantive work earlier, or in the next few weeks. Instead of debating the composition of the committee, I hope that from this point forward, we will focus on the substantive issue, which is determining the voting system that best reflects the opinion of Canadians and the results of the election.

When we were elected on October 19, 2015, we all received a mandate to change the way voting is done. The party that was elected to government and obtained the most seats in the House had promised that the 2015 election would be the last one under the first past the post system. Several other parties also spoke about this issue during the last election campaign and made a commitment to change the voting system to make it more acceptable to Canadians.

Business of Supply

The people of Sherbrooke told me that the current voting system does not assign sufficient importance to each vote. This is a message that all members probably received in talking to Canadians. This important issue often comes up in our discussions on Canadian politics. With first past the post, voters sometimes find that their vote does not have enough value, that it does not have significant weight. The other systems give more importance to the vote and hence to the opinion of voters.

Many systems could be evaluated and proposed by the committee. In my view, one thing is clear: our mandate is to consider all the possible options and propose a change to our system of voting.

To make such a change, it is self-evident that the parliamentary committee must represent as faithfully as possible the opinion expressed by Canadians in the last general election. Everyone must be able to express themselves in committee. I am very pleased that the motion by my hon. colleague from Skeena—Bulkley Valley on the composition of the committee has received the support of the government, which agrees that this committee should be innovative. A committee looking into so important an issue has to be innovative. It must be different from other parliamentary committees and follow different rules.

I am happy that this motion has received the government's support, because if we want to change the way we vote, all the parties running in elections must be able to express their opinion on the next voting system.

•(1200)

It is also important that a committee be formed so that, at least, the broadest possible consensus is achieved and no party in the House has all the power to decide unilaterally on the next voting system.

I say this with some hope of seeing some kind of consensus achieved. I also say it with moderate optimism as to the outcome of the committee.

The members are beginning to get used to the work of parliamentary business. As in all parliamentary committees, we can study, make recommendations, and sometimes even reach unanimous consent on things we then recommend. The committee drafts a report that the chair then tables here in the House. After that, ultimate power lies with the Government of Canada and the cabinet, the executive branch.

It is all very nice to reach a consensus, and I have seen that in other committees, to report to the House, and to make a number of recommendations. Then the government will accept one or two of the committee's recommendations and not the others. It is possible. That is why I continue to be cautiously optimistic about the outcome of all this. As my Conservative colleague mentioned just now, at the end of this process, the fact remains that the Canada Elections Act is amended by legislative means. It will be up to the cabinet and the government to propose this amendment to the Canada Elections Act to introduce the new voting system that is chosen.

That I why, today, I wanted to talk about cautious optimism and especially about hope. I hope that if a recommendation adopted by a majority of the parliamentary committee is submitted to the government, it will listen and follow that recommendation. I am therefore appealing to the government, while remaining moderately

optimistic. If the parliamentary committee does produce some ideas, I hope that the government will pay very close attention, and that it will act appropriately on that recommendation for changing the voting system.

It is quite clear that the distribution of seats in the House is problematic. A government can govern in the house with 55% of the seats after receiving 39% of the vote in the general election. Everyone recognizes this obvious problem. It is also recognized in a number of other jurisdictions in the world, where they are trying to have as little distortion as possible between the distribution of seats in legislative assemblies and the voting pattern in a general election. It is therefore extremely important for the committee to study all the options. Of course, some of them are much more effective than others for avoiding distortion and hence for representing as accurately as possible the votes cast in an election and the distribution of seats in the House of Commons. There are certainly more effective systems in this respect. I hope that all the options will be considered, and that the end result will make the House as representative as possible of the votes cast in an election.

Obviously, we want the proportion to be as close as possible to the actual percentage, so that if a party receives 39%, 40%, or 45% of the votes, it will receive 39%, 40%, or 45% of the seats in the House of Commons. I therefore hope that this committee will reach a conclusion that will make our voting system as representative as possible of the votes cast, and that the composition of the House will reflect the votes cast in the election.

•(1205)

[*English*]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, one of the aspects of the motion that I really appreciate is:

...that the Committee be directed to issue an invitation to each Member of Parliament to conduct a town hall in their respective constituencies and provide the Committee with a written report of the input from their constituents to be filed with the Clerk of the Committee no later than November 1, 2016.

Now, with the exception of the change in date that has been proposed, I think that is a fantastic aspect of the motion. I would think that all members would get behind that. Whether a member chooses to do it or not, that is completely up to that particular member. I am having my public meeting on July 6 at the Maples Community Centre. I encourage members of Parliament to go out and hold those public meetings.

We need to get over the issue of the process, and start talking more and more about the substance, as the minister talked about, and to have that conversation with our constituents. Now we have a reporting mechanism that I believe gives it that much more importance to have the meetings.

I wonder if the member might want to highlight the importance of members of Parliament being able to go out and possibly have those public meetings, or find other ways in which they can communicate with their constituents and report back to the committee.

Business of Supply

• (1210)

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his excellent question, which was about encouraging our colleagues to hold public consultations in their constituencies, as mentioned in our motion.

There was simply a change of date in the amendment to our motion, which was moved and carried. That gives me the opportunity to encourage all of my colleagues in the House to make every effort to organize a town hall with a view to gathering their constituents' opinions. We have an important opportunity with this motion, which gives the members of the House a mandate to submit a report to the parliamentary committee, which will be taken into account in the discussions.

Hence, we have a unique opportunity as members to submit the comments that we receive from our constituents directly to the parliamentary committee, which will then be responsible for compiling and reading all the comments and possibly formulating a proposal. From all the discussions I have had with my constituents, a consensus has already emerged around the proportional system. It will be important for the committee to hear all the comments, and that may certainly further inform the debates and discussions in the parliamentary committee.

[English]

Hon. Lisa Raitt (Milton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I hear about the mandatory nature in which we will be holding these town halls for a very specific question, I can anticipate that it is going to be, I hope, highly attended across our 338 districts.

As the member is probably aware, finding the appropriate space to accommodate 67% or 70% of our constituents to come in and give their views in one single town meeting could possibly be very expensive.

I wonder if the member has a view to whether or not this should be coming out members' budgets, or is it appropriate to send to the bill government with respect to having this town halls.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: Mr. Speaker, I think the primary role of an elected representative and a member is to consult his or her constituents.

Since that is a member's primary role, why not do so using his or her own budget? As all members are well aware, we have the opportunity to send written materials directly to the mailboxes of our constituents. If the opportunity is there, the invitation is sent out; we always hope that as many people as possible will take part in these consultations, but at the very least, the invitation will have been sent out. Every citizen in the 338 constituencies will, I hope, get an invitation, will have the opportunity to show up and participate in this type of consultation by expressing their opinions, which will then be passed on to the parliamentary committee. I therefore encourage all members to send out invitations and provide the necessary space to accommodate everyone who wants to take part in a consultation.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mr. Anthony Rota): Before we resume the debate, I would like to remind members that there is a

process to be followed. It is inappropriate to speak with a colleague at the other end of the House. If members have something to say to their colleagues on the other side, they can walk across the House and whisper. That would be more polite to the person speaking.

Mr. Luc Thériault: Mr. Speaker, speaking of decorum, could you enforce it?

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mr. Anthony Rota): We are doing our best.

• (1215)

Mr. Luc Thériault: Mr. Speaker, I am not sure there is quorum.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mr. Anthony Rota): Yes, we have quorum.

Resuming debate. The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Innovation, Science and Economic Development.

Mr. Greg Fergus (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Innovation, Science and Economic Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise today in the House of Commons, a powerful symbol of our democratic processes, to talk about the opposition motion on appointing a special committee on electoral reform made up of representatives from all parties.

I will be sharing my time with the hon. member for Saanich—Gulf Islands.

As you know, our government pledged to ensure that every vote counts. We said that the 2015 federal election would be the last to employ a first past the post system.

The question is, what kind of electoral system will be in place for the next federal election? As you know, the opposition motion, like the government motion on this subject, calls for the creation of a parliamentary committee made up of representatives from all parties to study various reforms, such as preferential ballots, proportional representation, mandatory voting, and online voting.

During the study of these changes, the government would like the committee to be guided by the following principles: restore the effectiveness and legitimacy of the voting system, encourage greater engagement and participation in the democratic process, support accessibility and inclusiveness for all eligible voters, safeguard the integrity of our voting system, and take into consideration the accountability of local representation.

I would like to focus my comments today on that last principle, the importance of preserving the accountability of local representation. In our country, we have always valued and maintained a geographic connection and accountability between voters and their elected members.

This principle reflects the value that Canadians place on their ability to directly elect their representatives to Parliament. In a 2015 Abacus Data poll, respondents were asked to rank the top five goals of a voting system; 46% indicated that the top goal of a voting system should be to allow people to directly elect the members who represent their community.

It should be noted how much Canadians value their ability to directly elect their representatives to Parliament. Local representatives understand and know the local conditions and how to advance local needs. They are prepared to discuss and resolve local concerns.

We all understand the value of Canada's diversity. It is our strength and our future. Canada's geographic diversity, its people of diverse backgrounds, and its diverse interests contribute to its wealth from coast to coast to coast. However, this diversity can also pose a challenge to us all.

We need to ensure that the perspectives and interests of a remote northern community, for instance, which may include indigenous populations, natural resources, or climate change, are represented here in Ottawa just as much as the interests of a 905 suburb, which may include carbon emissions, transportation corridors, and multiculturalism.

Our democratic institutions must take into account the interests and perspectives of all Canadians, no matter where they live. Local representatives can use their knowledge and understanding of local conditions to take local needs into account and advocate for them.

• (1220)

Members are willing to listen to their constituents' perspectives, discuss the things that matter most to them, and try to address their concerns, whether that means helping them get a visa or passport or resolving issues regarding immigration, employment insurance, retirement, or income tax.

Consider the example of the hon. member for Timmins—James Bay, who has worked tirelessly on behalf of his constituents, particularly band members in Attawapiskat, to understand the complex local needs and pool the resources to meet those needs.

Another example is the hon. member for Saanich—Gulf Islands. She is well aware of her constituents' concerns and works incredibly hard to make sure that her constituents are engaged and well informed in order to focus her efforts on their behalf. Those are just two of 338 examples.

The flip side of representation is, of course, accountability. It is extremely important that our elected representatives be accountable to their constituents in terms of how they represent their interests.

Without local representation, it is not hard to imagine how frustrated our constituents would be if they were not able to express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with how they have been represented locally.

Obviously, the fact that voters can judge their representatives' performance is a strong incentive for members to represent constituents' needs and concerns as best they can. Members should be held accountable for the speed, quality, and effectiveness of the way they deal with issues that are important to their constituents.

Local representation is important, since it strengthens accountability between Canadians and Parliament and it ensures that our country's vast and diverse geography is taken into account in our legislature. Local representation enables members to speak on behalf of their constituents on issues raised in the House, and it ensures that

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the perspectives of urban and rural communities, from coast to coast, whether they are prosperous or struggling, are considered in Ottawa.

Furthermore, local representation enables Canadians to hold their representatives accountable as to how well or how poorly they represent their constituents.

There are many voting systems that support this principle in order to maintain the accountability of local representation. Majority and proportional systems can all be designed in a way that complies with this principle. I am sure that the committee will consider this factor when it studies various reforms.

The government was elected on a platform designed to “[give] Canadians a voice in Ottawa”.

We recognize that if we want Parliament to run smoothly, members must be free to carry out the mandate they were given by their constituents to represent their communities and hold the government accountable. The government must always serve Canadians and find solutions to problems.

Canadians truly value the principle that the accountability of local representation should be maintained. The committee made up of representatives of all parties should be guided by this principle when it is assessing the possible voting systems for the next federal election.

In conclusion, I support the motion to create a special committee on electoral reform made up of representatives from all the parties in the House of Commons, with the amendments proposed by the Minister of Democratic Institutions.

I look forward to talking to all Canadians about the future of their voting system.

• (1225)

[*English*]

Ms. Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the composition of the committee being proposed is definitely an issue to which I want to speak. I have a concern with the Bloc Québécois being given a vote on the committee. It is a party that is bent on the destruction of our country as opposed to improving our democracy. I wonder if the member could comment on that.

Mr. Greg Fergus: Mr. Speaker, I am a Quebecker. I passed my entire life in Quebec. I believe in my country and I believe in my province. I have had the great privilege, as all of us have had, of being elected by my fellow citizens to represent their concerns here, so has the hon. member from Sarnia, and so have the hon. members from the Bloc Québécois. They represent equally and democratically their electors from their ridings who have made a choice from many parties to choose their representation. They have every right and legitimacy to be here, to take their seats in the House, and debate democratically the issues of concern to them. To me, it is a fundamental right.

I am very pleased the government has seen its way to support the opposition motion to allow the members of the Bloc and the Green Party to take their seats at the committee. It is a welcome move, it is legitimate, and it is a move all members should support.

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Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Speaker, there was an interesting comment raised by my friend, and I think I understand her concern or perspective.

I remember the former Conservative prime minister actually echoing very much what my Liberal colleague just said when asked if the Bloc even have seats in the House of Commons. This was from a debate a few years ago. The former Conservative prime minister, who is no fan of the sovereigntist cause I would argue, said that the legitimacy of our election required that we honour the representation of however Canadians from coast to coast to coast chose to elect their members.

What we are attempting to do is not necessarily setting any major precedents with the motion we have before us. We had discussed the motion a great deal, including the committee construction and how we would bring in 1.4 million Canadians who voted for parties that were not of official party status. A lot of Canadians do not know this, but unless a party has 12 members, it does not achieve party status and therefore has no right to sit on committee. However, when discussing this particular debate around how we vote and how our democracy functions, it seems to me novel and different than how we talk about a transportation bill or the other issues that come before Parliament. We had to be novel as well in the way we constructed the committee, not just in having them witness what was going on but to have the views that they represent and also the nearly 1.5 million people represented by a tangible vote.

Therefore, I understand the consternation. I do not doubt it. There are many who think certain parties should never be permitted to sit in our House of Commons. However, I would ask my friend this. Where does that path lead us if only certain parties with certain views are allowed to stand and seek a seat in the House of Commons? What would that eventually lead to for a democracy as rich and robust as Canada's?

Mr. Greg Ferguson: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for Skeena—Bulkley Valley who has a lot more experience than I do in the House and as a parliamentarian. He spoke quite eloquently.

It would be a very sorry development for the wealth and diversity of our country if we were to start regulating who could or could not have the legitimate right to represent their electors, if their electors so desired to be represented by that person by expressing their vote in that manner. It is a challenge for all of us.

In 1993, I was very much a politically active, much younger man. I certainly was disappointed that my province had elected not only a majority but a pretty large majority of members from the Bloc Québécois. As a federalist and someone who believed in Canada, I found that very hard. That being said, they were elected legitimately, honestly, and according to all the rules. They represented their constituencies with great honour and distinction. It is a strength of our system when we allow for that diversity of views to take a legitimate right.

• (1230)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, it is a great honour today to join this crucial debate on our democracy.

Today, we are witnessing a truly important event: the Liberal government has agreed to the NDP's proposal to create a committee in which the Liberals will not have the majority of the votes. That is truly extraordinary.

This parliamentary committee will have to study various ways of reforming the federal voting system and submit its recommendations by December 1. That is very important work, and I, for one, cannot wait to start.

[*English*]

I have been listening and watching our debates in this place since the hon. Minister of Democratic Institutions first put forward a version of this motion. For a while, it began to remind me of the 1969 peace talks in Paris to end the war in Vietnam, where the talks could not begin until they finished arguing over whether the table would be square or round. Although the issues are of very large significance to us as parliamentarians to ensure the committee will have legitimacy, I can imagine that those Canadians who are watching this are wondering when we are going to get on with the work of getting rid of a perverse voting system and stop discussing how many members and what rights we all have.

For myself, as the only member of Parliament here on behalf of the Green Party of Canada, I am, of course, here as a Green Party of Canada member of Parliament. I am not here as an independent, which is recognized, but as my hon. friend for Skeena—Bulkley Valley just pointed out, those of us in parties with fewer than 12 members are not considered, in the House process, as "recognized parties". Therefore, it is a bit confusing. I am a recognized member of the Green Party in this place, but I am not a member of a recognized party.

It is not unheard of, and as a matter of fact it is quite common, for members of smaller parties to be admitted to committees. There was a time when the NDP went down to nine seats, and in that circumstance, many members of the New Democratic Party served as full members of various committees in this place. There have been independents who have also served as full members of committees.

I have been willing to serve, because the work of getting electoral reform is far more important than any other aspect of the committee. However, I knew this was actually a departure from tradition, and far from being an exception to allow the Bloc and the Greens a seat on the committee. In these circumstances of a commitment to an all-party committee, it really is important that it be all parties.

I believe it is a significant step forward for this committee. It is something for which I am deeply grateful to the Minister of Democratic Institutions, her parliamentary secretary, and to the member of Parliament for Skeena—Bulkley Valley for making the case that it makes sense that all members of the committee have full voting rights and full participatory rights, and I intend to exercise mine fully with the goal of serving the public good.

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I know, given the partisanship in this place, it may be hard for people to believe, but I do think I am the most non-partisan leader of a federal political party. I absolutely commit to having an open mind to the various forms of voting that we will study on this committee. It is critical that we have a committee that inspires the confidence of Canadians by starting out in a non-partisan fashion with all parties willing to support the process. I hope our colleagues in the Conservative Party will support this motion.

We now know the Liberals will support the motion. It is the NDP's motion, and the member for Skeena—Bulkley Valley accepted, quite graciously, the amendment put forward by the minister. Certainly, the Green Party supports the motion, and I hope my friends from the Bloc also support the motion. Therefore, it would be important for this committee to start out the way we intend to go, and for the Conservatives to set aside whatever qualms they may have.

I want to emphasize, particularly for my friends in the Conservative Party, that it is quite extraordinary for a governing party with a majority of votes to voluntarily relinquish that majority. I do not think that should go without mention.

• (1235)

We have a committee of 12 people, and this is the formula as put forward by the New Democratic Party. It puts this committee forward on the basis of what this Parliament would look like had we had fair voting in the last election. It is an essential point of principle. If we did not have the first past the post voting system, with its infamous reputation for perverse results and false majorities, such as the false majority of the previous Conservative majority at 39% of the vote, or the false majority of our current Liberal government with 39% of the vote, Parliament would not have the configuration it now has.

This is really historic and suggests that we could go forward in a spirit of non-partisanship. The governing majority party has voluntarily relinquished its majority on the committee so that it is five Liberals, three Conservatives, two New Democrats, one Bloc Québécois member, and one Green Party member. That is a very good start.

Now we have a lot of work to do. I think our first job, as parliamentarians who passionately believe that we must ensure that the Liberal election promise, now enshrined in the Speech from the Throne, is actually achieved, is to ensure that 2015 was the last election held under first past the post.

Even as we go forward to study those methods of voting in the systems around the world that are far more democratic, far more inclusive, and that build consensus and have changed the way parliaments have functioned to achieve better results around the world, it is important to keep explaining why first past the post and any other majoritarian voting system, which includes ranked or preferential ballots, fall short of meeting the basic understanding that every Canadian has of what real democracy is. Surely, all Canadians have a right to know that their vote will count.

It is the perversity of the first past the post voting system that says that as soon as we have achieved 32% of the vote in some ridings, and in theory 25% of the vote, we win. We have been a multi-party democracy in this Parliament since around 1920. There has never

been a time when we could say that there were fewer than three, four, or five parties. We have been a multi-party democracy with a two-party voting system for almost a century. That is a century too long.

What happens when we achieve 25%, 30% of the vote and are the winner in that riding, it is winner takes all. Therefore, 70% of the votes just do not count. This contributes to voters feeling that if they live in a so-called safe Liberal riding but are Conservatives or live in a safe Conservative riding but are New Democrats, there is really no point in voting because their vote just will not count. Everyone knows the sayings, “You could run a goat in a red sweater in that riding, it wouldn't matter, they'll win. You could run a dog in a blue sweater in that riding.” Taking it away from animal rights at this point and going back to people, the reality of this is that it contributes to lower voter turnout.

Therefore, not as a matter of opinion but as matter of empirical research, looking at democracies all around the world, we know that there is a significantly higher voter turnout when people realize their votes count. The effectiveness of a vote is not in question if voters are under mixed member proportional, single transferrable vote, or any one of a number of hybrids of those systems.

First past the post is the only voting system available to us, as well as ranked ballots, where a minority of the public can elect a majority of the seats. This is particularly dangerous in a Westminster parliamentary system, such as Canada's. It is actually more dangerous in Canada than in most Westminster parliamentary democracies, potentially more than any Westminster parliamentary democracy, as it allows extraordinary powers to be vested in the Office of the Prime Minister, more so than in the U.K. or Australia where their parliamentary caucus can replace the prime minister between elections. For some reason in Canada we have sort of aped the U.S. system of convention so that only members of the party can select the leader. As a result of this, in a majority parliament in Canada, a prime minister can fully control the executive and legislative branches and essentially become an elected dictator.

In a system like ours, it is essential that voting be fair and proportional.

• (1240)

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we initially proposed this in February. We went to the government and to the official opposition and we approached my friend from Saanich—Gulf Islands as well. We also talked a bit with the Bloc.

The hope today is that we can simply pass this motion. The motion may be unusual for an opposition day motion. It would be binding when passed. The motion requires the committee to be constituted. Ten days after the motion passes the committee would start to get to work.

It has been eight months since the election with this conversation about process. What Canadians really want, whether they are interested in the status quo or whether they are interested in proportional representation as we are as New Democrats, is to get to the heart of the issue.

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I completely respect why some of my Conservative colleagues want to vote against the motion. They have a particular fixation on the referendum piece and wanting that language in there. There had been initial comments from all sides of the House about the basic construction of the committee. As my colleague pointed out, it should not allow any one party alone to pass something so fundamental as the way we vote as Canadians. It is imperative for all Canadians looking at this and trying to figure out why this matters that we not have a committee process that will spit out some result greatly favouring one party. It has to greatly favour the voices of Canadians.

Of all the work being done, the research being done in Canada over voting systems and voting changes, could my colleague tell me how those studies have concluded on the need for what is called proportionality, that representation be connected to how Canadians actually cast their vote?

Ms. Elizabeth May: Mr. Speaker, there is a rich literature on this. The committee is lucky in that several citizen assemblies in British Columbia and Ontario have already been held. We can benefit from the work that has already been done by those bodies, but the academic literature is rich.

A study was done of 36 democratic countries. It was empirically established that those countries with voting systems that ensure that every vote counts, those systems that can be categorized as consensus-based voting as opposed to majoritarian oppositional voting, have a more civil discourse, have higher voter turnout, have stronger macroeconomic results, have stronger social justice, better social safety nets, better environmental protection, more women elected to parliaments, and more minorities elected to parliaments.

We do not have to rely on opinions or party positions. When we really start to study this we will find that a lot of the work has already been done and it is clear that those systems that are proportional are fairer and produce better results.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham (Laurentides—Labelle, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the member for Saanich—Gulf Islands commented that only some systems allow a majority that has a different percentage of the vote from votes cast. There is one flaw in that argument. It is generally true but there is one in the proportional set that does have that problem as well and that is a mixed member proportional. This has happened in a number of countries that have abandoned it after trying it.

If a party were to be split in two, then people would vote on the seat list and on the list list and that party could end up with a majority government with only 30% of the vote.

It is important to be careful of all of the different risks and all of the different benefits in every system and to be careful in how we study this. I am looking forward to the work of the committee. I wonder if my colleague could comment on the finer details of some of these problems.

• (1245)

Ms. Elizabeth May: Mr. Speaker, when I say I favour proportional representation systems I would exclude one, which is the one where there is no connection between an MP and a community. It is really important that people know who their MP is, and by that I would exclude the system that is used in Israel and Italy

where voters just vote for a party and not for a member of Parliament to represent them. I do not think that meets the basic criteria going forward.

With an open mind, I could be wrong on what I have studied for years, that first past the post majoritarian voting systems produce this perverse result that no other system can. However, if there is a perversion of proportionality that produces perverse results, I certainly would not want to go there.

We have a huge amount of work to do and I want to start soon but we have to be prepared.

I appreciate that my friend from Laurentides—Labelle has looked at a particular system. The Minister of Foreign Affairs has an interesting system on his website that he invented for proportional, preferential, and personal. It is important that we look at all systems and hybrid systems.

The Deputy Speaker: I'll just give a reminder to all hon. members that this is a topic of great interest to hon. members and many are wishing to get up during the five-minute period we usually have for questions and comments. I remind hon. members to keep their arguments as succinct as they can so that their colleagues can participate in that portion of the debate.

Resuming debate, the hon. member for Vancouver Kingsway.

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will be splitting my time with the hon. member for Montcalm.

I want to open my remarks by paying some due respect to a number of people and parties in the House. It is something that I think Canadians would like to see us do more of. My first kudos have to go to my hon. colleague, the member for Skeena—Bulkley Valley, who from the inception of his appointment as the New Democratic critic for democratic reform has been a voice of reason, fairness, and co-operation on a matter that transcends partisan values in this place, and more important, among Canadians.

We are dealing here with something that is fundamental to our democratic fabric, and that is our electoral system. This is the foundation of our democracy. While we may disagree on matters like tax policy, social policy, or health policy and take partisan positions on those issues, our electoral system is something that transcends that kind of partisanship.

The hon. member for Skeena—Bulkley Valley has been, I think, a model of the kind of parliamentarianism that Canadians both expect and appreciate, in carrying the message that we need to approach this not from a partisan point of view but in a way that serves Canadians from coast to coast.

I also want to give kudos to the Liberal government, my colleagues on the other side. The genesis of the motion today started from a position where, in striking the committee that would look at changing the fundamental nature of our electoral system, the government's proposition was to establish a committee that was patently, fundamentally, and clearly unfair. It was a committee that ironically reflected the very illegitimacy of the first past the post system that the government has identified as a flawed system.

Business of Supply

Quite ironically, the government has acknowledged, and I think properly so, that the first past the post system almost all the time produces results in legislatures that are vastly disproportionate to the actual will of the voters. In the last case, of course, as the government has admitted, they received 39% of the vote of Canadians and they were rewarded with about 54% of the votes in the House. The Liberals themselves have called that an illegitimate result, yet the government's first proposal to look at change was to establish a committee where the government had 60% of the seats on that committee, notwithstanding the fact that they only have 39%.

It was quite ironic that the government, in calling the present system an illegitimate and skewed system that needed to be changed, would then strike a committee process that would replicate the exact same flaws that were inherent in that system.

Where I give them credit is, due to the hard work of my hon. colleague from Skeena—Bulkley Valley who put forward a committee structure that corrected those flaws, the government has done something that I think is very commendable and worthy of praise, and that is they altered their position. I give the government full credit for that, because the proposal before the House now is to make the committee that will represent Canadians and look at this very foundational and profoundly important issue proportional, or roughly proportional, to the votes of Canadians in the last federal election. It also, more importantly, requires the support of more than just the governing party in order to get any recommendation to come before the House.

That is as it should be, because any change to the electoral system of Canada should either have broad, cross-party support in the House, or in lieu of that, it should have the broad support of the majority of Canadians.

What is never acceptable is for one party, particularly a party that received a minority of votes in an election, to change the electoral system on its own without the agreement or support of anybody else. I think Canadians, over the last few months, have reflected that message loudly and clearly, and I give credit to the government for listening to that and making the necessary change.

I can tell the House that is something I did not see in the last Parliament under the Conservative government, which instead brought in elections act changes that were not consulted with or agreed to by any other party or Canadians. I think in fact in many ways that created the context for the current situation.

• (1250)

Before I leave this, I want to just say that the other reason it is important for the government to agree to this important motion today is because it was the same position that the Liberals took prior to being elected as government. The Liberal caucus chair and member for Lac-Saint-Louis, when he was in opposition, said, “As members who are in touch with our constituents' values, we know that Canadians have a very keen sense of fair play...Canadians recognize that we should not change the rules of the game without the consensus of all parties involved”.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs under the Liberal government, when he was in opposition, said, “A solid democratic tradition in Canada requires the largest possible consensus for the law that sets

out election rules. This time it is a complete failure.” The minister said that when the previous government wanted to change the rules unilaterally.

The government House leader had said similar things. The parliamentary secretary to the government House leader, when he was in opposition, said the same thing. Senior leadership of the present government, when they were in opposition, said publicly that we cannot change the electoral system in this country without the broad support of a majority of parties or at least the broad support of Canadians.

The reason that this is important to set out is because Canadians should still note that the first instinct of the current government, when it set out this committee, was to try to establish a unilateral ability to change this system. It was only through the hard work of the Conservative Party, the Liberal Party, the Green Party, and the Bloc Québécois, when we rallied Canadians to the notion that it is unacceptable that the government changed. While I give the Liberals credit for the change, I also think it is important that Canadians know that the Liberals tried to establish a process that would have allowed them unilaterally to change the system, probably toward a system that favoured them.

I want to talk for a few moments about democratic reform itself. It has been commented by many people across the spectrum of this country that Canadian politics have been marked by a certain amount of cynicism about our Canadian voting structure. We have low turnouts, decreasing turnouts in federal elections over the last several decades. I will venture a guess as to why that is. It is because under the present first past the post system, most Canadians realize that their votes do not count, that their votes often do not matter. The reason is that the first past the post system very commonly produces false majorities.

We know that the current Liberal government was elected by only 39% of Canadians. Sixty-one per cent of Canadians did not vote for it. The majority of Canadians did not vote for the Liberals, yet the government has been awarded with 54% to 55% of the seats and a majority government. That is not a partisan attack on the Liberals, because the exact same thing happened to the Conservative government in the last Parliament: 39% of the vote, 55% of the seats.

Democracy is supposed to be about government by the majority. We solve disputes in a democracy by taking a vote, and the majority wins. When we have perversely an electoral system where the majority of votes do not win and it is a minority of votes that determine policy, with 100% of the power going to a majority government with less than a majority of votes, that creates cynicism.

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Other problems with the first past the post system are that it minimizes or eliminates the motivation for co-operation and compromise in Parliament and discourages parties from working together; it encourages under-representation in Parliament, with fewer women, fewer minorities, and fewer disabled representatives. The first past the post system encourages and inflames strategic voting, which is toxic because it is the opposite of democracy. We should be encouraging people to vote for the party and candidate that they believe in, not the one they like less than the person they think is going to win. That is what strategic voting encourages. It is perverse in the system, where we have a system where people are encouraged to vote for someone they do not really believe in but they do it to avoid a bigger evil. First past the post was invented before the lightbulb, before women could vote, before minorities could vote, and before first nations could vote. It is an outdated, outmoded, and deeply flawed system.

I am going to advocate, as I have for the last 30 years, in this House and to Canadians as we move forward that we develop a system based on three principles: one, that every vote should count; two, that the parties' representation in Parliament should reflect the actual votes they get; and, three, where Canadians do not give any party a majority support, that parties should have to work together to produce policies that enjoy broad majority agreement in this country. That is proportional representation, specifically a mixed-member system where Canadians will elect a representative directly accountable to them as they do now, plus enjoy the benefit of proportionality.

•(1255)

Mr. David de Burgh Graham (Laurentides—Labelle, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have a quick question for the member for Vancouver Kingsway. The NDP has held power in many provinces in the country always under a majority ranked system. While it has been a platform plank of the NDP for as long as I can remember to influence proportional, in the six or seven provinces where they had majorities, they have not attempted to implement the system. I am wondering if the member could address why that might have been.

Mr. Don Davies: Mr. Speaker, I think that is a fair question. It gets to the nub of the problem that the Liberal government faced and the real dilemma that faces governments. When governments do get elected under the first past the post system and they have a majority, they tend to be discouraged from changing that system that they have just benefited from. I think that is a fair comment that has been the fair criticism of every party in this country that has achieved majority government through this flawed system and then failed to act to correct that primarily out of self-interest.

Again, I applaud the government for moving forward with looking at electoral reform, but it causes me to reflect on how important it is that we get the right system. If the Liberal government pursues what many Canadians think it wants to pursue, which is a ranked ballot system that is designed to favour a centrist Liberal Party, then that will feed into even increased cynicism in this country because citizens do not want to see parties favouring systems that favour the particular party. They want to see a real electoral reform based on principle that makes our electoral system better for voters, not—

The Deputy Speaker: Questions and comments, the hon. member for Chilliwack—Hope.

Mr. Mark Strahl (Chilliwack—Hope, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened with interest to the member's speech. Canadians and all members of the House will note that he is sincere in the system that he prefers to see come forward out of this process, but I would argue that the process matters less than the fact that with this process, even this new process that the NDP is proposing, Canadians still do not have a direct say in the outcome.

That is the fundamental difference we are seeing in the Conservative position. Perhaps the member will get his way on this committee. There is an additional vote for the NDP, an additional vote for the Greens, and an additional vote for the Bloc. There is not a vote for Canadians in a referendum, so he might win the day on the committee. The Liberals might win the day with their preferred system. He might win it with his.

Why will he not agree that no matter which recommendation the system produces, the only vote that really matters at the end of the day is the one given to all Canadians through a referendum? Why will he not allow Canadians to authorize this change through a referendum?

•(1300)

Mr. Don Davies: Mr. Speaker, the very first thing that comes to my mind as someone who has sat in previous Parliaments with the hon. member is to turn around the question and ask him this. Why did the Conservative government make profound foundational changes to our Elections Act that affected the enfranchisement of people, changed the qualifications of people to vote, changed whether or not there be educational systems of our young people in schools, took away public financing of voting, and made profound changes to our electoral system without putting those questions to the vote of the Canadian people?

The Conservative government did not see fit to consult a single Canadian about those changes to the Elections Act or obtain the consent of any other party in the House. When the Conservatives wanted to make changes that they thought were important in the electoral system, there was no consultation required. It is a little rich listening to the Conservative Party talk about consultation after being in a government that probably was the least consultative of any government in the 20th century.

Briefly speaking, I believe the member is right in the sense that we must get broad consensus among Canadians and political parties about changes to our system. If that is done through this chamber, through multi-party support, that is fine. If it is not done that way, I certainly think that consulting Canadians through a referendum is indeed a possibility that our party has not foreclosed.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Thériault (Montcalm, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for Vancouver Kingsway for sharing his time with me.

Business of Supply

First of all, I cannot ignore the remarks made by the member for Sarnia—Lambton, which, in the context of this morning's fully transpartisan debate, were disgraceful to say the least.

Let me remind the hon. member of two things. First, to the millions of Quebecers who voted for Bloc Québécois representatives in the House of Commons, Quebec is one of the founding nations alongside the indigenous peoples. The 1982 Constitution may have sought to obliterate our status as a nation and reduce it to one ethnic group among many, but we do not have to be treated as such.

One of the fundamental principles that all parliamentarians in the House must uphold is the principle of being democratic. When you are democratic, you are committed to pursuing the democratic ideal of a government of the people, for the people. In that sense, I represent the voices of constituents who pay taxes to the Canadian government and are entitled to make their voices heard in this assembly.

Only totalitarian and fascist regimes exclude parliamentarians or political parties based on their allegiance. We are not members of a religion and we do not adhere to dogmas. We are democrats.

That being said, the road to hell is paved with good intentions. We will keep that in mind as we begin the long journey that we are going to take together. I am not saying this to brag. I simply want to let my colleagues know that from 2003 to 2007, I was the official opposition critic on the reform of democratic institutions in Quebec. I was therefore able to witness first-hand Quebec's experience in this regard.

I spent an entire year making official and unofficial visits to all of the regions of Quebec. I listened to Quebecers who wanted to improve the democratic workings of government and those who also wanted to improve the voting procedure. They wanted to restore the public's confidence in the system and make sure that every vote counted so that Quebec's parliament would be more pluralistic.

For four years, I was either in front of the cameras or working really hard on modelling different systems. I would therefore like to tell all of my colleagues that all of the existing models have their advantages and disadvantages and that there will be distortion with each one of them. That is why it is not up to us to decide. It is up to Canadians.

When it comes to changing the rules of democracy in a transpartisan atmosphere, I know from my experience in Quebec how important it is to call people's attention to the issue and ask them to follow the debate and get involved, because it is up to them to make the decision.

● (1305)

The only way to increase citizen participation in elections is to make them feel that they are part of the process of adopting new rules. That is why we must make a commitment right now to avoid polluting the debate with partisanship because it will not be long before it comes back at some point. We must keep track of days like today. However, there will be disagreement. There is no problem with having disagreement if the goal is to find a point of convergence. However, if our point of convergence is wanting every vote to count in an election, how can we, from the outset,

oppose the idea of having the vote of each constituent count in determining the new election rules?

I also saw a government that said, in front of the cameras as the time, that it wanted a reform, but its leader was the only one committed to doing so, as the caucus did not follow. Ultimately, when you do not want a referendum and you do not want the people to decide, it will come from on high from a majority government elected by a distortion that some claim is not legitimate, as the government or the Prime Minister himself said here, and as the premier also said in Quebec. The result is that when the caucus is not on the same page, you end up with what I have just heard: a disconnect between the members elected by the people and list members and other members. We can have all those debates, but if this is not sorted out right away, there is a risk. If we held a quick secret vote on the other side of the House, then we would know how many of the Liberal Party members debated this issue during the election, how many have actually talked about it, how many feel committed, and, if they do feel committed, which model they chose.

Today, some of my colleagues, and this is fine, make me think of my daughter when she got a huge gift box she wanted so badly. She assumed the wonderful gift she wanted was in that big, beautiful box. It all came crashing down when she unwrapped it and discovered that there was so much wrapping and there were so many instructions that she needed a lot of advice and especially her dad's help to finally be able to enjoy the gift a few hours later.

The thing is, there is a committee. It is just an advisory committee. What will the government do afterward?

That is why I would like to move the following subamendment: "That the amendment be amended by adding after the words "in that regard" in paragraph 5(c) the following: "including a referendum on proposed voting systems.""

● (1310)

The Deputy Speaker: The subamendment is in order. However, I must inform hon. members that a subamendment to an opposition motion cannot be moved without the consent of the sponsor. If the sponsor is not present, the House leader, deputy House leader, whip, or deputy whip of the sponsor's party may give or deny consent on the sponsor's behalf.

[*English*]

Since the sponsor is not present in the chamber, I ask the hon. member for New Westminster—Burnaby if he consents to the subamendment being moved.

Mr. Peter Julian (New Westminster—Burnaby, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I wish my hon. colleague had actually given some notice around this.

As he knows, as a member of the House now for six months, he needs to at least send copies of those amendments around. So no, there is no consent, and there was no notice.

[*Translation*]

The Deputy Speaker: There is no consent. Therefore, pursuant to Standing Order 85, the subamendment cannot be moved at this time.

Questions and comments. The hon. member for Laurentides—Labelle.

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Mr. David de Burgh Graham (Laurentides—Labelle, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I commend the hon. member for Montcalm on his speech. His riding neighbours mine.

I want to come back to the issue of rural regions. We both represent large rural ridings. When it comes to electoral reform, I am always worried that electoral boundaries will be made between urban and rural regions.

Could my colleague from Montcalm say a few words about that?

Mr. Luc Thériault: Mr. Speaker, I did not hear the question. Could the hon. member repeat it?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Mr. Speaker, thank you for giving me a second chance.

I would like to know what my colleague thinks about the importance of preventing conflicts between rural and urban regions when it comes to electoral reform. I am still concerned that such problems will emerge.

Mr. Luc Thériault: Mr. Speaker, in Quebec, when it came time to propose a model, people suggested duplicating the federal ridings. For example, they proposed electing 75 riding members and 50 members chosen from a list. People thought that this was entirely legitimate and everyone would be pleased.

However, the work of a member who represents a rural region is quite different from that of a member who represents an urban area. In an urban setting it is easy to just cross the street and catch a bus and even cross three or four counties on one bus ride. However, the same cannot be said about getting from l'île d'Orléans to the other side of the riding. People living in rural areas were opposed to the idea because they absolutely wanted to be close to their member.

I am not sure if that answers my colleague's question, but that is the argument that is made in Quebec.

• (1315)

Mr. Gérard Deltell (Louis-Saint-Laurent, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my colleague's speech was very good, even though I did not agree with everything that he said.

We have two things in common: we were both members of the Quebec National Assembly and we are both in favour of a referendum. However, that is where the similarities end.

Earlier, the member referred to, and I quote: "the millions of Quebeckers who voted for Bloc Québécois representatives". I too sometimes exaggerate a bit. Here are the real numbers. In the last election, 821,144 people voted for the Bloc Québécois, while 5.6 million voted for our party. We got seven times more votes than the Bloc Québécois. However, the official opposition has just two members more than the Bloc on the committee.

Does the member believe that the composition of the committee, as it stands in the NDP motion, really represents the opinion of the House of Commons and Canadians?

Mr. Luc Thériault: Mr. Speaker, the members who spoke earlier mentioned the debate that took place back in the day as to whether the Bloc Québécois had the right to sit in the House. I was therefore saying that millions of Quebeckers have voted for the Bloc Québécois over the past 25 years.

I would also like to point out to my colleagues that, at one time, the Bloc Québécois was the official opposition. However, like other political parties, in the last election, we were the victims of the overdetermination of Quebeckers, who thought it was too dangerous to elect another Conservative government.

That is why they voted for a party that would get the Conservative government out of the picture. In fact, that is one of the good things about this voting system: people can vote out a government, in rotation, every four or eight years.

Mr. Louis Plamondon (Bécancour—Nicolet—Saurel, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I want to congratulate my colleague on his speech. I was just at the farmers' protest, and of course we stand in solidarity with them. We support their demands.

My colleague from the Quebec City region was talking about our legitimacy. With this kind of reform, all parties should be asked to participate. The Bloc Québécois has experience; we have been the official opposition and the third party in the past. Moreover, some of our members sat as independents at one point. Also, our party has proposed a number of changes and reforms that received unanimous support in the House.

I think our experience would prove very useful to the committee.

Mr. Luc Thériault: Mr. Speaker, my colleague's question allows me to continue my response to the member for Louis-Saint-Laurent.

Following his logic, members who belong to a political party that finds itself in the minority in the House should not have the same rights, as parliamentarians and legislators, as the other legislators who belong to larger caucuses.

I do not know what logic he is basing this on, but when I arrived at both the Quebec and Canadian houses of Parliament, nowhere was it written in my job description that party lines rule over everything else. That is not written anywhere. We are all legislators. We all have the same right to vote, and we would like to see people exercise their legislative authority outside the executive branch more often. This government logic underlies my colleague's comments. I suggest he become a democrat.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham (Laurentides—Labelle, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I will share my time with the member for Burlington.

As the 150th anniversary of the true north, strong and free approaches, it is important to emphasize our unfailing commitment to democracy. Since 1867, we have seen dictatorships and authoritarian regimes rise and fall, and we have seen major democratic events such as the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Arab Spring. Since then, Canada has been a ray of hope and a democratic force on the world stage.

This opportunity to reflect on the road we have travelled is also an occasion to think about what the next 150 years will be like in Canada. Like many of us here today, I am a parent, and I strive to be a model for young Canadians. I think it is safe to say that we all want to make our country a better place for those we love and those who will survive us.

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To prepare for the next 150 years, we have to create an electoral system that better reflects the choices of Canadians. The motion before us today, which calls for the establishment of an all-party committee, is the first step in engaging Canadians in a dialogue. Establishing that dialogue should be one of this committee's priorities, and I urge its members to broaden their efforts to reach people who do not vote, have not yet voted, or are not yet eligible to vote, particularly young people across Canada.

According to "The Millennial Dialogue Report", published in 2015 by AudienceNet, 29% of Canadians aged 15 to 34 think that very few, if any, politicians encourage people of their age to get involved in politics. That figure is not encouraging. It is therefore not surprising that the electoral participation rate is much lower in that group than in other age groups.

The all-party committee can help change things by giving future leaders an opportunity to participate in electoral reform, whether they are currently eligible to vote or not. To ensure the integrity of electoral reform, the views of current and future voters must be taken into account. Traditionally, election campaigns focus on vote-rich constituencies. As a general rule, those constituencies are not associated with young Canadians.

It is considered simpler to engage in a dialogue with a person who has voted for many years than to start a new conversation with Canadians who have never voted. However, such an attitude will not help stem the decline in electoral participation, which is mainly attributable to the low participation rate of younger people and a participation rate that is decreasing as young people get older.

The 2015 election showed that electoral value is a matter of mobilization and not demographics, but we still have work to do. According to the same AudienceNet report, the two main deterrents to electoral participation are knowledge of politics and trust in politicians. These deterrents are our responsibility, because they are directly related to getting out the vote.

A committee composed of representatives of all the parties working to gather the opinions of stakeholders and citizens would help us establish a more inclusive electoral system. Apart from the committee's efforts, this is an occasion to cement a dialogue with young people, our sons, daughters, nieces, nephews and grandchildren, the future of our democracy.

We will be returning soon to our ridings for the summer break, to spend time with family and friends. This affords an excellent opportunity to establish a dialogue with Canadians. Every handshake, tweet or video will be an occasion to address Canadians' lack of confidence in politicians. The more ties we establish with them, the more likely it is that young Canadians will be interested in participating in the electoral process.

It will not be easy. The level of political apathy among youth is high. According to an Elections Canada report on electoral participation, nearly 38.8% of those aged 18 to 24 voted in 2011. For electors aged 25 to 34, the participation rate was just 45.1%. That being said, important accomplishments are never easy. We all know what it's like to be young and to have to follow someone else's rules.

● (1320)

Sometimes we understood and respected those rules, and sometimes we followed them because that was the way things were. When people are not asked for their opinion, apathy grows and a sense of powerlessness takes hold in those who believe that their views are neither heard nor taken into account.

In a healthy democracy, the rules governing voting are of the greatest importance. However, the first past the post system now in place gives many electors the impression that their opinion and their vote are not being taken into consideration.

Things are that way because the first past the post system is the system that is most likely to waste votes. A wasted vote is often defined as a vote that did not go to the elected candidate. According to this definition and in the context of our current system, it often happens that the number of wasted votes is higher than the number of votes received by the winning candidate. People then wonder why they should bother voting, if their vote will not be going to the elected candidate. Such comments are hard to hear, I grant you, but it is not uncommon to hear them.

However, others may wonder why we are trying to fix something that is not broken. An EKOS poll from April shows that Canadians' current level of trust in their government is the highest it has been in 17 years.

I admit that the current system helped build our country and was simple and stable enough to serve our interests as we matured, expanded, and adopted the deeply ingrained values of inclusion, tolerance, and mutual respect. However, we can always do better. In fact, I would say that now is the best time to try to improve our democracy, when trust and engagement are high.

A democratic change should not happen only during times of scandal or crisis. I would rather address the decades of low voter turnout among young people before the situation becomes critical.

Clearly, our system needs to be changed. We need a system that reflects Canada today and in the future. Our country has evolved rapidly since Confederation, and we owe it to Canadians to ensure that the rules governing our democracy evolve at the same pace.

Seeking the opinions of young people today is investing in Canada's future and in the creation of citizens who will participate in the electoral process throughout their lives. The current opposition motion will make it possible to do just that. Consequently, I support the opposition motion with one amendment, and I look forward to seeing the committee get started.

Before I conclude, I want to say a little more about the options before us. There are many. I have a preference. I have worked on referendum campaigns, and I have opinions. Many colleagues in this caucus have opinions different from mine, and I am really eager to discuss them. There are systems like the one we have, proportional systems and preferential systems. Within each system there are several subsystems. The one I prefer is known as the Condorcet method, which is unfamiliar to most people.

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I am eager to see the study take shape and examine all the various options before us, in every way and without any collective prejudice. I am very eager to have that debate.

• (1325)

Mr. Robert Aubin (Trois-Rivières, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague from Laurentides—Labelle for his statements.

I admit that I was taken aback at one point, but perhaps I misunderstood. I would like an explanation.

He defined a wasted vote, which is often what many voters feel like in the current electoral system, as a vote that did not go to the elected candidate. It seems to me that a wasted vote is a vote that is not represented in the House of Commons.

Having lost many elections in my life as a voter, my consolation, if it was one, or my disappointment, if it was one, was seeing not only that the candidate that I wanted elected in my riding had lost, but also that my vote was lost by not being represented in the House.

Could my colleague provide a better definition of what he considers a wasted vote?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Mr. Speaker, I was actually not talking about my impressions but about those of young Canadians who do not participate in the system and find no reason to do so, because their vote does not count in the outcome that they want necessarily.

For me, the only wasted vote is the vote that is not cast. If someone does not vote, that is a real waste. In my view, participation is what matters most. The way we count votes and determine representation needs to be studied, and it is not our job to decide that in this debate. That will be the committee's job.

• (1330)

[*English*]

Mr. Mark Strahl (Chilliwack—Hope, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I too want to address the issue of a wasted vote.

I do not think we want to give the impression that any vote is wasted. Any time someone takes the time to exercise their franchise, their vote is counted. They may not win, but I do not think we should leave the impression or allow to stand that the hard-won right to vote that our veterans and the generations before have secured for this generation, for Canadians now, is ever wasted.

We might not always get our way, but we always get our say. That is the crux of the debate from the point of the view of the official opposition.

The member said that when people's opinions are not sought out, apathy grows. What better way to seek out the opinions of the people than through a national referendum. We might come to a mixed member proportional representation plan after this committee. We might come to the Liberals' preferred preferential ballot. We might come to a hybrid plan. We might have any sort of options, any combination.

However, unless the people are given the right to make the final decision, apathy will grow, and this will be illegitimate. Why will the Liberals not support a referendum at the end of the day, to give credence, to give a power, to this process?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Mr. Speaker, the word "process" is the key word here.

We are not at that point in the process. The point in the process right now is to study all of our options, to study every option. It is not only about voting. It is also about whether we bring in mandatory voting. I am hoping that we look at election financing reform, and that is my personal opinion. There are lots of different sides to this.

To say what we are going to do at the end of it when we are not at the beginning of it is a bit premature. I would like to study this properly and thoroughly and decide at that point the best course forward. That is what I am looking forward to.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Julie Dabrusin (Toronto—Danforth, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, my colleague talked a lot about wasted votes. How does he think the motion we are debating today will help resolve these questions of consultations or even engage people whose vote is not represented here? How will that help us avoid wasted votes?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Mr. Speaker, if we want to avoid wasted votes, we have to get people genuinely involved. The consultations called for in this motion are very important. We need to be on the ground involving people who do not usually get directly involved in politics. We have to go see them and find out what they think. They have to feel included in the process. That will make a big difference and will help make people in this country feel less apathetic. I am excited to see how this plays out.

[*English*]

Ms. Karina Gould (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise today to participate in this important and historic debate on the establishment of a special all-party committee on electoral reform. This is an issue that affects all Canadians, and I am glad to see such strong principles proposed in the amended motion to guide this committee's study.

I wish to spend my time today discussing some of the changes to our electoral system that have been introduced over the past century; changes that at the time were seen as rather dramatic alterations to our system. Many of these reforms, however, are now looked back upon by Canadians as moments of true progress in the history of our great democracy.

The electoral system we have today is the product of almost 150 years of evolution. The election we saw in October was quite different from elections upon Confederation, when only a fraction of Canadians, namely land-owning men, had a say in our democratic institution. Our government's pledge to replace the first past the post system is just another step in this historical evolution to a more inclusive, efficient, and stronger electoral system for all Canadians.

Allow me to begin in 1920, over a half century after Confederation.

After 50 years of elections in this country, Parliament established the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer. It was not until 1927 that the Chief Electoral Officer was appointed by the House and not the government. These were seen as quite major changes at the time, but they are ones we can all look back on, knowing they have helped lead to nearly a century of trusted and independent electoral administration in this country.

It was not until 1964, nearly a full century after Confederation, that Parliament introduced independent electoral district boundary commissions to draw riding boundaries, bringing an end to gerrymandering. Prior to this, the government could simply decide who got to vote where, with little recourse for individuals, communities, or opposition parties. This is another instance of what was once proclaimed to be a fundamental change to our electoral system. In hindsight, we see that this reform has helped build trust among Canadians that our electoral system has integrity, that it is fair, and that all communities have a voice.

In our ever-evolving system, parties only began registering with Elections Canada in 1970, and they only became subject to election spending limits in 1974. After a century of elections, Parliament significantly altered our politics by removing the role of big money in our elections. I truly believe our democracy is stronger because of that, but once again, it was an area of contentious debate at the time. Today, the idea of unlimited spending in an election would be quickly dismissed by Canadians as a barrier to the level playing field we hold dear for free and fair elections. We are proud that our elections are based on ideas and debate, and not simply dollars.

I have spoken briefly of some reforms to the electoral system itself, but I would like to turn now to the increasing franchise over the years; a clear example of how far our electoral system has progressed since Confederation. Allow me to return back to the 1920s, when elections in this country were decentralized and run under a hodgepodge of provincial statutes.

In the 1920s, the federal legislation deferred to the provinces in allowing disqualifications on the right to vote for “reasons of race”. This provision worked to disqualify many Canadians, including those of Chinese, Japanese, and Ukrainian descent, among others. However, it was not until 1948 that Parliament deleted references to disqualification on the basis of race. It was not until 1950 that Parliament allowed the Inuit the right to vote, and it was not until 1960 that Parliament allowed first nation people the right to vote without forcing them to give up their status or home on a reserve.

Expanding the franchise was divisive at the time. Today, however, we look back and simply wonder what took Parliament so long to recognize the rights of all Canadians in exercising their vote.

Women were not able to vote until legislative changes were enacted in 1918. Those individuals living in poor houses or the homeless were not able to vote until 1929. War objectors were not able to vote between 1938 and 1955. It was only in 1970 that the voting age was lowered to 18 from 21.

● (1335)

What I am trying to get at is that, when we reflect on these developments without the partisan frames in which they were originally debated, we see reforms that uphold and correspond to our

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values as Canadians; we see reforms that uphold the rights of all Canadians; and we see reforms that strengthen the bond between the people and the government and that instill trust that the government is formed by the true democratic will of all Canadians.

It is almost incomprehensible that we could ever exclude a full 50% of society from the franchise, that we could exclude indigenous peoples, ethnocultural minority groups, and those who dared to express different beliefs from those of the government of the day. While I am certainly not proud of the history of disenfranchisement in Canada's electoral history, I am truly proud of how far our democracy has evolved into a more inclusive system for all Canadians.

Electoral reform is the next step in this evolution toward a more inclusive system. We can build a better system that provides a stronger link between the democratic will of Canadians and the election results, one that motivates Canadians to take part, one that reflects our collective values of fairness, inclusiveness, gender equity, openness, and mutual respect. To get there, the process leading to reform must also embody these values. Parliamentarians will need to set aside partisan interests and engage in a thoughtful and substantive dialogue with each other and with citizens.

I strongly believe that stepping away from the first past the post system and embracing a new system that can reflect these values and the values articulated in this amended motion would be another milestone in the history of Canada's elections. I suspect future generations will look back at the reforms proposed in this motion and reflect on them, as I have done today with past reforms. I suspect they will note this is yet another example of how our electoral system has evolved to further increase the inclusion of all peoples, to better reflect the will of voters and the representation of the House, and to work toward a system that produces a House that looks more and more like the faces of Canadians.

I hope all members will join me and support the creation of this committee.

● (1340)

Mr. Mark Strahl (Chilliwack—Hope, CPC): Mr. Speaker, talking about adding people to the voting process, many Conservative governments had a key role to play in adding indigenous Canadians and women. That is a proud legacy that Conservatives have.

I have a question for the parliamentary secretary about something the previous member said when he spoke. He said that now is not the time to talk about the end result. The end result, if this motion is passed, is five months away, so I would say now is the time to be talking about the end result. All the official opposition is asking for is that, no matter what the end result is, Canadians will be given the right to authorize the change through a national referendum.

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We can have the discussion over the next number of months as to what a new system should look like, but why will the Liberals not agree with us in the Conservative Party that, no matter what comes out of this special committee, Canadians themselves should have the final say, through a national referendum?

Ms. Karina Gould: Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for his question, and I also welcome his remarks on the important history that all parties have had in the House about increasing the inclusion of Canadians into the democratic process.

I believe that right now we are taking the first step in beginning this conversation. This is a big conversation and a big dialogue that we as Canadians must have about how to continue to move our democracy forward. We will do it by engaging with Canadians, the committee doing extensive consultations, and members of Parliament conducting town halls. As we develop what kind of system we want to put forward to Canadians as to how to govern ourselves, we will think about the next steps after that.

I thank my hon. colleague very much for his question and welcome the contributions of all members of the House to this dialogue.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault (Sherbrooke, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for her speech.

I would like my colleague to tell us what the government plans to do when it receives the committee's recommendations. The committee will produce a report and recommend the voting system that, of all the options presented to the committee, may have garnered the most support.

Can she assure us that once the report has been presented and the committee has provided its recommendations on a new voting system, the government will accept whatever the committee has agreed on? Will the government accept those recommendations with no further debate?

Ms. Karina Gould: Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague from Sherbrooke for his comments and his question.

As we all know, the government and the House receive all recommendations from all parliamentary committees, and those recommendations factor into the deliberations.

[*English*]

This is to bring forward legislation and bring forward ideas to the House. I believe, as the Minister of Democratic Institutions has said and most ministers in this government have said, committees play an important role in the legislative process and at the end of the day the decision will be made by the House. The committee has an important role to play in terms of gathering information and making recommendations, but those final decisions are made by all members here in the House of Commons.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I think today's debate will go down in history, as the motion really did strike a blow for democracy, where parties were prepared to put Canada first and partisan interests second. As we go forward, I want to ask the parliamentary secretary if she agrees that it would be a good thing to encourage every member of Parliament to use the

mechanism of our householder to share information with Canadians about why first past the post is a perverse voting system and to share with them a range of options and ask for their feedback in that way.

Ms. Karina Gould: Mr. Speaker, while I would not say that we should prejudice Canadians' reflections on different electoral systems, I think it is an absolutely terrific idea to use our householders and the tools we have at our disposal to share what different options are available to Canadians and to invite them to submit their feedback. At the end of the day, we want to hear from as many different people as possible.

Throughout the election campaign and over the past number of months, I have asked a number of people in my riding for their thoughts. I am indeed considering doing that exact thing, putting this information into my householder, inviting feedback, and using that to guide me in my own decision and my own thinking on this matter.

I thank the member very much for an excellent suggestion.

● (1345)

Mr. Daniel Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I wish to inform you that I intend to split my time with the member for Laurier—Sainte-Marie.

I am really pleased to rise to speak to this motion. As the member for Skeena—Bulkley Valley mentioned earlier today in the House, I had a hand in crafting the proposal. As a new member of Parliament, it was nice to see openness within my party and that member to working with a new MP on an interesting idea on how to move voting reform forward. Today, it is nice to see that same spirit is prevailing in this place.

I have been a long-time advocate for voting reform. It is one of the issues I have held dear through my entire participation in the political process, let us say, and involvement in politics. We have heard partisan illusions about what the government may or may not be intending for a voting reform idea, proposal or initiative. I do not think anyone on this side of the House is naive that this is the beginning of a process. There may yet be many things that go awry in that process. It is up to the government and cabinet to decide whether ultimately they will take the recommendations of this committee seriously, or whether they will do their own proposal. Therefore, I do not think anyone here is naive about where we are at.

This is a very positive first step, but it is just one step. However, it is really important because we need to take that first step if we are to get to any kind of meaningful voting reform. I feel, not just from a partisan perspective, it is important that the government not do this by itself. This is the second reason why I felt this kind of proposal was important. If we really believe in voting reform and if we honestly want to move that forward, whatever proposal comes forward and for it to be legitimate, it cannot be just one party pushing it through. This proposal is a way of building in, at least into the initial stages of that process, that idea that proposals can only move forward with the support of multiple parties instead of just one party.

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It is right and good in this case of electoral reform, which I think is different from just about any other issue. This is a place where people come to disagree, or people who already disagree come to work that out. In other places, what happens in Parliament and the differences we see manifest in Parliament, are things that are fought for, not in a chamber but on a battlefield. We do come here and we do disagree, but we do it according to certain rules and on certain terms. By doing that, we ensure we do in a way that does not put people's lives in jeopardy for the values they hold and we have an understanding we will work things out with words. It is not always pretty. It is not always nice. However, it is a far better system than the kinds of ways of resolving conflict in some other parts of the world.

When we talk about voting reform and how people actually get here in order to engage in, if we want to use a militaristic metaphor, that kind of battle or that kind of argument, then it is important people agree on how we get here. Those are the basic rules and it is those rules that ensure that kind of civility.

I personally believe that if members of a party make it part of their electoral platform that they have a particular system, a particular model in mind and they get overwhelming support during an election, they may go ahead with that, but not in a way that people in other parties are not prepared to sign on to. We need at least the support of some other parties.

This is a way of building that into the process to ensure that whatever comes out of this process, at least at that first stage, will be something that a number of members across party lines in this place have agreed on. That is really important because it speaks to the legitimacy of changes. No government should be able to unilaterally change the rules by which people get here and fix the next election.

• (1350)

In that sense, I agree with some of the arguments from other members in this place about the importance of not having a government unilaterally change the rules.

As I have said, I have been a long-time advocate of voting reform. I have also been an advocate of a particular system, although there are a lot of debates to be had about how that may manifest. I have been an advocate for a mixed member proportional system. It is really important that people in particular geographic locations of the country have direct representatives who represent those locations within Canada. It is also important that our parliaments not be composed of false majorities or give a false impression of where Canadians are at.

Recently we have seen governments get 100% of the power with only 39.5% of the vote. That does not work because it does not reflect where Canadians are at. The problem with the first past the post system is that it tends to generate those issues. That is also a problem with the alternative vote method. It does it in a slightly different way, but it still produces parliaments that do not reflect the division of opinion within Canadian society.

Part of the issue is a philosophical one about whether we are busy electing individual representatives for a particular place, and that is certainly part of it, and it is important. In elections, we could have a system that would allow us to elect parliaments better, so we are not

just electing individual members but electing a parliament. We want a parliament that represents the diversity of opinion within Canadian society.

This is one of the major virtues of a mixed member proportional system. It allows us to balance out the representation of a party within the chamber so Parliament reflects the division opinion within Canada. Then members are forced to engage meaningfully with members of other parties to try to come to some kind of not consensus at least decision. On some issues, there will be a majority composed of certain members and on other issues there may be a majority composed of other members. There is agreement between some on some things and between others on other things, and that would be fine. This would be a virtue.

I look forward to the day when Canadians can contemplate not just who their local representative will be, but also what their Parliament might look like. I can imagine the situation. Some people may feel strongly about a certain local candidate, but not that candidate's party. Some people may want to vote for an independent candidate, but also want to have a say in what party they want. It is perfectly consistent for Canadians to say that they like a local representative, but they are not big fans of his or her party so they will vote for the representative. However, now, because we have a mixed member proportional system, Canadians would get to vote for a party different than the local rep thereby helping to shape Parliament and making it more about how they think. Canadians do not always agree with one party so a mixed member proportional system gives them a chance to express what may be a division of opinion within themselves, at least with respect to where certain parties are at, and allow them to balance out their own vote in a certain way. I see that as a positive thing.

I came to political consciousness in Canada in the 1990s. It was a time when Canadian politics was seriously regionally divided. Quebec was largely represented by the Bloc Québécois. The Reform Party was really a western Canadian party with hardly any seats outside of western Canada. The Liberal Party was the party of Ontario. It had some seats outside of Ontario, but not many, and it used that to win consecutive majorities.

Having sat in a caucus for just over six months, I can say now how important it is to hear the different regional voices within caucus. A first past the post system or an alternative vote system would not guarantee that a party would get members from all parts of the country within its caucus. Having an element of proportionality allows for that. It would help to quell some of the divisive regional politics that Canada has sometimes seen by having those voices represented in each caucus. That is an important virtue of the mixed member proportional system.

• (1355)

I am really glad we are taking a positive first step toward having a process to get to a proposal that will have to be decided on either here or by some other method. We are not there yet. I look forward to discussing these ideas more during that process.

Mr. Nick Whalen (St. John's East, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the member for Elmwood—Transcona for his well-reasoned and thoughtful comments on this topic.

Statements by Members

Today, we are really speaking about the notion of the committee. However, I am interested in his thoughts on how the list would be determined with respect to a proportional system, whether he is in favour of open lists where citizens across the country decide the ordering of the lists or closed lists where the parties decide.

Also, with respect to this notion of the mixed member proportional system he envisions, would the votes for individual candidates also count toward proportionality or would it just be the party vote?

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Mr. Speaker, I will not prejudge the process by getting right into the substance of the debate. I do have some preferences on that, but I am also not a total expert on the details. That is part of what we have to hammer out.

First, the committee would have to decide that it wants to go to some form of mixed member proportional system. At the end of the day, it would be unfortunate if the list of MPs was just a creature of the leader's decision. It is important for internal party democracy that there be some method, whether through the party or Canadians directly having a say in who gets elected off what list. That is where my sympathies lie. This is one of the issues that merits further study. I look forward to having a committee that can do that and then make a decision, not unilaterally by government members but by members in collaboration.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif (Edmonton Manning, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it appears there is a lot of interest among the different parties in having a new electoral system. For the proportional system, there are about six to eight models out there. I would like to hear from the member which system the NDP would prefer to have, at least on the ground base, to know where we can start from here.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Mr. Speaker, as I said, for a long time the NDP, as a matter of policy, has preferred some form of mixed member proportional system. That is where I am at as well. However, the nitty-gritty details would have to be worked out. We do not have a full proposal, but, in principle, it is important to maintain the idea of having specific regions and ridings in the country that are represented by an individual, and then to use list MPs to balance out Parliament and make it more representative of the views of Canadians overall.

The Speaker: Order, please. The member will have two minutes left for questions and comments following question period.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

[*Translation*]

JACQUES PARIZEAU

Mr. Rhéal Fortin (Rivière-du-Nord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, a year ago yesterday, Jacques Parizeau, a great Quebecker, left us.

A true pillar of the Quiet Revolution, Jacques Parizeau was a pivotal architect of Quebeckers' collective and individual growth.

He was behind the major initiatives that shaped modern Quebec and our distinct economy. His greatest legacy remains his humanity.

Sure to have an illustrious career, whether in or outside politics, Jacques Parizeau chose to serve the common good and dedicate his

life to building a Quebec that was both just and prosperous. He forced and opened many doors for Quebeckers. He helped us become accustomed to success. He gave us confidence in ourselves and in the future. He dreamed big for Quebeckers. He dreamed of a country that reflected them, and he devoted his life to that dream.

We are proud to continue his work for a free and prosperous Quebec.

* * *

● (1400)

[*English*]

POVERTY

Mr. Wayne Long (Saint John—Rothesay, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to congratulate the Liberal Party for last week's adoption of policy resolution no. 5 to develop a poverty reduction strategy aimed at providing a minimum guaranteed income. Guaranteed minimum income is an idea which time has come. Every citizen, no matter who they are or what their employment status happens to be, receives a minimum income.

Dr. Rob Moir, associate dean of research at UNBSJ, has proposed that a prototype be implemented and studied in Saint John, where we have the highest rate of child poverty in the country. Saint John is the ideal place for this project. Dr. Moir, a professor of economics, has said that the numbers are large enough to be statistically valid, but small enough to be traceable. There are eight UNB Ph.D.s, across four disciplines, who have already committed to this project. I fully endorse this initiative of Dr. Moir's, and have risen today in the hope that my words will encourage others to do the same.

* * *

HEALTH

Ms. Dianne L. Watts (South Surrey—White Rock, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise in this House today to bring awareness to an issue that has caused more than 1,000 deaths in Canada. Opiate overdoses will kill 800 people in B.C. this year, if the death toll continues at its current rate. In the first four months, 256 people have been killed, and a public health emergency has been declared in B.C.

On Saturday, a 23-year-old from my community ended up on life support, and a 22-year-old from Kamloops lost his life. Last year, in Alberta, there were 274 deaths associated with fentanyl. It is 40 times stronger than heroin and 100 times stronger than morphine. Drug dealers are importing an inexpensive powdered fentanyl, mostly from Mexico and China, but it does not end there. A new drug on the street, W-18, and other W-series opiates, are 100 to 1,000 times more toxic than fentanyl.

As Dr. Virani, an Edmonton public health doctor, commented on a recent drug bust of four kilos of powder—

Statements by Members

The Speaker: Order, please. The hon. member for LaSalle—Émard—Verdun.

* * *

LASALLE—ÉMARD—VERDUN

Mr. David Lametti (LaSalle—Émard—Verdun, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is with pride that I rise today to honour the exceptional civic engagement of the residents of LaSalle—Émard—Verdun.

[*Translation*]

We have many examples of organizations that work for the well-being of the community, such as Club Richelieu, the Optimist Club, the Centre social d'aide aux immigrants, and the Centre des femmes de Verdun. The people of LaSalle—Émard—Verdun are engaged citizens, just like my many constituents present here today for our day on Parliament Hill.

Let me take this opportunity to highlight the outstanding contribution of Robert Thivierge, a fellow resident of LaSalle—Émard—Verdun who has devoted his life to socio-economic development. After a successful career at the Canadian International Development Agency, Mr. Thivierge continues to use his expertise to benefit society through the Canadian Executive Service Organization. That organization, CESO, has in fact presented this exemplary volunteer with an honorary award.

As we say at home, Robert, keep up the great work.

* * *

[*English*]

STEEL INDUSTRY

Mr. Scott Duvall (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, last week, the United Steelworkers in the city of Hamilton were forced to file a second motion in the Ontario Court of Appeal after the judge still refused to release the secret deal between U.S. Steel Canada and the federal government in 2011. Details of the secret deal are critical for all parties involved as negotiations with potential buyers move into a critical phase. Only U.S. Steel Canada and its parent company have access to that information. How does that make for a fair process?

The current government could easily resolve the issue by releasing the secret deal. However, since being elected, the government has refused to help the 20,000 vulnerable pensioners or the 1,600 workers whose jobs are at risk. The Liberals have said nothing, zero. I have asked the Prime Minister and other ministers numerous times to release the details of the secret deal. Their non-answers have insulted me, the pensioners, and the workers of U.S. Steel Canada.

The current government should be ashamed. Step up to the plate, release the secret deal, and show the leadership that people expect and deserve.

* * *

[*Translation*]

XAVIER DOLAN

Mr. Ramez Ayoub (Thérèse-De Blainville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, every year Canadian films are selected for the most prestigious international film festivals and events and win many awards. This

year is no exception. I rise today to recognize the tremendous success of director Xavier Dolan at this year's Cannes Film Festival for his latest film, *Juste la fin du monde*, or "It's Only the End of the World". Mr. Dolan won the Grand Prix in the official competition, as well as the Prize of the Ecumenical Jury.

His talent, sensitivity, and unique creativity have taken Mr. Dolan to impressive heights. He is part of a pool of Canadian audio-visual artists who have distinguished themselves and shine on the international stage. Canada's audio-visual industry helps promote our culture and is an important sector of our economy. Our government is proud to invest over \$70 million in that industry every year.

On behalf of the Government of Canada, congratulations, Mr. Dolan.

* * *

●(1405)

[*English*]

NIAGARA REGION PUBLIC HEALTH

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Niagara Falls, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Niagara Region Public Health was awarded a Canada's Choice Award as part of Infoway Canada's ImagineNation Ideas Challenge.

The task was to come up with ideas that would enhance access to health care services and improve the quality and efficiency of the Canadian health care system.

The Niagara Region Public Health created a mobile application called "M+B 2B", offering help and guidance to expectant mothers at every stage of their pregnancy. The app has been downloaded over 17,000 times across Canada, which is an impressive statistic.

On behalf of all Canadians in the House today, I congratulate the Niagara Region Public Health on their achievement in providing this new resource, making for a more positive pregnancy for mothers to be and a better outcome for Canada's preborn children.

* * *

STATUS OF WOMEN

Ms. Filomena Tassi (Hamilton West—Ancaster—Dundas, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Canadian women and girls have achieved significant progress in recent decades, and much remains to be achieved.

In our cultural mosaic, Canadian women lead diverse lives, in a great range of different experiences and circumstances. In this diversity, we must build platforms for women to realize their brilliance by ensuring pay equity, while also investing in child care, health care, housing, employment, training, and other areas that influence women's choices and opportunities.

Statements by Members

Organizations like the YWCA, in my home town of Hamilton, need long-term, sustainable investments, so that they can continue to offer women and girls reliable supports to help them seize and create opportunities to reach their full potential.

Building a better future for all Canadians starts with recognizing the potential of women and girls, and creating systems that enable them to flourish.

* * *

[Translation]

DAIRY INDUSTRY

Mr. Rémi Massé (Avignon—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am proud to see so many farmers gathered here today to stress the importance of supporting Canada's dairy industry and protecting supply management from those who wish to abolish it.

I would also like to acknowledge the presence of farmers from back home in the Gaspé, the Magdalen Islands, and the Lower St. Lawrence.

In the past few weeks, the Minister of Agriculture, his parliamentary secretary, and many members have had very productive discussions with many representatives from Canada's dairy industry who will be helping our government develop a sustainable strategy for the entire dairy industry.

This week, with some Conservative members calling for the supply management system to be abolished, we now understand why the previous government failed to take action.

The government is determined to find a solution for the dairy industry and I can assure hon. members that it will continue to defend supply management. Our government strongly supports our farmers. The dairy industry is vital to our economy.

* * *

[English]

PHYSICIAN-ASSISTED DYING

Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC): Mr. Speaker, over the past several months, the Liberal government has refused to amend Bill C-14 legislation in order to provide adequate conscience protection for medical professionals and health care institutions.

They also voted against our opposition day motion that would have guaranteed these professionals their charter right freedom of conscience. Repeatedly we have heard the government indicate that we can count on provincial regulatory bodies to provide conscience protection. However, as we have seen, the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario and the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Saskatchewan have both indicated that there is an expectation on the part of their medical professionals to refer for the practice of physician-assisted suicide.

Enough is enough. Constituents in my riding have been crystal clear. This bill must include clear, ironclad conscience protections for health care professionals and institutions. I hope the Liberal government will listen to Canadians and do the right thing.

INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS

Mr. Don Rusnak (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today is the first anniversary of the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's final report.

I would like to acknowledge the incredible work of Senator Sinclair, Commissioner Wilson, and Commissioner Chief Littlechild for their work in advancing the cause of reconciliation in our country.

The report's calls to action provide all Canadians with a renewed path forward for Canada's unfinished journey of healing and reconciliation.

The government has committed to fully adopting the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and is moving forward with the missing and murdered indigenous women and girls inquiry. It is also making historic investments in education and infrastructure and is working in a full partnership with indigenous peoples to build a national framework to further ongoing reconciliation.

Reconciliation is the responsibility of every Canadian, and especially parliamentarians. I urge all members in the House to do their part.

* * *

● (1410)

PORTUGAL DAY

Mr. Peter Fonseca (Mississauga East—Cooksville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to announce that on June 7, the Canada-Portugal Parliamentary Friendship Group will be hosting the first celebration of Portugal Day ever to be held on Parliament Hill. It is a day celebrating both Portugal and the Portuguese communities worldwide on June 10. Now, it is recognized here in our nation's capital.

It is a special day of pride for me, both as a Portuguese immigrant who came over with my parents and my sister, and as a resident of Mississauga, a city to over 20,000 Portuguese Canadians, many of whom are my constituents in my riding of Mississauga East—Cooksville.

This day of Portugal honours the date of the death of the 16th century poet, Luís de Camões, who captured in words Portugal's age of discovery, when Portuguese explorers led the world in mapping the coasts of Africa, Asia, and Brazil.

I say to the House and to the Portuguese community across Canada, *Feliz dia de Portugal*.

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GEORGE HAROLD BAKER

Mr. Alupa Clarke (Beauport—Limoulu, CPC): Mr. Speaker, June 2, 2016 marks the 100th anniversary of Lieutenant-Colonel George Harold Baker. Lieutenant-Colonel Baker was elected as the MP for Brome in Quebec and is one of only two sitting MPs to have died during the Great War. Sadly, he was killed in action at the Battle of Mount Sorrel.

Here in Centre Block, a monument can be found that is dedicated to Lieutenant-Colonel Baker's personal sacrifice to Canada. Despite such commemoration, it seems that there is no official memory of this event in Ottawa. Indeed, there are no gatherings at the war memorial or of the militia units who carry the battle honour of Mount Sorrel.

[*Translation*]

We cannot find government sites or CBC reports that teachers could use to educate young people about this historic event. Nearly 8,500 Canadians were injured or killed during this battle.

Here in Ottawa, in a city where Canadians gather to debate the legislation that governs us, we must remember the sacrifices made by our ancestors, especially in major battles.

* * *

[*English*]

NATIONAL HEALTH AND FITNESS DAY

Ms. Pam Damoff (Oakville North—Burlington, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, on June 4, Canadians will celebrate National Health and Fitness Day. Over 240 cities and towns across Canada will mark the day with local events to encourage Canadians to be active and use our trails, parks, and recreation facilities. It is important for all Canadians to understand and appreciate the benefits of physical activity to our health, economy, and environment.

People can join me at a number of events in my riding of Oakville North—Burlington on Saturday, including a trail bike ride from Berton Park in Burlington, and an outdoor yoga class that I am hosting at River Oaks Community Centre in Oakville.

A big shout-out to the Burlington Sport Alliance for their efforts, and kicking off the day at Nelson Park in Burlington.

I encourage everyone to get active on Saturday, and every day, and help make Canada the fittest nation on earth.

* * *

ALS AWARENESS MONTH

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Mr. Speaker, June is ALS Awareness Month. The theme this year, “seize the 30 days”, is a reminder for all of us to seize every day and live our lives to their fullest potential.

The campaign also causes us to reflect on our fellow Canadians suffering from ALS, a condition that abruptly cuts life short, often in its prime. More than 3,000 Canadians and their families live with this disease, and at least three succumb to it every day. Few communities go untouched. This includes our very own parliamentary community.

When news arrived of the diagnosis of our dear friend, the member for Ottawa—Vanier, we joined together on all sides of the House to express our collective compassion and solidarity with him. His work in the chamber, service to our country, and courage and grace facing this illness are a model for us all.

This month, let us seize the moment. Let us commit to finding a cure for this deadly disease and ensure that all Canadians have access to high-quality palliative care in their final days.

Oral Questions

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

* * *

● (1415)

PHYSICIAN-ASSISTED DYING

Mr. Michael Cooper (St. Albert—Edmonton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, with one more sitting day after today before the stay on the declaration of constitutional invalidity expires, it is now clear that the government cannot meet the June 6 deadline to pass Bill C-14. The Minister of Justice has rightly warned of a legal vacuum absent the legislation, and yet the minister could do something to stop that legal vacuum from arising, namely by applying to the Supreme Court for a short-term extension of the stay to allow time for Parliament to pass legislation. However, the minister has done nothing. She has been all talk and no action. As a result, on June 7, there will be no certainty for patients, no certainty for physicians, and no protections for the vulnerable.

* * *

[*Translation*]

LA FESTA DELLA REPUBBLICA ITALIANA

Mr. Nicola Di Iorio (Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Leonardo da Vinci, Maria Montessori, Dante Alighieri, Giovanni Caboto, Sophia Loren, Michelangelo, Marconi, Giulio Cesare, Verdi, Cristoforo Colombo, Pavarotti, Caterina de Medici, and Federico Fellini are just some of the greats who have shaped history over the millennia, and they all share a common passion and country of origin: *Italia*.

Today, June 2, Italians throughout the world, including those in Canada, are celebrating the *Festa della Repubblica Italiana*.

I invite all my colleagues to mark this occasion by paying tribute to these unsung heroes, the Italian Canadians whose sacrifices have helped make Canada a better place.

[*Member spoke in Italian as follows:*]

Viva Italia!

ORAL QUESTIONS

[*English*]

DEMOCRATIC REFORM

Hon. Rona Ambrose (Leader of the Opposition, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today the Prime Minister actually said that he will not allow a referendum because it is often used to stop things. That is one of the most arrogant and elitist things that I have ever heard. The only thing that he is stopping is the right for Canadians to have a say in what their vote means.

Why does the Prime Minister have so little faith in Canadians?

Oral Questions

Hon. Maryam Monsef (Minister of Democratic Institutions, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, our approach today has been about working collaboratively with all parties in the House. Our approach today has been about moving the conversation around process to getting down to the work of hearing from Canadians what their needs and aspirations are for their electoral system. I thank the hon. members in the House for the healthy debate on this topic and look forward to getting down to the work.

Hon. Rona Ambrose (Leader of the Opposition, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I cannot believe the government's defence of this, that its process used to be a sham, but now it is less of a sham because the NDP is working with them. It would actually be funny if it were not so serious.

The voting system actually does not belong to the Liberals and it does not belong to the NDP; it belongs to Canadians. When we change what their vote means, Canadians get to say yes or no. Therefore, why are the NDP and the Liberals taking that right away from Canadians?

Hon. Maryam Monsef (Minister of Democratic Institutions, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, our approach from the very beginning has been to bring together a committee made up of all elected parliamentarians to act as a forum for the people of this country, to have their voices, their needs, and their hopes and aspirations known.

Today, we did something a bit different, according to the members opposite. We were elected on a promise to do politics differently. That means co-operating, that means recognizing that good ideas can come from all parties. I thank all members for their contributions to this healthy debate and look forward to hearing from Canadians.

Hon. Rona Ambrose (Leader of the Opposition, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this is not a decision for politicians to make; it is a decision for Canadians to make.

Instead, the Liberals and the NDP negotiate in secret, making deals in the backroom to actually take that decision away from Canadians. No matter who the committee talks to and no matter what report it writes, at the end of the day it is up to Canadians to say yes or no.

Why are the NDP and the Liberals taking that right away from Canadians?

• (1420)

Hon. Maryam Monsef (Minister of Democratic Institutions, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we are going to do three things. First, we are going to engage Canadians on their electoral reform. That is what the committee, on which we no longer have a majority, is going to do. Second, based on the committee's feedback and the input we receive from all Canadians, we are going to bring recommendations to this place. It will be up to all members to debate that. Third, we will not move forward on changes without the consent of Canadians.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes (Richmond—Arthabaska, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we already know that the government has shown no interest in really consulting Canadians and is refusing to hold a referendum. Now, today, it has the audacity to ally itself with the NDP.

What the government is trying to sell as co-operation is actually a secret agreement between two parties that do not care about what Canadians want.

The real question is this: will the Liberals try to change the rules of democracy to their advantage or are they trying out an agreement with the NDP rather than consulting Canadians directly through a referendum?

[*English*]

Hon. Maryam Monsef (Minister of Democratic Institutions, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is unfortunate that the Conservatives cannot move beyond their narrow political interests in protecting the status quo and allow Canadians to have a say in this process.

The concept of asking a committee to reach out to Canadians may be a strange one to the members opposite, but it makes most sense to Canadians and most of us on this side of the aisle—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Most members are able to listen to the question and the answer, even though they do not like what they hear, without reacting. That is the polite thing to do, so let us do that.

The hon. member for Richmond—Arthabaska.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Rayes (Richmond—Arthabaska, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are beginning to see through the Liberals' little game.

Canadians must be extremely worried about what they are seeing today. We have been saying from the start that it does not make any sense to change the voting system, the very basis of our democracy, through a committee. The fact that two parties have agreed to call the shots together does not make the situation any better. The only way to make an electoral reform legitimate is to seek Canadians' approval.

Will the Liberals finally agree to hold a referendum to ask Canadians directly, yes or no? Will they set partisanship aside?

[*English*]

Hon. Maryam Monsef (Minister of Democratic Institutions, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, unlike the member opposite, we have a great deal of respect for the work that committees have done and continue to do on behalf of Canadians. The special all-party committee is going to come together. The Bloc and the Green Party will have a vote. The government does not have a majority on the committee, but the opposition does.

* * *

[*Translation*]

DAIRY INDUSTRY

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet (Hochelaga, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the last time that dairy farmers came to protest on the Hill, the government told them not to worry, that it would take 30 days to hold discussions and find a solution. It has been more than 30 days, and we still have nothing.

Today, the farmers are back, and there are even more of them. For them, it is a matter of survival.

Oral Questions

Will the government finally listen to their pleas and fix the diafiltered milk problem once and for all?

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as a producer, I am proud to see so many farmers coming together today to honour of World Milk Day and to protect the supply management system that some want to abolish.

With respect to our commitment, we are still listening to the people in the industry. This morning, we met with the organizers of today's event. We will defend our supply management system, which provides stability to thousands of Canadian families. We fought to bring in supply management, and we will fight to defend Canadian families.

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet (Hochelaga, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we are hearing plenty of rhetoric and talking points, but what farmers want is action.

Dairy farmers are losing tens of thousands of dollars a week because the government continues to drag its feet. Our supply management system has helped our farmers prosper, but the many cracks are jeopardizing their future.

When the government gives in to free trade agreements, it promises compensation, but no one has seen any cash yet.

Why is the government treating our farmers with such contempt?

• (1425)

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, this is the government that set up supply management and this is the government that will defend it.

As promised, we are meeting with industry stakeholders across the country. Over the past few weeks, we have listened to them and had many very productive discussions that will help us develop a sustainable, long-term strategy for the entire sector.

[*English*]

Ms. Tracey Ramsey (Essex, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the fact is for decades, supply management has guaranteed reliable and safe poultry and milk, meaning stable livelihoods for hundreds of thousands of Canadians. But now Liberals are pushing ahead with a job-killing TPP trade deal with no sign of compensation for dairy producers who stand to lose big from this bad deal.

Canadian farmers are tired of the deafening silence from the government. Why are Liberals backing away from their commitment to Canadian farmers?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as I just said, we are aware of the industry's concerns about the use of diafiltered milk in cheese production.

The government and the industry are working together to come up with a sustainable, long-term solution for all Canadians. Our government fully supports supply management.

[*English*]

Ms. Tracey Ramsey (Essex, NDP): Mr. Speaker, that was the story 30 days ago and remains the same today with more farmers standing here on the Hill. I know the Liberal MPs were quick to shake hands with the dairy farmers on the lawn, but when it comes to rolling up their sleeves and taking action to defend dairy producers, Liberals are nowhere to be seen. Imported diafiltered milk undermines our supply-managed system and cost Canadian dairy producers more than \$220 million just last year. A fix is simple and quick. Why are the Liberals failing to enforce laws and protect Canadian dairy farmers?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, supply management is part of our values as a government.

Unlike the members of the official opposition, who are advocating to eliminate it, we will protect it. On this side of the House, our priority is to have a modern, prosperous industry that will continue to grow in this ever-changing global economy, and to ensure stability for our farm families.

* * *

[*English*]

DEMOCRATIC REFORM

Mr. Phil McColeman (Brantford—Brant, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is time for the Minister of Democratic Institutions to stop using persons with disabilities as tools to prop up her argument. Elections Canada is constantly working to make voting easier for persons with disabilities. She knows that work is ongoing and she knows that the work has absolutely nothing to do with changing the voting system.

Will the Minister of Democratic Institutions stop using persons with disabilities as a ploy for her increasingly weak arguments against holding a referendum?

Hon. Maryam Monsef (Minister of Democratic Institutions, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, days ago I met, along with the Minister of Sport and Persons with Disabilities, with the Elections Canada advisory group on persons with disabilities.

During this conversation, we were asked to bring their voices to this place. We were told that the very act of voting remains an obstacle course for many persons with disabilities. Our job in the House is not to just speak on behalf of those who have privilege and means. Our job is to ensure that the voices of the marginalized are included in this conversation.

Hon. Mike Lake (Edmonton—Wetaskiwin, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the minister's repeated use of people with disabilities as strategic pieces in her political game is not okay.

My son Jaden has autism and he cast his first vote in October. The Elections Canada folks were absolutely wonderful in helping him through that process.

Oral Questions

Having a referendum on which voting system to use will have absolutely no impact on Jaden's ability to vote. Will the minister please call a referendum and let all Canadians, including every Canadian with a disability, have their say on this important issue?

Hon. Maryam Monsef (Minister of Democratic Institutions, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am grateful that Jaden has had a positive experience in participating in the democratic process. That is the kind of full participation that we would like to see from all persons with disabilities and exceptionalities.

Our intent is to enhance the number of those who vote. Our intent is to enhance accessibility. Our intent is to be more inclusive in our approach to good governance, and we will deliver on that intent by continuing to listen to Canadians and by speaking on behalf of those who do not have as big a voice in this place.

• (1430)

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Democratic Institutions claims that she wants to have a conversation, but instead seems to be doing a really good job of dancing around the real question.

It is a question to which millions of Canadians are demanding an answer. It is also a question I have asked the minister several times in a very straightforward yes or no manner, and I have heard nothing but platitudes in return.

Let me try once again. Will the Liberals finally drop the platitudes and commit to a referendum, yes or no?

Hon. Maryam Monsef (Minister of Democratic Institutions, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today we did something that is a little different for the members opposite. We reached out across the aisle and worked collaboratively with the parties opposite to enhance the process.

We need to move this debate away from a debate on process and get to the substance of hearing from Canadians what their thoughts and ideas are for electoral reform. Only then can we begin to discover ways to determine how to engage their broad support on any changes we move forward.

Today was step one, and I look forward to working with all members of the House.

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Liberals claim they want to consult, but the whole point of consultation is to ask people their opinion, not to have backroom deals with other political parties.

What better way to get the opinion of every single Canadian than to ask them in a referendum? The Liberals are refusing to give Canadians a final say.

Why do they not commit to giving this important decision to all Canadians, not to political parties, through a referendum?

Hon. Maryam Monsef (Minister of Democratic Institutions, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, when the former government decided to bring forward the Fair Elections Act, did the Conservatives consult with parliamentarians? Did they consult with Canadians? Did they hold a referendum? Did they include the voice of the Chief Electoral Officer and include his feedback in the changes they brought forward? They did not.

We have learned from their mistakes. We will engage with Canadians.

We have empowered a special all-party committee to hear from Canadians what their views are before thoughtfully bringing forward a plan for the House for deliberation. We will do that in a respectful and inclusive manner.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): Mr. Speaker, if I understand the first part of the minister's response, she said the last government acted inexcusably and now it is her party's turn to do so.

The only protection Canadians have against the Liberal plan to rig the next election is the de facto veto afforded by a referendum.

The Prime Minister said today that he does not think his proposal could win the support of the Canadian people. Is that not the best reason for having a referendum?

Hon. Maryam Monsef (Minister of Democratic Institutions, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, after 10 years of undermining our democratic institutions, the party opposite was asked to stay in opposition.

Canadians provided us with a mandate for change. They asked us to do politics differently. They asked us to work collaboratively with other parties. They asked us to listen to their ideas before unilaterally making any changes.

Today we demonstrated that this is the way we will govern. This is good governance. We will continue to listen to Canadians and we look forward to bringing our electoral system into the 21st century.

The Speaker: We are hearing a lot of banter and response when ministers are answering questions. I think that colleagues ought to have confidence in the ability of their colleagues to offer arguments in response to an answer, or a question for that matter, without having to intervene when they do not have a mic on anyway.

Now the mic will be on for the hon. member for Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston. Let us listen to him.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): Mr. Speaker, on May 10, the minister defended the then structure of the proposed special committee on electoral reform by saying that after the committee had done its work, their team will then “present cabinet with a proposal”.

In other words, there is a committee on which the Green Party, the Bloc, and the NDP will sit, but when the actual decision gets made, when the actual proposal is designed, the actual legislation that will come before Canadians to change our electoral system, only Liberals will be in the room. It will happen in secret. Nobody will be present. We will have no way of finding out what is going on.

The Liberals maintain their monopoly. That is inexcusable. Why will the member not allow the Canadian citizenry to make the final choice in a referendum?

Hon. Maryam Monsef (Minister of Democratic Institutions, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, on October 19, Canadians made a choice. They mandated us to govern this country in an inclusive and responsible manner.

Oral Questions

On May 10, I put forward a motion to begin the work of hearing from Canadians what their thoughts are. We did so with the complete intent of hearing from all Canadians and all parties on ways to improve this process. The New Democratic Party provided valuable insight, as did all members of the House. We took that into consideration and we came to this place with a refined approach.

We look forward to working with all members of the House to continue to enhance this.

* * *

• (1435)

[*Translation*]

DAIRY INDUSTRY

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach (Salaberry—Suroît, NDP): Mr. Speaker, at noon today, hundreds of dairy producers from the Montréal region demonstrated on Parliament Hill to protest the Liberals' inaction.

The government promised to resolve the diafiltered milk problem before today, but that fake milk is still streaming across the border.

Our producers lost \$220 million last year alone because of this. Our regional economies and the next generation of farmers are in jeopardy. This situation is beyond urgent.

Why is the government dragging its feet and forcing dairy producers to struggle through more lean years instead of simply enforcing its own rules?

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as I just said, we are aware of the industry's concerns about the use of diafiltered milk. As promised, we are meeting with people from the industry across the country. Our government will protect supply management.

Ms. Karine Trudel (Jonquière, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am sick and tired of the same old lines, and if you do not mind, I am going to throw a little tantrum.

The Liberals are so frustrating. This problem should have been dealt with immediately. They promised that the diafiltered milk issue would be resolved by now. They are obviously not walking the talk.

The government has to stop saying that enforcing the law is complicated. Either the stuff is milk or it is an ingredient. Pick one.

In Saguenay—Lac-Saint-Jean alone, farmers are losing \$3 million in revenue.

Will the government keep its promise, or was that all just talk?

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as a farmer, I am proud that so many farmers took action today to mark World Milk Day and protect supply management. We are aware that the sector is going through tough times, and we are developing sustainable solutions for the long term.

[*English*]

MINISTERIAL EXPENSES

Mrs. Shannon Stubbs (Lakeland, CPC): Mr. Speaker, there is a bad pattern with the Liberals, like Liberal governments in the past, entitled to their entitlements. Now it is the Minister of Infrastructure. He spent nearly \$1 million on an office reno when many Albertans cannot make ends meet. They are losing their homes. They are choosing between wants and needs.

Infrastructure money is not getting to projects that provinces need, but the minister sure has a fancy new office with swanky furniture. Why was it more important for the minister to spend money on himself than to keep his promises and actually fund priorities?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Infrastructure and Communities, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, before November 4, 2015, Infrastructure Canada did not have a fully dedicated ministerial office. There was no office for the department's deputy minister either. Also, there was no office space for our employees.

This file is important to our government, which is why these positions were created. Accordingly, offices should be furnished for the minister, the deputy minister, and the employees. The department followed all the Treasury Board directives and that will always be the case.

* * *

[*English*]

INFRASTRUCTURE

Mr. Blaine Calkins (Red Deer—Lacombe, CPC): And now there is no money left over for infrastructure, Mr. Speaker.

Today the Quebec government pointed out the lack of infrastructure spending and the complicated process the Liberals have put in place. I guess Quebec did not get the memo that the only infrastructure money being spent is on posh Liberal cabinet ministers' offices. The infrastructure minister spent almost a half a million dollars on furniture to deck out sky palace 2.0, but there are empty offices and warehouses full of used furniture sitting collecting dust everywhere in the nation's capital.

Does the minister realize that he came to Ottawa to serve the taxpayers and not have the taxpayers serve him?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Infrastructure and Communities, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I will repeat what I said. The minister was extremely clear on this. The minister and the deputy minister needed to be provided with their own offices. Why? We are introducing the biggest infrastructure plan in the history of Canada: \$120 billion on infrastructure. We are investing in a greener Canada for our young people and our seniors. Together we are building the Canada of tomorrow.

*Oral Questions**[English]***FOREIGN AFFAIRS**

Hon. Peter Kent (Thornhill, CPC): Mr. Speaker, millions of Chinese citizens, victims of widespread and well-documented human rights abuse, must wonder about the Prime Minister's fresh start with their communist government. We recall of course the Prime Minister's professed admiration for China's basic dictatorship. Yesterday, the Chinese foreign minister angrily refused to answer any questions at all about China's lamentable human rights record.

Is it not time for the Liberals to rethink and recalibrate their priorities on the China file?

• (1440)

Ms. Pam Goldsmith-Jones (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we believe that engaging with China in a comprehensive way is the best option. Even when we do not see eye to eye with each other, we believe that dialogue is the most effective way forward. Having regular high-level interactions with China on a range of issues allows us to continue to have frank and honest conversations, and to make progress on difficult issues.

Canada consistently raises human rights concerns with the Chinese, as our foreign affairs minister did yesterday.

Hon. Peter Kent (Thornhill, CPC): Mr. Speaker, diplomatic news conferences are usually the stuff of deflected questions and high-level platitudes. However, yesterday, the Chinese foreign minister furiously dressed down a journalist who dared ask about human rights abuse and the imprisonment of Canadian Kevin Garratt for unsubstantiated charges of spying. The Minister of Foreign Affairs stood by quietly and said that he raised these same issues behind closed doors.

Can the minister tell us if the Chinese foreign minister was as angry, condescending, and disingenuous in his denials there, and how the minister responded?

Mr. Omar Alhabra (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs (Consular Affairs), Lib.): Mr. Speaker, on the one hand the opposition members do not want us to talk with China. On the other hand they are saying we are not talking enough with China.

This government will never abandon our Canadian citizens abroad. Unlike the previous government, we will always stand up for citizens abroad. Our officials and our minister have raised the Garratt case and will not stop until the Garratts return home safely.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, during a press conference yesterday a Canadian journalist was berated by the Chinese foreign minister for asking a question about human rights. While this was happening, the global affairs minister just stood by. Freedom of the press is an important value for Canadians, yet our minister stayed silent.

Will the government stand up for human rights and freedom of the press and join so many Canadians in criticizing the behaviour of the Chinese foreign minister?

Ms. Pam Goldsmith-Jones (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, yesterday was actually the inaugural meeting of the Canada-China foreign affairs

ministers' dialogue, which is an important new platform for expanding high-level engagement between our two countries. These discussions will focus on advancing mutual interests in our bilateral relationship, as well as global peace and security, and of course human rights. Asia is a critical region of the world. Canada is an Asia-Pacific country. This is an excellent beginning for discussing how to expand our strategic partnerships for the benefit of all Canadians.

[Translation]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, according to Human Rights Watch, Saudi Arabia is currently arming Yemeni forces. These forces, led by General Mohsen, are accused of violating human rights and recruiting child soldiers. We have no guarantee that Canada's armoured vehicles will not end up in the hands of this general, but the government continues to turn a blind eye.

Why are the Liberals rejecting our proposal to create a committee to study arms exports?

[English]

Ms. Pam Goldsmith-Jones (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, on the contrary, Canada has some of the strongest export controls for military and strategic goods in the world.

We committed to ensuring that Canada will become a party to the arms trade treaty, and that will be an important component of our increased rigour and transparency on export controls.

Furthermore, the government takes every opportunity to raise critical issues with senior Saudi officials with respect to humanitarian issues, consular issues, and human rights, as the minister did in his visit to the region last week.

* * *

PUBLIC SAFETY

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in 2010, the Conservative government of the time closed several prison farms throughout the country, without doing proper consultation into the usefulness and viability of providing essential skills for inmates.

In my riding of Kingston and the Islands two prison farms were closed in Collins Bay and Joyceville, without proper consultation of the public and to widespread concern from the public.

Oral Questions

My question is for the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness. Can the minister provide some input into whether or not the government will continue along the same path, or reverse that decision of the previous government?

• (1445)

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the short answer is yes.

We are launching a feasibility study on restoring prison farms in the Kingston area. This process will allow citizens, business leaders, and other stakeholders to share their visions for what the program could look like. It will allow the government to review the costs and efficacy of reinstatement.

An effective criminal justice system is built on evidence-based policies that promote public safety and the reintegration of offenders. I thank the member for Kingston and the Islands for contributing to that goal.

* * *

ETHICS

Mr. Mark Strahl (Chilliwack—Hope, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Ethics Commissioner has ruled that the new Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard cannot have any dealings with the Irving family.

However, Irving shipyards is a major supplier to the Canadian Coast Guard. Irving is undertaking major warranty work on several new Coast Guard patrol ships, a file that must be managed by the Coast Guard minister.

The Prime Minister has placed his new minister in an obvious and unavoidable conflict of interest. Will he realize the situation is unacceptable and appoint a new Minister of Fisheries and Oceans today?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Serge Cormier (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Canadians expect our government and its minister to be held to a high standard of ethics.

The minister already raised this issue with the deputy minister and the department. The commissioner's recommendations will be followed to the letter. In the meantime, the minister will fully comply with the rules already established by the commissioner. The minister has already contacted the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner for advice, and her recommendations will be followed to the letter.

[*English*]

Mr. Mark Strahl (Chilliwack—Hope, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we think the Coast Guard minister should be able to deal with Coast Guard files.

The Ethics Commissioner has said that the new Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard must not have direct dealings with the Irving family, their associates, or business interests.

James D. Irving is on the board of directors of the Atlantic Salmon Federation, which deals with declining salmon stocks in Atlantic Canada, another file that has to be managed by the fisheries minister.

Why did the Prime Minister appoint a Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard with so many clear conflicts, and when will he replace him?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Serge Cormier (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the minister took the initiative of informing the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner of his friendship with Mr. Irving and asking her for advice.

The commissioner recommended that the minister's staff use screening measures. The minister will recuse himself from any discussions or decisions involving Mr. Irving and his companies. The minister is following and will always follow the advice and recommendations of the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner.

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lévis—Lotbinière, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to a decision by the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner, the Leader of the Government in the House cannot have professional relations with the Irvings.

Since the Irving shipyard is one of the Coast Guard's largest suppliers, his appointment as Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard is very surprising.

Under the circumstances, how will the new minister be able to claim that he is able to do his job effectively when his hands are tied behind his back?

Mr. Serge Cormier (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as I said, our government and ministers will always demonstrate high ethical standards. The minister has already raised this issue with the commissioner, the deputy minister and our department.

The minister will always follow to the letter the recommendations made by the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner. That is what the minister pledged to do, and that is what he will do in the future.

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lévis—Lotbinière, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my government colleague can stand up and claim there is no problem, but that is just not the truth.

Anyone who thinks the minister can do his job properly when his personal ties prevent him from talking to the Irvings is dreaming. Not only do the Irvings own the shipyard, but a member of the family is on the board of the Atlantic Salmon Federation, another file that falls under the Minister of Fisheries' jurisdiction.

The Prime Minister must do what needs to be done and choose a different minister.

When will he do so?

Oral Questions

Mr. Serge Cormier (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, once again, as I said, the minister took the initiative to inform the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner of his friendship with Mr. Irving and seek guidance.

The commissioner recommended screening measures for the minister's office, and the minister will recuse himself from any discussion or decision involving Mr. Irving and his businesses.

Once again, the minister is adhering and will continue to adhere to the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner's recommendations. That is how we do it on this side of the House. We will continue to adhere to the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner's recommendations.

* * *

[English]

INFRASTRUCTURE

Ms. Linda Duncan (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, a clear priority for the FCM meeting this week is the challenge faced by Canadian municipalities in mitigating climate impact infrastructure.

Just this week the commissioner for the environment reprimanded the government for failing to ensure that federal infrastructure programs directed at mitigating environmental and climate impacts to cities actually deliver results. Equally troubling, she raised concerns with the dwindling gas tax revenues, a significant source of municipal roads, housing, and infrastructure.

What concrete measures is the government taking to ensure our cities are sustainable?

● (1450)

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, for a number of years the national disaster mitigation program and the mitigation aspects of the disaster financial assistance arrangements have not been fully utilized by previous governments. That is why in our campaign platform the Prime Minister included the specific undertaking that we would examine those very programs and determine how to improve the uptake. In addition to that, we have added \$20 billion in green infrastructure funding that can assist directly with those mitigation measures.

[Translation]

Mr. Matthew Dubé (Beloil—Chambly, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Liberals are incapable of making funding available for infrastructure projects in Quebec.

The Quebec minister responsible for Canadian relations is complaining that federal officials are constantly imposing new conditions for project approval, to the point where the Government of Quebec does not think it will get any federal funding before 2017. This is so problematic that the first ministers now must get involved.

Why is it taking so long for funds earmarked for infrastructure projects in Quebec to be approved?

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Infrastructure and Communities, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we are

working closely with our partners in Quebec to fund the infrastructure projects that Quebecers need.

Since we became government, we have already made six announcements with Quebec worth over \$36 million, and none of that money would have gone anywhere under the previous government, although it is moving quickly under our leadership.

Better yet, we have a few more announcements to make with Quebec over the next few weeks. We are working closely with our counterpart, the finance minister, Carlos Leitão, on new funding, and we hope to finalize an agreement very soon.

Consultation, partnership, and action are the way to get things done.

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VETERANS AFFAIRS

Mr. Alupa Clarke (Beauport—Limoilou, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Veterans Affairs recently supported the decision made by his colleague, the Minister of Justice, by agreeing that the government should take our veterans back to court in the Equitas case.

By supporting this legal action, the minister is clearly demonstrating that his political relationship with the Minister of Justice is more important than his sacred relationship with veterans.

The minister needs to take over this file, because it pertains to veterans. When is he going to reverse his decision and put an end to this disgraceful lawsuit?

[English]

Hon. Kent Hehr (Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as the member is aware, this lawsuit emerged under the former government.

We are delivering on behalf of veterans and their families. Just in this budget we delivered \$5.6 billion in financial security to veterans and their families. We will continue to address the mandate items to ensure veterans and their families have more opportunities to build their lives and find more success.

We are proud of what we are doing and we will continue to go down a forward-thinking path.

Mr. Alupa Clarke (Beauport—Limoilou, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are not talking about benefits, we are talking about a broken promise.

On Tuesday, the Conservatives submitted an amendment to the budget bill at finance committee. This amendment would have ensured that the Liberals' modification of the earnings loss benefit would not affect the most vulnerable veterans. This amendment was rejected by the Liberals and veterans around the country have been voicing their concern.

Why is the minister playing political games and putting veterans at risk instead of working with this official opposition?

Oral Questions

Hon. Kent Hehr (Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am proud to say that after a decade of veterans not being heard, we are listening and addressing their concerns.

In budget 2016 we addressed our promise to move the earnings loss benefit to 90% of a veteran's pre-release salary from a 75% level under the former government. Veterans have been asking for this change for a decade. We moved on it and we delivered on it, increasing financial security for those veterans who are most disabled and those veterans who have served our armed forces with great honour and great dignity. We are there for them.

* * *

[Translation]

NATIONAL DEFENCE

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, CPC): Mr. Speaker, first it was U.S. Army officers, now it is the commander of the Canadian special operations forces who is confirming that our troops are on the front lines near Mosul. Brigadier General Rouleau says that the troops spend 20% of their time on the front lines. The Prime Minister kept telling Canadians that this was just a training mission for Iraqi troops.

Can the minister confirm what percentage of our deployed soldiers are currently in combat on the front lines?

• (1455)

[English]

Hon. John McKay (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as members know, the Canadian Forces is among the best in the world for training and advising and assisting missions. Accordingly, it has been deployed by this Parliament and this government to do exactly that. That mission has not changed. Anything beyond saying that would be a matter of operational security. I am unable to comment further on that.

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INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, polio was a disease that ravished the world and was particularly devastating to children. The first vaccine was developed in the 1950s and many more countries have since been declared polio-free. However, Pakistan had 53 cases of polio in 2015, the highest for any country, and its persistence in Pakistan is the largest barrier to eradicating polio forever.

Could the Minister of International Development and La Francophonie please tell us what Canada is doing to help eradicate polio in Pakistan?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau (Minister of International Development and La Francophonie, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague from Scarborough Centre for her constant support of the Pakistani people.

The persistence of polio in Pakistan is the biggest obstacle to its eradication worldwide. However, recent evidence proved that the vaccination campaign is paying off. I recently pledged \$60 million

for the eradication of polio in Pakistan. We are committed to ending it for good.

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INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS

Mr. Dan Albas (Central Okanagan—Similkameen—Nicola, CPC): Mr. Speaker, yesterday the CEO of Moosehead Breweries Limited from New Brunswick told CBC that he agrees with the opposition that the Comeau decision should be elevated to the Supreme Court:

“The sooner there's some kind of decision, the better for everyone involved.”...He said Moosehead can compete in an open market if both tax and non-tax barriers to trade are eliminated by all provinces. “We sell beer in all 50 states in the United States with pretty open borders and hopefully we'll get to that point in Canada soon.”

Why are the Liberals refusing to listen to people like those at Moosehead Breweries, why are they denying people who want to buy Canadian, and why will they not elevate this to the Supreme Court?

Hon. Navdeep Bains (Minister of Innovation, Science and Economic Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the member opposite knows we are listening to Canadians. We are engaging them through the process of the agreement on internal trade. This process of collaborative forum allows us the opportunity to work with our provinces and territories to talk about these issues.

These are important issues because they are about growing businesses and ensuring that products and services can go from one jurisdiction to another. They are about ensuring that we have a bright future for our children and grandchildren.

For me, particularly, I am very proud to say that I am motivated by these talks to ensure that a brighter future exists for my two young girls, Nanki and Kirpa.

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CANADIAN COAST GUARD

Mr. Fin Donnelly (Port Moody—Coquitlam, NDP): Mr. Speaker, inspections of fishing violations off the coast of Newfoundland and Labrador have dropped a whopping 50% in the last five years. We have also learned that the capacity for the Coast Guard to respond to emergencies has been weakened. Our Coast Guard was gutted by the former Conservative government's budget cuts, and its failure to update the Coast Guard's aging fleet only made things worse.

Will the Liberal government commit today to reversing the Conservatives' ill-advised cuts, restore Canada's Coast Guard, and protect Canadians, our oceans, and our fisheries?

Oral Questions

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Cormier (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, at the Department of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard, we are well aware that we must protect our oceans and our ecosystems. To do that, we are going to invest in Coast Guard vessels, the patrol vessels that will protect our oceans, and ensure that our fleet is up to date. That is why we are going to work in consultation with the various stakeholders and partners in order to keep these promises.

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INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Mr. Pat Finnigan (Miramichi—Grand Lake, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, my constituents in Miramichi—Grand Lake understand that the economic agreement with Europe will give Canadian businesses market access to 500 million people and a \$20-trillion economy. They know that such an agreement will create numerous jobs, not only in my region, but in all regions across Canada.

Can the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Trade tell the House what measures the government is taking to conclude this agreement?

Mr. David Lametti (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Trade, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my hon. colleague from Miramichi—Grand Lake for his question.

Our government is working hard to ratify the economic agreement with Europe quickly. The hon. Minister of International Trade is currently in Europe, where she met with Cecilia Malmström, the European commissioner for trade; Matthias Fekl, the French secretary of state for foreign affairs; and Lilianne Ploumen, the Dutch minister of trade. She also gave interviews to French media to promote this progressive agreement.

We are working tirelessly to follow through on this agreement.

* * *

● (1500)

[English]

AGRICULTURE AND AGRI-FOOD

Mr. Larry Maguire (Brandon—Souris, CPC): Mr. Speaker, two weeks ago, I asked the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food if he would intervene on behalf of the Manitoba pork producers to keep the highly contagious PED virus out of Canada, but he refused. It has also only been a few weeks since the Canadian Food Inspection Agency changed the rules, and already an outbreak of this deadly virus has been reported on a Manitoba farm.

Will the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food now finally stop ignoring our farmers and work with the Manitoba pork producers to find a solution to contain this virus and keep it out of Canada?

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we are determined to protect the health of animals in Canada.

Emergency measures were put in place on the Manitoba border with the United States, and they will remain until the industry's

concerns about the epidemic can be assessed. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency, or CFIA, conducted a scientific study and determined that there was no need for such measures. The CFIA gave the industry time to return to normal conditions.

* * *

DAIRY INDUSTRY

Mr. Simon Marcil (Mirabel, BQ): Mr. Speaker, dairy farmers are in Ottawa to urge the government to solve the diafiltered milk problem.

The Minister of Agriculture says that it is not a dairy product when it goes through customs, but that same minister says it is a dairy product when the time comes to make cheese with it. We have been hounding the minister week after week for months, and he has been telling us for months that he is taking care of it, but he has done nothing.

Instead of repeating the same thing and reading his notes over and over again, will the minister show some backbone and solve the problem once and for all?

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, on May 3, we made a commitment to consult with the entire sector, and that is what we have done.

The Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and I have met with producers in the industry and have come away with interesting proposals. We are now in the process of analyzing all the proposals.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu (La Pointe-de-l'Île, BQ): Mr. Speaker, in Quebec, we care about our food sovereignty.

Twice, our National Assembly was unanimous in demanding that the diafiltered milk problem be solved. In Canada, when the federal government talks with western GMO exporters, it says that we must open the borders, but it tells Quebec dairy farmers the opposite. There are more holes in supply management than in Swiss cheese.

Does the government realize that, through its inaction, it is proving that the best thing that can happen to Quebec farmers is for Quebec to become a country that can make its own decisions, based on its own best interests?

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, a farm in Quebec, just like a farm anywhere in Canada, is a Canadian farm.

Over the past few weeks, we have listened to the entire sector. Our discussions were very productive and will help us develop a sustainable, long-term strategy for the entire sector.

Our government created supply management and will continue to defend it for all Canadian farms.

Business of Supply

[English]

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Mr. Andrew Scheer (Regina—Qu'Appelle, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I wonder if someone from the government could inform the House as to what the chamber will be debating for the rest of this week and next week as well, after we return from the weekend.

Hon. Kent Hehr (Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today we will continue debate on the NDP opposition motion.

Tomorrow morning we will commence debate on Bill C-15, the budget legislation. Following question period tomorrow, we will begin consideration at third reading of Bill C-6 on citizenship.

On Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday of next week, we will resume debate on the budget bill. We are presently in discussion with the opposition House leaders on the length of debate. Hopefully we will be able to find agreement.

Next Thursday, June 9, shall be an allotted day.

Finally, for next Friday, we will proceed with second reading of Bill C-13, the implementation of the WTO agreement.

• (1505)

[Translation]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet (Hochelaga, NDP): Mr. Speaker, there have been discussions amongst the parties, and if you were to seek it, I think you would find that there is consent to adopt the following motion:

That, at the conclusion of today's debate on the opposition motion in the name of the member for Skeena—Bulkley Valley, all questions necessary to dispose of the motion be deemed put and a recorded division deemed requested and deferred to Tuesday, June 7, 2016, at the expiry of the time provided for oral questions.

The Speaker: Does the hon. member have the unanimous consent of the House to move the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

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)

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[Translation]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL REFORM

The House resumed consideration of the motion.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, there are moments when one can be especially proud to be a member of Parliament. I am especially proud today to be part of this team, with my colleagues, who managed to put the process to reform the voting system back on track. This is truly a great moment and I commend and thank the Liberals for working with us and supporting our proposal.

Electoral reform is very important. In Laurier—Sainte-Marie, people talk to me about this a lot. It is important to them. Everyone had concerns about the process. They did not want to see it exacerbate cynicism rather than rallying the public around a common goal. They were quite concerned, especially about the committee that is being set up to undertake this reform.

I want to quote two people. First, Paul Journet, from *La Presse*, who said:

What could be more ironic? On the one hand, the federal Liberals want to change the voting system because it distorts the will of the people. On the other hand, they are using this distortion to give themselves a majority of the seats on the new review committee. They are taking advantage of the problem to better control the outcome.

That is what we have been fighting against for months now. I am pleased to see that we are going to have a committee that will truly represent how the public voted and will be relatively proportional.

I would remind hon. members that the NDP has long wanted to change the voting system as well. The current voting system just does not work. It creates false majorities. We saw just how much such a majority could be mishandled during the 10 years that the Conservatives were in power, although their majority was based on less than 40% of the popular vote. We hope that we will not see more of the same from the Liberals.

This fuels cynicism. People need to be able to believe in the system. I really like the idea of a mixed member proportional voting system. I know some people who have said that their vote for a given small party would be meaningless, because the party has no chance of winning in their riding. We all know of these examples.

With mixed member proportional voting, all votes count. Beyond the fundamental democratic issue and the fact that the House of Commons would better represent the popular will, this could also help combat cynicism. It could also encourage minorities, such as indigenous populations, to play a more active role in the electoral process. Indeed, over the past few years, voter participation has decreased, and we want the vast majority of Canadians to take part in the process.

I am also thinking of young Canadians, because, as we know, they do not vote much. I always like to paraphrase Rick Mercer, who once asked some young people whether they would let their grandparents choose their friends, their music, and their clothes. I often ask young people this question, and of course, they always say no. Like Rick Mercer, I tell them not to let their grandparents choose their government. It is absolutely crucial that young people vote.

• (1510)

It is not me who is going to be most affected by an issue like climate change: it is them. What we are now doing is building their future.

I hope that we are going to adopt a system that is both fair and equitable, but also, and to me this is essential, a system that will encourage people from all walks of life to participate, whatever their opinions or orientations, and especially young people. Action is urgently needed, and I find that the process is already lagging somewhat. Putting a new voting system in place is not something that is done overnight.

Business of Supply

I am truly happy, even delighted, that today we have at least managed to agree on a formula that gives the representatives of the Bloc Québécois and the Leader of the Green Party their say in the matter. Indeed, this formula is in large part a reflection of what we want to accomplish. I hope that everyone will be prepared to work together.

The House is currently debating two issues that are truly fundamental. I am referring to the bill on medical assistance in dying, and the reform of the voting system. In both these cases, we must succeed in establishing a dialogue and finding ground for agreement.

As I was saying, I am absolutely delighted to be part of a team that has pushed for a viable and credible solution for the population, and I thank the Liberals for joining us on this issue.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham (Laurentides—Labelle, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have a brief question for my hon. colleague from Laurier—Sainte-Marie.

She talks a good deal about a mixed member proportional system. I would like to know whether her opinion of this system is final or whether she is also open to other options.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Mr. Speaker, I think that the committee will have to do its work with openness and hear some experts; it will also have to rely on the participation of citizens and very broad consultations. After that, we will be able to assess the various options on the table. I do not think we should prejudge the final outcome on anything whatsoever.

Personally, I am looking at the mixed member proportional system. I see how it works in countries like New Zealand or Germany. This system seems to work very well. I find it has the advantage of encouraging people to vote, because everyone knows that every vote is going to count, one way or another. I consider this a great advantage. However, I think we should not prejudge what the committee will be able to accomplish through its consultations.

● (1515)

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for her very interesting speech. Like her, I am very happy to have the right to vote as part of a new committee.

I have just one question for her. Would the NDP be prepared to change its position only on some aspects of a proportional system?

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for her question.

The NDP has always been in favour of a mixed member proportional system, as I told my colleague earlier. I, too, think that it is the most appropriate system. That said, the last thing I want to do here is to say that the committee's findings on these issues should be *x*, *y*, or *z*. I think it is crucial that we let the committee do its job. However, I am sure that the NDP representatives on the committee will show the clear advantages of what we are proposing.

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet (Hochelaga, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my colleague talked about the importance of making every vote count. Yes, it is important to ensure that everyone has a say. As my colleague from Skeena—Bulkley Valley has said a number of times, what we are doing here is something we do not do often. This is something our generation has never seen before and will never see

again. That makes it all the more important to do this properly. I would like my colleague to comment on that.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for her question.

Yes, it is important to do things properly. It is important, and that is why I keep saying that we cannot prejudge the outcome of the committee's work. Doing things properly means opening one's ears, being ready to listen, engaging in truly broad consultations, and consulting experts as well.

We are MPs, which means that, to a certain extent, we are jacks of all trades. Even though we are relatively well informed about voting systems, we still have to listen to the experts.

We have to take the time to do things properly. That is absolutely essential. At the same time, the process has gone on for quite some time already, and we should not delay things further. That is why I am so happy that, as I said at the beginning of my speech, we were able to get the process back on track in order to move forward and ensure that we get a new voting system soon.

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, what a pleasure it is to rise to talk about a very important issue for all Canadians.

I have had the opportunity and good fortune to be a parliamentarian for many years, as have you, Mr. Speaker. I have had the privilege of having my name on the ballot 11 or 12 times, either as a provincial or federal candidate. I truly appreciate the important role everyone plays in making our democracy work in Canada.

I have argued, on both sides of the House, that we should never take that for granted. We truly appreciate the value of the trust Canadians have put in us, jointly and collectively as one body, to make good decisions on their behalf.

Today is a very positive day. I have heard discussions about electoral reform for years. In fact, I believe it was in the mid-1990s when I was asked to go around the province of Manitoba to canvass opinions and gather the thoughts of people on electoral reform.

I remember talking about the idea of whether we should reduce the age to vote from 18 to 16, or have leaders elected at large as opposed to being elected in constituencies, or the issue of multi-member wards. There are endless ideas out there.

Throughout my parliamentarian years, I have noted that there always seems to be some level of interest, at varying times, whether it is right after a federal election or after the observation of another election that has taken in place in Canada. At times, the issue really comes to the table. When that happens, there is a great deal of interest to talk about it. There have been endless discussions about it.

Business of Supply

I was quite pleased when our current Prime Minister clearly indicated over a year ago, in an election platform, that if the Liberals were to form government, it would be the last federal election based on first past the post. No one inside this chamber can question that statement from the leader of the third party at the time. It was very well publicized. It was included in the party's election platform.

The Liberal Party of Canada was not the only party that talked about electoral reform. The New Democrats and the Green Party have also talked about it fairly extensively. In fact, I have heard the leader of the Green Party talk extensively about it for many years. I said to her the other day that I was somewhat sympathetic. When I was in the Manitoba legislature, we did not have party recognition. Many of the things she aspires to try to change and reform, I can reflect on and recall my desires on those very important issues.

I raise it because it is important to note that even though the Liberal Party of Canada garnered the most support in the last federal election at 39% and that garnered the majority government, on this issue, more than 50% of Canadians voted for the need for change on our electoral system.

I pay tribute to the Prime Minister for the degree to which he has recognized this as an important issue for Canadians. Many would say that there are all sorts of other things we could and should talk about. However, I will go back to my opening comments on the importance of democracy to each and every one of us.

We always talk about Canada being one of the best countries in the world to live. Whether we talk about our democratic process, or our rights and freedoms, or our rule of law, these are all so fundamentally important to who we are as Canadians and as a nation.

● (1520)

Let us fast-forward a bit. I have in recent years seen many discussions on changes to the Canada Elections Act. We have been through those difficult committee hearings. I remember standing up at second reading on the fair elections bill, and there was a great deal of concern in terms of the lack of consultation that was taking place. I remember sitting in committee, and the Chief Electoral Officer had no sense in terms of what the government actually wanted to do with the Elections Act. There was no goodwill at all in terms of accepting any amendments from opposition parties.

That is why it is a bit much, day after day, hearing members from the Conservative Party at times talking about wanting a more open system with more consultations. The Minister of Democratic Institutions has been talking about that ever since she was appointed the minister responsible for democratic initiatives here. It is all about consultations, trying to extend the olive branch, trying to get other members engaged on this issue. I know how passionate she has been on it, and how the Prime Minister, in appointing this particular individual, felt very strongly that it was of critical importance that we get it done and we get it done right.

The Conservatives seem to be fixated on the issue of the process. That is in regard to wanting to have the referendum, as if that is the only tool in the toolbox that can deliver what Canadians want to see, which is genuine electoral reform. I would suggest that the referendum is not the only tool that is in the toolbox. We do not

have to recreate the wheel in order to be able to understand or appreciate that.

Major initiatives have taken place in terms of reforming our democratic system where there was no referendum. Rather, it was through consultation that took place in bringing parties together that ultimately led to the changes. One just needs to look at the enfranchising of women or first nations. Those are two that come to mind for which there were no referendums, but rather there were other ways by which we were able to successfully implement reform.

I look forward to the challenge that this current minister has in essence given to each and every one of us in terms of reaching out to our constituents and bringing that all into the debate. That is something which I am committed to, and that is why it is nice when we get a sense of co-operation taking place inside the House. Like the Prime Minister, I wish we could see more of that taking place. I am the type of person who does look at the glass as half full. I do believe that where there is goodwill, there will be opportunities to make things happen in a more apolitical fashion.

We saw that being demonstrated in the last 24 hours, or maybe even a bit longer than that, with respect to this particular issue. We have an opposition party in the House that stated it had an idea for opposition day, shared that idea with the government, and allowed the government the opportunity to take a look at it. Given the very nature of the motion, the government stated it was a motion that it could potentially support. The government did what a good government should do, and that was to look into the matter to see if there was a way we could get behind what we believe Canadians would want to see, more unity inside this chamber.

● (1525)

In a relatively short period of time, there was hopefully going to be an agreement when the minister responsible moved the amendment, and I will get into the amendment shortly. However, after the motion was initially moved, the minister then moved an amendment. It had to be accepted as a friendly amendment. Had it not been accepted as a friendly amendment, then we would be voting on the original motion, which has a lot of merit to it. However, it would have been a mistake, in the sense that if we can build on consensus, that is something we should do. The member across the way recognized that and accepted it as a friendly amendment. As a result, I believe the NDP will see widespread support on its original motion as amended by the minister responsible.

Let me highlight what we are actually talking about when I make reference to the motion. There is one part of the motion that I truly appreciate from a personal perspective. It is the second statement, where it says:

...that the Committee be directed to issue an invitation to each Member of Parliament to conduct a town hall in their respective constituencies and provide the Committee with a written report of the input from their constituents to be filed with the Clerk of the Committee no later than November 1, 2016;

With the exception of the date, and that is addressed, I thought that was a fantastic request being advocated by the New Democrats. We should be engaging as much as possible, and we can all engage in different ways.

Business of Supply

Allow me to share how I will be engaging my constituents on this issue. On July 6, we are going to be having a public meeting at the Maples Community Centre in the riding of Winnipeg North. By different means, via telephone and by letters, I will make sure it is very clear that I am having this meeting. We will probably even do a bit of advertising for it, if we can allocate a little budget from my member's office budget. We will make room for it, given the importance of the issue.

I hope to see a good number of people come out for the public meeting. We will try to get a better sense of what my constituents have to say. I am not going to that meeting with a predetermined position. I am approaching the meeting with an open mind. I genuinely would like to hear from individuals who have an interest in the subject matter. I would like them to come forward and share their thoughts are on the issue.

Realizing that I represent over 90,000 constituents, and many of my colleagues in the House represent well over 100,000, we are not going to get that kind of number into a community centre. I do not think demand will be quite that high. Typically, I suspect it will likely be somewhere in the neighbourhood of 25 to 250 people. I am not really sure, but whatever it is, if the demand is super high, we will have two meetings if necessary. That is one of the mechanisms I will be using.

Another mechanism I will use will be through social media, whether it is through my email list, Facebook, Twitter, or other ways that I can engage constituents I represent to provide their input on the issue.

As parliamentarians, we also have a wonderful privilege. I thank God for Canada Post and those who work for Canada Post. They are indirectly able to help me represent my constituents. I am so appreciative of Canada Post because that is one of the mechanisms I will be using to garner feedback on this issue.

• (1530)

These are the types of ideas that will help me make my presentation on the importance of this legislation in the debate we are having. However, there are others some might say, such as the age 55-plus bloc. We might end up going this way also. We should see if there is specific interest in going into some of those blocs.

What about community centres? How do we engage young people? I was part of a task force back in the 1990s. I think it was the 1990s. I sometimes get lost in the context of time. When I canvassed on democratic reform, I went into high schools. We found that young people were very interested in this issue. I would suggest, where possible, that others should go to the high schools. The point is that there are many different ways of doing it.

I want to highlight what we have actually witnessed here today. I believe it is a good reason for all of us to appreciate the gestures of goodwill coming from not one or two political parties, but three or four, though it would be nice to say all five parties. The proposed motion indicates that a committee be composed of 12 members, of which five shall be government members, three shall be official opposition members, two shall be from the New Democratic Party, one member from the Bloc, and the leader of the Green Party, all of which would be voting members.

This would be exceptionally rare, and I cannot recall a time offhand. Meech Lake, in the 1990s, when I was in the Manitoba legislature might have been one time. We would have the government of the day saying that it is prepared to forfeit its majority on the committee in order for other political parties to feel as though they are—because they are in reality—part of a very important process.

That is a very significant signal that is being sent not only from the government of the day, but from the New Democrats and the leader of the Green Party. They are prepared to put party politics aside in the hope of delivering an electoral system that is best able to serve Canadians from coast to coast to coast. I genuinely appreciate that and believe that Canadians will reflect very positively on that. I would encourage all members who will sit on this very important committee to approach it with a very open mind.

I would like to see a system that is modern, that enables people to feel as though their votes are not being wasted, a system that makes it easier for people to get engaged and actually vote. These are all important fundamental values that all of us share. In my 20-plus years of being a parliamentarian, it is very rare that we have been afforded the opportunity we have been given by different political parties in the House today.

My suggestion is that we take advantage of that recommendation and read through the resolution that has been introduced and the amendment that was brought forward. There are a couple of important aspects of the amendment that I would encourage people to read. The amendment states, "options identified could advance the following principles for electoral reform", and there are five of them. I do not have time to read the five. We need to realize that this is time sensitive. We do not want to lose the opportunity, and that is the reason we are saying October 14.

I know that as parliamentarians, we are not scared to work through the summer and will do whatever work is necessary to make things happen for Canadians. I suggest that we have the time to do something really good in terms of making our democratic system a better institution in Canada.

• (1535)

Around the world, parliamentarians and others look to Canada to demonstrate leadership on this issue, as we are a country that is envied by many. I think we have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make a difference, and I highly recommend that everyone vote in favour of the amendment and resolution.

Mr. Gord Johns (Courtenay—Alberni, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today is a very positive first step toward what we hope will be meaningful democratic reform for Canadians and an improved process that will greatly increase the chances of a successful outcome for all Canadians.

Business of Supply

In my riding, this is a very important issue. It was a very important issue in the election. I went door-knocking a few weeks ago. I knocked on doors and listened to my constituents. I met people who were Conservative, Liberal, New Democrat, and Green Party supporters. They all told me that the reform of our democratic system was important to them. During the election campaign I heard from young people as well on the doorstep. Many of them feel apathetic that their vote does not count or that they do not have a chance to ensure they are heard. Many of them are calling for a system that ensures every vote counts.

I will continue to hold consultations, go door-knocking, make phone calls, and send mailers to people in my riding so that everybody has a chance to participate. However, I will also hold town halls with stakeholders on this issue to ensure that it is not predetermined and that we get feedback from my community.

What will the member do to ensure that he is listening to his community? What kind of outreach will he do to ensure that the consultation is not predetermined and the government listens to Canadians and the people in his riding?

• (1540)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the question and the tenor in which the question was put. First and foremost, it is great to see the shift from a process debate over to the substance of the issue. Whether it is a town hall, which we will be doing, canvassing through the mail, using social media, or looking at those 55-plus blocks or our public education system, in particular our high schools, all of those are fantastic vehicles for members of Parliament to get engaged and get a better sense of what it is that their constituents want to see happen, and to then advance that, to share it with the committee that is out there or during debate when afforded the opportunity in the House to raise the issue, and to approach it all with an open mind. Whether we talk about preferential ballots, the proportional system, or some sort of hybrid, there is so much that can be discussed with respect to this issue.

Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is interesting to hear colleagues talk today about the fact that so many people voted for this particular method of electoral reform. This promise was put into a platform with dozens or perhaps hundreds of promises, yet my colleague suggests that constituents voted for this particular one out of all of the others. My colleagues often argue about the inadvisability of omnibus bills, yet a platform is just that. People pick and choose the items they will vote for and what kind of response they expect. There were a number of promises made in the Liberal platform that people may have voted for. They may have voted for small business tax cuts, but that one did not quite work out. The \$10-billion maximum deficit did not work out. We are still not seeing action on restoring door-to-door mail delivery or on the banning of partisan advertising. None of these have worked out.

My colleague can host town hall meetings and he can go on Twitter, but the percentage of people from his riding who will get to a town hall meeting at best, if his number of 250 is accurate, is one-quarter of 1%. A referendum could actually access between 60% and 90% of Canadians. Why would my colleague not allow more Canadians to have a say on this very crucial matter?

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Speaker, as much as possible, and in as humble a way as I can, I would assure the member that I would

like to think that 95% of my constituents will be afforded the opportunity to provide direct input to me in one form or another. The town hall meeting that he makes reference to is just one component, and a very important component for me personally. Having said that, whether it is by canvassing through the mail, the discussions that I will be having over the summer, or the literally many different events that I will be participating in, I suspect this will be an issue that will be talked about a great deal.

With respect to the issue of it being one of many platform issues, I disagree with the member's comments in terms of broken platform promises. He made reference, for example, to small business. First and foremost, small businesses want customers. We are giving that middle-class tax break. That will create a lot more customers and small businesses want that. However, that is not what we are debating today.

I appreciate the question, and I can ensure the member that the constituents of Winnipeg North, and I suspect a vast majority of Canadians as a whole, will be aware of what it is we are doing.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Labour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I was not here for the entire speech, but I did get portions of it. I got the good parts for sure.

If I could share with some of the new members in the House, this is significant. This would not be unique in past Parliaments. This is my sixth Parliament. In earlier Parliaments, committees at least were able to work together to find results to present to a minister and make recommendations.

I remember sitting on fisheries and oceans with the NDP, my colleague and friend Peter Stoffer, and John Cummins, Reform or Canadian Alliance and Conservative. John is a great friend of mine. There would be the right, the far right, and the extreme far right, and John would be just a little bit further than that. He was a great guy with the fishery. He understood the fishery. Out of 18 reports that we had done on that committee over the course of time, 16 of them would have been unanimous. Somewhere in the middle, Peter Stoffer and John Cummins would come together for the benefit of stakeholders in the industry, in the fishery, for the environment, and come forward with recommendations.

It was not until the last Parliament that the well was poisoned, and committees morphed into this thing that was just nothing more than a day care for MPs. The Department of Environment had greenhouse gases and global warming, yet we were studying the impacts of hunting and fishing on the environment. I think their time could probably have been better—

• (1545)

The Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I was fairly sure I had not called resuming debate on that particular point. It was questions and comments.

Business of Supply

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Speaker, my colleague had many words of wisdom. I think the message that he is really getting across is just how important the role of parliamentary committees can be.

I would suggest that the real potential backbone of the parliamentary system going forward is to consider the work that can be done in the committees. We might want to use this as one of those potential sample committees where we get a higher sense of co-operation. That is what we are starting to see, more amendments being brought forward, consensus from different political parties, and so forth.

If parties recognize the valuable role standing committees can play, it could be the future backbone of the parliamentary process, which would be a positive thing, but it takes a lot of co-operation from all political parties.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague from Winnipeg North. We have discussed the fact that when he was in the provincial legislature, he suffered the fate I now suffer of, let us just say, colleague deficiency.

We know that a fairer voting system will empower those people, whether Liberals living in a Conservative-dominated area, Conservatives living in a Liberal-dominated area, or pretty much anyone in Canada who wants to vote Green, who have been traditionally disadvantaged by a voting system that is winner takes all.

I wonder if my hon. colleague would agree with me that the current voting system also injects more toxicity into our dialogue. The reason for wedge issues and attack ads is to hang onto a vote and avoid people voting strategically. I wonder if he has any comment on that aspect.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Speaker, the system we flow to will determine in good part whether wedge issues would be embellished or diminished.

One of the interesting arguments I used to have was about how a leader of a political party should be elected, whether it was to Parliament here or to a legislature. Some people argued to me a number of years ago that if a political party assumed 5% of the vote, then the leader of that political party should be given a seat in that chamber, whether it is in a legislature or inside the House, but the leader of a political party should not be held to one constituency.

I say that for one reason. I really hope the committee members will approach this with an open mind, and if they do that, we will have a better system at the end of the day.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor (Cowichan—Malahat—Langford, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is a very real honour to rise today to speak to the motion.

Just on a personal note, democratic reform has always been a very high topic for me. It was a big one for a lot of my constituents during the election as well. I also want to pay some very good attention, and give credit where it is due, to my friend from Skeena—Bulkley Valley. I think it is absolutely incredible that we are creating a committee with 12 members where the government, which has a majority in the House, will not have a majority on the committee. That is a big step forward.

The NDP has a long tradition of fighting for fairness. When we look at the way our Parliament is elected under first past the post, we can look across to the government side and they have all of those seats, plus what we like to call the rump over there. That majority is based on false premises, because 39.5% of Canadians voted Liberal in the last election. However, by giving them the majority of the seats, we basically have an elected dictatorship.

I admit that the Liberal Party, while in government, has been working with the opposition on some issues. On others, it has moved forward with time allocation. I guess the main point I want to get across is that at the end of the day, if the Liberal government really wants to get its way, it can do so. It has the votes in the House to make its voice heard, to get its agenda through, and it has demonstrated that a few times. Based on the fact that only 39.5% of Canadians voted for that, I think that is where questions of legitimacy come up.

I think that because we are dealing with such an important measure, it is important that all parties in the House have a voice. The previous idea that was floated by the Liberal government, to create a standing committee that mirrors the existing ones, where the governing party gets six members, the Conservatives get three, the NDP get one, and the Bloc and the Greens get to attend but have observer status only, does a disservice to Canadians who voted for those other political parties. It also does not give respect to the proportions in which Canadians voted for those other parties.

I would like to give an example. Andrew Coyne, the journalist, has been writing some great articles lately on democratic reform. In one of his articles he pointed out that it took roughly 38,000 votes to elect each Liberal member of Parliament. By contrast, it took 57,000 votes to elect each Conservative; 79,000 votes for each New Democrat; and 82,000 for each member of the Bloc Québécois. For my friend from Saanich—Gulf Islands, it took 603,000 people to vote her in. That is not a fair system.

In order to respect the people who made those choices, they really do need to have a say at the table. This is only the first step. I do not want to presuppose what the committee is going to do. At this stage, it is almost like having a bill at second reading.

We want to support the committee's work in principle, but I really think it is important that, before we pass judgment on the committee, we give it a chance to form, a chance to meet with witnesses, a chance to speak to experts, and to deliberate, as we were sent here to do, and to do so in good faith, based on a rough proportion of the votes that each one of those parties received. We owe it to ourselves to let that committee do its work before we pass judgment and presuppose exactly what it is going to do.

I have been incredibly proud to be a member of the New Democratic Party, because we have always had a long stance on supporting proportional representation. I have heard some members speak in this chamber about how they do not want to prejudge what Canadians want, they do not want to come with a preformed opinion, and that is fine. I respect that.

Business of Supply

I have always felt that having the number of MPs in the House closely mirror the national averages is only fair. It really goes to the heart of the matter of having equal votes for every Canadian, and having one Canadian and one vote.

• (1550)

I will also take some time here to talk about some legislation that I had the honour of introducing on Tuesday. Bill C-279 is a part of this continuing conversation that we as parliamentarians must have on democratic reform. While we talk about how we elect our members, I think we also need to talk about some of the situations that exist around how we elect people, some of the money that is being spent, and how long our elections are.

For example, in the previous Parliament, the Conservatives passed what was known as the Fair Elections Act. One part of that change was that the spending limits of each party translated to roughly \$675,000 each day when a party's national campaign went over 37 days. As a result, we have this difference. In 2011, political parties could spend \$21 million, while during the 2015 78-day marathon, parties could bring their limit up to \$55 million.

I think we are slowly heading down a road where money starts playing a larger role, which distorts the view that many Canadians hold when we are giving such importance to wealthy donors and so on. Also, Canadians do not need to have 78 days to make a decision.

My bill proposes to put a maximum limit of 46 days on an electoral period, while keeping the minimum at 36 days. I hope that, as we discuss this issue of democratic reform, I can invite all members of the House to have a constructive conversation on how long our elections are.

The other thing I think all members will want to take stock of is the cost to taxpayers, because the previous election cost us \$473 million to run, which was a \$150 million more than the previous election. Therefore, democratic reform cannot simply stop at how we elect our members; we also have to look at the influence of money in our politics.

Before I continue, Mr. Speaker, I forgot to inform you that I would be splitting my time with my great friend the hon. member for Victoria. It was a rookie mistake.

• (1555)

However, I will say that this is a big deal today. My friends in the government, the Liberal caucus, deserve congratulations and credit where credit is due. It was a big step. I was watching the minister on CPAC this morning, and when I heard her say that the government would support this motion, I was genuinely impressed, and I congratulate the Liberals for doing that. It is my hope that by the government giving up its majority on this, and by all other opposition parties suddenly having that legitimacy, we can find a way to work together.

My colleague from Skeena—Bulkley Valley proposed this new method back in February, and we are now in June. Therefore, I think the minister was quite correct in saying that the government was getting worried that we were just getting bogged down in process, which is true. We need to move beyond process and get to some more substantive debate. We need to hear from experts. We need to

hear from witnesses. We need to give the committee all of the tools it needs to consult with Canadians. I will leave it up to the committee to decide what course of action is right, but in the end, I strongly feel that we need to give that committee the time to do so.

I will conclude by saying that one of the phrases that inspired me to run as a New Democrat came from our late leader, the Hon. Jack Layton. I think it was shortly after we formed the official opposition in the previous Parliament that he said it is not enough just to be opposing, but one has to propose solutions.

My friend from Skeena—Bulkley Valley is enduring the spirit of that phrase in the truest way today, because since February he has come up with a practical solution. Instead of just shooting down what the government has been offering, he has said that there is a different way, that this is our constructive alternative, and today the government accepted it.

• (1600)

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Labour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as I was saying before I was so graciously interrupted, the last Parliament certainly did not serve us well. There was no real attempt to make it right. When we make it right at committee and make it right for stakeholders on particular issues, we make it right for Canadians. That is what is ahead of us here. That is the opportunity we have, and we heard that over the course of the election.

I think this is something we can live with. We should all encourage our colleagues from all parties to go out and engage and hopefully come out with good quality recommendations to move forward. I heard over the course of the last election that Canadians wanted that change and wanted an adult conversation about it. That is what today's motion allows us to do, and that is why I look forward to supporting it.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Mr. Speaker, my friend may know that I had the honour and privilege of working for Jean Crowder for seven years as a constituency assistant, and she sat in four different Parliaments, so she was quite a veteran of this place. In the previous Parliament, she was the official opposition critic for aboriginal affairs. I know from working for an MP for seven years what committees devolved into. Indeed I think the member will agree with me there was even a special handbook presented on how to obstruct committee business.

It is my hope that we can leave the past as the past. We should learn from it, but I hope that we go forward with a renewed sense of purpose, that we do not presuppose or prejudge what the committee is going to do, and that we accept the fact that this new structure is now more fair. The government has given up its majority voluntarily. Let us let the committee get formed and continue its work.

Mr. Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I think any of us in this place could come up with maybe half a dozen different ways to vote. That is fair because we are in this place and we are engaged. However, I will use an analogy that my predecessor used and it is a good one. Because we are Canadian, it is a hockey analogy.

Business of Supply

When the general managers for the NHL get together every year to discuss rule changes, usually the general managers of the smaller teams would want less fighting and more penalties. Those with the bigger teams would want more fighting and fewer penalties, because it is to their advantage.

We are striking a committee based on political people changing the rules on how we vote without having that final say. As I said, we can come up with a half dozen options, but someone has to make this decision. It is not that the general managers are bad people, or that we are bad people; it is just that we are in the game. Someone makes that decision.

After all the consultation we talked about, how can we not say let us give the people the opportunity to vote on a preferred method at the end of the day, through a referendum?

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Mr. Speaker, I will go back to my comment about not presupposing or prejudging the committee's work. The three Conservative members who will be sitting on the committee should be bringing that case forward while they are at committee. If they feel strongly that a referendum is the answer, they should bring forward witnesses and experts on previous referendums and let them present the evidence and make a strong case for it.

However, enough talk about the process right now; let us let the committee do its work, and I hope members make a strong case at committee because now there will not be six Liberals who have a final say. They will have the ability to work with all parties on this measure, and in this place if people have a valid argument and back it up with strong facts, hopefully that is what will win the day.

• (1605)

Mr. Murray Rankin (Victoria, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise today on this important occasion and to address this important motion.

The very agreeable tone of the debate today is a tribute to my friend from Skeena—Bulkley Valley, who has worked so hard and so long on this very issue. His work has been guided by a value that I hold dear as a New Democrat, and that is a belief that a noble end can be reached by noble means, that positive change should not always be on the horizon but should be part of our work in the here and now.

The solution my colleague has offered today is not only a reasonable and creative compromise, but it is also a principled proposal that matches our basic values about fairness and democracy. It is a principle that all Canadians would agree is fair and, as such, I hope it is a plan that every member in the House can support.

I am pleased that the Minister of Democratic Institutions has accepted the NDP proposal. In the words of the member for Cape Breton—Canso, we are truly having an “adult conversation”, a conversation that is starting here and I hope will spread throughout the communities from coast to coast to coast.

Before we can come together around a fairer way to cast our ballots, though, Canadians need to have confidence in the process itself. The best way to earn that confidence is to start with the system that reflects how they voted just eight short months ago, which

encourages inclusiveness and collaboration with every party at the table.

Outside of the halls of the Prime Minister's Office I suspect we would be hard pressed to find a single Canadian who believes that getting less than 40% of the votes should equal 60% of the seats and 100% of the power. Canadians know that to use the results of a broken system to craft a better one is to pluck the fruit of a poisoned tree.

Instead, we have a chance here today to deliver change and to do it right through a process that embodies our values. This is how Canadians expect us to resolve the issue, because it is how Canadians have always tried to resolve differences themselves in their homes and in their workplaces, by bringing everyone to the table and listening to every voice so that everyone has a say and a stake in how we move forward together.

Across the aisle, my colleague from Burlington spoke very eloquently today, and she was right: this motion is a landmark in the evolution of our journey to democracy in Canada.

At the start of the last century, more than a generation past Confederation, voting rights were still denied to vast swaths of the Canadian population. The ballot was denied if one did not hold land, if one held a different faith, if one's skin was not white, and of course, if one was a woman.

There are Canadians alive today who have seen in their lifetime this evolution. They have seen the House finally grant federal voting rights to women. It would take another year for women to gain the right to run for one of those seats, another decade before women opened doors of the Senate, two decades before leaders like Thérèse Casgrain won the right to vote in their province, three decades before indigenous women first cast ballots in band elections, and four decades before all indigenous people in this country won their rightful voice in the affairs of the House of Commons.

This is a long arc. It has risen at a shameful pace and every advance has been bitterly resisted and hard won. However its trajectory is clear. The evolution that the member for Burlington outlined, the story of Canada's democracy, is the story of the continuous broadening and deepening of our democracy.

Democracy is not a state. It is an aspiration. Just as we could not claim to have reached the goal of true democracy when half our population was denied the right to vote, neither can we rest on our laurels when the makeup of the House does not match the choice of Canadians. Therefore, what is the next step?

• (1610)

Two years ago, I held a town hall in Victoria to discuss electoral reform with my constituents. The overwhelming view of the crowd that filled the hall that night was that the allocation of seats in Parliament ought to directly reflect the balance of votes that parties earned and that only true proportional representation could reliably and accurately deliver that balance.

Business of Supply

Canadians are tired of the winner-take-all system. Winner takes all is not a value we teach our children and it should not drive our politics either. Canadians know that a better system is possible. Advanced democracies around the world have long recognized the flaws of the winner-take-all systems. Canadians are not alone in recognizing that this system not only distorts results but produces more adversarial politics.

The list of major democracies that have adopted proportional representation includes powerhouse economies like Germany and nations with similar Westminster institutions, like New Zealand. Not only does the system match Canadian values about fairness and inclusion, but it brings some unexpected benefits as well. In fact, a landmark study of 36 countries found that proportional representation increased voter turnout, elected more women, and led citizens to report feeling more satisfied with their democracy, even when the party of their choice was not in power.

Other studies have uncovered more surprising benefits. Countries with proportional representation score higher on indices of health, education, and standard of living. They are more likely to enjoy fiscal surpluses. They have healthier environmental policies, faster economic growth, and less income inequality.

What explains those differences? How can a voting system fuel economic growth and diminish inequality? It comes down to people. Consensual political institutions involve and empower more citizens. They respond to and represent a deeper pool of interests and people. The policies they enact are not just more representative of the average voter, they are more credible and more stable. Those qualities make consensual politics better for people, better for business, and, indeed, better for our planet.

I am proud that our party championed this system not only in the last election but in the last Parliament as well. I say that because proportional representation would actually have given the New Democrats fewer seats in the 41st Parliament than we won in 2011 under the first past the post system. This is a matter of principle and the principle is simple: every Canadian deserves fair representation, every Canadian voice should be counted and equal, and every vote should be counted. I think every Canadian can support that principle and it is the standard by which we will judge the work of this committee.

My colleague from Vancouver Kingsway was absolutely correct this afternoon. The biggest thing we can do to combat cynicism and kindle hope in our politics is to build a system in which more voices matter, not only one which entrenches power for those who already have it.

I call on my colleagues to approve this motion and get to work as soon as possible, building a new electoral system for a new century, one in which we will finally see our democratic institutions reflect fairly, proportionately, and accurately the choices of our fellow Canadians.

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith (Beaches—East York, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member and his colleagues for putting this motion forward, and I thank my government for working with the NDP and agreeing to the motion. Co-operation is a sign of strength, in my opinion.

I want to ask the member about fairness. I agree that proportional representation is a fairer system. It is not just me or the member opposite who thinks that. The 2004 Law Reform Commission report also agrees, after extensive consultation. In its view, mixed member proportional representation was chosen out of nine options that were surveyed.

Does the member, in speaking about proportional representation, have one particular view of the matter? For mixed member proportional representation, there are party lists, PR and single transferable vote. There are different models.

When we talk about fairness of process, this is an important first step, obviously, in agreeing to the committee. When we talk about legitimacy of process, what are the member's views on a referendum, a supermajority? Are there other avenues we might arrive at that would grant this process legitimacy?

• (1615)

Mr. Murray Rankin: Mr. Speaker, I agree with my friend from Beaches—East York's premise that co-operation is a sign of strength. I am pleased that through co-operation in this place, we are modelling that kind of strength in the House of Commons.

I agree with my friend that proportional representation was studied in 2004 by the Law Reform Commission. I agree that MMPR was the model it thought best. However, I am agnostic at this stage because I want the committee to do its work, hear from Canadians, and figure it out. To come into it with prejudged positions would be self-defeating. As long as those values that I spoke of in my remarks are at play, I am confident that people of goodwill sitting around the table in a representative capacity will get it right for Canadians.

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened to the member's comments. I know him to be an honourable member and I am sure he is quite sincere. I know he believes in the position of his party in its desire for a proportional-type system. However, I think the concern many Canadians have right now is that they are seeing these backroom deals going on between his party and the Liberal party. I think they are wondering where is there chance to have a voice. I know we are talking about having some consultations, but the real voice of Canadians gets to be heard when every Canadian gets to have a say.

This is not about political parties getting a say. This is not about politicians getting a say. This is about every Canadian. The one way that can happen is through a referendum. Therefore, I want to know this. Sure, there are processes that will take place and a committee will be struck. However, at the end of the day, if his constituents say to him that they demand a referendum, that they want the chance to have a say, that they do not think political parties should make this decision, that they believe all Canadians should make the decision, where would he stand on that?

Mr. Murray Rankin: Mr. Speaker, my colleague identified the position I advocated on, which is proportional representation, as one of my party's. I want to make it clear that it has been a personal view of mine for many years. I am pleased that it is reflected in the position of the New Democratic Party, but it is to reduce the impact of proportional representation, to think of it in partisan terms. Around the world, proportional representation has been adopted by advanced democracies. That is the key point.

Business of Supply

When the lightbulb went on for me was when the member for Skeena—Bulkley Valley yesterday asked the government whether it was prepared to move alone on a previous approach that did not involve one of the major parties in the House. That tells all, and the government has accepted that is not the appropriate way to move forward. I am confident we can get it right this time for all Canadians.

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate my hon. colleague from Victoria on what I think is one of the most powerful, well-reasoned and cogent speeches that I have heard in the House in eight years on any subject. I was particularly interested in his accurate and powerful description of the extension of the franchise and his narrative of democracy being a living organism and not a static kind of concept. He pointed out that in Canadian democracy, we have gradually expanded the vote from white men with property to people with property to women to aboriginals to non-Caucasian people, from people who are 21 years of age down to those who are 18.

My question to him is this. Several people on different sides of the House have proposed that it is time to expand the franchise to reduce the voting age to 16, so 16 and 17 year olds, who we tax, who drive, who can marry, who can join the army, can also have a say in their democratic structure. As we explore our democratic reform system, is this an opportunity for us to take the next step and actually continue that process of enlarging the franchise to get more Canadian citizens involved in their democracy?

Mr. Murray Rankin: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague and friend from Vancouver Kingsway for his very generous remarks.

I am personally committed to lowering the voting age. It is the right thing to do for a number of reasons, the least of which is because the kids today are a lot smarter than I was when I was that age and are much more involved. This would be an opportunity to engage them more. Rather than phoney events in their high schools where they vote for the student union, imagine if real politicians came in and were trying to achieve their vote? To me, that is a really important test. If we can hook young people on democracy at a young age, I suspect that positive addiction will continue throughout their lifetime. There are a number of good reasons for doing so. I hope the committee will study that as well.

• (1620)

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to stand up for Canadians and for their right to have a direct say in any changes to the method of voting, to the method of our democracy.

I have listened to a lot of speeches today, and what I have heard deeply concerns me. I am hearing a lot of talk about what is best for political parties, what is best for politicians, how do we best ensure that all political parties, or at least one other political party, is happy. It is not just about the governing party or the Liberal Party.

It is all about this proposed competition in the community and what is best and what is fairest for political parties, what is fairest for politicians, and what is fairest for their partisan interest. This discussion should not be all about political parties. It should not be about politicians. It should be about the Canadian people. It is their method of voting. It is their democracy. This discussion needs to be

about Canadians, all Canadians. It should not be about politicians. It needs to be about ensuring that each and every Canadian has an opportunity to have a direct say.

When we are thinking about the motion today and discussing it, more than on any other occasion, we have to ensure that what we have at heart is the best interests of all Canadians. When we get down to that, when we are changing the most basic rules of democracy, everyone gets a vote, a direct say. It should not be just the Prime Minister and the Liberal cabinet. It should not be just politicians or political parties, especially when we are talking about backroom deals. It needs to be about each and every Canadian, everyone getting a direct say. That must be the absolute essence of any discussion we have in Parliament about electoral reform. Canadians absolutely must have the final say in a national referendum on any proposed changes to how they elect their representatives.

It was actually the Minister of Democratic Institutions who said, "...listening to Canadians is at the heart of a healthy democracy". It is unfortunate that what we are seeing in the actions of her Liberal government is reflecting the exact opposite of that.

I want to touch a bit on the party's positions. First. Mr. Speaker, that I am sharing my time with the member for Richmond—Arthabaska.

When we talk about this, a lot of claims have been made about the fact that Canadians voted for a party that wanted to change the system somehow. Different positions have been taken by the different political parties. The New Democrats, from their platform, want to make an individual's vote truly count by bringing in a system of mixed member proportional representation. That is their position. About 19.7% of Canadians voted for them.

The Green Party talks about replacing the first past the post system with proportional representation. Therefore, we have one party talking about mixed member proportional representation and another one talking about some form of proportional representation. The Green Party got about 3.4% or 3.5% of the vote in the last election.

Members of the Liberal Party, which is typical of the Liberal Party, have taken a position of riding the fence, putting themselves in a bunch of different camps so one candidate can claim one thing and one can claim another. At the end of the day, they will do what they want. They have said that they might look at a variety of different types of systems. They got the support of 39.5% of Canadians. They have taken all these numbers, put them together and they think that somehow that gives them the right to change the system without asking Canadians, without talking to Canadians, giving them a chance to have a direct say. I do not think that is what has happened at all. I think they are just trying to avoid the ability of Canadians to have that say, but this has to be about them.

Business of Supply

If we are truly to have a discussion on electoral reform and a very open discussion on it, as the Liberal government claims, and the fix is not already in and there has not already been these backroom deals to some kind of conclusion as to what will be put in place, why have the Liberals taken one of the options off the table before they even have had the conversation with Canadians, which is our current method of voting, the one we have had since Confederation? Some people claim that makes it a bad system just because it has been around for a long time. That is up to Canadians to decide. That is not up to the politicians in this room to decide or for the political parties to decide.

● (1625)

It seems to show a lot of arrogance, in my mind, towards Canadians to have political parties say that they will have a conversation with Canadians and give them some options, but they will take one option out, it is gone, and it is off table before we even have a conversation with Canadians. It seems like a lot of arrogance to say that it is not an option and Canadians cannot choose it. They can choose one of the things we might like them to choose, but not this other option. This needs to be their decision.

A few days ago, *The Huffington Post* was reporting on one of the Liberal members, the parliamentary secretary for Veterans Affairs, the member of Parliament for Kanata—Carleton. She recently had an electoral reform town hall in her riding. The one thing I noted in the story was that the member was quoted as having laughed when she recounted a story about a citizen who said he did not think there was anything wrong with our electoral system. Well, that was his opinion and he has a right to have that opinion. Is that the attitude that we can expect from the current Liberal government when it is consulting with Canadians; laughing at those who have a different opinion from its opinion?

If the Liberals are truly interested in listening, they would not laugh off the opinions of Canadians. This comes back to that arrogance of their party. I think when we talk about some of the backroom dealings going on with the NDP, there is arrogance being shown here, which is a real concern, because Canadians need to have that say, and not these political parties with their backroom deals.

One thing that I think has been abundantly clear when I look at the actions of the Liberal government is that the members' actions are in their own self-interest. They are in the interest of politicians and not in the interest of Canadians. The Minister of Democratic Institutions stated that she wants to listen to Canadians, but instead the Liberals are charging ahead with a plan that, unfortunately, does not give Canadians the ultimate say. It is one that does not leave all the options on the table. It tells Canadians that they know better than Canadians, that this option is not available to them, that they can pick from some of these other choices, but Liberals are going to decide what those choices are.

I think it is clear that the Liberal government and the Prime Minister seem to think that only those people who agree with them and with the committee that has political partisan interests, that was created through backroom deals, is who should get the say. The Prime Minister has been quite clear about how he opposes directly consulting Canadians through a referendum on any fundamental changes to how we vote. In fact, he told students at the University of

Ottawa exactly that. He said, “the fact is that referendums are a pretty good way of not getting any electoral reform”.

Well, I do not know, that may or may not be the truth, but the bottom line is that it is not his decision to make; that is Canadians' decision to make. I would say to the Prime Minister that the fact is that referendums are the best way and probably the only way to ensure that Canadians get a direct say, the ultimate say, on their democracy.

We looked at a lot of other jurisdictions that have made decisions or looked at proposed changes to their electoral system, such as Ontario, Prince Edward Island, British Columbia, and other democracies like the United Kingdom and New Zealand. They have all done this. All of them have given the direct say, the ultimate decision, to their citizens through a referendum, not to their politicians.

I am really quite concerned to see what I am seeing today. The fact of the matter is that three-quarters of Canadians have said that they want to have the referendum on any electoral reform before the government proceeded. Therefore, they want to have that say, they want to have the choice of all the options, which has been made quite clear by Canadians, and it is being made quite clear. It is the only way that the current government can ensure that the changes the Liberals are making are supported by all Canadians and that their plan is fair and transparent.

Whatever the government decides to do, Canadians need a vote, they want a vote, and they want to be able to say yes or no. What better way to consult with all Canadians than through a referendum? A committee of parliamentarians, no matter what its makeup, no matter what the party stripes, no matter what their partisan interest, is not and never will be a substitute for all Canadians having a say and having their voices heard directly through a referendum.

● (1630)

In 1992, there was a referendum held on the Charlottetown accord. Three-quarters of eligible Canadians voted. Almost 14 million Canadians voted. To be able to reach the same number of people with this town hall proposal, 40,000 Canadians would have to show up to a town hall meeting in each and every single riding. That is 40,000 Canadians in each of 338 ridings. I cannot for the life of me understand how the current government would not choose to give each and every Canadian a say in a referendum before it changes the very method by which they vote in elections.

Mr. Mark Holland (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Democratic Institutions, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I listened with interest to the member opposite. There were a lot of conspiracies there. I do not think I have heard that many conspiracies anywhere, maybe not even at an alien convention.

Business of Supply

The reality is that when the member talks about backroom deals, I am confused. There were many conversations that took place with the critic for the member's party, that took place with all of the critics for the different parties. We have had a debate on this particular matter for weeks around what the composition of the committee would be, with members from the Conservative Party saying that the proposal that was put forward by the NDP was a good idea. I heard that many different times. We have tried to work constructively to build that bridge and pull people together and say, "Let us find middle ground, a place to work together". I am confused here today that there is no movement from the Conservative Party.

There is a channel to have a debate as to how best to engage Canadians. That is the committee, and that is the motion that we have in front of us. Given the fact that there was such a clear iteration in the last election that the status quo was not acceptable, will the member not work with us in the way that the Conservatives were talking about before, and ensure that we have a method to productively modernize the Canadian electoral system?

Mr. Blake Richards: Mr. Speaker, I am really sorry to hear of the member's confusion. I do not think there should be any confusion here.

The bottom line is that it is not up to the Liberal government, it is not up to politicians, and it is not up to political parties to be able to decide for all Canadians how their voting system should work. The very fundamental basic of our democracy is how we vote. For there to be these conversations, or whatever he wants to call them—backroom deals, as I call them—or whatever we want to call them, the bottom line is it should not be up to politicians or the political parties to make this decision. That is what I keep hearing in this debate today, and it is what I keep hearing from the current government: "We are going to work with the political parties".

Canadians get to have a say. Members do not just take one of the options off the table. They have to say to Canadians that they are going to give them all of the options, let them have a say, and then at the end of the process let Canadians decide yes or no with a referendum.

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is unbelievable. We just heard from the parliamentary secretary how he does not believe that the Canadian people should have a choice, but actually that the parties should have the choice in how Canadians elect their representative.

Earlier on, we had the Prime Minister reference that the reason he does not want to actually go to a referendum is because he would not likely get the result that he wanted. Then today in question period, we actually had the minister refer to the people who want to have a referendum as being narrow minded. That is a disservice to Canadians. That is a disservice to everyone who sits in this great House.

Why is it important that we have a referendum in Canada and allow the people to have a say on all of the options that are available for them in how they select their members of Parliament?

Mr. Blake Richards: Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for that question. It gives me the opportunity to reiterate the most absolutely fundamental, important point in this whole debate, and it is the one that I am not hearing from any of the other parties in this House. I am

not hearing about this because all I keep hearing about is the interests of political parties.

This is about Canadians. This is about the way they vote. This should be a conversation first, but then it needs to be given to every Canadian. It needs to be put in Canadians' hands and they need to be given that choice. They need to be given all of the options available to them and they need to be able to make that choice and say, for the system that is being chosen, "I agree" or "I disagree", yes or no, as to whether they want to change the voting system or they do not.

That is the conversation that needs to be had with Canadians, but it also needs to be given to every Canadian to have a direct say and the final say. It is not the Prime Minister's choice and it is not political parties' choice, it is Canadians' choice.

• (1635)

[Translation]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet (Hochelaga, NDP): Mr. Speaker, before today, we had a committee that had a clear Liberal majority.

Now we have a committee made up of 12 voting members, including five Liberals and three Conservatives, by the way, if we are talking about backroom deals. The Conservatives are going to be in the room.

Which of the two does the member think is more democratic?

[English]

Mr. Blake Richards: Mr. Speaker, there is one thing that would make this completely democratic and that is to say at the end of the process, Canadians get to have a say. The composition of a committee does not matter. If it is a majority of Liberals, or if there is somehow agreement between two of the parties, or whatever it might be, at the end of the day it is not up to politicians to make that decision. It is up to Canadians. The composition of a committee does not change anything in terms of the fact that Canadians need to have the final say in a referendum to say "yes" or "no".

[Translation]

The Deputy Speaker: It is my duty pursuant to Standing Order 38 to inform the House that the questions to be raised tonight at the time of adjournment are as follows: the hon. member for Burnaby South, Status of Women; the hon. member for Carleton, Taxation; the hon. member for Beauport—Limoilou, Veterans.

Mr. Alain Rayes (Richmond—Arthabaska, CPC): Mr. Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to speak to this very important issue, namely, the electoral reform that the Liberal government wants to bring in. I really wanted to speak to this because it is fundamental to our entire voting system and our entire electoral system. It forms the very foundation of our structure in Canada.

First, let me give some background. How did we get where we are today? The election that took place at the end of last year, in October 2015, resulted in a Liberal government with 39.6% of the universal suffrage. That is very close to the percentage the Conservatives had in the previous election. In other words, it was more or less the same percentage that gave the Liberals a majority of seats in Parliament. This majority of seats, which gives them 100% of the power, does not, however, give them 100% of the truth in the House.

Business of Supply

Since the beginning of their term, the Liberals have not stopped telling us that with this majority, Canadians gave them the right to implement their entire election platform. They talk in the House as though Canadians read the 219 proposals in their 97-page election platform, and as though the 39% of the public that voted for them gave them the mandate to carry out these 219 proposals unilaterally, without approval from Parliament as a whole and, in the case of this electoral reform, without the public's approval.

This Liberal government, which was elected by 39% of the population and has the majority of seats and therefore all the power, is saying that it wants to change the rules of voting, the very foundation of our democracy. The Prime Minister himself, in his Speech from the Throne, simply announced that the current voting system could no longer be used and that last fall's election was the last one to use it. Then, he also announced in various conversations and at various press conferences that he already had a preferred voting system in mind, a preferential voting system, which is clearly advantageous to the Liberal Party across the way.

When you consider all of those things and also consider the government's plan to create a partisan committee, right here in the House, the outcome is already clear. The committee will make a recommendation to the government and ministers, who, together, will propose a change to our electoral system. They already have a majority.

What the Conservative Party is asking for today is simple. We are not against consultations, nor do we think we should not figure out how to reach as many people as possible. We are saying that, ultimately, the Canadian public, all Canadians, must say whether they want to change the voting system. This decision should not fall to the Prime Minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau, who was elected with 39% of the vote.

I am sorry, Mr. Speaker, I should not have named—

• (1640)

The Deputy Speaker: Order.

The hon. member for Abitibi—Témiscamingue on a point of order.

Ms. Christine Moore: Mr. Speaker, the member named the Prime Minister.

The Deputy Speaker: I think the hon. member knows that he is not allowed to use another member's first or last name. He must refer to members by their riding name or title.

The hon. member for Richmond—Arthabaska.

Mr. Alain Rayes: I am sorry, Mr. Speaker. I got excited and completely forgot that rule.

What I meant to say was that it is not up to the Prime Minister of Canada and his majority government to decide what kind of voting system we should have. He can go ahead and consult everyone. Everyone is okay with that; nobody is against doing the right thing. Nevertheless, he needs to send a clear signal to the House that he will let Canadians have their say about whether they want to change the voting system or not. He should not be arrogant.

Since 1950, any provincial government that wanted to change the voting system went to the people to find out if they agreed with the proposal. That is all we are asking. It is not complicated. We are asking the government to rise above its position, set partisanship aside, stop treating us like we do not matter, and agree to let the people decide in the end.

Today, the government would have Canadians believe that changing the voting system will get more people engaged in politics. That is not true. In every country in the world, where there are different governments and different voting systems, the number of people who vote from one election to the next keeps going down. It is no different here in Canada. The problem we have is a cultural one. We have to change the culture and put an end to excessive partisanship, which we are currently seeing from the Liberal Party. We are asking the government to trust the people.

New Zealand held public consultations on changing the voting system for 10 years. They asked experts and the public for their opinion. They changed the first past the post system to a mixed member proportional voting system. The voter turnout during the last election declined by 10%.

Leading the public to believe that changing the voting system will automatically improve voter turnout is completely false.

We have been asking the government questions from the beginning. However, all we hear is that the opposition, the Conservative Party, is being partisan and does not want to contribute or listen to what is being proposed.

I took the time to compile what political analysts had to say about the minister's proposal. Across all media platforms, whether written, televised, or broadcast, here is what was being said about the government's electoral reform:

Emmanuelle Latraverse, a CBC journalist, wrote an article entitled “Réforme électorale de Justin Trudeau : un premier rendez-vous manqué”, or “Justin Trudeau's electoral reform: a missed opportunity”.

In *Le Devoir*, Manon Cornéliier—

Ms. Christine Moore: Mr. Speaker, the member mentioned the Prime Minister by name again.

The Deputy Speaker: I remind the hon. member that even when a member is named in quoted material, he may not use the member's name.

The hon. member for Richmond—Arthabaska.

Mr. Alain Rayes: Mr. Speaker, I apologize. I will stick to my quotations, but without using any names. I will continue:

...all this hurried brainstorming will not be preceded or accompanied by an information campaign on the various voting systems, a task that could have been given to an independent organization, such as Elections Canada.

Voting belongs to the people. It is their tool for selecting their representatives. Since time is short...the whole process is being left up to those same elected representatives who know very well which system will work most to their advantage. One only has to look at their past positions to find out...

Holding the 2019 election under a new voting system imposes a tight deadline that does not give Canadians a chance to have a proper debate, like the ones that took place in Quebec...British Columbia, Ontario, New Brunswick, and PEI.

Business of Supply

In each case, a referendum was held and the people refused what the government was proposing.

I will continue:

The people will not have the final say, either, because the government has ruled out the idea of a referendum. Yes, time is short, and so is coherence.

Here is another quote:

Electoral reform could require reopening the Constitution. The Liberal government could plunge the country into a constitutional mess against its will.

There are a lot of quotes like those ones. Here is the last one I will share:

Imagine if the reform leads to disinterest and lower voter turnout; that would be a disaster. A referendum would ensure that the public is in agreement.

We are simply saying that it is not up to the elected officials in the House to control the very foundation of our democracy, which gives men and women the opportunity to govern for four years. The public should have this control. Let us put our trust in the public. Let us be sensible with them, and they will be sensible with us. That is how we can change the culture of disinterest.

• (1645)

Ms. Christine Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, NDP): Mr. Speaker, during the previous Parliament, the Conservative government and the minister for democratic reform, who was then the member of Parliament for Nepean, if I am not mistaken, introduced a reform that made significant changes to our election rules. My colleague was not here at the time, but I do not think the government consulted the public back then, and they certainly did not hold a referendum.

I am trying to understand the Conservatives' logic. Why do they insist on a referendum when they are not in power, but do the opposite when they are in power? The party's position seems to change based on when it is in power.

Should it not reconsider our proposal to make a committee or entity responsible for making that decision? That is what we have proposed, and that is what we will do.

Mr. Alain Rayes: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for her question, but I am flabbergasted.

I just cannot get over how the other opposition parties are playing right into the government's hands. The opposition parties that want to get on board with the plan to set up a committee are telling Canadians that they are not smart enough to have an opinion about something as important as the voting system.

The Conservative government made changes, but it never put forward a motion or a bill to change the voting system. Now the government wants a partisan committee composed of elected men and women to come up with a proposal that suits their personal interests.

I am not the only one to say that. I challenge the government to find a single political analyst who supports the government's proposal. The NDP, the Bloc Québécois, and the other parties are flirting with the government. I could just about fall off my chair.

[English]

Mr. Peter Fonseca (Mississauga East—Cooksville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I listened intently to the hon. member for Richmond—

Arthabaska. The member was talking about being hyperpartisan and how to take that out of politics. That is the platform that we ran on, a platform of real change, of positive change. Having accepted the motion from the NDP, we are reaching across the aisle, looking at ideas from all members.

Would the member be open-minded enough to reach out to his constituents through Twitter, through a town hall, through emails, voice drops, whatever, to bring them into the process and let them speak to what they would like to see in terms of electoral reform here in this country?

• (1650)

[Translation]

Mr. Alain Rayes: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague opposite for his question.

I will be pleased to consult my constituents and ask their opinion. I think that everyone will do that. The committee will do it and the members will too. However, ultimately, I will never tell them that it is an elected official, here in the House, who will make a final decision on the voting system, the very foundation of our democracy, without asking for their clear opinion.

I would like to remind everyone that I studied math and computer science and that I also have an MBA. Right now, there are 26 million voters registered in Canada. Even if we look at the worst-case scenario for a referendum, which is about 50% of voters, that would still be 13 million people who voted during the most recent referendums on the voting system in the various provinces in Canada.

Here in the House, the government is saying that, in the next six months, the committee members will decide what is good for Canadians and that they will do so during the summer, when they are busy barbecuing, sitting around their pools, or vacationing in various places across the country or throughout the world. No, thank you. I will not play the game of the members across the way and I hope that the other opposition parties will not play either.

[English]

Mr. Kennedy Stewart (Burnaby South, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will be splitting my time with the member for Abitibi—Témiscamingue.

I am very happy to stand up today to speak to the motion. My colleagues have outlined the core of the motion, what we are proposing for the committee, and the good news about the co-operation that seems to be bursting on the scene here in the House of Commons. However, I would like to give a little context. Since I did spend six years doing a Ph.D. on political science, I might as well geek out a bit and use some of that knowledge, as we look at changing what is a fundamental institution of our country.

Business of Supply

In early political science, all that political scientists studied were rules. They studied the institutions by which we make decisions. They tried to say that if we had a certain set of rules or institutions, we would always get a certain outcome. That was how political science really started. They soon found out that was not the case because a little thing called human behaviour got in the way. Consequently, in the fifties, we had a behavioural revolution. All we studied was human behaviour, saying that was what determined the outcomes of politics. However, after some while, they found that institutions did matter, and we had this kind of merger of the two ideas. It was said that both institutions, the rules by which we make the decisions and human behaviour, help to determine how we make certain political outcomes. Therefore, in a way, the rules by which our institutions are structured bound our behaviour.

We notice this in the House of Commons. We are elected through the first past the post system currently. That sets up an adversarial system in the House of Commons. By the nature of the rules, we have to have a majority on one side, followed by an opposition on the other. The expression that we are two sword lengths apart, and all that, has come from that tradition. However, it means we have an adversarial system. The government proposes something, and then our job as opposition is to criticize it.

These kinds of rules exist in all kinds of legislatures. Some first past the post majority systems are very adversarial. We see that. We see conflict and nastiness. Others are less so. Others are more co-operative. Although they are adversarial and although people are pitted against one another, the behaviour within the House matters. Therefore, I am hopeful that what we are seeing here today is perhaps us taking control of this institution, realizing that we are bound by the current rules we have, but deciding to change our behaviour collectively.

I was in the last Parliament. It was very adversarial, and it was by nature. I was very opposed to a number of the bills that the Conservatives put forward, the way they were pushed through the House of Commons by closure, omnibus bills, and those types of things. I was not just angry at the content of the bills, but a lot of the ways by which those bills were forced through Parliament offended me. I spoke up about that quite a lot.

Now, we are in a new Parliament, and we have had promises that things are going to work differently. We have the same rules we had before, but perhaps we can have different behaviour. What I have noticed as an MP is that we have vestiges of the last Parliament. We are still acting that way. We have a different Prime Minister. We have different positions on this side of the House, and maybe we do not have to be so adversarial. I was very happy with the motion we put forward, but I was extremely happy to hear that the government had decided it would support it. To me, that represents an important cultural shift in the House. I will not say everything is roses, but it does say to Canadians that this place is different now than the last Parliament. That would never have happened in the last Parliament, and it is an important step forward.

If the vote does pass next week, we will have a committee that will go forward to study our electoral formula, the formula by which we redistribute our votes, but also other aspects of the electoral system. That is very important.

We actually have two institutional changes to consider. We have the matter of how the electoral formula will redistribute our votes. The other consideration is the way we are going to make the decisions about how we change the votes.

The Conservatives have been quite clear. They demand a referendum, although I have not heard much detail, for example, on the threshold of acceptance. I do not know if it is 50% or 60%. They have not laid out much in the way of specifics in terms of what their referendum would look like.

• (1655)

I think it is a valid thing for them to argue, although I do not agree with it at this point. We have a bit of a conundrum here in the House of Commons because we had an unusual election promise. It is playing out that we are a little uncertain about how this should go forward.

As an example, our platform included a promise to bring in a mixed member proportional system. We have made that very clear. We made that clear in many elections, all the way through. If we had been elected in a majority in the House of Commons, we would have had a mandate to put through a mixed member proportional system. In other elections, parties campaigned on referendums to change electoral systems. I did not see that in the Conservative platform. I did not see a proposal for a referendum. This is a new thing for the official opposition to suggest this.

We had from the Prime Minister an election promise that I have not seen in any other election. It was not a promise for a specific system; it was a promise that changed the current system, and that is unusual. I think we have had a bit of trouble trying to figure out how that should happen because we do not have a lot of precedents to look at. We do not have many countries where we can say a government was elected with a majority making a promise to change the system, without giving an idea of what that would be.

I suspect if I were a Liberal, I would probably like a alternative vote system because that would benefit me in upcoming elections. I have read the work of the very respected political science professor from Quebec, our Global Affairs minister, whose preference is for some version of alternative votes. I know that the Liberals will be going into the committee thinking that this is their top preference and what they would like. Of course, Canadians know what the NDP's position has been forever, which is a mixed member proportional system, so that is what we will be going into the committee for.

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With the Conservatives, we know it is the status quo, but the promise from the Prime Minister is that we will not have the status quo. I am quite happy that we have come to point where we have a committee that can show Canadians what a proportional system would look like. It is not an adversarial system. We know committees are set up to be adversarial. One side has a clear majority and another side argues. It is just like here in the House of Commons. Eventually, if behaviour changes, sometimes we can make amendments to committee reports, or sometimes bill will change slightly. That is if the behaviour changes, if the culture is different. However, it is still a majority system, where the majority kind of rams things through.

If the motion holds, we are getting into a position where we will show Canadians how we as politicians will operate under a proportional system. That is incredibly important. It is almost a preview of what Canadians could see if we changed our electoral system to make it more proportional.

My colleagues have outlined very well what we have proposed here. They have also outlined, and again thanks to the government for agreeing, that this is a better structure for a committee that we should go forward with. However, what we need to hear as soon as the committee is struck are the principles for it.

I have a bill in front of Parliament concerning gender equity, which would nudge parties toward running more women candidates in the hope that we can get more women elected to this place. Canada is ranked 61st in the world in terms of the number of women who are elected to this legislature. We used to be 19th in the world. We have fallen to 61st because other countries have taken measures within their electoral laws to prompt parties to run more women candidates. I know we started to have that debate here, but I think that would be something that the committee might consider. Because we are proportional, we could have a very balanced discussion about that.

I know what my sights are set on. It is trying to get as much of a proportional system as we can, but which the parties can agree on. The second thing is to fundamentally change this place to make it more reflective of the Canadian population. To have only one-quarter of our members being women, parties have to nominate more women candidates. We want a Parliament that reflects Canada more broadly and that the politics and presence of all Canadians are felt in this place.

● (1700)

Mr. David de Burgh Graham (Laurentides—Labelle, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to come back to the comment of the member for Burnaby South that had the NDP won the election with a majority government, it would have brought in proportional representation. History belies this point. New Democrats have been in power in six or seven provinces and have never actually done it, even though they made that promise over and over again. Their federal and provincial parties are the same party, it is in their constitution, so it is a little strange for them to say that.

On another point, we have talked about first past the post and mixed member proportional. First past the post, as a term, was introduced to be diminutive. It was introduced to say it is a horse race, not a real system. I wonder if we could, as a group, agree to call

it single member plurality, which is the correct name for it. We should do that or start giving everything nicknames. For example, mixed member proportional could be first past the post with consolation prizes. There are a whole lot of different systems out there and we should be using the technical terms so we do not bias the terminology.

Mr. Kennedy Stewart: Mr. Speaker, I guess it is technicality versus what the public is most familiar with. Of course, we will not have to talk about it much because the last election was the last election that used first past the post/single member plurality, so perhaps it will be thrown into the dustbin of history and we will have a new system.

I take the member's point that we have to make it clear when we are explaining to Canadians that this is a very technical thing, which I have been explaining for 20 years to people. I really hope the government puts all of its resources into this to help Canadians through this, because it is basically a mathematical redistribution of votes, which is not that sexy most of the time.

Mr. Pat Kelly (Calgary Rocky Ridge, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member had some interesting things to say and I thank him for doing so. In the last election, I heard at thousands of doors an awful lot about a variety of issues, with emphasis on the economy, jobs and employment, the refugee crisis. I had conversations about leadership and preferences for the person people wanted as prime minister. I cannot really recall a comment about electoral reform and the desirability of it. This was not an issue that the majority of Canadians based their decision on, so it is a little disingenuous for parties or the government to claim this mandate for doing so.

In the member's speech, he talked about the NDP's desirability for proportional representation and he talked about the desirability perhaps of the government for an alternate vote. This is again a discussion of political parties deciding how they want to set up the system. Why will they not agree that Canadians ought to have the final say with whatever proposal is put forward and decide yes or no by referendum once the consultation is concluded?

● (1705)

Mr. Kennedy Stewart: Mr. Speaker, these are great questions and these are the kinds of discussions that will take place in committee. However, let us be clear that we all have partisan choices. New Democrats have been clear for decades that ours is mixed member proportionality, but the member's preference is for the current system.

In the election campaign, the Prime Minister made a promise to the Canadian public that that would be the last election under first past the post or single member plurality, as my colleague would call it. That is what we are trying to move towards. I would encourage the member to drop the spirit of the last Parliament and work with this Parliament. He should not use the adversarial system of the last Parliament and change his behaviour. Let us all work together on this.

Business of Supply

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault (Sherbrooke, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I commend my colleague on his expertise.

I am wondering whether, like me, he is at least somewhat optimistic about the outcome of this process. He is very familiar with how parliamentary committees operate and how they make recommendations.

Does he share my rather cautious optimism regarding the answer the government will get from the committee when it submits its report and recommendations based on its consultations?

[English]

Mr. Kennedy Stewart: Mr. Speaker, my hope springs eternal, and I forgot to mention in my speech how much I would like to thank the member for Skeena and the member for Rosemont, from our party, for making this happen.

We will have this committee, we will have our discussions, and there will be a committee report. I think it is something that is such a big change that we will have to take it step by step. However, I am very happy with the first step we took today.

[Translation]

The Deputy Speaker: Before I recognize the hon. member for Abitibi—Témiscamingue, I must inform her that she has about seven and a half minutes remaining and I will have to interrupt her at 5:15 p.m.

The hon. member for Abitibi—Témiscamingue.

Ms. Christine Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, NDP): Mr. Speaker, although I do not have 10 minutes to speak, I am pleased to be able to speak to this motion on the special committee and, more generally, on electoral reform.

I want to thank my colleague from Skeena—Bulkley Valley for the work he has done. I also want to commend the work done by the member for Edmonton Centre, among others. In the previous Parliament, my former colleague from Louis-Saint-Laurent, Alexandrine Latendresse, also worked very hard on the issue of electoral reform.

I would like to point out that most NDP members who were here before 2015 did a great deal of consultation in their ridings and used every means available to them to talk about electoral reform in a general sense in order to get a clearer picture of the most common concerns.

One of the most frequently raised points on the topic of electoral reform and our current system was that it does not make sense for a majority to have 100% control over Parliament when the majority of Canadians did not vote for them. Many people told me that minority governments are also perhaps not so effective, because that situation often leads to quick elections and not much work gets done during those Parliaments.

Nevertheless, many people have told me that they much preferred minority governments because members were forced to talk to each other to achieve their goals. Others told me that the problems started up again as soon as majority governments returned and they were allowed to take all control.

It obviously does not make sense to talk about electoral reform in a committee controlled by the majority government. If that had been the process, it would have made a mockery of our democracy, and I supported the proposal by my colleague from Skeena—Bulkley Valley to ensure that the committee reflects the percentage of votes we received.

As a result of his work, we will have a committee in which at least two parties will have to agree on the recommendations for them to be included in the report. At the very least, two parties will have to work together. For some recommendations, it may be two different parties than for other recommendations. At least the composition of the committee will leave us no choice but to work together. I am so happy about that.

Now, I will talk a bit about the points that are most often raised when I speak to people in my riding. One of the concerns that is raised most often has to do with the principle of local representation. People are worried that, if a new system is put in place, they will lose their local MP. They think it is extremely important to have a representative in the riding and to be able to contact someone who will help them. They are afraid of being forgotten if they are placed with a member who comes from a big city, for example. That is one of the points that was raised most often in the discussions that I have had with my constituents.

People also wanted to ensure that every vote counts. That is important. People told us that they always felt as though their vote was lost. They feel that is unacceptable. They said they liked voting for small parties and for people who really share their beliefs, but they know that if they do so, their vote is basically worthless. They often feel as though they cannot vote for their preferred candidate, who will do the best job, but instead they have to vote for the least objectionable candidate, according to the context and that person's chance of winning. That is not how people want to vote.

These are really important elements to consider and the committee will be able to examine the different systems based on these factors, as well as factors related to local representation and the ability of small parties to exist.

If we reform the electoral system, we need to remember that one thing that is different about Canada is that independent candidates regularly run in local elections. In my opinion, we need to take into account the fact that some members want to run as independents or that some candidates want to try their luck that way.

● (1710)

All of these different points can be studied by this committee, and no one party will have control. Obviously, the committee will produce its findings, but there is much more. With respect to witnesses, if a party has the absolute majority, it can block a witness who may have views that differ from the party's, for example.

This could affect more than the committee's decision or the recommendations it makes. It could affect the work that members do in this committee and even the reliability of the committee process. If people only listen to the witnesses they want to hear, the testimony will not reflect reality.

Private Members' Business

In such a comprehensive process, it is important to hear from experts who can provide information and talk about all the possibilities. Once we have this information and the recommendations on the table, we can decide on how to proceed.

However, for now, it is important to arrive at these recommendations based on as much information as possible. We must work as a team and be sure that our process is democratic and representative. Once this process is complete, we can decide what to do with the recommendations. Do we submit them to the public in a referendum? Do we move straight to a bill because there was a broad public consensus? To do so, we have to do the work fairly and equitably. All parliamentarians, who represent all of the political views across the country, must have a chance to be heard, participate actively, and vote.

With this process in place, the first step will be to make some specific recommendations. Once we have the recommendations, we can decide what to do. A number of Conservative colleagues have mentioned a referendum, which is why I wanted to touch on that topic. Before we talk about a referendum, we need to know what we would ultimately want to ask in a referendum. Right now, we want to look at all of the proposals. We cannot hold a referendum to ask the public whether they agree with each of our proposals.

When a referendum is held, the question must be clear. I think the proposal needs to be quite clear so that people understand it and can respond accordingly.

I am very pleased to conclude the debate on the excellent motion moved by my colleague from Skeena—Bulkley Valley.

• (1715)

[English]

The Deputy Speaker: It being 5:15 p.m., pursuant to an order made earlier today, all questions necessary to dispose of the opposition motion are deemed put and a recorded division deemed requested and deferred until Tuesday, June 7, 2016, at the expiry of the time provided for oral questions.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Speaker, I think if you were to canvas the House, you would find the will to call it 5:30 p.m.

The Deputy Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: It being 5:30 p.m., we will now proceed to the consideration of private members' business as listed on today's Order Paper.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

[English]

INCOME TAX ACT

Mr. Bryan May (Cambridge, Lib.) moved that Bill C-240, An Act to amend the Income Tax Act (tax credit — first aid), be read the second time and referred to a committee.

He said: Mr. Speaker, today it is my pleasure to rise in the House and speak to my private member's bill, an act to amend the Income

Tax Act to provide a non-refundable tax credit for those who take first aid courses.

I recognize well that my role is often to advocate for and represent my riding of Cambridge in North Dumfries. This is a role that I am honoured and humbled to fulfill, and I thank the people of my riding for placing their trust in me.

Private members' bills provide a unique and valuable opportunity to represent all Canadians. That is something that was foremost in my mind when I was designing my bill. I wanted to ensure that Canadian values and interests were inherent and that my bill would create a benefit that all Canadians could access equally.

With my PMB I wanted to achieve a few broad goals. We need to start a national conversation in this country about emergency preparedness and getting ready for the demographic shifts that we know are approaching.

The need for emergency preparedness has always been present in our society. However, with an aging population, Canadians need to be ready for more medical emergencies, more cardiac arrests, more strokes, and more falls.

The need for basic medical emergency preparedness in Canada is still growing, and this need has never been greater. In Canada, there is a heart attack every 12 minutes. People experiencing cardiac arrest have their chance of survival increased exponentially if there is a first responder or similarly trained individual present. Unfortunately, in many cases of cardiac arrest, no one with this lifesaving knowledge is nearby.

Right now more than half of adult Canadians live in a household in which no members have an up-to-date first aid or CPR certification. This reality is as dangerous as it is unacceptable, particularly when the training is readily available. These Canadian households are not prepared for emergencies. They are at risk, and it is our moral duty to do whatever we can to help our citizens be better prepared.

This legislation would fill a void in our current legislative framework and our broader society. Training to prepare people for medical emergencies is there, and we know it works. The only limitation is how many people in Canada have the training and the confidence to take action. This legislation is a measured response to the need for an incentive to encourage more Canadians to get trained.

The bill is designed to provide a modest change, innovate within a sector, and improve lives in a measured and specific way.

The legislation has the potential to make a lasting impact on the lives of many Canadians without making a lasting impact on their wallets. It is designed to appeal broadly to those members of the House who consider themselves fiscally responsible, as the costs are reasonable. At the same time, the bill's appeal is obvious to those members who seek an avenue for bettering people's lives and making our communities stronger, safer, and healthier.

I hope that my attempts to create this legislation, however humble, will save lives and achieve far grander benefits than might otherwise be apparent.

Private Members' Business

When people undertake first aid certification, what they are ultimately doing is gaining the skills and knowledge to serve their community at a personal cost. Perhaps even more important than the skills they are learning is the confidence they are gaining in an emergency situation where literally every second counts. The confidence gained through these courses can be the difference between life and death. Undertaking first aid training and administering first aid are fundamentally selfless acts that benefit not only the individual citizen but our communities as a whole. The House has the opportunity to recognize, incentivize, and facilitate these selfless acts by reducing the costs incurred by these civic-minded individuals. That is something that all members should laud, appreciate, and promote.

With this private member's bill, I propose that our government should provide a tax credit to those who take an accredited first aid, CPR, or AED training course. This tax credit would be non-refundable and provide a deduction in the amount owing equal to the lowest federal income tax rate currently at 15%. This tax credit would come at a relatively low cost to the government but would make a difference in the affordability of lifesaving training for individual Canadians.

● (1720)

According to Ipsos Reid, only 18% of Canadians have an up-to-date certification, meaning they have passed a course in the last three years. That means approximately 1.8 million Canadians will take this lifesaving training this year. At \$15 per person, the bill would cost the government a maximum of \$26.5 million this year. Compared to the value of the lives being saved, this is miniscule.

Of course, not all course participants will be eligible for the tax credit, nor will they all owe taxes. More than half of certified Canadians have their training financed by their workplace. When these facts are considered, we can see that the cost to the government would actually be much lower, likely less than \$13 million.

As I have said, a great many Canadians are trained in lifesaving first aid, CPR, and AED techniques through the generosity of their employers. This generosity is to be commended. These employers recognize the value of having certified employees in their workplace. However, employers who pay for their employees' training are not eligible for the tax credit, because they already receive tax incentives when they claim it as a business expense. Similarly, the employee cannot claim the cost of a course that their employer has paid for.

For many Canadians, however, this type of training is not available at their workplace. Many of these people are still interested in the training and frankly, society would be greatly benefited from their having this training.

First aid training is lifesaving. My hope is that by making first aid courses more financially accessible, Canada will have more citizens with these lifesaving skills. Having more people with first aid training increases the likelihood of trained individuals being at hand during an emergency.

One-third of Canadians have never taken a first aid, CPR, or AED training course. This is a huge lifesaving resource that we are not accessing as a culture, but we should be. Helping Canadians gain the skill to treat medical emergencies out of hospital also has the

potential to result in cost savings to the health care system by giving individuals the skills to better respond to minor situations, such as cuts and scrapes, and the knowledge and confidence to help minimize the damage sustained in the case of more substantive injuries.

For someone who breaks a bone, for example, knowing how to place a splint could have a major impact on their recovery time and the cost associated with it. For someone having a seizure, a passerby with the knowledge of rescue treatments, how to give care, comfort, and first aid, and when to call for emergency help can prevent injuries and keep many Canadians safe.

It is my hope that Canadians will take advantage of this modest tax credit to gain the skills that might allow them to save lives, prevent injuries, and help keep their neighbours and families safe.

I know that I am not the only member of Parliament for whom safeguarding the well-being of Canadians is of the utmost priority. The member for Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston has made it his personal mission over the past number of years to increase the number of automatic external defibrillators in his riding and has campaigned for greater access to these devices all across Canada.

An AED is a small portable device used to deliver a shock to correct abnormal beating of the heart. These AEDs, when kept in public spaces, are an incredible asset to the safety of those around them. Every police cruiser in Ottawa has one of these devices, and it has directly resulted in around 10 lives saved every single year.

Every workplace under federal jurisdiction is required to have first aid kits for this same reason, but we need to ensure that their are hands capable of wielding these tools so that they can be effective at saving lives.

Before working in the House, I was an employee at the YMCA for many years. I remember, as the director of the YMCA about 10 years ago, my boss came to me and said that he wanted me to become a lifeguard. My first response was why. At 30 years old, why was this something that was important?

● (1725)

I am very glad for the opportunity to do that, although it was incredibly humbling, at 30 years old, to be taking lifesaving training with a number of 16-year-olds. However, I can say that this first aid training has made me confident that in the face of any emergency I would be able to safeguard the lives and well-being of my neighbours, my family, and my colleagues.

It is my hope to spread that kind of knowledge and confidence within Canada. I have been asking for support for the bill for the past few months. In fact, I have been nagging people to a certain extent and sending them video emails and those sorts of things. I have risen today in the House to debate it and ask for the support of all members.

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I ask for this support for the sake of the well-being of our communities. The House has the opportunity to safeguard the lives of Canadians and display our commitment to emergency preparedness. I am confident that the members of the House will appreciate the impact of the legislation on the lives and safety of ordinary families. My hope is that my bill passes second reading and goes to committee, where I am open to any recommendations to make the bill better.

I thank members for their support on this issue, and I look forward to hearing their thoughts and answering any questions from the House.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alupa Clarke (Beauport—Limoulu, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague from Cambridge for his fine speech and his bill, which is quite laudable and very hard to oppose. My question is very simple. I was a member of the Canadian Armed Forces for a few years. Every year we had to take a first aid course, so that we would be able to give first aid to anyone who might need it, whether it was during our missions or while on exercise in the forest.

My colleague wants to offer a tax credit for that. That is good. As members know, we on this side of the House love tax credits. In his bill, did the member include any guidelines or provisions to ensure that official, recognized organizations would be the ones to provide the first aid courses, in order to ensure that this tax credit does not become a means for private companies to set up shop simply to make money while offering poor-quality courses?

• (1730)

[*English*]

Mr. Bryan May: Mr. Speaker, I am encouraged that there are others in the House who are as passionate about this particular issue as I am.

I understand his concern and, yes, there are safeguards in place. The provinces oversee the accreditation of institutions like the YMCA, the Boys and Girls Club, the Red Cross, and all these organizations that responsibly offer this kind of training. It is very clear in the bill that only accredited courses would qualify for this tax credit. As accreditation has been the provinces' responsibility, they have been doing a fairly good job of that.

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to congratulate my hon. colleague on the bill, and the New Democrats will be supporting it.

We are, however, concerned about the excessive proliferation of what are called boutique non-refundable tax credits that have been added to the Income Tax Act in recent years. These non-refundable tax credits are generally believed primarily to benefit middle- to upper-income families for whom financial barriers are less of a concern.

This also may have the unintended consequence of subsidizing the corporate sector by inadvertently encouraging employers to abandon their existing first aid training for employees. Finally, we believe that access to lifesaving training such as first aid and CPR should be equitable.

Will the hon. member consider ensuring the bill would commit the government to assisting low-income Canadians or Canadians with

no taxable income to take these lifesaving courses, and ensure that corporations still provide these necessary services to their employees?

Mr. Bryan May: Mr. Speaker, I am very excited to hear that New Democrats will be supporting the bill, and I thank them for that.

To the first part of his question, no, this is not a boutique tax credit. A boutique tax credit, by definition, is one that supports a very small number of people. There is a very specific parameter around the tax credit. The benefits of the bill would be available for anyone in this country who availed themselves of a training course, so by definition I would suggest that it is not.

I share the hon. member's concern about potentially having adverse impacts in terms of suggesting that other employers would not offer this anymore. I do not have any reason to believe that would be the case. This is a very modest bill. We are not suggesting we would be paying for 100% of the cost of this training. Because I have kept this very modest, it would not have the impact that the member was necessarily suggesting.

Mr. Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to speak to Bill C-240, An Act to amend the Income Tax Act (tax credit — first aid). I thank my colleague from Cambridge for bringing this important issue to the House.

I was excited to see my colleague opposite offering Canadians a tax credit rather than increasing their taxes. I hope it is the first of many.

This bill, as we all know, proposes amending the Income Tax Act to provide a non-refundable tax credit to individuals who complete a first aid or other health and safety instructional program or course. The proposed tax credit will be similar to the federal student tuition taxation credit for everyone who takes life-saving first aid, CPR or automated external defibrillator, AED, training.

This bill could mean the difference between life and death in an emergency situation. Tax credits like the one proposed in this bill will encourage Canadians to get trained and certified in CPR, first aid, and AED use. During an emergency, having someone on site who is trained in first aid and CPR could make the difference as we all know.

In fact, according to the Heart and Stroke Foundation, there are 40,000 cardiac arrest incidents in Canada each year. That is one every thirteen minutes, and 85% of those incidents will take place outside of hospitals. After 12 minutes, the survival rate is just 5%. After four minutes, significant brain damage can occur. During an emergency situation, CPR plus an AED double the chance of survival.

These are our neighbours, our friends, and family. The importance of CPR, first aid, and AED training is clear just by looking at the number of people who spend their hard-earned money to be trained, groups like Scouts and Girl Guides, youth groups, babysitters, camp counsellors, first responders, just to name a few. That includes, of course, both adults and children.

St. John Ambulance alone, certifies more than 550,000 Canadians a year, with more than 100 locations across Canada, including a location in Lindsay in my riding.

The proposed bill will have a direct impact on Canadians who may be considering training, but are worried about the cost. However, for most people looking to take these types of courses, it really is not about the prices. It is about helping our fellow Canadians. Therefore, why not give them thanks from the Government of Canada, after all they are spending their own money.

Canadians coast to coast will see the direct benefits of this proposed change. This is not a new issue of importance for Canadians or for the government. It was our government that initiated the national AED program, which saw \$10 million funded through the Public Health Agency of Canada, to install AEDs in rinks, arenas, and recreation centres all across Canada.

According to the Heart and Stroke Foundation, this initiative, recently concluded, was responsible for the installation of 3,234 AEDs and the training of 25,360 Canadians on how to respond to cardiac arrest situation.

In my riding this program allowed for 23 AEDs to be installed in public access areas like the S.G. Nesbitt Memorial Arena in Minden, the A.J. LaRue Arena in Haliburton, and the Lindsay Recreation Complex.

This program has already been responsible for saving 10 lives across Canada.

I believe this bill represents a continuation of a number of tax credits initially started by our previous government, including the children's fitness and arts tax credits, both of which are now sadly gone, and the volunteer firefighters tax credit. The volunteer firefighters tax credit had the same effect I think this bill will have. It encouraged Canadians to be trained and to help each other. It allowed for Canadians to help themselves. Again, it is not about the cost, it is about helping our fellow citizens.

As such, we should let the measure we are discussing now, and the previously mentioned measures, act as a way of giving back to Canadians for trying to help and do the right thing. In many small communities, like those in my riding, many firefighting departments are completely run by volunteers. These Canadians sacrifice their time and safety, even time with family, to help protect others.

Increasing the number of Canadians who have the financial ability to be trained in CPR, first aid, and AED use will help Canadians coast to coast to coast, especially in remote and rural areas where medical assistance is not always around the corner.

A 2012 Ipsos Reid poll showed that 38% of Canadians said that they had provided first aid, and 78% believed it was important to know how to perform first aid. While the information is a few years old, it is still very relevant for the discussion on this bill. The results

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showed that two in three Canadians had taken a first aid course, with only 18% having taken it within three years of the poll, and 49% having taken it more than three years before that poll.

● (1735)

Canadians who have taken a first aid course are significantly more competent in their skills to help someone in a medical emergency.

The results of this poll help paint a very big picture. It paints a picture of the importance of first aid, CPR, and AED training. Similar information has been found by our neighbours south of the border. According to the American Heart Association, each year more than 350,000 out-of-hospital cardiac arrests occur in the United States. Almost 90% of people who suffer out-of-hospital cardiac arrests die.

CPR, especially if performed in the first few minutes of cardiac arrest, can double or triple a person's chance of survival. Seventy per cent of out-of-hospital cardiac arrests happen in homes. Unfortunately, only about 46% of people who experience an out-of-hospital cardiac arrest get the immediate help they need before professional help arrives.

Our Conservative Party highly values life and life-saving capabilities, and I support incentives and rewards to help save lives. If more medically trained personnel exist, financial burdens to emergency services may be reduced, resulting in greater efficiency and productivity.

While there is much to praise about the proposed bill, I look forward to seeing what the potential cost of these measures will be. We need to ensure that proper balance of tax credits and fiscal responsibility are there.

Canadians are kind and generous people, as we all know. I believe the bill would give Canadians an increased opportunity to be certified in first aid, CPR, and AED use, which of course, as I think we all agree in the House, is a benefit to all.

I would like to thank the Canadian Red Cross, the Heart and Stroke Foundation, St. John Ambulance, and all the organizations that have promoted, trained, and certified Canadians in first aid, CPR, and AED use. I would also like to thank the volunteers, because we cannot forget the volunteers who work so hard in our communities to make them safer.

People should remember that during CPR, we should push on the chest at a rate of 100 to 120 compressions per minute, or to the beat of the Bee Gees song, *Stayin' Alive*.

I encourage all members to support the bill and to encourage all Canadians to get trained in first aid, CPR, and AED use. It could mean the difference between life and death in an emergency situation.

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• (1740)

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to speak to Bill C-240, an act to amend the Income Tax Act, to provide a tax credit for first aid courses. This bill proposes to introduce a non-refundable tax credit of up to \$200 for all first aid courses, cardiopulmonary resuscitation training, and automated external defibrillator training.

The member for Cambridge introduced this bill with the intention of providing a financial incentive to encourage more Canadians to receive first aid and other emergency health and safety training courses. If adopted, all taxpayers and their eligible children would become eligible for this credit. I want to congratulate him on this initiative and tell him that the New Democrats will be proudly supporting this at second reading.

First aid, CPR, and AED are skills that can be used by everyday citizens in emergency situations to stabilize health conditions until first responders arrive. An Ipsos Reid poll commissioned in 2012 revealed that nearly 40% of Canadians say they have provided first aid in their lifetime. The majority of first aid is provided, importantly, to a family member.

As well, while nearly 80% of Canadians believe first aid is a very important skill to have, only 18% of Canadians have been certified. According to the Red Cross, Canadians with first aid training and certification are considerably more confident in their skills to be able to help someone experiencing a medical emergency. It saves lives.

Here are a few relevant facts about first aid in Canada. The Red Cross estimates it trains approximately 600,000 Canadians every year in first aid, CPR, and/or AED. While nearly 80% of Canadians believe first aid is a very important skill to have, only 18% of Canadians were certified. An Ipsos Reid poll commissioned in 2012 revealed that 40% of Canadians have provided that important skill to their family members. First aid saves lives, and efforts to promote this training should be encouraged.

New Democrats support the objective of this bill and look forward to engaging in a deeper study at the committee stage. As a party, New Democrats believe fundamentally that the lens of equity and social justice should be applied to all legislation that passes through the House. It should, therefore, come as no surprise that New Democrats are always concerned by the proliferation of non-refundable tax credits that have been added to the Income Tax Act in recent years.

Many expert observers argue that these kinds of tax credits primarily benefit middle- and upper-income households. To quote a 2013 report by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives:

These credits...make the tax system less transparent and...once they are put in place there is little...accountability of the amount of money spent on them or their effectiveness.

...a large number of current deductions and credits disproportionately benefit high earners....

The question of accessibility cannot be forgotten in the larger discussion around the promotion of first aid training. When assessing this bill, members should ask themselves who benefits and who could be left out. Certainly, this bill can achieve the desired effect of promoting first aid training among a number of families. However,

the same must be focused on low-income Canadians and those on social assistance.

There are Canadians for whom the cost of first aid training presents a barrier. These are the Canadians who might not have enough income to benefit from a non-refundable tax credit, and like the rest of us, these Canadians would also greatly benefit from first aid training. It is, therefore, my hope that this bill progresses to the committee stage and that the committee is given the opportunity to take a closer look at the issues of accessibility in this bill, in the hopes of broadening its reach.

On a similar note, New Democrats believe all bills involving tax credits should be properly costed before being adopted by Parliament. In my research on this bill, I asked the Library of Parliament to draw up a rough estimate of the annual cost of Bill C-240. Accounting for multiple variables, the analysts have estimated a cost at between \$30 million and \$60 million per year. While relatively small in the grand scheme of a \$300-billion budget, it is not insignificant, particularly when we consider the number of proposals for tax credits that have been introduced in Parliament and the others that are already on the books.

Finally, this initiative may also have the unintended consequence of subsidizing the corporate sector by inadvertently encouraging employers to abandon their existing first aid training programs. We would have to keep a close eye on that.

These are some of the issues that New Democrats believe require consideration at committee stage, and I look forward to having the opportunity to participate in that analysis.

• (1745)

As I have stated before, Mr. Speaker, this bill has the laudable goal of promoting life-saving first aid training among Canadians, and it spurs a conversation about how best to improve first aid training in our communities.

While reading Bill C-240, I was reminded of the local heroes in Vancouver and across Canada who either teach or use first aid, CPR, and automated external defibrillation to save lives every day. My thoughts go to those remarkable first responders in Vancouver who have worked admirably throughout the years, and today, often in very challenging situations, to make our communities safer for everyone.

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I have often had the great pleasure to meet with firefighters in Vancouver, from IAFF Local 18, people like Rob Weeks, Lee Lax, Dustin Bourdeaudhuy, and Chris Coleman. These are hard-working local heroes who, with their workmates, often on the front lines of traumatic and tragic events, provide life-saving skills every day. In their jobs they save lives, livelihoods, homes, and more. In my meetings, I hear the pride they have to serve the public and to perform their jobs with honour and professionalism. These men and their colleagues truly make Vancouver a safer community for everyone. On behalf of the residents of Vancouver Kingsway, I want to thank them here in this House for their work.

I have also listened to the legitimate requests these local heroes have made to improve their occupational health and safety, and their quality of life. I have heard their requests for a firefighter compensation fund, funding for increased staffing in fire halls, and better PTSD services for working firefighters. We need to act on these justified and necessary requests, and do so soon.

My thoughts also go to first responders such as Tom Stamatakis, from the Vancouver Police Union, and the men and women who serve us in the police forces across this country. I have heard of the valiant work of policemen and policewomen who patrol the streets and are often the first people to answer emergency calls. In cities sometimes blighted by organized criminal activity, the policemen and policewomen are on the front lines every day to make our cities and towns safe and secure places to live. They save lives every day as well. I want to thank them in this House for their work.

In my capacity as health critic, I have also had the great pleasure of meeting with representatives from the Paramedic Association of Canada. Paramedics save lives every day in emergency situations, using first aid skills, and a variety of other specialized medical training. We need to thank them and support them in their work.

My thoughts also go to the countless organizations in Canada that provide first aid training in schools, community centres, and offices, to better equip the public for emergencies. Many see first aid as a form of community care, a form of empowerment for people in our communities to take care of themselves and save lives.

As many know, Vancouver is blessed with its location between the mountains and the ocean. Despite the wonderful geographic features that make Vancouver so unique around the world, we also live with many of the associated risks. Vancouverites are active boaters, swimmers, hikers, and skiers. These exciting sports are part of the attraction of the west coast lifestyle, but they also raise the risk of accidents and emergencies. Widespread first aid training is vital to creating a safer environment for Vancouverites, British Columbians, and indeed all Canadians, to get out and play in our beautiful environment and our country. Therefore, thousands of Vancouverites, and millions of Canadians, count on incredible non-profit Canadian agencies, such as the Lifesaving Society, St. John Ambulance, Canadian Ski Patrol, Canadian Red Cross, and Heart and Stroke Foundation to provide life-saving first aid training.

Vancouver is a city that sits on a seismologically active fault line. Frequent minor earthquakes in the region are a reminder of the power of the earth beneath the feet of Vancouverites and British Columbians. For years, geological scientists have predicted the possibility of a large seismic event in the Pacific northwest. The “big

one”, as it is commonly referred to, could strike here, at any time. We had recently a magnitude 4.1 earthquake on the west coast of Haida Gwaii. Earthquake preparedness is part of the way of life for Vancouverites. We need to make sure our first aid training, our seismic upgrading, and our preparation for our population, particularly on the west coast, is given a high priority by the Liberal government.

To conclude, I want to reiterate that the New Democratic Party's support for Bill C-240 is strong. We believe more needs to be done to promote first aid training among Canadians to make our communities safer. We look forward to a vibrant debate at committee stage and beyond as we work to improve and implement the provisions of this important bill.

Once again, I thank my hon. colleague for bringing this important issue to the attention of the House.

• (1750)

Mr. François-Philippe Champagne (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the member for Cambridge is not only a great member, but he is also a friend.

The bill pursues a great goal. I think all members would agree to that. We all commend members who present private member's bills because we know how much work, time, and effort goes into them, and I know the member is genuine in trying to pursue a very important initiative in our country.

I took a course in first aid when I was an army cadet and it has served me well throughout my life, so I do understand what the member is trying to achieve, and I commend him for that because he has taken this issue very seriously. We had a number of consultations. We spoke together. We spoke with the minister, but as good as the policy objective is, the tax system is not the appropriate vehicle for action, and we believe it would be unlikely to increase participation.

Considering that 67% of Canadians have taken first aid courses, it is unlikely that a deduction of \$15 claimed about 16 months afterwards would have a significant effect on increasing enrolment in our country.

In addition, the tax credit would be complicating our tax system and adding significant administration and compliance costs for the government.

[*Translation*]

I have the privilege once again to discuss an issue that is important to Canadians in the House, in their House of Commons. I thank my colleague for introducing Bill C-240, an act to amend the Income Tax Act.

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Among other things, the bill seeks to provide a non-refundable tax credit to individuals who complete a first aid or other health and safety instructional program or course. I thank my colleague for his efforts, and he knows that. However, the Government of Canada is trying mainly to help the middle class and those working hard to join it. That is why in December, one of the first things our government did was to implement a tax cut for the middle class. In total, nearly nine million Canadians have been benefiting from this tax cut since January 1, 2016.

Next came budget 2016 and the new Canada child benefit. This benefit will provide additional support to Canadian families to help them deal with the high cost of raising children, and it will replace the current complicated child benefit system. The new benefit will also be better targeted to help those who need it most.

In the same vein, budget 2016 reflects our election commitment to eliminate poorly targeted and inefficient programs, wasteful spending, and ineffective and obsolete government initiatives.

As a first step towards meeting this commitment, budget 2016 announced annual reductions of \$221 million in professional services, travel and government advertising, starting in 2016–17.

Going forward, under the leadership of the President of the Treasury Board, the government will identify other changes and better align government spending with priorities.

In addition, the government remains committed to ensuring federal tax expenditures are fair for Canadians, efficient and fiscally responsible.

Individuals and businesses have expressed concerns related to the efficiency and fairness of the tax system and how the increasing number of tax expenditures has made the federal tax system more complex.

In the coming year, the government will undertake a review of the Canadian tax system to determine whether it works well for Canadians, with a view to eliminating poorly targeted and inefficient tax measures. Consequently, introducing a new expenditures outside the budget process would run counter to the objectives of the comprehensive review of current spending that the Government of Canada is currently conducting.

Let us take a closer look at what the bill sets out to do. As I said earlier, my colleague from Cambridge has a worthwhile goal, but we need to examine the degree of complexity that this proposal would add to the tax system.

● (1755)

The bill seeks to provide a maximum tax credit of 15% of up to \$200 for the cost of a first aid or other health and safety instructional program or course successfully completed by an individual or the individual's qualifying child. The bill would provide a limited incentive, as I said earlier.

Let us look at the facts: the number of Canadians who register for a first aid course is already quite high, and that is very good. According to a 2012 Ipsos Reid poll conducted for the Canadian Red Cross, we should be pleased that 67% of Canadians have taken a first

aid course, of which roughly a fifth were taken in the past three years.

What is more, existing policies at various levels of government make it mandatory to know first aid at the workplace. Many employers help their employees take this type of training. At the federal level, the Canada Occupational Health and Safety Regulations stipulate how many employees are required to receive first aid training at federally regulated workplaces.

Furthermore, all the provinces and territories have adopted legislative requirements for the workplace regarding employee training in first aid. Given that a typical first aid course costs around \$100, it is unlikely, in our view, that a \$15 refund received up to 16 months after the training cost was incurred would lead to a significant increase in the number of registrations for such programs. The credit would probably mainly constitute a subsidy for the many Canadians who are already taking such courses. It is estimated that this would cost the Canadian government approximately \$17 million per year.

The average benefit of this measure, in terms of reduction of income tax payable, would be weak relative to its administrative costs and compliance costs. What is more, the bill establishes no criteria for the quality or legitimacy of programs eligible to the credit. It is for these reasons that the government is opposed to this bill.

I would now like to draw the attention of the House to certain measures that the government has taken in budget 2016 to strengthen Canada's financial sector to support economic growth in the country. Canada's financial sector framework balances various objectives, namely those of stability, competition, and meeting the evolving needs of consumers and Canadian businesses.

The financial sector plays a vital role in allocating capital efficiently to businesses and households across the economy. It must continue to play this role effectively, to ensure that Canada's economic growth will be long-lasting and inclusive. Canadians deserve financial consumer protection that keeps pace in meeting their needs. In addition, the financial consumer protection framework must provide clarity to guide the operations of federally regulated banks.

Amendments to the Bank Act will be proposed to modernize the protection framework for these consumers by clarifying and enhancing protection measures through a new chapter in the act. They will reaffirm the government's intent to have a system of exclusive rules to ensure an efficient national banking system from coast to coast to coast.

The government will collaborate with provinces, territories, and stakeholders to support the implementation of the framework, as well as to enhance consumer education and financial literacy. Stable and secure housing markets protect the greatest investment of many middle-class Canadian families. This is why on December 11, 2015, the government announced coordinated actions to strengthen the resiliency of Canada's housing finance system, increase market discipline in residential lending, and promote long-term stability and balanced economic growth.

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In closing, I would like to thank my hon. colleague from Cambridge once again for his motion. I thank him for having proposed an important bill, and as I was saying earlier, we will have to oppose that bill as it now stands, for even though its objective is laudable, we have to consider its important tax implications, the cost of this measure, and especially the fact that 67% of Canadians have already taken part in a first aid program or course, and in our view a new tax credit will have a limited impact on participation.

• (1800)

[*English*]

Mr. Todd Doherty: Mr. Speaker, on a point of order, I fail to see the relevance in that whole diatribe from our colleague across the way.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mr. Anthony Rota): I thank the hon. member, but I think that is going to debate. We will proceed with scheduled debate.

The hon. member for Barrie—Innisfil.

Mr. John Brassard (Barrie—Innisfil, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am thankful for the opportunity to rise here today to speak in support of the bill.

I am actually quite shocked that the government will not be supporting its own private member in this particular situation, given the nature of the bill to potentially save lives across this country.

Certainly on this side of the House, we value life, and we value the ability of individuals to help people in certain situations where this an emergency. I can speak to this on a first-hand basis, given that I spent 30 and a half years as a firefighter. I am trained in first aid. I am trained in CPR. I am trained in AED. I have seen first-hand the impact that training can have, not just with myself, but with my colleagues, and several thousands of colleagues across the country, who are trained to act, in particular those who are not paid professionals and are there when people need them.

Therefore, to spend 10 minutes of one's speech talking about the implementation of the budget, which I think we are dealing with tomorrow, I find a little disingenuous. I certainly understand my colleague for Cariboo—Prince George standing on a point of order, particularly when the parliamentary secretary was focused on his government's middle-class tax fraud. However, I will say that given the experience I have had, that is why I rise in support of this private member's bill.

I will give members an example of how helping people in an emergency situation is beneficial. Just after I was elected to Parliament, I think it was my second trip to Ottawa, I was heading home back to Barrie—Innisfil. When driving down Bank Street, there was someone who was hit by a car. My medical gloves are never too far away, and I stopped, as one would expect, to help this individual until the fire department and ambulance showed up. This is really what the bill is speaking to. I will also say that in Barrie—Innisfil, we have a tremendous amount of experience with respect to AEDs.

I want to spend a bit of time talking about Chase McEachern. For those in this country who do not know Chase, he was a hockey player from Barrie and a prolific goal scorer. At the age of five, he

scored 130 goals while he played for the Vaughan Kings Minor Pewee AAA team in the Greater Toronto Hockey League.

In 2005, at the age of 11, after being injured while playing a pick-up football game at school, he went to the emergency room where doctors found that Chase's heart was beating up to 150 times a minute. He went by air ambulance to The Hospital for Sick Children and underwent a cardioversion, in which doctors returned his heart rhythm back to normal with a small electric pulse. Chase was able to return to school and continue playing hockey, but this time under doctor's orders while wearing a heart monitor.

It was at that time that Chase started a campaign to make AEDs mandatory at hockey arenas and schools everywhere, because he realized that heart problems did not just affect older people. Chase, in fact, wrote to Don Cherry. He got Don Cherry involved by writing the hockey commentator a letter asking for his support, and, in what has become legend, Don Cherry actually brought it up on Coach's Corner.

Sadly, before the campaign had a chance to fly, Chase collapsed during gym class and was rushed to hospital where it was discovered that he had suffered severe brain damage due to a lack of oxygen. After a heartbreaking six days on respirator, his parents made the decision to take him off of it.

As a result of that tragedy, the Chase McEachern Memorial Fund aims to have an automatic external defibrillator or AED in public places, such as community centres and arenas. It is a legacy from this tragedy that Chase's parents, his father John, have carried on in Chase's memory.

• (1805)

Since 2006, over 12,000 AEDs have been put in these places because of the Chase McEachern memorial fund. In fact, just two weeks ago, on May 16, I attended a CPR and AED training session in Barrie at Georgian Chevrolet that acted as not only a free training session that was put on by Mr. McEachern and others, but also to benefit the Chase McEachern memorial fund. This Sunday, there is golf tournament at Angus Glen to help support the fund.

Imagine an 11-year old boy having that great an impact on our country and having 12,000 AEDs in place.

I also want to highlight as well the significance of the Simcoe County public access defibrillator training. Since 2006, Simcoe County paramedics have trained 11,485 people in first aid, CPR, and the use of an AED since the start of our program, with 1,307 people trained in 2015. Fourteen public access defibrillator saves have been made since the program started. In 2015, the latest statistics show that three people have been saved by public access defibrillators.

Adjournment Proceedings

To suggest that this is not a priority is misguided for the government. I heard the hon. parliamentary secretary speak about tax credits and the fact that the government would not support them. When we look at some of the impacts that tax credits have had, particularly on the issue of life safety like this, there should be no doubt that this is something the government should consider. We on this side of the House support it.

One of the things I want to focus on with respect to tax credits and the significance they have to people in our country is the fitness tax credit. I do not think any of us would be against this. The fact is that the health and fitness of our children is paramount to the future of our country.

From 2006 to 2015, \$1.13 billion in tax credits have been claimed by Canadian families just with the fitness tax credit alone. That has meant that middle-class families have been able to put their kids into sports and receive tax credits. I have spoken about this before in the House, but in my situation, with four children, the tax credit has made it much easier for me to put my kids into fitness activities. On the arts side, between 2011 and 2015 tax years, Canadians have claimed \$190 million in credits. These credits have been wiped out, yet they directly impacted Canadian families.

This private member's bill would not only impact Canadian families and potentially save some lives, but it would be an incentive for people to train in first aid, CPR, and the use of automatic external defibrillators.

In some of the talks we have had, it is my understanding that right now only 18% of Canadians are current in their first aid and CPR training. If there is any way at all that they can be given an incentive to continue on with that training, I do not see that as an issue.

The bottom line is that we want people to act in the event of an emergency. We want them to be able to render assistance until first responders are able to arrive. Oftentimes in first aid and CPR training we talk about the golden hour, the golden 15 minutes, where one can actually make a difference in somebody's life by starting CPR and first aid.

I am proud to say that just yesterday, the first outside automatic external defibrillator was delivered in Barrie, Ontario.

It is so important that people not only know first aid or CPR, but it is so important to give them the ability to train on AEDs. This private member's bill would do that. We on this side of the House are very supportive of the bill. I thank the member for Cambridge for bringing it forward.

● (1810)

[*Translation*]

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mr. Anthony Rota): Resuming debate. The hon. member for Abitibi—Témiscamingue has three minutes left for today.

Ms. Christine Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I suppose that with a bit of luck, I will have the other seven minutes another day. For now, I will focus on just one element of the bill that I find interesting. I will be asking the member for some clarifications once the bill goes to committee.

The bill provides a \$200 tax credit for people, and their dependents, who are eligible and want to take first aid training. I would like the member to clarify whether this tax credit is indexed based on the number of children, because that does not appear to be the case in the bill. If I have two dependent children, are we talking about \$200 or \$600?

This needs to be clarified, so that people who have a large family can make sure all of their children take a first aid course. For instance, a friend of mine, Jamie Bouchard, has eight children. Clearly, with \$200, she cannot expect the same results as someone who lives alone. I think the member needs to clarify that when the time comes to study the bill in committee.

It is extremely important for children to take first aid courses, even when they are very young. I have had the opportunity to work as an emergency room and ICU nurse, and I know how vital it can be for children to know what to do in an emergency, particularly when it is their mother or father who is in trouble and they have to intervene.

Finally, some paramedic friends shared some videos with me of a three-year-old child who, in a simulation, managed to place his mother in the recovery position and call emergency services. It can be very useful to teach even very young children basic first aid techniques.

Could my colleague clarify whether the bill gives a tax credit based on the number of dependants? Is it \$200 per person taking the courses or \$200 for all of the courses taken by that person and his or her children?

I have seven minutes left and I hope to be able to continue my speech in the second hour of debate.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mr. Anthony Rota): As mentioned, the hon. member for Abitibi—Témiscamingue will have seven minutes to finish her speech when the House resumes debate on this bill.

The time provided for the consideration of private members' business has now expired and the order is dropped to the bottom of the order of precedence on the Order Paper.

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

A motion to adjourn the House under Standing Order 38 deemed to have been moved.

● (1815)

[*English*]

STATUS OF WOMEN

Mr. Kennedy Stewart (Burnaby South, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am proud to stand tonight to speak to an issue that I asked the Minister of Democratic Institutions about a few weeks ago during question period. Specifically, I asked whether the government would support my private member's bill, the candidate gender equity act, when it comes up for a vote at second reading.

Adjournment Proceedings

Before getting to my questions for the government, let me start by going over the details of Bill C-237 and the reasons why I put it forward.

While Canadians felt pride when the Prime Minister announced that his cabinet would be Canada's first gender-balanced cabinet, we really cannot lose sight of the fact that women still only hold 26% of the seats in the House of Commons, and this is the closest we have ever been to gender parity. This means that almost three out of every four MPs are male and Canada now ranks 61st in the world when it comes to the proportion of women in our national legislature, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union. While we were ranked 21st in 1991, we have fallen behind countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, and El Salvador so it is a poor record.

This is more than mere statistics. These numbers mean something. The politics of presence is essential for any well-functioning democracy, and the decisions made in this place directly reflect the perspectives of those who propose and vote on decisions in the House. If our Parliament were equal and more diverse, our democracy would better represent Canadians and their aspirations.

That is why I put forward the candidate gender equity act. Academic research, some that I have actually published myself, shows that women face significant barriers and unfair biases in the processes used by political parties to select their candidates. It is not the voters that are the problem, it is the parties that are the problem. That is what Bill C-237 would do. It would incentivize parties to recruit more women candidates and move toward parity in their candidate lists. We would incentivize this by using the existing public subsidies that parties receive from taxpayers. A party's post-election rebate would be gradually reduced if it did not have at least 45% women candidates, and then of course the subsidy would be further reduced as the party moved further from parity.

I was disheartened that the minister said that the current government would oppose the bill, at least now. However, today, where the government has accepted our opposition day motion, our suggestions for how we might change the committee studying electoral reform, I am perhaps hopeful that maybe the minister will also change her position on the bill.

I would like to outline a few things.

First, the bill that I put forward was formulated by experts and drawn from laws from other countries. For example, Ireland passed a similar law in 2012 and under this law, the Irish increased the number of women candidates in the election by 90%, and believe it or not, increased the number of women in their legislature by 40% with just one year of this single law.

Second, this law could work under any voting system. We will be changing our electoral system here, from what I understand. This law would work under any voting system, so it would not constrain us in that sense.

Third, what is most important is that this would not be a quota. I have heard from this side of the House and the other side of the House that it is a quota. It is not a quota, and in fact, in no way would it interfere with the internal workings of the parties.

This is an important measure and I look forward to the response from the other side.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to share some thoughts with the member in regard to his private member's bill, and specifically to his question. It is important that we recognize that gender equity is laudable and a necessary objective. It is one which we support wholeheartedly. In working toward this goal, however, we must select the most effective way to achieve it.

As all members know, the government has, with other parties of the House, formed a special committee. The member actually just made reference to that committee. It is mandated to examine a variety of reforms to our electoral system, such as preferential ballots and proportional representation. In other words, Canada's electoral system for the next election is still unknown. Under these circumstances, it is premature to impose a legislative quota, at best designed for the first past the post system.

With respect to the bill, it limits both the independence of parties with respect to their choice of candidates, but also with respect to their position on gender equity. For example, an all woman party aimed at increasing gender representation would be penalized and would have to limit opportunities for potential candidates.

I have had the opportunity to serve on election readiness committees and to get involved in many different capacities within my own political party. There are a number of ideas there. At the end of the day, what we want to see is gender parity. A lot of it depends on leadership. We have seen significant gains through our current Prime Minister, and we will continue to grow in this area. I was very proud of the fact, as I believe all Canadians were, that we had gender parity within the federal cabinet. It was the first time, and it has been acknowledged around the world.

There have been some very significant gains. From a very personal point of view, in the last provincial election my daughter, who is 24 years old, was elected to the Manitoba legislature. The Manitoba Liberal caucus, albeit small, is made up of three MLAs, two female members and Jon Gerrard. I know from personal experiences in the past we have had some very strong personalities of the female gender involved in politics.

I do not think the bill is appropriate at this stage, when we reflect on the resolution that we supported today looking at electoral reform, which I am anticipating will be passed and hopefully we will see a very exciting number of months ahead of us. I would really encourage the member to do what he can in terms of advocating what he believes is important not only to himself but to his constituents and the broader community, recognizing that he has brought forward a bill that might already be taken by some of these initiatives into potential consideration. I do not want to prejudice what the committee is going to be looking at, or the scope per se, but there are some objectives. For example, there were five listed off by the government.

There is an opportunity for the member to further explore his idea. At this point we are just not convinced that the bill he is referring to is the best tool to do that.

Adjournment Proceedings

●(1820)

Mr. Kennedy Stewart: Mr. Speaker, numbers do not lie. Only a quarter of the seats in the House are filled by women. That is the most we have ever had. We are 61st in the world.

I put forward a bill. The most important thing for private member's bills is to get them to committee. That is what I am asking for, a vote to get it to committee.

I am happy to build concessions into the bill. For example, in Ireland, these kinds of measures have been phased in. As I have said, I have asked the House of Commons law office whether the bill is constitutional. It indeed meets all the requirements of the constitution. It does not interfere with the way parties select candidates. In fact, it is the only way forward in the House.

Therefore, the member is either for the bill and for gender equity or he is against gender equity measures. How will the Prime Minister be a feminist if he does not put forward gender equity measures?

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Speaker, I do not think it is a fair assessment to say that, if individuals are for gender equity, they have to support this bill.

I do not think the Prime Minister needs to take a gender equity lesson from the member, given the many different things he has done in a relatively short time span to promote and encourage gender equity, as I stated, right from cabinet itself, which is a significant achievement in its own right.

The bill would create financial and political incentives to refuse the nomination of qualified candidates on the basis of gender. We recognize that. In that respect, the bill would limit the independence of parties with respect to their choice of candidates but also with respect to their position on gender equity. For example, an all-woman party, as I indicated earlier, aimed at increasing gender representation would be penalized, and it limits opportunities for other potential candidates.

A second concern we have with the bill relates to transgender candidates, as there is no mention of non-binary—

●(1825)

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mr. Anthony Rota): The hon. member for Carleton.

TAXATION

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Carleton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, everybody loves the underdog. Think of great movies, like *Rocky*, *Rudy*, or Will Smith's, *The Pursuit of Happyness*, or think of the great legends of David and Goliath or Robin Hood.

Speaking of Robin Hood, our Liberal opponents are always telling us that we need big government, to take from the rich and give to the poor. Why is it that big government always seems to send the money in the opposite direction? Think about the Bombardier bailout, which would take a billion middle-class tax dollars and give them to a company of billionaire owners and millionaire executives; or there is Ontario's so-called Green Energy Act, which forces low-income families to pay inflated electricity bills that subsidize millionaire insiders with green energy contracts; and there are the government-mandated taxi cartels that allow millionaire taxi plate owners to rip off cab drivers and their passengers.

Those who have the money to lobby government and game the rules of government always win with bigger government. The underdogs, by contrast, have to fight their own battles. We need to fight alongside them. That means fighting for immigrants who are qualified engineers and doctors working minimum-wage jobs because bureaucracy prevents them from getting a licence to practise their profession.

It means fighting for small businesses that pay too much tax. It means fighting for lower taxes for low-income people, so that work always pays more than welfare. Speaking of welfare, we should get tough on welfare for the incompetent millionaire CEO who is back at the trough seeking yet another bailout or handout from working-class taxpayers.

This is what it means to stand up for the underdog, for the people who work hard, pay their taxes, and play by the rules. They too often are forced to shoulder the burdens of wealthy insiders who take advantage of big government to profit and enrich themselves.

I ask today if the government will stand on the side of Canada's underdogs by keeping its promise to lower taxes for small businesses from 10.5% to 9%, allowing those businesses to create jobs and opportunity for all Canadians.

Mr. François-Philippe Champagne (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for his very surprising statement. I have a lot of respect for the hon. member, and he knows it, but that is a government that is working for middle-class and Canadian families.

He talks about stepping up. We are stepping up for nine million Canadians by reducing their taxes and we are stepping up for Canadian families with the Canada child benefit. We are helping nine families out of 10 in this country and lifting 300,000 children out of poverty. Really, this is a government that is stepping up for Canadian families and the Canadian middle class.

I would like to thank the hon. member for his dedication to the advancement of small businesses in his riding and across our country. He has made a number of speeches in this House to which we have listened carefully.

We are all committed in this House to supporting small businesses. We have shown it on many occasions. As he said himself, "to create an awesome company it takes treasure and talent, but young companies often do not have the treasure to pay for the talent, so they use stock options."

Our government has always stated and understood that stock options are a legitimate and valuable form of compensation for many Canadian start-ups. The member will know that our government is committed to grow this sector across all sectors of the economy. We will ensure that innovators and start-ups maintain the ability to use this form of compensation.

Our government is committed to consulting with Canadians and listening to them. This issue was one I discussed with many Canadians, particularly entrepreneurs, over the course of the pre-budget consultations I undertook with the Minister of Finance earlier this year. I recall in particular a discussion that we had in Quebec City with young entrepreneurs who just started start-ups and yes, we listened to them. We listened to Canadians.

● (1830)

[*Translation*]

We criss-crossed the country asking Canadians to tell us what the government could do to help the middle class. We met with aboriginal leaders, business leaders, and leaders in the arts and culture. We listened to Canadians and engaged in discussions to find practical solutions to the problems they face.

The consultations continued online and were enormously successful. We did something that the previous government did a few times. We consulted Canadians.

We got a strong response online from people who wanted to comment. Over 300,000 people visited our site, and we collected over 5,200 separate comments from Canadian taxpayers and groups of Canadians.

Throughout the consultations, Canadians confirmed that they wanted their government to strengthen the middle class and help workers aspiring to join it. I am proud of what we have to offer in budget 2016, and I thank my colleague for giving me the opportunity to talk about these measures.

With respect to small business, for small businesses to flourish, the economy has to grow, and customers have to buy their products.

In closing, we are helping the backbone of the Canadian economy to prosper by investing in growth, supporting the middle class, strengthening the economy, and putting more money back into Canadians' pockets.

Budget 2016 does more than just offer immediate assistance to Canada's middle class. It seeks to build an economy that is good for everyone today and tomorrow.

[*English*]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Speaker, I am pleased that the member is willing to take my suggestions on treating the underdogs of society with more fairness, and so I have some suggestions I will make very pointedly: Stop giving welfare and bailouts for the super rich. Right now the government is considering giving \$1 billion to a company of billionaire owners and millionaire shareholders at the expense of working-class people.

The government is considering, in conjunction with the provinces, convoluted climate change policies that will take money out of the pockets of everyday consumers and enrich Liberal insiders, like it did in Ontario where Liberals have made fortunes on the backs of the working poor.

The government is considering other bureaucratic schemes that take from working families and give to the super elite.

Will the member work with me to put an end to the insider economy so that we can get back to the free market economy?

Adjournment Proceedings

Mr. François-Philippe Champagne: Mr. Speaker, I am quite surprised and disappointed to hear an hon. member suggest that we should not support the aerospace industry in our country. Particularly for members from Quebec who think about Bombardier and the 60,000-plus people who work for Bombardier, it is quite shocking to hear that from a member who understands business and what business is doing for the country.

Let me reassure the member that if he wants to work with us to find measures to support middle-class families, he should think about the ones we supported by reducing taxes. That should be music to his ears. We reduced taxes for nine million Canadians. I would expect a member like him to be very pleased that we reduced taxes and put more money in the pockets of Canadians. He should think about what we did with the Canada child benefit and be very happy that we are supporting families, putting more money in the pockets of families. Families in Canada will receive, on average, \$2,300 more.

If the member wants to work with me to support Canadian families, Canadian business, and the middle class, we will work with him any time.

● (1835)

[*Translation*]

VETERANS

Mr. Alupa Clarke (Beauport—Limoilou, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is an honour for me to participate in the adjournment debate, or what is known in parliamentary jargon as the late show, for the first time. I will learn how this works in the next few minutes.

I am also pleased to see that the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister of National Defence, the hon. member for Kanata—Carleton, is here. I hope that she will be able to give me some answers.

I am here to share some concerns that have been expressed by Canadians in general, not just veterans. The House will understand why. Recently, the minister introduced new financial benefits for veterans under Bill C-12, which unfortunately no longer exists because those measures have now been inserted into omnibus Bill C-15.

These amendments include increasing the disability award, expanding access to the higher grades of the permanent impairment allowance, and increasing the earnings loss benefit. Veterans tell me that these improved benefits are worthwhile, but that the government could have made a better decision. For example, veterans would have liked the government to invest more in mental health clinics, provide more assistance for families, such as military spouses, and improve help for the transition from military to civilian life.

Adjournment Proceedings

This evening, I will talk about the fact that the disability award was increased and that the increase is retroactive to 2006. We are talking about approximately \$3.7 billion that will be spent on these retroactive payments. This expenditure is highly questionable.

I am going to tell a story that explains why I think that we need to ask questions in that regard. One of my constituents came to see me. She earns about \$100,000 a year. She was a soldier and she has hearing problems. Although she will not do so, if she were to apply for a disability award from the Department of Veterans Affairs, she would be eligible to receive a cheque for between \$5,000 and \$10,000. I think that everyone here will agree that this person, who earns \$100,000 a year, does not need that money and that her loss of hearing does not prevent her from working.

Imagine how many cases like that there are in Canada and how many people, in the coming months, without thinking of their fellow soldiers, will apply for disability awards for physical injuries that do not necessarily prevent them from working. Under the law, they are eligible for that money and it is good that the government is trying to help them. However, when it comes to veterans, there are urgent needs in many other areas, including those I talked about earlier.

My question for my colleague from Kanata—Carleton is very simple. According to her estimates, how much money will be paid out retroactively to 2006 for hearing-related injuries?

[*English*]

Mrs. Karen McCrimmon (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased my colleague opposite called for an adjournment debate on this topic. Any opportunity I get to explain what the government is doing to support our veterans is good with me.

I understand there are a lot of issues out there about the financial security for our men and women who have served in the Canadian Armed Forces. We have had stakeholder meetings, policy group meetings, and advisory group meetings. What I keep hearing is news to my ears. It is wonderful. People are saying that there are gaps problems. They want us to look after ill and injured veterans. They want us to look after the families of ill and injured veterans.

In the budget plan 2016, we are providing access to very critical benefits that will improve the long-term financial stability, security, and independence of ill and injured veterans and their families. We announced an enhanced access to the permanent impairment allowance and an increase to the disability award in line with what was asked by the Veterans Ombudsman. We are taking advice from right across the spectrum. These people have been talking to veterans for years, to the ombudsmen for the Canadian Armed Forces and veterans.

We will ensure that all veterans benefit from an increase. We knew the disability award needed to be improved. This has been in committee reports now for almost five years. The actions we are taking right now will make a positive difference in many lives of Canadian veterans. We also signalled our intention to increase the earnings loss benefit. It will be fully indexed so it keeps pace with inflation.

In the past, these benefits were not indexed. In 2011, when we talked about earnings loss benefit, that baseline was set to just over \$42,000. Now we are resetting that baseline to \$44,496. On top of that, we are increasing the amount they are eligible for, from 75% to 90%. That reset means that everyone will come away with at least a \$2,000 a year improvement in their financial security. The earnings loss benefit is just one of many supports available to transition from military to civilian life.

Yes, we need to do a better job of communicating with veterans and telling them about the benefits and supports they deserve. Some help can be done immediately. I agree with the member opposite. I want to see those things happen. The mental health wait times had ballooned to over eight months. We are working on this. Do we want a centre of excellence on mental health? Yes, we do.

Some things take a little longer to put into place. When we talk about hearing loss, it is a pain and suffering award. It is a disability award and it can range anywhere depending upon the severity of it.

We all want the same things. We want to work together. We want to make the lives of veterans better. There is a lot more to do, but we are on our way.

● (1840)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alupa Clarke: Exactly, Mr. Speaker, we want to work together.

I always thought that veterans affairs should not be a partisan issue. That is why I was pleased to see that the minister treated it separately in Bill C-12. However, that is no longer the case.

I would like to say to my colleague from Kanata—Carleton that unfortunately, she did not answer my question, which was on the amount of money that will be allocated retroactively to 2006 for hearing loss. The reason I want to know this sum is that Canadians are wondering if that was the right thing to do. Instead of making this retroactive payment, the government could have used this \$3.7 billion implementing a lifetime disability pension effective immediately.

The concerns my colleague is talking about are indeed those of interest groups representing veterans. However, the veterans I meet in person talk to me about the lifetime disability pension option and not the disability benefits for hearing loss.

[*English*]

Mrs. Karen McCrimmon: Mr. Speaker, there is so much work to do. There is a lot of work to do with respect to the earnings loss benefit, the disability award, the permanent impairment allowance, mental health offices, and case workers. I am proud of what we have managed to accomplish to date. Is it all done? No, it is not anywhere near being done.

Adjournment Proceedings

In terms of the retroactivity of these, this was based on recommendations that came out of the ombudsman's office. People have been waiting for this disability award increase for a while. They expect it. I know that we will have to make some decisions about what gets priority spending. If the member wants details, we can probably provide him details if he gives us a specific question, but we acknowledge that we need to work together to make this happen.

●(1845)

[*Translation*]

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mr. Anthony Rota): The motion to adjourn the House is now 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 6:45 p.m.)

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