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Chair

The Honourable Larry Bagnell

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• (1100)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.)): Good morning.

This is meeting number 19 of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs in the 1st session of the 42nd Parliament. This meeting is held in public. Today we continue our hearings for our study of initiatives toward a family-friendly House of Commons.

For the first hour we welcome Clare Beckton, the executive director of the Centre for Women in Politics and Public Leadership at Carleton University, and David Prest, a long-time staff member with the Conservative Party on Parliament Hill, to make sure that we're inclusive of everyone involved with our decisions. In the second hour, we'll have Mr. François Arsenault, director of parliamentary proceedings at the National Assembly of Quebec.

We welcome Joël Lightbound to the committee. I'd also like to welcome a former city councillor from the city of Whitehorse, Ranj Pillai. He is right at the back, experiencing another order of government.

Just so that people know, from a discussion that we had recently, the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner's term ends this June. As we're making decisions on that file, there may be a new person.

Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): I appreciate your raising this.

To the best of my knowledge, she's an officer of Parliament, an agent of Parliament. When we went through the process of hiring the new Auditor General—there were so many fires going on at the time that we could only spend so much time on it—I was not very pleased with the process.

It is Parliament that decides who is hired for these positions, and it's only Parliament that can remove those people from their positions. Yet the government of the day completely owned the process; the opposition was not engaged. There was maybe a little bit of perfunctory consultation about what sorts of things we were looking for, but it didn't amount to a real consultation. By comparison, when we hired the Sergeant-at-Arms when I was at Queen's Park, because that person was hired by the provincial parliament, there was an all-party committee struck, and it was totally non-partisan all the way through.

What we do here federally, at least with the last big appointment... The government did all of it. They did the consultation, they did the interviews, they did the selection, and then they offered up to Parliament a name, and it was vote yes, vote no. The process just didn't seem to me to be consistent with the notion that the person is an agent of Parliament. It's deliberately structured that way so that the government of the day can't order these particular people around, people such as our Privacy Commissioner, our Auditor General... We have a number of them; I think there are 10 or 11, actually.

The process should support the notion that Parliament is doing the hiring, and yet the other process was not that way at all. It was rather like: "Oh, by the way, do you mind giving your thumbs up, yes or no?" If this process is going to kick in again, I would very much like us to engage, in some fashion. I don't even know where we'd begin, Mr. Chair. I just lay this in front of you. The new government seems to be interested in doing things differently. This is one opportunity by which we could right-side Parliament by giving Parliament back control of the whole process of hiring these agents and officers, which is then consistent with the notion that it's Parliament doing the hiring and that Parliament is the only one that can fire someone. The reason is that if the prime minister of the day, no matter who, is upset with an Auditor General's report, he can't fire them. It takes Parliament to do that.

I would ask that we engage early in this and look at doing things differently, consistent with the government's indication that they want to do it differently.

Thanks.

The Chair: Now that we have some members here, I want to get on with the witnesses.

David, could you take that back to the House leader and talk with David about it?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham (Laurentides—Labelle, Lib.): Absolutely. We'll take it under advisement.

• (1105)

Mr. David Christopherson: I appreciate that. Thank you.

The Chair: We will welcome our witnesses.

You have about five minutes, roughly, for your opening statements. Who would like to start?

Clare, why don't you go ahead?

Ms. Clare Beckton (Executive Director, Centre for Women in Politics and Public Leadership, Carleton University): Thank you for inviting me to appear before you.

I'll just make a couple of short remarks, because I know you like to ask a lot of questions.

I'm pleased that the committee is looking at the issue of a friendlier Parliament that recognizes the need of members of Parliament to meet family responsibilities as well as their home responsibilities. Needless to say, that is not an easy challenge, as we know from many sectors.

Creating a more family-friendly environment requires mechanisms to support and ensure practices and actions that reflect gender equality. Currently about 26% of members of Parliament are women, which contributes to an environment that does not fully recognize gender equality. There is a need for leadership from political parties to continue to augment the number of women running for office, including being fair and not putting them in unwinnable ridings, which happens. Having more women, I must caution, does not automatically create equality, but it contributes to changing the culture.

I know the term has been "work-life balance" here. I always use the term "work-life integration", as I believe that this striving is for a mythical balance that doesn't exist. I've never found it in my life, and it has never bothered me that I didn't. Instead, we need to look for ways that permit members of Parliament to serve their country as they wish while still having time for their families, which can include child care support that recognizes the needs of members of Parliament while in Ottawa.

Male members of Parliament need to be encouraged and supported as well as female members in meeting their family responsibilities.

Orientations for members and chairs of committees should include how to create a respectful environment and, for committee chairs, how to schedule to accommodate members' needs as well.

Also important is having an environment of respect that allows members and their staff to get work done without fear of harassment and disrespectful behaviour. House rules, education, and processes can assist in making this happen, along with modelling of the desired behaviour by party leaders.

For political participation to be equal, the environment and the House processes need to ensure an equal voice for men and women and have peer processes for resolution of any complaints.

Efficiency of processes in the House is certainly one way of helping to reduce Parliament.... For example, reducing Parliament to sitting four days a week could be one option that might better reflect the need of out-of-Ottawa MPs to return to their ridings and families. Electronic voting, in the age of technology, can certainly assist, as it may allow someone to vote while still caring for a member of the family, if that is necessary. While eliminating evening sessions may not be possible, they can be reserved for urgent or emergency debates and votes, for example.

Being mindful of sittings on major school holidays is another thing that can be looked at.

These are just a few possibilities, and I welcome your questions this morning.

The Chair: I would just comment that the holidays, unfortunately, are provincial, so they are not always the same.

Mr. Prest.

Mr. David Prest (As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thanks for the invitation, committee.

Just by way background, I'm currently with the opposition House leader's office. I've worked for House leaders and whips for some 35 years, in government and in opposition. I have been a parent for 25 of those 35 years. I have six children and I still have young children at home, the youngest being eight years old, so I may qualify for this family-friendly discussion. Just don't ask me for advice about family planning.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. David Prest: I would first like to comment on the calendar and the number of days a year and days a week that the House sits. I will be advocating for the status quo. I lived through the open-calendar days when there was no end-time and no indication of how many days the House would sit and when it would sit. Our current fixed calendar is much more family-friendly than the open-ended calendar.

In examining the particulars, the House calendar needs to accommodate things such as the number of sitting days required to get done what business needs to be done, the number of days the government is available to be held to account by members of the House, and the number of days members can spend in their constituencies and be with family. It has been my observation that the current calendar strikes the right balance. Increasing one item while taking away from another may not get us where we want to go.

I have some suggestions, though minor ones.

Last year, before we adjourned for the summer, we settled the sitting days for January, February, March, and April 2016, instead of waiting for the fall, which is the usual practice. The committee might want to recommend an earlier decision on the calendar as the normal practice, as I'm already booking things for February and I'm not sure whether I'll be able to go now; I have to wait until the fall.

Also, when providing input to the Speaker in drafting the next calendar, I would avoid scheduling long periods of House time together, particularly the five-week blocks. When my in-laws were organizing a family reunion in Vermont for this July, on the question of how many days it should last I gave the same advice. People are enthusiastic at first, but after a few days somebody is going to cry. It's the same sort of thing here.

I have a comment with respect to the hours of the House. Most extra-curricular activities for children begin before the House adjourns on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays. I miss a lot of these activities when the House is sitting, and my kids are late a lot for soccer and baseball. When they get into competitive sports, they are penalized for that, so when the House is sitting, my kids are on the bench a lot. I think the committee could look at altering the hours of the House, perhaps starting earlier and ending earlier.

I like the fact that the whips are now scheduling votes following question period instead of in the evening, and the continued use of the application of the votes by the whips frees up more time for members and their staff. Consolidating votes on one particular day of the week would reduce the number of days the House sits late as a consequence of those votes' taking place after question period.

Finally, I asked my oldest daughter Wrenna what her thoughts would be about this study, and she addressed something I didn't think of, maybe because it had nothing to do with the rules of procedure. She suggested that we have more organized family-friendly events and cited the time I took her to a Christmas party organized for children of staff and MPs. It had quite an impression on her, and she obviously has fond memories of that experience. When I had my office on the second floor here in the Centre Block and I would head home on a Tuesday or a Wednesday, I would walk through a gauntlet of organized events and receptions on the way to the car. Every room and every corner of the Centre Block had a reception going on or some sort of event. Obviously we have people who are very good at organizing events, so perhaps it would not be too much of a bother to organize more family-friendly events, perhaps one per season.

• (1110)

The Chair: That's a very interesting idea.

We'll go to questioning now and start with Ms. Vandenberg.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Thank you very much to both of the witnesses.

My question is for Ms. Beckton. I heard you say “work-life integration”, and I'm interested to know a bit more about that. One of the things that has come up in our study is that it isn't so much work-life balance; it really is just trying to find ways to work more efficiently, to modernize the House procedures in such ways that we are able to do more in less time and therefore that we have a resulting work-life balance. But it really is more about that efficiency and integration.

Can you elaborate on that?

Ms. Clare Beckton: The reason I prefer “work-life integration” is that if people are always striving for a mythical balance, they often feel stressed because they're not achieving that balance. You're

absolutely right that you need to look at how efficient the process of Parliament is and how it helps members meet their responsibilities.

If people are passionate about what they're doing and they really care, they're not always concerned that they spend an extra hour here one day and less here the next. I think that's part of what we mean by work-life integration. It's not always possible—in fact it's rarely possible—in the kind of roles that MPs play or the kind of roles that I've played over the years to have that perfect balance. It's more whether we feel satisfied with what's going on or feel supported in being able to take on responsibilities.

That integration could work differently.

You've talked about family events. Sometimes you go to family events and you don't spend the time at the workplace, and that should be just fine, because that's the kind of thing we need when we're talking about “integration” and not necessarily “balance”. I agree with you.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Your work has been on women in public leadership and women in politics. There is a gendered component to talking about the hours of sitting, when we talk about caregiving responsibilities. While they affect, obviously, men and women both and there could be an age thing as well, when we heard from the IPU they told us that when listing barriers to politics, women were much more likely to talk about the hours of sitting and the caregiving responsibilities.

Can you talk a little about the differential impact and maybe the deterrent effect on women, particularly women with young families, of the hours and the work week?

Ms. Clare Beckton: There is definitely a deterrent, because there is still an assumption in society that it is women's responsibility to do the caregiving. We know that this is changing with the younger generation, that more and more men are becoming engaged and really want to be spending time with their families and their children, but if you look at the percentage of time, it's still higher for women.

I think women tend to worry more about being in two places at the same time. I talk to women all the time who say, I feel guilty when I'm at work and I feel guilty when I'm at home, because I feel I'm not giving effectively to either one. There's also the notion—and still, even in recent times—that women will be asked about their family responsibilities, members of Parliament or otherwise, and men will not be. There is that media perception still of what women should be doing and what their role should be, and I think this inhibits women.

The other thing that I think inhibits women, and I've heard it many times, is "I don't want my private life put out there", and so they will step back, and that's unfortunate, because I think it should not be the case.

• (1115)

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Do you think, then, that addressing the efficiencies of the time we spend here and perhaps even compressing the work week would help in redressing the imbalance in our Parliament? We're number 48 in the world for the number of women in Parliament. Would this help to address that?

Ms. Clare Beckton: It's one of the elements that would help address it. I think there's no substitute for leadership from the political parties whereby they put a real focus on how you encourage more women to run. We know that women usually don't put themselves forward: they need to be asked. Parties need to be out there recruiting, engaging, and asking women to run, because we need that diversity, and the House is better served.

What you say is one piece, but there is that broader piece of how you get them to run in the first place. It certainly would open the door for younger women, because you find that many women wait until their children are a little older before deciding to run, because they feel that they'll have a better opportunity to put their energies where they'd like them to be.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Picking up on what you said about the culture and about respect and modelling the desired behaviours, I've had young students coming to question period, young women, saying "I'll never run for Parliament" because they just don't like the very aggressive behaviour.

What do you think could be done about that?

Ms. Clare Beckton: Well, I think that is the whole piece about respect: how you work to change question period so that it really becomes an opportunity to really genuinely ask questions. That is desirable; it's a good thing. You want to be able to challenge the leaders and the government, but you want to be able to do it in a way that is not for showmanship but is really aimed at getting the kinds of answers that people in the country want to hear. I think many people out there would look at Parliament in a different way, if this were the case.

Certainly, I have heard a number of women ask: why would I want to engage in that kind of fray? I don't feel comfortable doing it, it's not my style, and it's not how I want to do things. We run into that everywhere, because when women are perceived to be more aggressive, that is perceived to be bad, while if men are more aggressive, that's okay, that's what they do.

Rightly or wrongly, this is still there as a perception, and we hear it all the time, that there's that double standard. It's more often an unconscious bias than it is a conscious decision.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: If we were to compress the work week and deal with the number of hours and make it more efficient, or if we did something about maybe having the Speaker enforcing decorum in the House, would those changes encourage more women to run? Do you think we would see more women on the ballot as a result?

Ms. Clare Beckton: I think those are certainly very positive steps that would help. When you're trying to sell to women the desirability of running for office, those things might help make the tipping point when you ask women to run or have women being encouraged. We're certainly out there always saying, put your hand up, step forward, do it, because we need women in these roles.

The Chair: Just as a reminder to committee members, if you want to make sure that everyone gets a chance to ask questions, you're welcome to split your time.

Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): By happy coincidence, that is exactly what I was going to do with my colleague Mr. Schmale.

First of all, I want to thank David Prest for attending as a witness. David has unparalleled experience in our caucus, working up here through all kinds of different circumstances over three decades and, of course, in various stages of life: as a young parent and then as a parent of a growing family, and so on.

My first question, David, is for you. Regarding the family-friendly events, I agree with you. I have a sense that the reason these things tend to fall apart is that we get periodic tsunamis through here. Good ideas come along and become part of the culture, and then you get 200 new MPs out of the total number and many of the good ideas are just swept away and have to be rediscovered.

Thinking of what you suggested, I just jotted down possibilities for four possible events. One is doing it from when our year begins, which is September—that is, something in the autumn. I was thinking of maybe a Halloween party. We used to do one with the help of the Speaker—that's after the confectioners shut down theirs. Anybody who has kids who have been loaded up with candy knows that too much candy is not family-friendly, but there could be a Halloween party.

There could be a Christmas party that's child-oriented.

We tried one year doing something in February with the co-operation of the Speaker. February is the period when the blahs set in.

Finally, there could be something either on the lawn or maybe in the East Block courtyard—outdoors, anyway—in June.

Does that strike you as a reasonable number of things, or would you suggest different ones?

• (1120)

Mr. David Prest: I was thinking of the four seasons, and these suggestions would suit that notion.

Mr. Scott Reid: The chair suggests possibly an Easter egg hunt.

These things have tended to be for MPs and their kids, but I gather you're thinking of something that could be for the kids of MPs and also the kids of staffers, where possible.

Mr. David Prest: Yes, I think for staff too—or you can have it separate. Sometimes caucuses organize things for staff and MPs together.

I don't know how many members have families here in Ottawa. The Christmas one that I was thinking about was closer to the caucus Christmas parties, for which a lot of spouses are here and their families are here; they had a lot of MPs' families present. I guess that at other times of year it would be more difficult to bring them in here.

Mr. Scott Reid: The other thing I want to say, not to our witnesses but to the committee members as a whole, is that I think there might be merit in our sending a letter to the House leaders of the various parties asking them to start discussing sometime this spring the sitting schedule for next year, rather than waiting. They can do what they want with it then, but that would put it on their agenda.

The Chair: Is there anyone opposed to that?

We'll do it. You have to be listening.

Mr. Scott Reid: That was all.

The Chair: It's a good idea.

Mr. Schmale.

Mr. Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Reid, and Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses once again for your contributions. This is very informative indeed.

I want to pick up on one thing you mentioned about guilt: it's regardless of gender. When I'm at home I feel as though I need to be at work and when I'm at work that I need to be at home. I think it's everyone. Maybe women feel it more, but I know I get that feeling. I think it just goes with the job, but if we can find a way to lessen it, that would be great.

I want to mention, before I get on to my next point, the family-friendly events and bringing families here. This is something we talked about in a previous meeting: the use of travel points for some of our spouses who live out of province or out of driving distance, that type of thing.

I think we all supported disclosure, but I think we all came to an agreement that maybe we should or could look at ways to reduce the impulse of the public to then say, you're flying your spouse everywhere on the taxpayer's dime. I think that may help; I don't know. Nonetheless, in order to get them included, I think everyone has agreed, on every side of the aisle, that getting your spouse here and seeing how the place works and showing what you do is actually of benefit, because they can understand.

I don't know whether you want to comment on that before I get to the next part.

Mr. David Prest: Using travel points, you mean?

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Either way.

Mr. David Prest: I didn't want to suggest that because it would mean spending more money; but yes, they could. They could be organized in advance. I guess it would be cheaper if you could have advance bookings of these flights to get the family here. I think it would be worthwhile.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Ms. Beckton, do you find that getting families involved is a better thing? I would assume so.

Ms. Clare Beckton: Yes, I think that giving families a better understanding of what their spouse or parent is doing on the Hill would certainly make it easier to understand when that spouse or parent is not always available. I think there have been a lot of marriage breakups, and part of that is from a lack of understanding of the pressures that are imposed on an MP when they come to Ottawa.

• (1125)

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Sure.

You were talking about compressed work weeks. We had talked about this in previous meetings as well, and the unintended consequences for those MPs who had actually brought their families to Ottawa. I think it causes an issue for them if they are now leaving on a Thursday instead of a Friday, or what have you, however their situation works. I think that might cause another unintended consequence. I think that's something we have to keep an eye on as well.

Ms. Clare Beckton: Yes. It's a matter of looking for that best solution that suits the majority of people but doesn't penalize others, which is very challenging at times.

Those are simply things that one looks at whether they work or not. It really depends. I think David has much more understanding of the parliamentary rules and procedures than I do, but certainly that is something that has been done in other areas.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: How much time do I have, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Twenty seconds.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: I'll save that one for now.

Ms. Clare Beckton: For the next round.

The Chair: David could extend that into eight minutes.

Voices: Oh, Oh!

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson, you have seven minutes.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you, Chair. After you've been here for a while, you can do anything with 20 seconds, trust me.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: I could have kept going.

Mr. David Christopherson: That's all right.

Thank you both very much for your attendance today.

The first thing I want to do is pick up on what Mr. Schmale said regarding guilt. I've been doing this for over 30 years. I remember a staff rep with the Auto Workers. We were at a retirement, and he was giving his good-bye speech, and said, "You know, everybody over the years has said to me"—meaning him—"Oh, thank you for the sacrifice that you made for the union members, for the cause, to make the world a better place." He said: "You know, the truth of the matter is that it wasn't me who made the sacrifice. It was my family who made the sacrifice, because I was off doing what I enjoy doing; I was able to pursue my passions of speaking out on matters of injustice and fairness, so I was getting a return on what I was doing. But the wedding anniversary, the children's birthdays..."

Do you want to talk about guilt? It's awful. But that's the truth of the matter: it's the family who pay the sacrifice, because quite frankly, many times you have a choice. It sounds awful, but this is the dilemma; this is what we're talking about, the real life of being an MP. We're still people, and that guilt, when you have to go to a major event—for whatever reason, you have to be there—but your partner is saying, "It's our daughter's birthday. How could you possibly make anything else a bigger priority?" There is such guilt.

I guess talking about it may be one way of dealing with it. I always thought that was a profound observation that Frank Marose made, that the sacrifice really wasn't his, although everyone was saying "Thank you for your sacrifice", but that it was his family that made those sacrifices.

Second, Peter Stoffer, one of the most amazing parliamentarians to ever darken the doorways around here.... One of the things he was known for was the "All-party party", which blew me away, because I have to tell you, if my whole reputation from this Hill back in Hamilton were that I was the organizer of a major party, I'd be in for one term. But Peter pulled it off. He was a one-off guy, and people loved Peter.

Maybe it's time to find somebody. There's a unique opportunity. We have a lot of rookies. There's a vacuum there to step into. He literally was all about pulling us all together.

Mr. Prest, everything you were talking about.... That was Peter. That's what Peter was about. The examples you were giving, I think, were mostly Peter: the Christmas one, the "All-party party"; then there used to be the "Halloween", which Mr. Reid has pointed to. I'm glad you raised that, and this is something we'll look at.

I want to comment again that I can't believe the difference it has made to have the votes after QP. How many evenings are not destroyed by that? And by saying this, I don't mean that we get to go back to our apartments; I mean that then we can finally go to the meetings we're supposed to be at and the receptions we want to get to, and yes, sometimes spend some social time with colleagues we don't really get to know all that well.

That was a simple thing, and I think it has made a huge difference.

While I have the floor, I want to mention the House and the tone with women. I've defended heckling as an important part of the culture of Parliament, but of course by that I mean one-offs that are like political cartoons, which are meant to be funny and biting and to make a point.

I experienced something yesterday, and I didn't rise to make a point of order, but I did make a point of going over and talking to the Speaker afterwards.... I sit right across from the Minister of International Trade. Now, the Minister of International Trade happens to be a woman, and she happens to be a small woman; she's petite. She sits right across from me, as David is here, and I have to tell you, the drowning noise coming from, I'll just say, "opposition benches", was so loud that I could hardly hear her. That's not heckling. That's not an intelligent contribution. That's not an emotional response reflecting something that's of value to you that you had to speak out on. No, that's just plain rude and ignorant and unacceptable. Hopefully, when we talk about heckling, we can separate the difference between what is meant to be a pointed contribution to a debate, remembering that our debates replace fighting on the battlefield, so that there has to be some letting go, and just plain drowning someone out because you can, particularly—and I'm going to say it—just because you're a man and you have a bigger....

I have a big, loud voice. To use it for the sole purpose of shutting down a colleague is the antithesis of an intelligent, civilized, democratic debate, and I think we're going to see the Speaker continue to do what he can to stop that.

• (1130)

I do have a question here.

Mr. Prest, you have the unique advantage of having been on both sides as a staff person. With all your experience, just give us your thoughts on the differing impacts on staff—and I've been on both sides, in different houses—from your perspective as this place affects staff, depending whether you're in government or in opposition.

Mr. David Prest: When you're in government, you have to be here more often. I think there are later hours, but you also have more resources and more people to do things, and being in more than one place at the same time is less of a problem. When the House sits, you have to be here.

When you're in opposition it's not as crucial. I like it when the House goes on these autopilots; it frees up both sides. You can go home and not worry that something is going to happen and that you're going to have to rush back. Generally, when the House is sitting it's tough on both sides; it doesn't matter whether you're in opposition or government.

Mr. David Christopherson: I'm sure my time has expired.

The Chair: No, you have one minute.

Mr. David Christopherson: No kidding? Woo-hoo! All right.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: You have 50 seconds now.

Mr. David Christopherson: You're making me lose it.

Do you know what? I'll let it ride, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Okay.

David, could you come and take the chair? We'll go on to Mr. Graham.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Mr. Prest, you've been a staffer since 1981. Is that about right?

Mr. David Prest: Yes.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: That's the year I was born. It is very nice to meet you here. Thank you for that.

Your comment earlier was that you like the status quo. That's fine; it's a fair point. I'm just curious about how you see Fridays, whether as an advantage or a disadvantage. Should we leave them the way they are? Should we make them longer? Should we make them shorter? Should we make them "autopilot"? What ideas do you have for Fridays?

Mr. David Prest: When it was first brought up, you'd get excited about having long weekends, but then, when you think about it in practice—

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: —it's just more time in the riding.

Mr. David Prest: I thought about how it applied to me and probably to most members with family in Ottawa. It would exacerbate my ability to get my kids on the soccer field on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, for sure, because the House would have to sit longer.

My kids go to school. I don't think I would be given the Friday off anyway, but my kids are in school, so it wouldn't matter. I find that the House adjourning at 2:30 on Friday is good enough. That's the only day I pick up my kids from school, Fridays.

I think there are not many votes on Thursday evenings and none on Fridays, so the House is rather on autopilot, I guess, on Thursday afternoon and Fridays, as far as substantive business is concerned.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Well, it's a de facto autopilot; it's not a real autopilot on Thursdays. Would you want to see it as a full autopilot in the Standing Orders on Thursday afternoons and Fridays? Even both sides—

Mr. David Prest: Not really. I think as a government you want some flexibility to do something on Thursday afternoon; you might need to do it. But the whips control the votes anyway. They can just defer it; both the opposition and the government whip have the same authority. I think it's taken care of that way. If you were going to have a vote, you'd have a vote on a dilatory motion to adjourn, which is not going to....

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Do you think we should move all substantive votes in the Standing Orders to after question period?

Mr. David Prest: I think you leave flexibility with the whips to do it.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: You'd rather leave it the way it is, so that basically you see motions to do it each time, instead of this being the default.

Mr. David Prest: Or you could just have it as an option in the Standing Orders, so that a whip could trigger it. I think you would want to leave it open—again, speaking as a government hound—in case you need to have a vote in an afternoon or after question period to advance a bill for the next day. Then, the odd time you might have to have a vote on Thursday night. I would leave it flexible.

•(1135)

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: You probably know the Standing Orders better than all of us combined, with the time you've been in the House leader's office. Is there anything you'd want to change or revise, if you had the chance, in the Standing Orders? Is there anything about which you would say, that's a really silly thing, and perhaps we should revisit it?

If there is ever a time or a place to do it, it's here.

Mr. David Prest: Do you mean In relation to their being family-friendly or not?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I mean either family-friendly or just generally in the Standing Orders. You've been on both sides; you've seen how it works.

Thinking totally objectively, is there something there that nobody has talked about and about which you think "that's silly, and we should probably fix it"?

Mr. David Prest: Well, not off the top of my head. I do have a list of things I would like to change, but it has nothing to do with family-friendly. It has to do with increasing the role of backbenchers—and the opposition, now that I'm in opposition. I change my view as I go from government to opposition.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I'd be curious to hear your view of both before and after, then.

Mr. David Prest: Pardon me?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I'd be curious to hear your view on those matters before and after—when you're in government and when you're in opposition. I'd love to hear the ones that haven't changed.

Mr. David Prest: Well, here's one. I'll give you an example: motions to instruct a committee giving it authority to divide a bill. They are moved by a private member, but when the debate is adjourned they become a government order. They're controlled by the government afterwards, so they just sit there.

It used to be like that for standing committees, when they would report to the House. You'd move concurrence, and once that motion was adjourned it became a government order. We changed the rules to address that, because it didn't make sense, if you had a report that was ordering documents from the government, that the government controlled when that was going to come to a vote. They used to talk about how powerful committees were, and actually they weren't.

Anyway, we made that change. We should have made that change also for other routine motions during routine proceedings, such as for a motion of instruction to a committee.

That's just one off the top of my head.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Taking it back to where we're supposed to be—family-friendly—what kind of changes do you see being needed on the simple things we've been talking about? I don't know whether you've been following our process for the last couple of months, but questions around day care, the bus system, parking, calendar sharing—all these kinds of things—have come up, which are technical questions and internal economy questions. I wonder whether you have feedback on those.

My personal pet peeve, as a former staffer—I was a staffer here for many years as well—is the fact that you can't share your calendar between an MP and a staff member on your BlackBerry in such a way that both can edit it. I'd like to take that a step further and allow, for example, my spouse to see my calendar, so that I'm not stuck using Google Calendar and going off the reservation to share it, so that they know where I am and we can actually plan things.

Mr. David Prest: Is that a technical problem, or a...?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I was in tech before I was in politics, and I don't see it as a technical problem. I see it as a political problem; therefore, it has to go to Internal Economy to direct ITSD—the IT service desk—to do something about it, and they won't do it without that direction.

Is that a direction you would want to see?

Mr. David Prest: I guess I don't grasp what the politics of it is. I suppose, if you were serious—

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: If there were no politics, it would be fixed by now.

Mr. David Prest: I guess I'm not familiar with the issue. I really don't know.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: What about the day care and the bus system and parking?

You have an immense amount of experience here, and I defer to that.

Mr. David Prest: They had the day care here when I first started having a family, and I found it too expensive at that time, for one thing, and once my children were of school age it didn't make sense for them to be in downtown Ottawa; I'd rather have them close to their school and home. It didn't make sense to me, so I never really considered it. It may be different for MPs who live downtown; I don't know.

I'm not sure what you mean by the bus system. Do you mean the House of Commons buses?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Yes, the House of Commons bus system, the House of Commons cafeterias—all these things—are geared to MPs and, quite frankly, they're useful to staffers as well. The service is considerably reduced in cafeterias and buses when we're gone, and the frequency of the buses has dropped over the last few years. When I started here, there were a lot more buses than there are now, as an example.

Do you have comments on that, or on things you'd see as improvements?

Mr. David Prest: If the House isn't sitting, then it wouldn't bother me that there are not as many buses available, because I'm not

rushing somewhere, as I would be when the House is sitting. I've never found that to be a problem with the buses.

For the cafeteria, it's the same thing. I've never found it to be a problem.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Christopherson): Mr. Graham, you only have a couple of seconds left. You have enough time to say goodbye and thank you.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Okay, go ahead. Everybody else gave their last 10 seconds.

Thank you, David.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Christopherson): Very good.

Moving now to five-minute slots, Mr. Richards, you're up first, sir.

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): Mr. Prest, I have a few questions for you as well.

This has been covered a little bit already, but you made mention in your remarks of the votes being after QP, and I think you made it fairly clear that you believe there still needs to be some flexibility there. I don't disagree with you on that, but the fact that we've been having more votes after question period is something that I would say, from what I've seen, has been pretty nearly unanimously, or maybe even unanimously held as a positive thing,

I want to get your perspective as a staff member. You mentioned that one of the challenges you have is for your kids in extracurricular activities—sports and arts and things like that—and that it's difficult for you to get them there on time when the House is sitting.

Does having the votes after QP help? Obviously, that can reduce the length of time the House sits somewhat, sometimes, because we're eliminating at least the bells portion of a vote. Has that been something in which you've noticed a difference? Has it been helpful? Have you been able to see your kids get a little more time on the playing field and a little less time on the bench as a result?

• (1140)

Mr. David Prest: As a staffer, it really doesn't have much of an impact on me, but I noticed that it has a positive impact on members. I don't vote. Actually, sometimes in the evening when members are voting I don't really need to be there to watch them vote. When I was working for the whip, I did, but no, from a staff perspective, it doesn't matter.

Mr. Blake Richards: It hasn't made too much impact, then. Okay.

You also talked a little about the sitting days and about how, if they were set a little earlier in the year, that would make sense. I can understand and appreciate that people are always looking to plan holidays or other family functions and such things. The earlier someone has that calendar, the more it makes planning a little easier.

You mentioned that last year we were able to do that before the House rose, so obviously it's possible for it to be done. Having worked in a whip's office, I assume you probably have some knowledge of how it is done. I wonder whether you see any problems that would arise in trying to set the calendar a little earlier in the year, or is it something you see as entirely possible without any real unintended consequence to doing it?

Mr. David Prest: Because we did it last year, I see it as a possibility. There might be a case in which the provinces haven't established their break weeks, but with that type of change, with unanimous consent you can rejig it when you get closer to the date, if you wish, by one week or something. But to have to block out all those months just because of waiting for more information seems to be a little excessive.

Mr. Blake Richards: You also talked a briefly about longer blocks of sitting weeks. You mentioned they are something you felt should be avoided.

I wonder if you might want to give us a sense of what you would see as optimal in terms of sitting weeks. I understand that one thing that is done is to try to plan a little bit around... As the chair mentioned, the school calendars are set provincially, obviously, but I think there is an attempt made to try to make this work for as many people as possible across the country, so that our calendar is aligned with such things.

I know there needs to be some flexibility in respect to meeting those parameters, but could you maybe give us a sense of what you would see as optimal in terms of three weeks on, one week off, or whatever else it might be, and also give us a sense, from your experience over the years, of what you see as happening around here when we get longer blocks or blocks of a shorter period? Are there impacts on the way business flows from those as well?

Mr. David Prest: I think that ideally, three weeks on, one week off works the best. When you get into the fourth or fifth week, often they are not productive at all: people are at each other, and nothing is moving forward. They are almost like a wasted week, I find, when you get into these fifth weeks, and it takes a toll on the morale of the MPs to be away from their families and in this sort of combative environment for that long a time. It's always good to have a break, to regroup, and then come back. The three-week sitting blocks are ideal.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Christopherson): You're good for another three minutes.

Oh, I'm sorry; I apologize. It's a five-minute round, not a seven-minute round, so you have 15 seconds.

I get you all revved up and then shut you down.

Mr. Blake Richards: Gee, thanks, Mr. Chair.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Christopherson): Yes, I know. That's why I'm not the chair.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Blake Richards: In that case, thank you both very much for being here. We appreciated your help today.

• (1145)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Christopherson): Thank you, and I'm sorry for the confusion.

Ms. Petitpas Taylor, you have the floor, ma'am.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe, Lib.): Thank you, and you pronounced my name right. That's great.

First and foremost, I want to thank both Ms. Beckton and Mr. Prest for being here today. We appreciate your taking time to help us with this really important portfolio that we're looking at.

To start off, probably six years ago I was approached to run provincially in my province, and at the time my reality was very different from what it is now. Back then I was taking care of a mother who suffers from dementia, and I really wanted to be there and needed to be close to home, so I quickly made a decision that the timing was off.

At the time when I was approached to run, they had indicated that first of all they were looking for more women to run provincially and also wanted to make sure we had younger women run. That was one reason I had been asked, and also that I was involved in my community.

Fast forward six years and here I am now. My mother is still living—she's in an assisted facility—but when I reflect upon why I made the decision not to run, it's that there were some obstacles put in the way.

If I look now, I guess that as Canadians we want our Parliament to really reflect our Canadian population. I guess my question—to both of you, really and truly—is how do you think the status quo will encourage or discourage more women from running, or also getting more young people to run to ensure that we have a more inclusive Parliament here in Ottawa?

Ms. Clare Beckton: Without reference to specific rules, I think the status quo around the culture of combativeness will continue to discourage younger women and women in general, and people from some of the different cultural backgrounds in which that is not the way they operate and not the way they're accustomed to operating. They're more used to a collaborative style. So I think that is one of the things that will continue to inhibit people.

You were talking a little bit earlier about day care. I think for a lot of young parents coming to the Hill, having something that was close might allow them to bring their younger children to be closer to them and their family if that was what was necessary. I've seen a few MPs, who are nursing mothers, trying to manage that in their schedule every day.

I think quite apart from the rules, the culture plays a big role in attracting younger women, and in fact all women, to come, as well as, I think, a certain number of younger men as well, because they're looking at things a little differently today.

Mr. David Prest: I think we just need to keep moving towards a more family-friendly House, and that will encourage more women to run, because they are usually the ones who are looking after children. I can't think of any rule changes that would encourage... I think we should just keep moving forward with this study and improving things around here for parents.

Ms. Clare Beckton: You need EI changes that would provide a specific portion that men could take or they would lose it, as is happening in Quebec. That does really give men permission to take that, which right now is challenging. They find that in their environments it is very challenging to take up the parental leave.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I have one other quick question. Would you both have any suggestions on how to improve decorum in the House?

Ms. Clare Beckton: He's the rule guy, but I think the Speaker plays a very important role in decorum in the House and how that's enforced, and we heard that earlier today.

I think you also need to make sure you have policies around harassment and codes of conduct. The public service has always had codes of conduct and there are always rules around harassment. It's really important when you can draw that line between what constitutes acceptable behaviour and what might very well constitute harassment, because no one wants to work in an environment that is full of harassment. That applies not only to members but also to their staff and the kinds of things they have to put up with, whether it's workplace harassment or sexual harassment. That's a very important thing that does contribute towards decorum.

Mr. David Prest: I was here when they used to slam their desktops in the House instead of applauding, and it was noisy and the public did not like it. All it took was, I think, the Conservatives, or Progressive Conservatives, stopping, and then everybody stopped. I think if there is guilt and shame, eventually it will change. It has to come from the members themselves and the public, and once you start changing then everybody will follow.

Ms. Clare Beckton: The leaders and influencers can make a big difference by modelling the behaviour that they expect and they want in the House. That applies in any organization. When you see the top behaving in a certain way, that starts to send the message that this is the kind of behaviour they want.

• (1150)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Christopherson): You have about eight seconds.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Christopherson): Moving on, we have a five-minute spot for Mr. Schmale.

You have the floor, sir.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Thank you very much.

My time last time ran short so I wasn't able to get on that, which was a good thing. I wasn't going to touch on that, but now I have another round.

Just to briefly focus on the heckling part, as I said before, whether you put 338 lawyers in a room or 338 real estate agents, if you are debating a very hot topic—and I've seen it in high school debates—I think you're going to get some tempers rising.

I do agree that there is a limit to heckling, but I also agree that it is a part of the atmosphere, especially when in opposition you ask a question and you believe the answer you get is totally off what you think it should be or it's a non-answer. I think maybe we have to have general question period reform before we get into removing the heckling altogether, but I do understand that being heckled, over and above an acceptable level, can be intimidating for some.

I know some provincial legislatures have taken steps to bring that down and get it under control, but again, I think it's a question of the

level of sensitivity of some of the issues we're dealing with as well as the passion that's involved in some of these debates.

I don't know what the right answer is. I don't know who said it at the previous meeting, but I don't think that sitting as though we're in church is acceptable either.

Ms. Clare Beckton: You can have a spirited debate without necessarily having heckling, and you see that in a lot of spheres. Lawyers do a good job of doing this by being respectful in the courtroom but still having a very significant debate with their esteemed colleague across the table.

I think spirited debate is great and everyone wants to see that and to see that passion. I think when you're demeaning other people as part of that process then it's not that kind of debate.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: I don't know who was demeaning.

You might get a moan or a groan, and I've been here only a short time, but I haven't experienced name-calling or anything like that.

Ms. Clare Beckton: That's good.

Mr. David Prest: I think some heckling actually adds to a debate, and I think sometimes when there's some mild heckling, it aids a debater, but when it gets out of hand, how do you control that?

I have no suggestions for you except that it could be the Speaker, and as was said earlier, the leadership has to set the tone. There has to be a school for proper heckling or something, some training. I don't have any magic rule changes to suggest.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Just touching on the schedule quickly—how much more time do I have?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Christopherson): You have two minutes.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: On the schedule, I agree that having an advance schedule is a good thing.

I know, David, you did touch on how having too many sitting weeks in a row could be problematic for people with families. As Mr. Richards said, I don't know if there's a magic number here, but personally that two-week constituency week was great. I got events in, and I got family time, and it was very good. I felt when I came back that I was in a better place and ready to tackle the issues here.

I do recognize personally that when there is one week on and one week off and one week on, it isn't comfortable and I feel as though I can never get settled and I am moving from one place to the next. I like the idea of getting a schedule that we can see in advance, which has somewhat of a pattern if possible, recognizing holidays and that sort of thing. I think that's important too. I like that idea.

I touched on this before, but I think having family-friendly events is very important. I think that is a way to get people involved and it leads to better happiness all around. When you have your spouse here, it's always a better thing too.

I don't know if you have any more tips on that you want to touch on now before I....

Mr. David Prest: Just with regard to the calendar, the blocks, and the work weeks, the tolerance seems to be three weeks in which you can be productive, and after that it starts to wane. I think ideally, as I mentioned earlier, there should be three-week blocks.

As for the family-friendly events, my kids love coming up here to the Hill, and they come here often. I would just encourage more of that.

They think this place is already family-friendly when they come up here in fact. They ask me if they can go to work with me. I'll bring them to the library or introduce them to people, and they always seem to enjoy it. Sometimes I have to bring them here because the House is sitting late and I have some gaps in my day care, so I bring them here. It's always been a good experience.

● (1155)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Christopherson): Great. Thank you very much.

We have a three-minute slot left and I know, Ms. Sahota, that you were trying to get in there, so I'm going to give you that last three-minute spot before we wrap up.

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): Thank you for being here, Ms. Beckton and Mr. Prest.

I heard both of you say that when you add more women to politics, you change the culture here. I've also heard it said the other way: why don't we just change the culture and perhaps then we'll be adding more women to Parliament? That's exactly what we're trying to do at this committee here today as we explore ways we can change the culture.

I haven't been hearing a whole lot of concrete ideas. I'm hearing a lot of let's keep the status quo, and it's fun for kids to come up here on the Hill sometimes, but I don't think that's necessarily what we are getting at. Whether we can have a fun event with kids...we should be having those, and I think that's a great idea and I bring my kids up here as well. But it's about getting representation and about making sure the people we have here, whether staff or politicians, end up staying here for the long run as well and not deciding to leave their jobs for particular reasons.

My question is more to you, Ms. Beckton. Could you elaborate a little bit more about what other barriers or challenges you see? You're saying we're at 26% right now. How can we do better? What things should we do? You talk to women every day. We have our own stories, but what are some stories you would like to share?

Ms. Clare Beckton: I think one of the things that is important is that women need role models, particularly young women. It's important that they see members of Parliament who are women, see what they're doing, and see that they can behave authentically with who they are, and that they don't necessarily have to act like men. That makes it very hard. If you feel you have to be in there heckling and shouting, which is not your normal way of doing things, it can be very discouraging if you come into an environment where that's expected.

It's also about being able to authentically be who they are, speaking to young women, and being encouraging. I think men can encourage women by inviting them to come to the table, because women don't always come to the table on their own. This is something we can certainly work on. I think they need to feel that they have an environment of support. The women's caucuses are important. The cross-party caucuses can play a strong role in telling women when they come, "You will have support, you will not be alone here", because it can be very lonely when you're trying to find your way into that space.

I think there is a culture around harassment, and we should make sure there is a safe environment and that you have a place where you can report harassment if it happens. You know that it has happened on the Hill. We know it's happened to MPs, and we know it's happened to members of their staff. That is not the kind of environment you want.

The whole environment around respect means that when you see people acting in a respectful manner that does encourage women to look.... Something I hear all the time is that "I don't want to be part of that kind of behaviour", and "I don't want to have to be treated by the media the way I see the media often treating women". Those are things that discourage women. There is a certain awareness of what it means to be an MP and what things you can contribute and how valuable that is to our country.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Christopherson): Thank you so much. Our time has expired, but maybe that's an avenue. The last thing we need to do is to get more work. It's the first time I recall the whole idea of the media being mentioned. Maybe we should ask to see a delegation from the media to see if they have any thoughts on it. I'll leave that there.

Thank you both so much. We appreciate your attendance. You've been very helpful in terms of our studies. We will conclude, colleagues, this part of our meeting. I will suspend the meeting briefly while we reset for our videoconferencing guests.

Again to our guests, thank you so much for being here. We now stand suspended for a few moments.

● (1155)

_____ (Pause) _____

● (1205)

The Chair: Just before we start with our witness, we have a handout, but unfortunately it came in too late for us to translate the attached charts. Most of the handout has been translated, but the charts are still in French. Is there any objection to our distributing them? I'm sure that we all know what lundi, jeudi, and vendredi mean anyway.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: It's better to have half a thing than nothing.

The Chair: There is no objection? Okay.

Just so the committee knows, so we don't have to take time later, we've asked the Clerk to come to our next meeting on Tuesday. Then in the second hour on Tuesday, we'll have the clerk from the Ontario assembly. Then at six o'clock Tuesday evening, we're having the Australian delegation.

You have to change the schedule in front of you. It's pretty important. Don't show up on Tuesday night, because it's been changed to a week later. You'll get a message anyway. Australia is on the 17th, not on the 10th. The schedule has Australia on the 10th, and it's actually on the 17th. On the 11th it is New Zealand, as you see, at six o'clock in the evening.

Then next Thursday, Elections Canada has invited us to an informal briefing.

Okay, I'd like to welcome François Arsenault.

[*Translation*]

He is director of parliamentary proceedings at the National Assembly of Quebec.

Thank you for your participation today.

You may begin. You have five minutes.

Mr. François Arsenault (Director of Parliamentary Proceedings, National Assembly of Quebec): Thank you.

Good morning, Mr. Chair, ladies and gentlemen of the committee. My name is François Arsenault. I am director of parliamentary proceedings at the National Assembly of Quebec. I wish to thank the committee for inviting me to speak with you. I hope that what I have to say will be useful to you in your work.

First of all, I should mention that, in 2009, the National Assembly adopted major parliamentary reforms involving several issues being studied by this committee. The objectives of the 2009 reform were to: spread out legislative work over time, balance constituency and Assembly work, limit extended sitting periods, avoid long winter and summer breaks, incorporate private members' business in the calendar, and make enough time available for the government's legislative agenda.

I will begin by talking about the sitting schedule and the parliamentary calendars.

The calendar in place since 2009 lengthened each parliamentary work period during the year while cutting the number of sitting hours per week and adding designated constituency weeks. In practical terms, Assembly sittings start and end earlier in the year. The number of hours for routine proceedings was significantly reduced. However, the government still has a lot of leeway for moving its legislative agenda forward, while a lot of time still goes unused.

As well, each sitting of the Assembly now begins with routine proceedings, since that is when the largest number of members are in the chamber, the Salon bleu. The Tuesday sitting, usually the first sitting of the week, starts in the afternoon so that members working in the regions can return to the Assembly.

Lastly, the number of sittings with extended hours was cut in half, from four to two weeks per work period, a total of four per year and, during this period, the Assembly and committees do not sit as late in the evening.

On page 3 of the document you have received, you will find a summary of the calendar that is in effect until June. One period of 16 weeks begins on the second Tuesday in February. The other period, 10 weeks long, begins on the third Tuesday in September.

There are then extended sitting hours for a total of four weeks, two weeks following each regular session. The calendar also provides for work in electoral districts: three weeks during the session starting in February, one week during the session starting in September and one week following the end of period.

On page 4, you will find the calendar of Assembly work. By that, I mean the hours during which the Assembly sits. I will spare you a reading of all the hours listed there. I do apologize, however, for a small typo. This is an older version, with 9:30 a.m. indicated as the starting time, which is now 9:40 a.m. after an adjustment to the standing orders a few months ago. This is the calendar of both ordinary hours and extended hours.

Parliamentary committees are also included because, except for constituency weeks, committees may meet at any time during the schedule on page 5. You can also see that committees can meet on Monday afternoons and Friday mornings. Up to four committees can meet simultaneously. This number increases to five when the Assembly is not sitting.

I would now like to deal with voting procedure in the chamber or in committee.

Electronic voting or remote voting is not permitted in the National Assembly. Members must be present to exercise their right to vote. However, there is a way to avoid holding votes at less desirable times in the chamber, such as late at night. These are known as deferred divisions and they allow the government to defer any division until the routine proceedings on the next sitting day. Divisions may be deferred only upon request of the government house leader.

As for child care, there have already been discussions to consider opening a child care service within or near the Parliament building for parliamentarians and their staff. This was not pursued, in part because Parliament Hill is well served by several child care facilities and members did not want to open such an exclusive service while not all Quebecers have access to subsidized child care.

As well, the vast majority of members do not have their primary residence in the Quebec City area, so parliamentary child care would not help make the assembly more family-friendly. Remember that the Assembly meets 26 weeks per year for an average of just under 80 sittings.

● (1210)

Like the rest of the province, parliamentarians technically have access to parental leave, although so far this type of leave has never been used. Members hold a publicly elective office and are deemed to be exercising the duties of this office as long as they remain in office. A member's seat becomes vacant only under the circumstances outlined in sections 16 and 17 of an Act respecting the National Assembly, for example, in the case of resignation, electoral defeat or imprisonment.

Since the voters in the riding elect members for a maximum five-year term, the member's duties cannot be delegated to someone else. If a member took extended absence for parental leave, who would represent the constituents? Could a member's absence from a vote end up changing the outcome? Should members on parental leave be counted for a quorum? Who would sign official documents on their behalf? Who would have authority over their staff?

Section 35 of the *Code of ethics and conduct of the members of the National Assembly* states that members must “maintain a good attendance record in carrying out the duties of office”. They may not be “absent from sittings of the National Assembly for an unreasonable length of time without a valid reason”. How would the Ethics Commissioner view an extended absence for parental leave?

I want to comment briefly on technologies to improve work-family balance.

Of course, the National Assembly uses technology to allow parliamentarians to do their work efficiently, especially by providing them with various tools such as laptops, iPads and smartphones.

Another tool is the Greffier website. I see that my time is flying. I will just say that Greffier is an intranet site accessible to all parliamentarians, wherever they may be in the world. They can access various parliamentary documents, such as schedules, briefs submitted by groups for upcoming hearings, texts of bills and amendments. This all may be found on Greffier, in the Assembly or from home.

You will find attached a few statistics on the parliamentary work at the National Assembly that may be of interest to members of the committee.

Thank you.

Of course, I am available to answer your questions.

•(1215)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

I would just point out with regard to your comment about replacing someone that in Sweden, ministers get a whole replacement person for their constituency work. I think it might be for parental leave too.

We'll start out with Mr. Graham, sharing with Mr. Lightbound, I think.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: That's correct, Mr. Chair. I'll be sharing with Mr. Lightbound.

[Translation]

Thank you, Mr. Arsenault. I very much appreciate the time you have devoted to us.

My question is a quick one; it deals with procedure in the National Assembly.

At federal level, four days are allocated for a bill to be debated, studied in committee and sent back to the House. How long do you

allocate for a bill to be studied? Here, we can study it in a week, but you only sit for three days. I am curious to understand the difference.

Mr. François Arsenault: Thank you for your question.

There is a major difference. The time allocated for each of the legislative stages is not calculated in days, but in individual speaking times for each of the members.

When the work schedule is established in the National Assembly, I would say that, in theory—it may be a little different in practice and I will explain to you why—it become difficult to predict, because there is no fixed length of time for the a bill to be passed in principle. For example, the standing orders do not say that it will take five hours, 10 hours or two days to go through the process of passing a bill in principle. Instead, it is done on the basis of the hours or minutes anticipated for each member.

In practice, of course, for most uncontested bills, the parliamentary leaders talk to each other and try to set an informal schedule that is not made public. For example, in setting the time need to pass a bill in principle, the official opposition may say that it will have three speakers and that they will speak for about an hour in total. Then the second opposition group says how long they will take, and so on. The standing orders themselves do not stipulate a specific duration, except when exceptional procedural motions are being discussed.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Is each speech limited in time? Is each member limited to one speech per subject? Are there limits like that?

Mr. François Arsenault: Yes. Each member can actually speak only once at each legislative stage. So, for example, at the passage in principle stage, each member may speak only once.

The standing orders set a maximum time per member, according to the debate. The speaking times are not always the same. The time can vary depending on whether we are at the passage in principle, the report stage or the final passage. Speaking times are longest when we are at the passage in principle stage.

In addition, speaking times vary with the function of the members. For example, the minister introducing the bill and the critics from the official opposition may speak longer than the other members.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I will let Mr. Lightbound continue.

Mr. Joël Lightbound (Louis-Hébert, Lib.): Good afternoon, Mr. Arsenault. Thank you for being part of our session today.

All of us around this table share the same concern. We all want to have a parliament that better represents Canadians. Among other things, then, we want to attract more women.

As a result of the changes you introduced in 2009, have you observed a quantitative increase in the number of women elected to the National Assembly?

Qualitatively, have there been any comments about their experience with the work-life balance, and I would include men in that as well? How has it been received by the members?

•(1220)

Mr. François Arsenault: As for the participation of women, there are presently 36 women out of the 125 members, a little less than 29%. In 2012, 27% of the members were women. I do not have the 2009 figures with me, but essentially, we have seen no significant difference since the 2009 reform. There has not been a greater representation of women in the Quebec National Assembly. That's point number one.

As for point number two, the impact of these rules on the work-life balance. As you can see in the media, that is currently making headlines in Quebec. Even before the events of this week, the subject kept coming back with parliamentarians. It did not solve all the previous problems. If you asked parliamentarians for their opinion about the current calendar that I showed you and what proposals they might have about it, you would probably get 125 different proposals from the 125 members. There really is no consensus on this issue.

Parliamentarians who live in and around Quebec City may see significant advantages in finishing work earlier and not sitting so late in the evening, because they can go home to their families. However, it is different for those from the regions and from outside the Quebec City area. If the National Assembly finishes its work at 6 p.m., it is impossible for a number of them to go home to their families. Some would therefore feel that, by contrast, the National Assembly should concentrate its calendar even more and sit for longer, over a much shorter period of time, so that they could go back to their constituencies.

Really, I would add that there are always discussions about Mondays and Fridays. When you looked at the national assembly's calendar, you saw that it does not sit on Mondays unless there is a government motion. That is quite rare. In addition, it does not sit on Fridays except during the extended hours.

However, there is an impact on parliamentary committees. Some parliamentarians would prefer the National Assembly or the committees never to sit on Mondays and Fridays in order to make sure they could go back to their ridings and take care of their family obligations and their constituency work.

[English]

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Mr. Joël Lightbound: Oh, 30 seconds.

[Translation]

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: With your permission, I would like to continue for a few more seconds.

Briefly, do you wonder why no parental leave has been taken?

Mr. François Arsenault: You would have to ask the parliamentarians.

One of the difficulties may be technical in nature. I am not an expert in this area, but the Québec parental insurance plan applies to everyone. If members wanted to take advantage of it, they would have to give up all the other benefits that they might be able to receive. That is not necessarily to their advantage.

Do not forget the reasons I listed in my presentation. Members taking a six-month absence to take care of their babies have no

replacement system to fall back on. There are no substitute members to do their jobs. So what can they do?

Suppose we had a government with a slim majority, and we have had them in some years. If several government members took parental leave, the government might well lose votes in the National Assembly. That situation has not risen yet, however. We are not at that level, but there have certainly been discussions between the members of some parties and their whips to grant shorter leave. However, we have not yet seen a member officially use parental leave in Quebec.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Richards has the floor now.

[English]

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you very much for being here with us today. I have a few questions for you as well.

First of all, I want to say that I appreciated your remarks with regard to parental leave for parliamentarians. You raised a series of questions, and I think one of the things we always have to be conscious of when we're talking about these kinds of reforms is the impact they will have on constituents. Constituents vote for someone to be their representative, and they believe that that's the person who would best represent the constituency. For someone to take parental leave would leave those constituents without a representative.

I've appreciated some of those questions you asked. Who would represent the constituents? Would that absence end up changing the outcome of a vote? There's a whole series of other questions, and I think those are important. It is important we remember that we're here to serve our constituents. It's a crucial thing.

I want to follow up in a couple of areas. In the exchange you just had with members from the government, I think I was understanding where you were going, but when you made your reforms, you made the decision—I think, if I'm understanding correctly—to go with more sitting weeks, but shorter weeks in those sittings. It sounded like that was currently being looked at, or reviewed, or there had been some discussion about it at least.

Could you elaborate a bit on why? One of the challenges for us in Ottawa to look at something like that would be the significant cost, particularly for people coming in from the west. If you have more weeks, but shorter weeks, that would increase the travel costs to taxpayers. I'm wondering if that is part of the reason you're looking at it. I know that the context is a bit different at the provincial level, but I'm wondering if that's one of the reasons why this is currently being reviewed, or if there are other reasons, and if you could elaborate on them.

•(1225)

[Translation]

Mr. François Arsenault: There are many reasons why these issues are being studied again. In terms of travel costs, Québec's territory is smaller than that of Canada as a whole, and, therefore, the issue is perhaps a little less important.

Furthermore, before the 2009 reform, the Quebec National Assembly began its work in mid-March and ended a little before Saint-Jean-Baptiste, towards the end of June. In the fall, it began its work in mid-October and adjourned around Christmas Eve, which parliamentarians complained about. They actually argued that, between the end of the Assembly's proceedings and the Christmas holidays, they had very little time to do their work in their ridings. This is why the schedule was changed. We now begin our work in September and end in early December. The same principle applies to the spring period.

Another decision was made to introduce what the standing orders call constituency weeks during those periods of parliamentary work. Those are weeks of parliamentary recess during which the Assembly and the committees cannot sit. That is especially the case during the spring period, which is the longest. The parliamentary recess periods coincide with school breaks, often in March, and with Easter. There is already a statutory holiday on Monday of that week. In addition, there is another week, which is flexible and can be moved. This year, it is this week. Right now, we are in parliamentary recess. Last year, it was combined with the school break I mentioned. We finish the work earlier, but we start earlier too.

Another important fact is that the sitting hours are shorter, especially during the extended sitting periods. Previously, during those periods, the Assembly and the committees sat until midnight four days a week, but now the meetings are adjourned no later than 10:30 p.m. This is indicated in one of the appendices. In fact, they end at 10:30 p.m. only on some nights. Otherwise, they end earlier. It was agreed that 10:30 p.m. is late, but at least parliamentarians do not finish their day at midnight. Because of the long working hours and lack of rest, they found it difficult to do their job as parliamentarians and to balance work and family.

• (1230)

[English]

Mr. Blake Richards: You mentioned in your presentation that e-voting or remote voting is not permitted in the National Assembly. I personally believe there's something significant about—again, this goes back to making sure we're serving our constituents in the best possible way—members standing in their place and having their constituents seeing them standing and being counted, but I don't know if that's why that's the case in the National Assembly.

Is this something that was discussed when you were doing your reforms or just something that wasn't considered? If it was considered, for what reasons was it decided not to go with the idea of e-voting or remote voting?

[Translation]

Mr. François Arsenault: The issue of electronic voting was addressed during the discussions that led to the 2009 reform, but not in depth or very seriously.

There are two aspects to that.

First, we asked ourselves how we could ensure the validity of votes, from a legal standpoint, if parliamentarians voted from their various ridings rather than in Parliament itself. How can this be organized? How can we ensure the integrity of the process? That's an

issue. I am not saying that it's impossible. I'm just telling you that it is an issue.

Then, it must be said that many parliamentarians feel a certain pride to be present in the House during the recorded votes, to rise before all their colleagues to vote in favour or against a motion.

However, the issue of electronic voting has not been studied in depth. The discussions about reforming it were not very extensive.

[English]

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay. It sounds as though many members there felt, much as I do, that it's important to stand and be counted your place so their constituents could see and witness how you're voting on their behalf.

It appears that you're maybe indicating I'm out of time here, Mr. Chair? Okay.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: You have a good sense.

[Translation]

The floor is yours, Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Arsenault.

[English]

I appreciate your being with us.

My first question is based on testimony we heard from an earlier witness prior to your joining us. It was from a seasoned staff veteran who's been on both sides of the House, government and opposition. When asked what he thought the ideal length of time for the House to meet was, bearing in mind the needs of government and all the things that factor in, he said three weeks was about right. With anything less, we're maybe not as efficient; with anything longer, we're keeping people from their homes and families, and there is the mood and the tension as you get into fourth weeks and fifth weeks. Those of us who have served five weeks know exactly what that's about. It gets crazy.

Would you agree that three weeks is the right length of time, or is there another number that you think more reflects that balance?

[Translation]

Mr. François Arsenault: It is difficult for me to give you a clear answer mainly because I am not a parliamentarian. Common sense tells us that people should be more efficient and less impatient when they are less tired. It's human nature. People sometimes tend to forget that parliamentarians are human beings more than anything else. Break weeks can be beneficial.

As we can see in our current parliamentary calendar, in February, we resume work for a very short time before our first constituency week. All goes well. However, toward the end of the parliamentary session, in the final sprint of the somewhat extended sitting periods, there is more tension at times, probably because people are tired and the stress has accumulated. That said, parliamentarians would be in a better position to talk about it.

In your study, you need to determine how many weeks the government needs for its legislation. I always say the government, but there is clearly the opposition, which must also play its part. The issue of parliamentary control is also very important. You must determine how much time is needed and how Parliament can operate effectively. That is a very difficult thing to do, and it depends on the measures and bills that are challenged. Bills on which everyone agrees usually move forward quite well and quickly. However, when the opposition decides to fight tooth and nail against a bill, whether for ideological or other reasons, the government is happy to have those time slots to move the work forward.

In addition, even though the exceptional legislative procedure, like a gag order, is still an option, governments, at least Quebec's, are desperate to avoid using it. Having more time may help some bills to finally be passed, sometimes with opposition amendments, because the government wants to end the debate and reach some sort of consensus.

● (1235)

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you.

[English]

A quick glance at this suggests that your House still sits less than ours now, and yet your government doesn't use closure on a regular basis in order to meet its time frames. Usually the argument a government will put up is that it has to do that because it has a deadline to meet. Yet, your culture is that it doesn't use that as much, yet it sits for less time. You may not be able to answer this one, but what do you think of that disparity? Is there a more co-operative culture at the leadership level in your House that allows things that are not controversial to remain not controversial and to go through more smoothly? Why do you think that is? I'm not expecting a detailed answer, but just your thoughts on why we sit longer and why the government, regardless of political stripe, it seems, feels the need to shut down debate on a rather regular basis?

[Translation]

Mr. François Arsenault: It is very difficult for me to answer that question. I sort of follow what is happening in the House of Commons, but I am not there. Perhaps you would need to compare how many measures and bills are put forward at the federal level and in Quebec. Unfortunately, I cannot say much more about that.

[English]

Mr. David Christopherson: I sat in the Ontario legislature for 13 years, and a study might show it to be different, but I don't recall the number of bills going through the House being that much greater.

Thank you for your comments on that.

I want to move again, and I may need some assistance from our analysts here, so I'd ask that they be on standby. You mention on page 6 of your opening remarks that your code of ethics empowers

the ethics commissioner to determine whether a member's absence violates the code under section 35, and I quote: "A member must maintain a good attendance record in carrying out the duties of office. He or she may not be absent from sittings of the National Assembly for an unreasonable length of time without a valid reason."

Through you, Chair, to our analyst, I believe, and correct me if I'm wrong, that we have an actual number of days, and you are either okay within that number of days or if you cross that threshold, you're into another scenario. Can you help me out, please?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): You have about five seconds left. I'll let the analyst respond to your question and then your time will be up.

Mr. David Christopherson: Fair enough, Chair. Thank you.

Mr. Andre Barnes (Committee Researcher): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's set out in the Parliament of Canada Act that it's 21 days. There are specific reasons why you can be absent, including illness and a couple of others that I don't recall offhand.

Mr. David Christopherson: It is interesting, though, that one allows a judgment by a third party, and the other one is very prescriptive.

Thank you, Chair, and Mr. Arsenault.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): Now we have Ms. Sahota, who is going to share her time with Ms. Petitpas Taylor.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Thank you for all your valuable insight into how the Quebec Assembly works. You mentioned that members wanted to be more present in their constituencies to serve their constituents and to do constituency work. Have the amendments that you've made in the assembly allowed the members to serve more time? Have you had feedback from the members? Have these amendments satisfied their constituents as a whole?

● (1240)

[Translation]

Mr. François Arsenault: I would say yes and no. Let me explain why.

The answer is yes because we think parliamentarians are happy to be able to finish the work earlier in the year. That gives them a little more time before Christmas and before the summer.

However, in reality, there is a lot of discontent, particularly with respect to the parliamentary committees. The committees may sit when the National Assembly is sitting, but they also meet a lot when the National Assembly is not sitting. When the National Assembly is not sitting, the parliamentary committees have more time to sit.

In Quebec, many parliamentary committees begin their work quite early in the year. As a result, that forces the members of the committees to be in the Assembly for very long periods of time. So that adds up to much more than 26 weeks. That may be a somewhat negative effect of the 2009 reform.

It is difficult to assess the situation. Does this have to do with the change in the calendar or the fact that committees sit more? It must be said that there has been an increase in public hearings held by parliamentary committees.

If we were to survey parliamentarians on how satisfied they are with the current calendar, we would not get a very high score. As I explained earlier, there are probably 125 different viewpoints among the parliamentarians. Which calendar should be used?

In some ways, things have improved, but not in others, especially in terms of the parliamentary committees. A lot of parliamentarians tell us that they spend too much time in Quebec City and that they don't have enough time to do their work in their ridings. However, other parliamentarians would probably tell you something different. It depends.

We are seeing that we need a lot of time for the committees that are sitting. That does not affect all 125 members, but it affects many of them. Take August for example, and that's my final comment. From mid-August to the end of August, parliamentary committees are starting to sit. Clearly, that's never very popular with parliamentarians for obvious reasons. If the parliamentary committees have long mandates and they sit from mid-August to the beginning of the National Assembly sittings in September, those members will not have a lot of time to work in their ridings. Clearly, that applies more to the members from outside the region.

[English]

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Has there been feedback from the constituents, from the citizens of Quebec, on the changes that you've made?

[Translation]

Mr. François Arsenault: We have received no feedback from the public. I suppose the members must have received feedback from their own constituents, that's pretty much a given, but we have received no opinion, favourable or unfavourable, from the public at large.

[English]

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I find it difficult to explain to my constituents sometimes. Although I enjoy a lot of the work that I'm doing here in Ottawa, they like to see me there and they like to be able to share their concerns and problems. It is important to get back to your constituency.

I'm going to share my time with my colleague here.

[Translation]

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Mr. Arsenault, thank you very much for your presentation. It will really help us develop good recommendations, particularly for work-life balance.

Could you tell us what prompted the changes in 2009?

●(1245)

Mr. François Arsenault: It was a series of circumstances. There have been small adjustments, but the last major reform of the calendar was in 1984. However, Parliament had changed quite a bit in the meantime. Parliamentarians had asked that a number of aspects in the standing orders be amended. Two government leaders at the time introduced reform proposals. The speaker of the Assembly himself introduced a plan to reform a host of issues.

A committee was formed in 2008, I think, to study those proposals. The reform took place in 2009. The calendar was one of the key issues discussed. That is still the case today. A technical committee made up of parliamentary leaders meets to discuss future reforms or adjustments to the standing orders. The parliamentary calendar is clearly still one of the items on the agenda.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I suppose that you were in the Assembly in 2009 and you were there before the changes were made. You are still there now.

Could you tell us what you think has had most effect?

Mr. François Arsenault: I was indeed in the Assembly before the 2009 reform. That said, it is always difficult to answer questions on effectiveness. How can we measure effectiveness? Is effectiveness when a bill is passed quickly? Some will say yes. Does effectiveness mean allowing the entire opposition to express its point of view, to bring about change through debate and the time spent debating, to introduce amendments that will make the government think more or put some water in its wine to amend the legislation? We have seen situations where the opposition proposed major amendments to bills. Initially, the government did not agree, but after hours or even days of deliberations, it decided to put some water in its wine to reach a consensus with the opposition. It is really hard to say what is effective and to define effectiveness. Some will say that spending many hours in committees or in the chamber is effective, while others say that it is completely ineffective.

It is important to keep in mind that the wisdom of parliamentarians and speakers lies in developing standing orders that strike a balance, allowing first the government to govern and pass the measures it introduces, and, second, the opposition to express the view that it thinks does justice to the people. We hear a lot about the fact that citizens may express their views to parliamentarians. The National Assembly has 125 members. This means that many people may want to express their views. Clearly, you have even more people. The idea is to find a balance, which is not easy.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): Thank you.

I will now give the floor to Mr. Schmale for five minutes.

[English]

Mr. Jamie Schmale: I appreciate the discussion going on now. It seems that a lot of our questions and concerns clearly relate to the schedule and how we can make this work. I like some of your suggestions.

I would like to ask a quick question. On page 6, you mention parental leave for parliamentarians. You say, “so far this type of leave has never been used.” Is that to say that nobody has ever had a child while they were serving? I just want to see if there is a distinction there.

[Translation]

Mr. François Arsenault: That's an excellent question.

Some parliamentarians have had children, just like the general public. Actually, a member has become a father in the past few weeks.

Officially, no parental leave has been requested by parliamentarians. Would the whips allow it? Some members may be absent from the National Assembly for all sorts of reasons. It is rare for 100% of the members to be present in the National Assembly. Some have permission to be absent, whether to participate in parliamentary missions, to work in their ridings or to make ministerial or other announcements.

Do whips allow some members to be absent, for a relatively short time, from the National Assembly? They probably do. Clearly, that is not done at our level, but surely an exception may be made for some. However, to date we have not seen parliamentarians absent from the National Assembly for months because they became parents. That has happened before, but they were not officially on parental leave. It may be the case informally, but not officially.

•(1250)

[English]

Mr. Jamie Schmale: I am surprised that wasn't brought up in your review of 2009. I would find that a very discouraging factor for some people getting into politics, if there is nothing.... I know we have that extended leave of 21 days, and I know we are talking about that in this forum.

Has there been any discussion or comments from male or female parliamentarians who are new parents? You just said you had a new father here, so I am wondering if any comments have come forward about ways to accommodate that.

[Translation]

Mr. François Arsenault: I know there are constant discussions among parliamentarians on this important issue of work-family balance. How can we attract more people to the National Assembly? People may actually be discouraged when they see the schedule or the impact on their families. Those discussions come up constantly. There is no solution for the time being, apart from what I have explained at the outset. Nothing can be done about it.

That said, it is an ongoing discussion. People are thinking about it and the solution is not simple. Parliamentary work is unique, for the reasons I mentioned. Earlier, some of your colleagues expressed it well, at least in terms of the constituency work. Would constituents agree to their representatives being absent for months? I don't know.

There is also an impact on the operations of the National Assembly and the role of members.

It's not simple, but it is the stage that the discussions have reached.

[English]

Mr. Jamie Schmale: I definitely agree there is something to be said for standing in your place and voting on a particular issue, so I do get that point.

As for technology to improve the family work-life balance, I know we have been talking about this a lot. Something that continues to come up is the use of our parliamentary calendar. A lot of us, including me, use something that isn't in-house, the Google Calendar, so that all of our staff and our families can access where we will be and have an opportunity to input items that we should be at, a family birthday party, and those kinds of things.

We often talk about ways of fixing this or finding a solution, and sometimes we overthink things and kind of reinvent the wheel. I am just curious if there is a system that you use that allows, through your management platform, the opportunity for your MNAs to have their families or staff members access it without the secure ID cards that we have here.

[Translation]

Mr. François Arsenault: Access to the Greffier site is reserved for parliamentarians and their researchers and assistants, who have access to the site. In principle, family does not have access to the site for security reasons.

If I understood your question correctly, I would have to say that the Greffier site will not necessarily be the answer. In terms of the calendar, the Greffier site will simply show it. In fact, this isn't true. It can be part of a solution, in the sense that the schedules for hearings and the calendar of upcoming events can be easily found. I'm sticking my neck out a bit, but I know that the whips' offices have their own parallel calendar system to ensure that members are present both at the National Assembly and in parliamentary committee at various times. I think they probably make more use of this calendar from the office of the whip for each political party.

•(1255)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): Thank you.

We're now onto the second round, starting with Ms. Petitpas Taylor.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you.

Me again, Mr. Arsenault.

I think you said at the very start of your presentation that 29% of Quebec MNAs are women. Did I understand that correctly?

Mr. François Arsenault: Actually, 28% of MNAs are women.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: And as for minority groups—

Mr. François Arsenault: No, you're right; it is 29%. I'm sorry.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you.

Do you have statistics for minority groups as well?

Mr. François Arsenault: Yes, we definitely have those statistics, but I don't have them with me. I could send them to the committee, though.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Excellent.

All that to say, we want to make sure that Parliament reflects Canada's population. And by that, we don't just mean women and minority groups, but the age of our MPs as well.

Could you tell us what the average age is of members who sit in the National Assembly of Quebec?

Mr. François Arsenault: It's currently 53. I checked and found out that MNAs over age 50 currently make up about 70% of the parliamentary representation. In other words, 70% of MNAs are 50 or older. The average age is 53 years old. The 18-39 age group— young people—currently represent 10%, which isn't very high.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Do you think that if there were more young MNAs, family policies might be a little different?

Mr. François Arsenault: Possibly. It's probably the same for you. In a parliament, when there are a lot of new members who, initially, don't have as developed a parliamentary culture, it is completely normal that they would question a lot of things. Needless to say, these new parliamentarians raise more questions than those who have been doing the job for 20 years, although parliamentarians who have 10, 15 or 20 years of experience also question certain procedures. In fact, society is changing, particularly with regard to the role of women, and Parliament is not impervious to this.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: My last question has to do with parental leave.

Would it be frowned upon if a member decided to take parental leave, or would the member be encouraged to take it?

Mr. François Arsenault: That's a good question. I don't know. You would have to ask the parliamentarians or the population. I don't know how it might be perceived.

From a purely practical perspective, it raises one question: if a member takes six months of parental leave to take care of his or her child, who will take care of that member's riding? Indeed, it will be necessary to ensure that voters in that riding still have a voice and that the work in the riding is being done. I think this is true for all parliamentarians. None of them wants to see the voters abandoned or less well-served if they take leave.

It's difficult for me to provide a precise answer to the question. I imagine that the answer varies depending on who you ask.

● (1300)

[English]

The Chair: Just before we let you go, on parental leave, as I was saying earlier, from the research that we have done, we know that in Sweden members of Parliament do take parental leave and get replacement MPs to handle their ridings at that time. That's a very interesting concept. In fact, the ministers are not allowed to sit in the legislative assembly in Sweden. They each get a replacement, because they're supposed to be off doing other work. It's an interesting model.

I have one question before we let you go. We discussed security a bit. I often leave my office at two or three in the morning. If we have late-night sittings, staff have to leave late. Did you have any discussions about late-night security, for people leaving the assembly, such as staff or MNAs?

[Translation]

Mr. François Arsenault: Yes, a bit, but it's important to mention that the parking lots for people who drive are still fairly close to the National Assembly. They aren't necessarily on the National Assembly grounds, but they are still fairly close. Parliament Hill is very well covered by security camera systems. The area around Parliament is really very secure. Indeed, someone who leaves the premises at two in the morning, when the streets are deserted, may have some concerns, but as far as I know, no MNA or staff member has had any unfortunate incidents in the area.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I think this has been very helpful to us. You have some new ideas, some new things for us to think about. We appreciate your taking this time. I know you're very busy. Thank you very much.

There's one thing for the committee before you leave. We were talking about kids a lot today, so what do you guys think about having a playground in front of Centre Block?

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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