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Chair

The Honourable Larry Bagnell

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• (1205)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Good morning, and welcome to the 46th meeting of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. This meeting is being held in public and it's televised.

Pursuant to the order adopted by the committee on November 29, we have with us today the Minister of Democratic Institutions, the Honourable Maryam Monsef, to discuss the provisions contained in Bill C-33, an act to amend the Canada Elections Act and to make consequential amendments to other acts.

The minister is accompanied by Natasha Kim, director, democratic reform, Privy Council Office; and Robert Sampson, senior policy adviser, counsel, democratic reform, Privy Council Office.

Before giving the floor to the minister, I want to make a couple of points.

I'm sure you all received the document sent to you by the Library of Parliament researcher comparing the recommendations in the Chief Electoral Officer's report and the items in Bill C-33.

Although Bill C-33 has not been referred to our committee by the House, the committee has invited the minister to discuss the content of the bill, pursuant to its permanent mandate under Standing Order 108(3)(a). Members will note similarities between some of the provisions of the bill and the recommendations contained in the Chief Electoral Officer's report, which the committee has been studying. Much of that study has been carried out in camera so members should exercise caution if they refer to the committee's deliberations.

The Chief Electoral Officer's report and all the recommendations are public. You could talk about them and talk about Bill C-33, which is public, but not what we discussed about the Chief Electoral Officer's recommendations.

Minister, welcome. Thank you for coming. The floor is yours.

Hon. Maryam Monsef (Minister of Democratic Institutions): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you, colleagues, for your invitation to be here with you today.

The last time I was here we talked about the Senate appointment process and the government's mandate and commitments on ways we can improve our democracy and our democratic institutions.

I'm very much grateful for the opportunity to be here with you today for a number of reasons. You've had more than 40 meetings; it has been about a year since this Parliament began sitting, and you and I very much walk the same path. We have the same challenges and we have the same goals of protecting what's working and what we are so fortunate to have and improving it further.

As always, your input and perspective are greatly appreciated. As my parliamentary secretary Mark Holland and I have travelled the country and studied the work we're doing, time and time again the testimony that has come before this committee comes up, around a family-friendly Parliament, for example. The work this committee has done and the conversations you've had come up again and again. As you know, my work on this file is shaped mostly by a desire to make this place more inclusive, to make the voting process more accessible. I know that together we share these objectives. We have a lot of work to do, and we've begun some of that work.

I also know that you have been reviewing the recommendations our Chief Electoral Officer made based on the results of the last election. I'm really looking forward to the results of that study. I'm looking forward to the possibility of hearing more about that work today. As I've said, we're very proud of the phase one reforms that we've introduced through Bill C-33. We believe it's a strong bill, but I'm also mindful of the fact that the bill could be further strengthened, and if your committee and the work you've done could contribute to that, I think we would serve Canada well.

Now, before I move on I think it's really important, given that it's the middle of December, Mr. Chair, that I take this opportunity to express how much I value—and I think we all share this—the work we've been able to do with our Chief Electoral Officer. He has served this country and Canadians for a decade, and his professionalism and dedication to this country and to the health and integrity of our democracy, I believe, are a model for public service. I'm sure we all wish him well in his retirement, which is imminent.

As you know, Bill C-33 proposes amendments to the Canada Elections Act. We introduced it in the House recently, and it's important to talk a little about the current Canadian context for Bill C-33.

You've been involved in this conversation, colleagues, as has the electoral reform committee. What Mark Holland and I have heard across the country is that, while it's important to enhance the way we vote, it's also really important to make it easier for people to get to the polling station, to prove their identity, to have the right information, and to remove unnecessary barriers that exist. This is in line with what we've heard across the country.

As we work towards electoral reform, while it's clear there are sometimes contradictory perspectives on process and many different perspectives, I think something we can all agree on is that our democracy is connected very much to who we are as individuals and to our sense of identity as Canadians. Canadian democracy continues to be a model for the world.

That's why I think it's really important that any improvements we make be in the best interests of all Canadians, and that's what Bill C-33 is all about. The changes we're proposing in Bill C-33 are about empowering Canadians with the knowledge they need and encouraging greater engagement in our democracy.

• (1210)

Bill C-33 is about helping more Canadians learn about the value of voting. It's about empowering more Canadians who qualify in casting a ballot. It's about breaking down barriers that don't need to be there, that currently prevent too many Canadians from voting. While it's true that the democracy and culture we have here in Canada are the envy of the world, and they work, we can't be complacent. The pressing challenge for us ahead I believe is to make sure that our democracy works for all Canadians without exception.

We want to make it easier for Canadians to vote, because when that happens, democracy is better. This is a goal that I believe we can all agree on. It can only be accomplished if we all work together. You may recall the conversation I had with the good folks at the press gallery after introducing Bill C-33, when I mentioned how important it is for me for this bill to have benefited from the expertise and contributions of all parliamentarians. I want to reinforce that here today. I am counting on your deep expertise and knowledge of electoral reform to achieve that.

To paint the picture of this suite of reforms that I have been mandated to ask for, I'm going to set aside Bill C-33 for just a moment, just to let you know what we've done in the past year and what's ahead of us. I have a feeling I'll be coming back to this committee again and again, and I think it's helpful for you to know what initiatives are likely to come before you for deliberation.

As you know, the Prime Minister set a rather ambitious agenda for democratic reform. While it brings many complex challenges, we are making progress on this agenda.

A non-partisan, merit-based appointment process for the Prime Minister to be advised on Senate appointments so that accomplished Canadians from all walks of life from across the country would be considered for the Senate has been established.

A parliamentary committee has studied electoral reform. The committee's report was received on December 1. The government will be responding in detail to that report in the new year.

The matter that brings me here today is an item that is in my mandate letter. As you know, the Fair Elections Act has unfair aspects which were controversial in nature but also unhelpful in engaging Canadians and allowing them to participate in their democracy in their ability to vote. These are things I have been asked to address through repealing those elements of the Fair Elections Act. These again are things that make it harder for Canadians to vote and easier for lawbreakers to evade punishment.

With Bill C-33, the government has introduced some amendments to advance these commitments. The focus was on making changes to those areas that we heard most loudly on from Canadians. We've heard from the debates that took place in the House and in committees like this one, during the last election, and from people, frankly, who I've met across the country in talking about electoral reform, that changes need to be made. There was no good reason why some of those changes were introduced in the first place.

There are other changes that have been suggested and the government will be looking to introduce further legislation going forward. I look forward to the input and advice of this committee to make sure that we're putting the best possible legislation forward to benefit all Canadians.

What is Bill C-33 about? It responds to the concerns that I've just shared with seven important reforms.

The first two reforms focus on making it easier for eligible Canadians to vote. Ultimately, it would increase voter participation through reinstating the voter information card and the vouching process.

The third reform is about engaging Canadians through education about Canada's electoral process.

• (1215)

The fourth, and this is something that I've heard across the country, is about engaging youth further by providing an opportunity for Elections Canada to pre-register youth ages 14 to 17, so that they can be invited to be part of the democratic institutions at an earlier age.

The fifth reform is about building more integrity into our voting system by giving Elections Canada the resources it needs to clean up the data in the national list of electors.

Our sixth reform would make the administrative adjustments necessary to formally return the commissioner of Canada elections to Elections Canada.

Finally, our seventh reform would make it easier for Canadians working and living abroad by expanding the right to vote to over a million Canadians, even if they've been away from home for more than five years.

Again, I want to be clear. I believe these are strong reforms that we've introduced. There's more work to be done and we'll be introducing further legislation, but Bill C-33 is the first of a series of reforms that will come before you for consideration.

Another area that is a priority for Mark and me is to focus on ways to improve access to the democratic process for Canadians who are often on the margins of our society. I'm talking about homeless people, young people, seniors, indigenous Canadians, new Canadians, those with physical disabilities, those with various abilities and exceptionalities, and of course, those who come from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Bill C-33 aims to address some of those challenges for these groups by making voting easier for groups that traditionally and consistently experience difficulty proving their identity. There is also a great deal invested in enhancing youth participation through a future list of electors being generated, but as always, there's more work to be done.

Something that we can look forward to in the future is a commitment to bring forward options to create an independent commissioner to organize political party debates. The options that we present need to be informed by the input of Canadians, political parties, broadcasters, journalists, and others as we work towards this goal. We've learned that knowledge is key to democratic participation, and leaders' debates are an important piece of the puzzle when it comes to educating Canadians. I know that the Chief Electoral Officer's recommendations are before you. You'll be working together to enhance the accessibility of our elections. I very much look forward to hearing your recommendations on the Chief Electoral Officer's advice.

I want to thank you, again, for the opportunity to be here, Mr. Chair. I'm very happy to answer any questions that colleagues may have.

• (1220)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll go to Mr. Graham for the first round of seven minutes.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham (Laurentides—Labelle, Lib.): Thank you, Minister, for being here.

I find Bill C-33 is a very important bill. As staff to the Liberal critic for democratic reform in the last Parliament, I was very heavily involved in fighting the unfair elections act. That said, you are aware that we were studying the election office's report and from the announced report there are five overlapping sections of the bill with our study.

I don't want to get too much into that, but I wanted to make sure you're aware of that part, which you've addressed, and I thank you for that. There are 132 recommendations in that report, of which there are 127 left. You just said there are going to be more bills coming. I'd like to get a sense from you of what the priorities are for

us to study so we don't have the situation again where the bill comes before our study is complete.

I'd really like to make sure that we have the opportunity to study it in advance. I'd like to know, of those 127 remaining recommendations that didn't get addressed in Bill C-33, where your priorities lie for us to get through.

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Mr. Chair, I thank my colleague for his very thoughtful question.

While I'm not privy to the conversations you folks have through your in camera deliberations, I understand that reviewing and making recommendations on the Chief Electoral Officer's report is very much within your mandate. It's something I'm counting on. These changes we put forward in Bill C-33 I believe are straightforward. I'm not sure where you are in your review of them, but you're right that there's quite a bit more work to be done. I understand that you will be providing a report to the House in the new year. We're eagerly awaiting your recommendations.

On this particular bill, too, there were areas where we could have gone further, but the decision we considered to be the most thoughtful one was to just wait. An example is expanding the right to vote to Canadians living and working abroad for more than five years. We've expanded the right to those Canadians who have at one time lived here in Canada, but something that we're counting on this committee to study further and provide its recommendations on is the status of the children of those Canadians living abroad who are still Canadians but who have never lived in Canada. Do we expand the right to vote to them?

Ultimately, I believe my main goal with my mandate letter, the reason we all work very hard every day, is that we want to see more Canadians participating in their democratic process, whether as engaged and informed voters or as active participants and candidates. That is an area of key priority for me: accessibility and inclusion. That is something I think we can do in the months, if not years, ahead. That's something we can improve upon. These are some of my priorities that I think are important for you to know, but I'm also happy to have conversations with colleagues around this table about what you would collectively like to see moving forward.

I know that what you do in this committee, one of the things that's quite impressive, is you're able to work collegially. You're able to put partisan interests aside. You see the big picture and you move forward based on what's in the best interests of all Canadians. That's the spirit that I think we need to work towards to improve democratic participation. If there are areas you believe need to be at the heart of our focus, then talk to me.

• (1225)

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: The last three sections of Bill C-33 deal with the Frank decision and repositioning the elections commissioner. None of those topics were addressed in the election officer's report. What I'd like to know from you is, what approach you think we should take to reconcile our recommendations, which we cannot disclose at this time, with the bill that is already out. You're open to amendments, but they could become quite significant, so I want to get your take on that.

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Okay. Not having seen the report—

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: We can't obviously as we're not in camera.

Hon. Maryam Monsef: I understand. I believe the work that you've done, whatever areas of the recommendations they've been on, will be really important for everyone. The bill's going to come before you and we are open, as I mentioned from the very beginning, to thoughtful amendments, to further strengthen this bill. That's what the democratic process is all about. That's why committees are tasked with doing the important work they do, so that together we can make sure we put the best legislation forward for Canadians.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Thank you for taking the time to have this conversation with us. I think it's a very important one to have.

I have a few minutes left, and I'd like to give them to Ms. Petitpas Taylor.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe, Lib.): Thank you.

Once again, thank you so much, Minister, for joining us this morning. I realize you're busy, and we appreciate having you at the committee.

Over the course of the summer, I had an objective that I was going to have one town hall on electoral reform. When I had my first town hall, I realized that many people at that town hall were oftentimes the same people I had at most of my town halls. I took it upon myself, however, to go out and to meet with different groups of people I wanted to meet with, specifically our marginalized population, our youth, and people who are oftentimes not engaged in the political process. Could you please specify how this legislation, Bill C-33, would involve more Canadians in the electoral process, especially among disproportionately under-represented groups?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Ginette, the first two measures are all about ID requirements. We know that homeless people don't have a fixed address. We know that students, for example, who are first-time voters, who are away from home and studying in a different community, may not always have their most recent address on their ID. We know there are individuals, for example, indigenous persons, who have been counting on vouching as a way of being able to participate. We know there are a lot of older adults. I'm from

Peterborough—Kawartha, one of the oldest CMAs in Canada, where there are a lot of retirement residences, a lot of long-term care facilities. There were seniors who showed up with their voter information card during the last election thinking that they could use it as ID, and they were turned away.

The Chair: We're out of time for this round.

We'll go to Mr. Reid.

• (1230)

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): Thank you, Minister. Glad to see you here.

I wanted to ask you, have you had a chance to read the letter I sent to you yesterday? Excellent. Would you be willing to answer questions today regarding MyDemocracy.ca?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: I want to thank my colleague for the very thoughtful letter that he sent and for the very important questions that he raised. I'm happy to answer broadly any questions you may have about MyDemocracy.ca, but also, Mr. Reid, I'm happy to come back to this committee and have an in-depth conversation about electoral reform, as you folks see fit.

Mr. Scott Reid: Does that include, Minister, coming back, as the motion I had put forward on Friday suggests, to answer questions regarding MyDemocracy.ca and the government's planned agenda for electoral reform?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Yes, if you believe that's a good use of your time, and if you think that is a good idea, I can make sure that I have the right time frame set aside, but also we'll make sure that we have officials in the room who can provide any technical explanations or descriptions as you see fit.

Mr. Scott Reid: That's fantastic.

I do want to move to Bill C-33. In order to facilitate that, now that we know you'd be willing to come back, Mr. Chair, I move:

That the Committee invite the Minister of Democratic Institutions to appear for not less than two hours to answer questions regarding MyDemocracy.ca and the government's planned agenda for electoral reform.

I take it, Mr. Chair, because we moved off the topic, that we can conclude that I haven't used up my seven minutes yet. I'm not using up the time for the questions to the minister.

The Chair: Right.

Mr. Chan.

Mr. Arnold Chan (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): I have a question on the motion. Is it the exact one that you filed? Is it verbatim?

Mr. Scott Reid: Yes. If I deviated in any way, regard the written text as the one that is being moved here.

The Chair: Ms. Sahota.

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): I have a comment on the motion. It's written in a way where it says "not less than two hours". To me, I understand that the intent may be to have the minister here for a full two hours, but the way it reads, you could suggest six hours, eight hours, or whatever. I was just wondering if you'd be open to a friendly amendment to say "for two hours".

Mr. Scott Reid: For two hours. Yes, I would be agreeable to that.

The Chair: Are people ready for the question?

(Motion as amended agreed to)

The Chair: You can carry on with your questions.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. We were at one minute and 45 seconds when we stopped.

First of all, Minister, thank you for coming here to talk about Bill C-33.

Minister, I've been on this committee for over a decade, through a number of election cycles, starting under the Chrétien government, and every election cycle, the minister, or rather, I correct myself, the Chief Electoral Officer submits a report on recommended changes subsequent to the election and the experiences that he—it's been a he so far, so that's not sexist language—Mr. Kingsley or Mr. Mayrand, thinks ought to be made based on the experience.

Then the procedure and House affairs committee engages in an exhaustive review of that report, makes recommendations based on a riffing off, if you like, of the CEO's recommendations, submits those, and the government responds. It may respond in a way the committee judges to be satisfactory or unsatisfactory, but the fact is that you wait for that process.

You moved ahead without waiting for our report, and although we're not permitted to say what we were discussing, I can tell you that some of what we were discussing in our report was, I thought, of enormous use, and cannot be dealt with in some supplemental piece of legislation because it very much featured some of the key issues that you're dealing with and setting in stone in this piece of legislation.

May I ask why you didn't follow the precedent of all your predecessors in this regard and wait until our report had been submitted? If I may say so...well, let me just stop there and ask that question, Minister.

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Mr. Chair, first, I'm thankful to the honourable member for his decade of service on this committee. I used to watch committee proceedings like this on television, and I'm continuously in awe of the work that you do and the collegial way in which you do it. I've been following the work of this committee closely. I know that you've been working on a review of all the recommendations—over 100—that the Chief Electoral Officer made. I can assure you that nothing is set in stone.

As you understand the parliamentary process, introducing the bill is step one. There will be ongoing debate, and your recommendations and the work that you've done can be formulated into

thoughtful amendments to the bill. As I've indicated, I'm interested in making sure that the strongest possible legislation moves forward, and that includes input from you as well.

● (1235)

Mr. Scott Reid: Mr. Chair, I will split my time with Mr. Schmale.

Mr. Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): Thank you very much, Minister. It's always good to have my geographical neighbour here at this committee.

Hon. Maryam Monsef: We're neighbours. That's right.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: It's nice to see you again. Given the fact that you're here at this committee to talk about Bill C-33, and the fact, as Mr. Reid was saying, that it kind of jumped ahead of the study we're doing in committee, you also mentioned in your speech that there is further legislation coming. I think Mr. Graham asked the question, but I just want to clarify a little sooner, based on the timeline that we don't come back until the end of January, and you said, I believe, that in the spring you're coming.... That doesn't really give us much time to get the study done, get the information to you or to Parliament, and allow that to be incorporated into your legislation. Given the fact that you're here because you kind of jumped ahead, how are you going to have the correct information in front of you and be able to get in a piece of legislation in time to actually make our work worthwhile?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Mr. Chair, I want to thank my neighbour for his question. The work that I'm doing is guided by my mandate letter. I think it was the Clerk of the Privy Council who said that, of all the government web pages, the page with our mandate letters is the most frequently visited one. So there's some interesting trivia for you, if that's helpful in any way to guide the work that you do.

Repealing the unfair aspects of the Fair Elections Act is part of my mandate. Putting together a process for appointments to the Senate has been part of my mandate. The establishment of an all-party committee was part of my mandate. Moving forward, creating the office of a debates commissioner is something that is going to require significant deliberation, coordination, consultation, and study. That's something that I'm counting on this committee to help support. Moving forward, areas around the review of the Elections Act itself as it pertains to various ways that our elections are governed is in line with my mandate. I'm looking forward to working with this committee.

The changes that we proposed in Bill C-33 were relatively straightforward.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: I don't mean to cut you off. I do only have a limited amount of time, and you did mention a few things.

How do we have a guarantee that this will not happen again with what we are working on?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: When is your report going to be delivered? Perhaps that's an area that you can provide me with some clarity on, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Our time is up, but if you have any answer to that, go ahead.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: I was going to say that was the first part of my question.

The Chair: I'm happy to respond.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: That was the first part of my question, how this has happened, and we jumped ahead of the process, and the fact that, as I mentioned, we come back at the end of January. You're saying in the spring there's more legislation coming, so how do we have a guarantee here as a committee that you're not going to jump ahead? If that is the case, what is the point in our doing this work, as Mr. Reid pointed out?

The Chair: Maybe you could wait until later because his time is up.

Mr. Christopherson, you have seven minutes.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Minister, thank you very much for coming. We very much appreciate it.

I have to tell you, you being here is a complete shemozzle. I am so confused. I am further confused as to why you're here talking to us about this bill.

The fact of the matter is there's only so much I can say in terms of our in camera talks, but there are smart people in this room, such as Kady O'Malley, who can look very carefully at the chronology of what has happened to get some idea of why you're in front of this committee. I can assure you that it wasn't to talk about the pleasantries of Bill C-33.

The fact of the matter is you say things such as "eagerly awaiting", "walk the same path", "if we all work together", and "collegial". The fact is that we started an excellent process of working together on this committee to review the recommendations of the Chief Electoral Officer. We were going along working, and we have dual tracks and lots of stuff. We're doing good work; we thought we were doing good work. We're feeling good about it. That's not to say we've agreed on everything, but in terms of process, we were working as a team trying to come up with rules that everybody thought would be fair. Then, all of a sudden, out of nowhere, thump, and Bill C-33 lands in the middle of the floor of the House of Commons on the very same day that we're about to meet and continue working. We're left, or at least I was left, wondering what the hell? What is going on?

On the one hand, we have a committee that's working together. Your government, Minister, promised that you were going to treat parliamentary committees with the respect they deserve, that you were going to bring back the importance of parliamentary committees, yet all we've seen are insults, especially with this committee as a result of Bill C-33. Then, I won't dwell on it but I have to say, we watched the absolute disgrace of the government's response to the electoral reform committee's tabling of that report, where you were on your feet apologizing.

Again, I'm kind of stuck here because I can't talk about what was said in camera, but I can say—and if somebody wants to hold me for telling tales out of school, fine, but I think I'm walking the line carefully—that Mr. Graham, to his credit, came to me immediately afterwards, when we were seized of the bill being tabled, and said, "How can we fix this? What can we do?" I said my goal was to get us back to work, that after all these decades in public life I didn't need another headline, and that what I wanted to do was some good work.

Then I happened to bump into you, Minister. I won't talk about the full conversation, but I think it's fair to say that we actually bumped into each other twice in the hallway on that day, and you were asking the same as Mr. Graham, "How can we fix this?" My response was the same, that an apology would be a good way to start. I still haven't heard one.

You go on and on about Bill C-33. We didn't call you in here, Minister, to talk about Bill C-33, because it hasn't been referred to us yet.

What I as one member of this committee want to know is how do we continue to do the work that we're doing—which is supposed to show the respect and importance that this government was going to return to committees—when you drop that bill on the floor, looking for all intents and purposes as nothing but a diversion to get you and your government out of trouble for the heat you were taking on the broader file that was going down in flames?

If it's not that, at best it's a lack of respect or consideration for this committee. At worst, it's a total disregard for committee work, which happens to have been reinforced by the comments. I accept that you've apologized; nonetheless, it happened. I happened to walk into the House as you were beginning and I couldn't believe that was the response.

Minister, I am still angry about the process. At least the previous government didn't pretend to want to make the committees important. They at least were clear about their disdain for parliamentary committees and the work they do. Fair enough; that has been dealt with. Those chickens came home to roost, and that's why you, Minister, are sitting where you are sitting, in large part because of that attitude. You can say you're going to do something different, but so far we hear talk, talk, talk, but none of the walk.

So, Minister, I need a couple of things from you, starting with an apology to this committee, as you apologized to the last committee, for the way you have treated the work of this committee. Second, I'd like to get some idea of how you think this parliamentary committee is going to continue to do its work in light of you dropping bills on the floor that cherry-pick issues we're working with.

I'll end on this final point. When you say things such as, "When will your report be ready," it is a very good question, but that is the kind of question that should be asked at the beginning of the process of our work if your ministry is serious about coordinating it with the work of your government. Right now, there's a disconnect.

• (1240)

I need to hear from you, Minister, how you think we are going to respond and get back on track, or are we not going to be able to? Are we just going to continue to have this government pitted against its own parliamentary committees?

The Chair: Minister, you have about 45 seconds.

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Mr. Chair, I want to thank my colleague for his work and clarify that the repealing of the unfair aspects of the Fair Elections Act did not come out of nowhere. They were very much publicly shared through my mandate letter, as given to me by the Prime Minister.

I continue to have a great deal of respect for the work that you do. There are areas within Bill C-33, which I outlined earlier, that I'm counting on you to do further analysis and study on.

Can we do things better? Absolutely. Am I committed to that? I can guarantee that to you, Mr. Christopherson.

I will end on this. In March 2014, I watched you advocate for the very changes that we brought forward in Bill C-33. That's the important work that we're here to do. Mr. Christopherson, I'm going to count on your expertise and wisdom to make sure that more of the recommendations from the Chief Electoral Officer make it into legislation so that we can improve access and engagement for all Canadians.

• (1245)

Mr. David Christopherson: Wow. If that's the approach, Minister, to responding to everything that's happened, I'm sorry, but your government is just not getting it.

The Chair: Ms. Vandenbeld.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Thanks very much, Minister, for being here today and for being so willing to come before our committee to answer our questions.

I'd like to take a moment to pick up on what Mr. Christopherson said. My understanding from your testimony just now is that you are very open to having amendments to Bill C-33 that could be informed by the discussion that we have been having. We can't discuss what we've been doing in camera, but if there are aspects where we've had deliberations and dialogue, the work that we've done is going to be useful when we receive Bill C-33, and we're able to put forward amendments.

Could I clarify that you would be open to amendments that are informed by the dialogue we've been having?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: We believe this is a strong bill, Anita, but absolutely. That's why the bill is coming to you. We're counting on your deliberations to further enhance it.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: Thank you.

I'd also like to ask about an element that is not in the Chief Electoral Officer's report, but is in Bill C-33. It is one that is of

personal interest to me, having worked overseas for many years with the United Nations and other organizations. There are some very good Canadians who are abroad, who are doing work promoting Canadian values. In my case, I even received a peacekeeping service medal from the Governor General for the work that I was doing in Kosovo with OSCE, and yet, had I continued that work, I would have become ineligible to vote in Canadian elections, as have many other Canadians, because of the changes that were made by the previous government.

I understood you to say earlier that you were looking to our committee, not only to look at that aspect of Bill C-33, but to decide on some of the parameters and how this would actually apply.

I also know there is a court case right now, a charter challenge, *Frank v. Canada*.

Could you elaborate on why it is important that a young generation of Canadians who are going around the world and starting businesses...? We have doctors and teachers who are going around the world. There are all kinds of Canadians who are doing very good work around the world. To lose your right to vote because you have gone abroad to promote Canadian values, I think, is wrong.

Could you elaborate on that and tell us what you see our committee doing in that regard?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Mr. Chair, the world is changing. Globalization means that people, especially younger people, frankly, are travelling abroad to see the world, to contribute to the complex challenges that exist, and also to bring different ways of doing things, different ways of thinking, back to Canada.

We want to promote that. We want to promote the sharing of Canadian values abroad. The right to vote is protected for Canadians. This is one of those fundamental rights that we have as Canadian citizens. Our government believes that a Canadian is a Canadian is a Canadian.

Yes, there is a court case that will be heard in February. We are mindful of that, but I've heard stories like yours, Anita, and I've also heard stories of young people whose parents are working abroad. These are people who didn't choose to go abroad. They went because they had to.

I'm getting letters and emails from them saying, "We're paying attention to what's happening to our country. When we're old enough to vote, we want to be able to, but right now we can't. That's not right, and it's not fair." We agree.

These are young people who have lived in Canada at one time, and so the provisions that we've introduced here will grant them the ability to vote, just as it will for over a million Canadians. As I mentioned earlier, what we need deeper analysis on from this committee is this: the children of those Canadians living and working abroad who may have come to Canada to visit, but have never actually resided in Canada, have never lived here. Do we extend the franchise to them, too?

That's an area that requires cross-party conversations, something that this committee is very well positioned to do.

• (1250)

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: How much time do I have left?

The Chair: You have one minute and 15 seconds.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: I'll pass that on to Ms. Sahota.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Thank you.

Thank you, Minister, for being here with us today.

Bill C-33 is great legislation. I've been long awaiting for these changes to take place, but I think, as Mr. Christopherson said, that the upset was the timing of the legislation, not so much the content of the legislation.

I'm very much in favour of the content of this legislation. I just want to hear from you why you felt it was important to put forward this legislation and to reverse those portions of the Fair Elections Act at this time. What was the thinking of the government, or the ministry, behind that?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: These are really important changes that need to be made. They're changes that we campaigned on, frankly. They're changes that are outlined in my mandate letter. They're changes that we heard from Canadians over the past year. But they're just the beginning. A great deal of work needs to continue to be done. More legislation needs to be introduced. Although the system that we have, the democratic institutions we have now are good and they're serving us well, we have many areas of improvement that need to be worked on, and there's a legislative agenda to be mindful of. Given that we have so many thoughtful recommendations from the Chief Electoral Officer that require further thinking, for us these were the more straightforward changes that we knew would have an immediate impact.

This is just the beginning, and the rest of the work moving forward requires more digging and more research. I think that's where this committee's work is going to be essential.

The Chair: You only have 10 seconds.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I just want to say thank you.

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Thank you, Ruby.

The Chair: We'll move to Mr. Reid for five minutes.

Mr. Scott Reid: Mr. Chair, I hope to be splitting my time with Mr. Schmale, depending on the minister's answer.

Minister, this evening there will be a vote on concurrence in the second report of the electoral reform committee, which asks you to include on the MyDemocracy.ca website the same questions that were on the committee's questionnaire. These include specific questions that deal with what people think about individual kinds of

electoral systems. There's also a question relating to whether people feel that a referendum would be an appropriate way of dealing with this issue once the government has come forward with its proposed legislation, so that Canadians get the final say on whether or not to switch to a new system.

My question is this: How will Liberal members be voting? Could you provide us with the reasons they will be voting the way they will be voting?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Mr. Chair, I can't speak for all Liberal members, but I want to acknowledge—

Mr. Scott Reid: Is it a free vote then?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: I'm not sure. I want to acknowledge that the issue of a referendum is referenced in the report of the electoral reform committee, and the government will be responding to that particular question.

As far as MyDemocracy.ca goes, we're asking questions. We worked with political scientists who have various preferences themselves. We were asking questions based on the values that make up our democratic institutions, and we're asking Canadians to engage in this conversation in a new way.

Canadians are engaging. This is a more inclusive and accessible way for them to have this conversation with us. Again, as your motion earlier allowed, Mr. Reid, I'll be coming back to this committee to talk further about electoral reform and MyDemocracy.ca. I'm happy to get into greater detail then.

• (1255)

Mr. Scott Reid: I had the opportunity, Minister, to speak with one of the academic experts. That individual advised me that, in fact, the kinds of questions they were permitted to put forward were constrained by the government and did not include questions on specific electoral systems. In fact, the suggestion that the experts made the decision to not include questions on individual electoral systems, which you have said in the House of Commons, is, in fact, not merely misleading, but it is literally the opposite of the truth. In fact, you and your officials were the ones who made the decision to restrict the subject matter and to exclude specific electoral systems from MyDemocracy.ca. That was done at the very beginning so they never had the option of bringing them forward.

Is that not true?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Mr. Chair, I'm going to take this opportunity to thank the academic advisory panel that has been working with us in collaboration to make sure there is science behind our approach. I'm really proud of the work we've been able to do with them.

Mr. Scott Reid: With regard to the question, Minister, did you and your staff, in fact, restrict the range of questions that could be put on MyDemocracy.ca so that the academic experts from the very beginning were not able to put forward anything regarding individual questions?

You can answer any way you want, but a yes or a no has to occur here.

Hon. Maryam Monsef: We've been working in collaboration with them, and we've been asking the questions that are really important to ask, Mr. Reid.

If you would like to talk in greater detail about the process and the technicalities around MyDemocracy.ca, we have at least 120 minutes to do that in the near future. Today, I think—

Mr. Scott Reid: We do, but the question I'm asking you today is did the academic experts make the decision on their own to exclude questions about specific electoral systems and about whether or not there should be a referendum on legislation, or were those questions, in fact, excluded by you and your bureaucrats in the nature of the survey, the umbrella of permissible questions they were then asked to design? Yes or no, please.

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Working in collaboration means different people get together and everyone has an opportunity to provide their feedback. Working in collaboration with political scientists on this particular project, Mr. Reid, has been about making sure the questions we're asking are as accessible as possible.

There are Canadians who have a very easy time being able to have a conversation about the technicalities of the different systems, but we know that's not the case for most Canadians. We know many Canadians don't even know where to begin being part of the conversation on their electoral reform. That's the reason we chose the approach we took. Based on the evidence that exists out there and best practices, asking values-based questions, and about the impact of different systems on the way Canadians are governed is a more inclusive and a more accessible way, and I'm quite proud of that.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Ms. Petitpas Taylor.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I have two very quick questions because I know we're running out of time.

To follow up on Mr. Christopherson's and Ms. Sahota's comments, what steps could we take to avoid this type of situation again?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: I'm very much looking forward to your report. I think having conversations...come talk to me, and I'm happy to come and talk to you. I know as a government we committed to restoring the independence of committees, and I know that's been a really important measure towards a healthier democracy, but this relationship is an important one for me. Whatever it takes to make sure we work better together, I'm open to it.

Given that there are people who have been doing this work for more than a decade, I'm open to that feedback. Let's make sure we continue to work the same way you folks have been able to, which is this is not about the parties we represent; this is about what's in the best interests of Canadians and how we can improve democracy. I'm very much interested in that. So let's talk.

• (1300)

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Do I have anymore time?

The Chair: Yes, three and a half minutes.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Okay.

Are you satisfied with the process with regard to Bill C-33 and if not, what would you do differently?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Recognizing the passion that I've heard from some of my colleagues here today, I'm mindful that things could be done better and things could be done differently. I'm open to hearing from you how we can improve this process. Ultimately, I think we're here to make things better for Canadians, and establishing a working relationship that works for everyone is really important to me.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you.

Mr. Chan.

Mr. Arnold Chan: I don't have a lot to say, if we want to wrap it up at one o'clock.

I'm just mindful of the time before we start. How much time do I have left, roughly?

The Chair: You have two minutes and thirty seconds.

Hon. Maryam Monsef: A lot can happen in—

• (1305)

Mr. Arnold Chan: A lot can happen in two minutes.

Minister, I just want to thank you for coming.

Of course, I didn't have the pleasure of being there when Bill C-33 was introduced in the House. I wasn't present and I apologize for that. As a result of my absence, I inadvertently missed it.

I might be in the minority relative to all of my colleagues, but I'm not fussed, David, by the minister's introduction of Bill C-33 in the House. From my perspective, the minister has a clear executive mandate, which is very publicly accessible. She has every right to introduce legislation that the political executive deemed is important.

We have clear work, which is mandated legislatively and through the Standing Orders, for us to review the results of the previous Parliament and the report from the Chief Electoral Officer, and as legislation comes to this particular committee, when it finally gets referred to it from the House, we pivot accordingly. I actually don't see much substantive divergence. I think folks here are a bit fussed with respect to the process and the minister is committed to finding, I think, a better way to communicate that better.

I'm here to work with you. I think we want to achieve the same substantive outcomes at the end of the day and I think we should just get on with it and get that particular work done. When Bill C-33 comes from the House, we'll make adjustments accordingly. As I've already indicated, I am not fussed by what has transpired.

I think there are substantive questions that my Conservative friends would like to ask and I think the government has already demonstrated more than it's willingness and openness to deal with any substantive questions that they want to pose, so we'll get answers from the minister accordingly.

My invitation to my colleagues on the opposite side is, when we come back in the new year, let's get back on to the work that we're doing and when Bill C-33 is referred to us from the House, we will then pivot accordingly. Until the House has spoken and we are seized of that legislation, I think it's premature for us to get into a lot of the details, without knowing the substance of what we're allowed to actually review and study. From my perspective, the work that we're already doing is good work and let's get on with it.

The Chair: That's your time, Arnold.

You have the floor, Mr. Schmale.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Thank you very much, Chair.

I do disagree, unfortunately. I like you a lot, Mr. Chan, but I do disagree with what you're saying. But I'm not going to waste my time in debate.

Minister, I do apologize, since my time is short, that I may jump in here and there.

In order to move this committee forward, we want to study this legislation. I agree with everyone here that we're doing good work. We didn't agree on everything, but we were, I think, doing some good work.

At the end of the day, although I doubt this will happen now because the marching orders have been given, if the committee does disagree with a recommendation that you have already included in Bill C-33, will you amend the legislation to reflect that?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Mr. Chair, as I mentioned since the very beginning when the bill was introduced, yes, we believe this is strong legislation. It is up to Parliament and this committee to help further improve it. If you have thoughtful improvements that you would like to be considered, of course, I'm open to that.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Based on that response, and since you're expecting a report, and given the fact that this happens in every Parliament after every election, why did you move forward with Bill C-33 before we were done our study?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: The elements that are outlined in Bill C-33, as I've mentioned, are rather straightforward. Many of us campaigned on them. This is in my mandate letter.

I knew that you folks were reviewing the recommendations that came before you from the Chief Electoral Officer, not knowing which ones you were studying at what time. I knew that the work

you were doing on this committee would allow you to provide that further level of detail to the bill once it came before you. I remain open to any amendments that you believe will further strengthen this bill.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Again, going forward, how do we stop this from happening again? Will you commit that no further legislation will be tabled until the committee gets to forward our report? Otherwise, I don't see the point in continuing to study the Chief Electoral Officer's report. If you're going to do what you're going to do anyway, we can just do something else or figure out something else to do.

Hon. Maryam Monsef: I don't think you can do something else. You're mandated to study the recommendations from the Chief Electoral Officer, and I'm counting on you to do that.

One area with Bill C-33 is the piece around expats voting.

Another area is around the commissioner of Canada elections. For example, do we grant them the power to compel testimony to address election fraud in a more comprehensive way? That's an area that I believe is really important for this committee to study.

I can assure you that if we do what we've discussed here today, which is to come up with processes that work for everyone, then moving forward we're going to continue to improve the working relationship between this committee and me. I'm very much open to that.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Given the fact that after an election we would be examining this, wouldn't it be fair to say that possibly, very possibly, there would be something in the report changing a bunch of things? Again, why didn't you just wait? Give me something to keep us going here.

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Well, keep going because Canadians are counting on you to keep going.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: I need an assurance that this won't happen again.

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Keep going because we're all trying to create a healthier democracy, Mr. Schmale. Keep going because I have asked you, and I'm counting on your support.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: But are you going to make a change if the committee decides...? Will you make the change? If the committee decides that something in Bill C-33 isn't something that the committee would like, would you amend the legislation?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: As I've mentioned, of course I'm open to any amendments that would improve this bill further.

The Chair: Thank you, everyone. That's it.

Thank you very much for coming, Minister. We appreciate it.

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Thank you very much.

Happy new year, merry Christmas, and happy Hanukkah.

The Chair: We'll see everyone in the new year.

The meeting is adjourned.

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