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Chair

The Honourable Larry Bagnell

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• (1100)

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mrs. Stephanie Kusie (Calgary Midnapore, CPC)): I call the meeting to order.

Good morning, and welcome to meeting 144 of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

Today, as we begin our study of parallel debating chambers, we are pleased to be joined by Sir David Natzler, the Clerk of the United Kingdom House of Commons, who is appearing by video conference from London, and who is retiring.

Congratulations on your retirement, sir.

Thank you, Mr. Natzler, for making yourself available. Please go ahead with your opening statement.

Sir David Natzler (Clerk of the House, United Kingdom House of Commons): Thank you.

It's a great pleasure for me to be talking to you. I think I did talk to your committee some years ago on the subject of child care.

Today is indeed my last day as a Clerk. This is practically my last hour, and there is nowhere I would rather be.

You've had a paper from us about Westminster Hall. What I thought I would do is just make a few general points, and then I'm happy to answer any questions.

My first point is that 20 years ago when this started, a lot of people thought it was a pretty batty idea. How could the House sit in two places at once? Either everybody would go to Westminster Hall and the chamber would be empty, or nobody would bother to go to the parallel chamber in Westminster Hall. There's no possibility of having votes there, so what's the point of having parliamentary business when you can't come to any decisions that are at all controversial? They thought the thing would be a dead duck.

It wasn't an original British idea, as you probably know and as the memo sets out. It actually comes from our Australian cousins, who'd had a parallel chamber for some years, which we'd observed. It was a straight steal from them. Therefore, if you do take it on, please remember where the parliamentary copyright belongs: It is in Canberra, and you might like to ask my colleague in Canberra for his experiences over a longer period.

Over the last 20 years it has become an absolutely understood part of our parliamentary life here. As with you, we have a lot of

members. We have more than you; we have 650. You're all members; many members have speeches and issues they want to raise, and they don't have enough opportunity to do it. Westminster Hall offers them that possibility through a series every week of around 12 debates of different lengths, but most importantly, all of them are answered by ministers.

In other words, it is not a graffiti wall. This is a series of policy issues that are answered by ministers. In the longer debates, the opposition has a slot, as does indeed the second-largest opposition party.

It has also proven a popular space for doing slightly new or different things. It has always been a little more relaxed than the main chamber, partly because it's smaller and partly because of the layout. It was a deliberate decision to lay it out not in the face-to-face style that I know you have and that we have in the main chamber, but in a couple of horseshoes so that there is less of the sense of party. I wouldn't overstate that, but there's less of a sense of party. It's also slightly better lit and less panelled and forbidding, particularly for new members, who often start by making a speech in Westminster Hall before they make a speech in the main chamber. The Speaker allows that, so their maiden speech is in the chamber, but they can, as it were, get used to the idea of speaking in front of colleagues in Westminster Hall.

It's also, on a very domestic note, a good breeding ground for our clerks. Our more junior clerks are in charge there, sitting next to the chair, and both the chairman and the clerks benefit from that.

It has, to my mind, no downsides. There's no real evidence that it sucks people out of the chamber. The two buildings are very near one another. It is true that the chamber retains a type of seniority in that people will have a debate in Westminster Hall sometimes for an hour or 90 minutes, and then a couple of weeks later you hear in the chamber, "Well, we've had a debate in Westminster Hall, but it's time we had a debate in the chamber", as if that were somehow slightly higher status.

In terms of the debates raised by backbenchers, it has no more or no fewer practical consequences, but there is that inherent pecking order. I'm not sure that's a bad thing. As I say, it has massively increased opportunities for individual backbenchers or groups of backbenchers to have debates heard and answered in reasonable time.

●(1105)

I'll add one more thing. We have an e-petition system that you may know about. If more than 100,000 people sign a petition online, it's not guaranteed, but they're given a very strong steer that it is likely to be debated. Those are debated on Monday evenings. It's the only thing we do on Mondays between 4:30 and 7:30 in Westminster Hall.

It is very popular with the public. It's not that they come along, but they watch online in astonishing numbers. It is, of course, a subject they themselves have chosen, an often slightly unexpected one—slightly off centre, if you like. We tell the petitioners that this is when the debate is going to be and that they might want to watch or listen to it, and they do.

In the last few years, I think eight of the 10 most-watched debates in Parliament here have been in fact on e-petitions at Westminster Hall. The most watched was not the debate as to whether we should extend our bombing campaign of northern Iraq into Syria, as you might expect, but a debate, which sounds facetious, on whether we should exclude President Trump from visiting the United Kingdom. He wasn't at that time a president, but that was a very heavily signed petition. Something like, from my memory, 300,000 people watched it, and not just from the U.K., but from literally almost every corner of the world, including southern Sudan, so don't imagine that Westminster Hall, because it doesn't have the main party debates on second readings or report stages of controversial bills, is not of interest to the public.

That's probably enough.

Did you hear all of that?

The Chair (Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.)): Yes. Thank you very much. That was very helpful.

We're excited to have you with us on the last day of your 43 years in office. Hopefully if you come to Canada, you'll visit us. You could probably tell us a lot more. You're welcome to come to our committee.

Thanks, Stephanie, for filling in for me.

We're going to have some questions now to see what we can mine from your 43 years of experience.

Go ahead, Mr. Simms.

Mr. Scott Simms (Coast of Bays—Central—Notre Dame, Lib.): Yes, and I have a very short period of time to do it, Mr. Natzler.

My name is Scott Simms. I'm from Newfoundland and Labrador. Thank you so much for being here.

I have a couple of specific questions, but before I get into the specifics, I want to ask you about participation rates in the parallel chamber. I've read quite a bit about Australia and the experience in Westminster.

Would you say that since its inception, participation rates have been better than expected, lower than expected, or as expected?

●(1110)

Sir David Natzler: It's very nice to meet you.

I don't think anything in particular was expected, and that's not being evasive.

Mr. Scott Simms: I understand.

Sir David Natzler: Most of the debates are in a standard format. A member puts in for a half-hour debate, makes a 15-minute speech, and is then answered by a minister for 15 minutes. The minister—in normally accompanied by a parliamentary private secretary—in other words, another member—an unpaid assistant, and/or a whip. However, the party representative from the opposition is not allowed to take part, and other members are not expected to take part. You only expect three members, and it would be unusual if there weren't, and there nearly always have been.

There were some misunderstandings early on with the government—they perhaps didn't take it with the full seriousness that they later realized they should—in that they were either supplying the wrong minister or mentioning that a whip could answer the debates. That was a very brief early misunderstanding, and they're now fully answered by sometimes senior ministers at Westminster Hall.

For the longer debates—and there are about three 90-minute debates and two 60-minute debates a week—other members can be expected to join in, and they do. In the application, the member is meant to show a belief that there are going to be people there, because it is a competitive process to get the slots. When that has happened, there have nearly always been more than enough people to have a decent number of speakers, if I can put it that way.

What we don't do is keep an exact count of who is there for any one debate. We have at times done that—about 10 years ago, I think—and it showed unexpectedly high participation. Members like going there. It's easy to drop in. It's easier, psychologically, to drop in to Westminster Hall than it is to the chamber. You're still meant to be there for the opening speech, but there's slightly less of the atmosphere of going to church, which we still have with the chamber.

I don't know if you have that in Newfoundland, but—

Mr. Scott Simms: Yes, we do. It's my cabin in the woods.

I want to ask you about something brought in that's not part of the Canadian Standing Orders, but it is part of the British. I want to see how it fits with the second chamber, and that is government programming. I believe it was in the 1990s when you programmed the bills. We don't have programming per se. You call it guillotining, I believe, when it comes to a certain debate; we call it time allocation.

When it comes to programming of the bill, when you proceed in the main chamber, will that go over into the second chamber, the parallel chamber, and be part of the debate on the legislation?

Sir David Natzler: No. The Standing Orders originally conceived that non-controversial orders of the day—that's to say government business, predominantly bills—might be taken in Westminster Hall. In practice, in 20 years it has never happened, and I think it never will.

Two provisions make that inappropriate for anything that's at all controversial and that also requires a decision, which is different from being controversial, and there's a really important distinction.

One is that you can't have a vote. If the question is opposed at the end of the business, if somebody shouts "no" and other people shout "yes", the chair can simply say, "We can't decide it." In theory, we remit it to the chamber. In practice, because the business doesn't require any decision, it's just been a take-note debate, in effect, on the motion that this House has considered a particular matter. Only on one occasion has time ever been found to have a pro forma division in the main chamber. In sum, no controversial business is ever put there.

In terms of bills, you're right. Nearly all government bills are now programmed, which means that after second reading there is a motion put to the House, and generally agreed to, that says how long the public bill committee has to look at it—in other words, the date by which it must be reported—and it also usually provides one or, occasionally, two days for the report—that's the consideration stage—back on the chamber. Virtually all bills are programmed.

Guillotining was something slightly different, because it tended to cover how long you would have for second reading as well. We still have that for bills that are introduced in a great hurry and go through all stages in a day. We may be having two next week to do with Northern Ireland. They often come up in a hurry. That's the guillotine. It's a motion that you do before you've even got on to the bills. It's a really interesting point, but it has nothing to do with Westminster Hall.

I just stress that you can have controversial subjects there that can be debated, but they're not decided. You can have a debate on abortion, which is a really controversial subject; or on organ donation, but simply on the motion that this House has considered organ donation. You have a vigorous debate and speeches, but at the end of the day there's no decision expected.

• (1115)

Mr. Scott Simms: Is the parallel chamber used for a lot of the subjects that you just brought up? If I were to say that I want to have a take-note debate on my particular opinion on the backstop for the Brexit situation, would that be done in a parallel chamber? Can I do that, or is it frowned upon?

Sir David Natzler: You could do that. It wouldn't be frowned upon. We've had quite a lot of debates on that subject.

I should have brought the Order Paper with me. Somebody may be going to get an Order Paper for today. The director of broadcasting has nimble feet—

Mr. Scott Simms: I hope it arrives before you retire.

Sir David Natzler: Sorry?

Mr. Scott Simms: I said that I hope it arrives before you retire.

Sir David Natzler: Yes, and I have about seven hours.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Sir David Natzler: The source of subject might be more like... I can tell you what is on, which is much easier than giving notional examples.

It might be a particular education issue in Newfoundland—in other words, a local issue of some national significance—or it might be a national issue, but one that not everybody wants to get passionately excited about, but some people do. There are a range of issues that members want to debate and want to build up interest in, as it were, but don't expect a decision on.

Mr. Scott Simms: Thank you, sir.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Clerk, for supporting our bow tie Thursdays, which the next speaker was instrumental in starting.

It is Mr. Scott Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): Thank you.

Sir David, it's a pleasure to have you with us.

It looks as if the Order Paper just arrived, by the glance you gave to the side. If you need to—

Sir David Natzler: No. That was because of the reference to bow tie Thursdays. I'm wearing a bow tie and I'm about to go back into the chamber, but it's also the name of the television company that is running this service for us. It's called Bow Tie television. They're terribly pleased to have you on their trailers.

Mr. Scott Reid: It's a little extra service that we offer.

I just want to make sure that I understand this.

As I understand it, from what you said there would never be a vote in the House of Commons on an item of business that had been debated in the parallel chamber. Is that correct?

Sir David Natzler: This is a technical misunderstanding.

If something is debated in the parallel chamber, the Standing Order says that if, when the chairman puts the question, it is opposed, then it cannot be decided then and there and it stands over to the main chamber. However, there is in fact no provision for putting the question in the main chamber. It's not put automatically. It doesn't just appear on the Order Paper that you have to suddenly vote whether or not the House has considered the matter of organ donation. There would have been no further debate, and it would be a quite pointless vote. Nobody would know whether to vote yes or no. It would have no meaning—although we do have some of those votes sometimes. In this case, we've only ever had it once in 20 years, for a political reason, a bit of a stunt, and it wasn't popular. Members asked why we were voting on it.

It is simply a votable matter. It isn't debated in the parallel chamber. We only have these debates where the House has considered a particular matter.

Mr. Scott Reid: Regarding the Hansards of the debates that take place in Westminster Hall, how are they recorded?

I know that everything is put online nowadays, but in my head I think of Hansard as a paper document. Would one read through the debates of the day in the House of Commons, and then separately find the debates of the parallel chamber, much as someone would have to search separately if looking for the debates of one of the committees? Why don't you tell me how it's done?

Sir David Natzler: As you say, there are two forms of publication—well, actually three.

There's the written record, the Hansard, as you say. Then there are the records of Westminster Hall. In this case, the decision has been taken to circulate and print them with the Hansards, the daily parts of the chamber.

Each day, you get your Hansard, and at the back is the full transcript of Westminster Hall, which you would not get of committees on bills or delegated legislation, so it is given that status. It is the sitting of the House. That wasn't uncontroversial and obviously costs a bit extra. However, it's a very interesting point and it shows that it is taken seriously.

Anyone flicking through the Hansard...and obviously, there are still old-fashioned types like me who actually read things on paper and don't necessarily go online. Online, you'd find it as easily as you would the main chamber, but it would obviously be under a separate heading.

The third one is the full audiovisual record, which is streamed and is accessible through parliamentlive.tv, for all proceedings of the House.

• (1120)

Mr. Scott Reid: What would happen if I were to go to the online Hansard to search for a debate using certain keywords? Let's imagine I was looking for "organ donation".

Sir David Natzler: It was what, sorry?

Mr. Scott Reid: I'm just throwing out organ donation as an example.

Let's imagine that this subject has been debated on one day in the Commons, and on some other day it's been debated in Westminster Hall. Would I use the search same process, and would it turn up results differently?

Sir David Natzler: It is completely integrated into the proceedings of the House for the purpose of archiving, of transcribing, of recording—everything. It has exactly the same status and therefore is as reachable.

Mr. Scott Reid: One of the issues that is constantly on our minds in Canada is our century-long and completely unsuccessful battle against excessive partisanship. There was some hope being expressed by members, including me, that a parallel chamber might be a venue where there would be less partisanship than there is in the main House. You made comments indicating that might be a vain hope.

I am wondering if you could indicate whether or not partisanship is in fact lessened in your parallel chamber. If it hasn't been lessened to the extent that it could have been, what suggestions would you have as to how that situation could be improved?

Sir David Natzler: As ministers say, that's a very good question.

It is still partisan. These are debates sometimes on matters of party controversy, but sometimes not. However, if they are on matters of party controversy, the language will be as strong, the debate will be as vigorous, and the opposition will be as strongly expressed from one side to another as in the main chamber.

There is a slight difference of atmosphere, but one must remember that the end of each day is a half-hour adjournment debate in the chamber, which the whip sits in on but plays no part in. That's really between a member and a minister. That is the format in Westminster Hall, and those have never been partisan.

People have introduced elements of partisanship when members, or indeed the minister in replying, tend to get a rather frosty response, but there is a feeling that here is where you try to put party aside. It obviously depends a bit on the subject. Sometimes you can't, when the subject has been raised in a partisan spirit. Because other members are not present and supporting and encouraging, as it were, it is more like a private match of singles and not one of your ice hockey games where everyone is shouting. The nature of the debate makes it less partisan.

I think people have observed over the years in Westminster Hall a slight relaxation of tone. It's hard to put a finger on it. It's partly because of sitting in the horseshoe. Sometimes, if there are more than five or six, some people will have to sit not definitely on one side or another, whichever party they're from, and might be a little more co-operative in debate. I do urge you to think of the layout of the chamber. I think it makes a huge difference in how people behave, and I am not alone in this. Obviously every behavioural psychologist will tell you it makes a difference. I think it has in Westminster Hall.

I have here the five subjects that are being debated on Tuesday in Westminster Hall.

On the future of Catholic sixth form colleges, there's an hour and a half, meaning quite a lot of people want to join in there. Religious education is highly controversial in some ways, but it will not necessarily be massively one party against another. I suspect there will be people from both parties making similar views, probably in support of their Catholic sixth form colleges.

U.K. relations with Kosovo will be debated for half an hour. That is not a partisan issue.

Investment in regional transport infrastructure will predominantly be people from the opposition complaining that the north of England doesn't get enough, but there will also be one or two from the government side complaining they don't get enough either.

There will be a half an hour on the effect on the solar industry of the replacement of the feed-in tariff. That is something that is critical of the government, because they replaced the feed-in tariff. That again will be non-partisan, in the sense that a Conservative member is raising it, but there may well be Labour members asking to have permission, which they will get, to intervene. The minister will then make a very vigorous defence.

Finally, there will be half an hour regarding the effect of leaving the EU without a deal on public sector catering. I don't understand that. That is probably quite a factious affair.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Sir David Natzler: I do understand. It's about the public procurement directive in public sector catering, including the House of Commons. We have to comply with that, so we aren't allowed a "buy British" policy. However, once we leave the EU, we would possibly be allowed a "buy British" policy, or indeed, if we get "Canada-plus" plans, a "buy Canada" policy.

• (1125)

The Chair: Thank you. That was very edifying.

Mr. Christopherson is next.

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

Thank you very much for your presentation. It was not only informative but enjoyable.

I wish you all the best in your retirement. As somebody else getting ready to join that club, I wish you a good one.

Sir David Natzler: I'm sorry to hear that.

Mr. David Christopherson: Well, I'm not, and neither is my family. All good things come to an end.

I have three questions. I'll outline them, and you can answer them as you feel would be best.

The first one, in no particular order, is about the slots. You said there were x number of speaking spots, or slots. Who fills those?

One of the controversies that we continue to have is the expanding power of whips' offices over individual members. Questions and everything else are preordained by the whip and the Speaker, who in some cases are acting like a traffic cop rather than using their discretion as to who gets to speak. I would be interested in your comments on that.

Two, what changes to your standing orders, as you can recall, did you have to make to bring about the chamber and to find its place in the organization of things?

Lastly, you made reference to the agenda today. I think you said there were five things. How does the agenda get set?

Sir David Natzler: I'll take one and three together—the agenda-setting and the slots.

The whips in the government have absolutely no power in this at all, so it is in the hands—equivalent to the Standing Order—of the chairman of ways and means, who is the Deputy Speaker. That is not notional, and he exercises the same sort of paternal control that the Speaker exercises over the chamber.

That doesn't mean he's there much of the time. The chairman of ways and means doesn't normally preside in Westminster Hall; other chairs do, from the panel of chairs who do public bill committees, and so on. It is, rather, his baby and not the Speaker's baby; that was the idea 20 years ago.

The actual decision as to how many slots there are is a tricky one, oddly enough. It changes occasionally, but it is decided, ultimately, by the chairman of ways and means; it isn't in the Standing Order.

Currently we have 13 hours. Some longer slots are an hour and a half, and there are some shorter slots, and each day is a mixture of

the two. The chairman can vary that, and as the years go by, occasionally they do. We're experimenting now with 60-minute slots, that being the compromise, as you will grasp, between a 30-minute slot and a 90-minute slot.

Mr. David Christopherson: That's very Canadian of you.

Sir David Natzler: The important thing is that it's not the whips who decide any of this, nor, interestingly, is it the House itself; it is actually the Deputy Speaker.

The subject matter is largely decided by a ballot. You put in a new ballot for a particular slot. You can put in for 30, 60 or 90 minutes, and take your chance on what comes out.

Now, I don't think it's a secret that in addition to being a ballot, there are some informal aspects—what one might call speaker's choices. In other words, some subjects that come out of the ballot are perhaps not entirely through the process of sortition. I don't know how it's done, but the subjects somehow turn up. I think members are able to make a particularly strong case for a subject.

There is also, I think, an informal party balance kept through the week, so that if there are more tickets going into the ballot than there are places, there's a reasonable balance among the various parties as to which member of which party gets which slot. That has nothing to do with the whips. It would simply mean that on a given day, it isn't coincidence that on the Tuesday I spoke of... Well, we actually have one Conservative and four Labour members, but I don't know who put in or who wanted those particular days. I notice the balance is different the next day. There are three Conservative, one Labour and one SNP member on Wednesday of next week. We don't generally have all the same party, as far as I can see. I've never asked.

The standing order is very simple. In Standing Order No. 10, we just said there shall be...well, you can read it. It wasn't difficult to set it up by Standing Orders, because all the Standing Orders, except those specifically excluded, apply in Westminster Hall. There are a few excluded, which probably are not of interest to you, and I'm sure that Charles Robert will be able to construct one for you. It was partly about the powers of the Chair being potentially slightly different.

The procedures are the same and the conventions are the same. They are about having to turn up at the beginning and come back at the end, how you speak, where you speak from—you speak from your place. If you see what I mean, it wasn't as though we were setting up a completely new style of debating chamber. The powers of the Chair to... We have time limits now in Westminster Hall, which there weren't originally. There were time limits that were introduced in the chamber, and then after a few years the chairman of ways and means himself said he thought we should have time limits in Westminster Hall. There was a little difficulty in introducing them, for electronic reasons.

Otherwise it broadly reflects the chamber. There's very little difference.

• (1130)

Mr. David Christopherson: I have one last question.

Was it unanimous to create your Standing Order No. 10?

Sir David Natzler: You have me there. I will correct myself, or someone else will when I'm gone.

Yes. It was not a political issue. It was done first, as the memorandum points out—which I must admit I had forgotten—on a pilot basis, as we often do. In other words, we often set something up for a year. It only lasts for a year, so it's a sessional order. At the end of it, if it works we can change it, adapt it, and come back with it. That is the way that nearly all innovations have come forward, because of that sense of caution.

Mr. David Christopherson: Very good.

That's good for me in this round, Chair. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Christopherson.

Now we will go to the wooden bow tie, with Mr. de Burgh Graham.

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

I'm curious about a whole lot of things. I'll see what I can get through in the time I have.

As you're probably aware, the House of Commons in Canada is undergoing renovations. I understand that Westminster itself is going to be under renovations soon.

I'm curious about the physical structure of the two chambers in relation to each other, where they are geographically, how big Westminster Hall is in terms of the number of seats, physically, and what your plan is, if you close the main chamber for renovations, for a main chamber and secondary chamber.

That's my first question.

Sir David Natzler: Shall I answer the first one?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: By all means.

Sir David Natzler: I have a very little brain. I won't remember them otherwise.

That is an issue. Currently, what we call Westminster Hall is actually the Grand Committee Room. It is a late 19th century construct, like a sort of pimple on the northwestern corner of Westminster Hall, which is our great medieval hall. It is extremely easily reached from the chamber nowadays, even for those with disabilities. It used to be a major problem. People had to go up some stairs. We finally got our lifts in, which was really important. It was a block that we couldn't overcome.

I suspect that it takes a member about three minutes to get from the chamber to Westminster Hall. When there's a vote in the main chamber, as I explained, the sittings are suspended so that the members can go to vote in and around the main chamber.

I've never heard of any difficulty with members getting away from Westminster Hall when the sitting is suspended and getting to the chamber. It holds about 70 people. I think that's right. There are technically 70 seats, from memory.

It has actually had almost that many people, amazingly. There can be this big debate in Westminster Hall, and you get dozens of members. There's very little public gallery space. There's only room

for about 25, and they are seated as in a select committee room, like your room, at the back. There are just three or four rows of chairs that are very near the members, which is slightly unusual for us, but it is the same in our committee rooms. We have the full audiovisual set-up, which was quite an expensive ask.

Indeed, we are moving out, as you are, and redoing the main palace. We haven't published our plans for how we're going to provide for Westminster Hall sittings. However, you can be assured that we will have a very large committee room very near the main chamber, which will indeed be designed to ensure that we can have Westminster Hall sittings.

When we go back into the main building—which I know you are planning to do as well—the more interesting issue will be whether we will resume using the Grand Committee Room for Westminster Hall sittings. Some members are saying, “Why don't we use the lovely new chamber, the big one, the temporary one that we'll just have left? We could always go and sit there.”

The answer is that the whole idea is that it should be smaller. The Grand Committee Room is a very pleasantly sized room, nearly Gothic, but well lit. If there are four or five people, you don't feel that you're in a completely empty room.

• (1135)

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Is there any quorum requirement for Westminster Hall?

Sir David Natzler: Yes. It's in the paper, and you have it there. It's either two or three; I can't remember. In other words, effectively no.

There are no quorum requirements in the chamber either, unless you have a vote. You have to have a certain number of people to vote, which is 40, but if you aren't having any voting, you often just have three or four members there.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: You mentioned the petitions with 100,000 signatures. How often do those happen? Have there been quite a lot of them?

Sir David Natzler: We only have about 28 or 29 sitting Mondays in a year. Again, it's my impression that it is most unusual now to have a sitting Monday without having a petition debate in Westminster Hall. There was a bit of a slow start, but the word got around that it was really worth going and that we would have petitions introduced.

The issue is that they've not been arranged by a member. A member of the Petitions Committee introduces them. They're not necessarily in favour of or against what's being discussed, but it's to get the debate going. Most of them are successful, in the sense that they attract half a dozen members who are willing to take part.

There's the occasional dud, a petition about which members don't really feel they have very much that they can usefully say, but as you can imagine, that's quite rare.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: You mentioned that debate length is based on the projected interest in a debate. That's why you get some that are 30 minutes and some that are 90 minutes.

I know that around here, RSVPs from MPs are notoriously unreliable. They often say that they're coming and they often don't. How do you prejudice attendance at a debate?

Sir David Natzler: We don't; the member has to, and it is a slight problem. The member takes responsibility. If she or he puts in for a 60- or 90-minute debate, it says very plainly that you shouldn't do this, and if you want to say which other members are putting in, please put it in on the form.

You can't force them to turn up; you're absolutely right. I guess maybe about once a week or once a fortnight, we do get what's meant to be a longer debate, but even with a long speech from the member starting, other members have not turned up in the event, and the thing falls short. We suspend so as to know when we're starting the next one with a new minister and new cast.

I don't think there's a public black mark against the member, but there's certainly a private one to note that they are not meant to go for the longer debates unless they think they can fill the space, not just with themselves, but with colleagues.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: You mentioned that chairs of Westminster Hall are committee chairs as opposed to chamber chairs. Is that correct?

Sir David Natzler: We have a two-tier committee system, so that may be misleading. We have our select committees, which look into subjects of their own choice, the so-called scrutiny committees that have chairs elected by the chamber. That's a different issue. They are not involved.

These are the committees that are smaller versions of the chamber, of maybe 17 or 20 members who look at legislation in detail on the committee stage off the floor, or look at delegated legislation, statutory instruments and so on. They are chaired in a neutral manner from a panel of about 35 members who are nominated by the Speaker on a party balance. They are senior members who are paid extra. They chair public bill committees and general committees, but they also chair Westminster Hall.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: In a typical week, how long does Westminster Hall sit, how many hours?

Sir David Natzler: It sits on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, and Mondays for three hours if there's a petition. For the Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, my math produced 13 hours, but my math may be wrong. I think it's 13 hours plus a possible three hours for a Monday sitting, which is quite a lot by our standards or anybody's standards. That's a lot of paper.

On a Tuesday or Wednesday Hansard, Westminster Hall is a pretty significant wodge at the back.

• (1140)

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I'm out of time. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

The clerk has to go in about 10 minutes, so if it's okay, I will go to Mr. Nater. If people who are interested could ask one question, that would be great.

Go ahead, Mr. Nater.

Mr. John Nater (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and again, thank you, Sir David, for joining us on the day of your retirement. It is much appreciated.

I'm going to divert very slightly from Westminster Hall. I'm taking advantage of your expertise on a slightly different matter.

It's on the subject of the Backbench Business Committee. Would you be able to very briefly describe the purpose of the Backbench Business Committee, who sits on it, and how those members are appointed to that committee?

Sir David Natzler: Okay. I will try to be brief.

The purpose of the Backbench Business Committee, which was recommended in 2009 by the House of Commons reform committee, was to ensure that on days when the government didn't need the floor for its agenda, rather than filling it with boring debates in which junior ministers would make long statements and nobody wanted to debate them, the backbenchers would have a decision as to what they debated, and to some extent put that to the House for decision, because these are potentially decisive resolutions.

The idea was to set up a committee of backbenchers, chaired by a member chosen by the House as a whole from the opposition, to act as a jury, if you like. Members come and pitch to that committee and say they would like to have a three-hour debate if possible on X. They now sit in public to hear these applications. They then meet in private to decide which ones to give, and for approximately how long and on which days.

They are nominated theoretically by the House and in practice by parties. It was originally a whole-House selection, but that rather fell away after some difficulties early on, which are behind us now.

It's a real success. It means Thursdays are now by and large not voting days. Today is, obviously. For Thursday we've had the business still going on, thank goodness, on two backbench topics. One is about Welsh affairs, because tomorrow is St. David's Day, and we always have a Welsh affairs debate near St. David's Day. The other one is on the U.K.'s progress towards net-zero carbon emissions.

I'm watching my own annunciator on this as well. I notice how many members are speaking on that. They will turn up and speak about that. It's backbenchers who have chosen it. Ministers respond, and the opposition joins in, and so you have debates that are purposeful. Sometimes they are controversial and can lead to votes, and they are resolutions of the House. They are perfectly the same, in theory, as any other decision of the House. Just because it came on a backbench day doesn't make it less valid.

Mr. John Nater: Thank you for that. That's very helpful.

I note that St. David's Day and your first day of retirement fall on the same day. That's somewhat coincidental, or perhaps it's on purpose that it happened, but that's wonderful.

Sir David Natzler: It's not a coincidence.

Mr. John Nater: Well, that's wonderful. Happy St. David's Day.

Sir David Natzler: Thank you.

Mr. John Nater: I just want to clarify something. You had mentioned earlier that no government legislation is dealt with in Westminster Hall. Am I right to assume, then, that Westminster Hall in no way speeds up a government's agenda, and in the same way, Westminster Hall is no way for opposition to thwart the business of government? Thus, it has no impact, one way or the other, in speeding up or slowing down legislation.

Sir David Natzler: That is absolutely correct. It is neutral. As far as I know, other than ensuring ministers turn up, the government's business managers—who I do know fairly well—take very little interest in Westminster Hall at all, and that's a good thing.

Mr. John Nater: Thank you so much.

The Chair: Mr. Simms, you have one question.

Mr. Scott Simms: Thank you, Chair.

Very quickly, I understand that in 2009 or 2010, or shortly thereafter, you made a huge change in Westminster, whereby your select committee chairs are chosen by all members of the House. How is that going?

Sir David Natzler: It has gone well. This was a recommendation from the House of Commons reform committee, to which I was the clerk.

As it's in my last hour, I can be candid. Most members favoured this idea. They thought it was a really good idea. It would give the chairs of the committees more standing in the House.

There had been a habit of the members being appointed to select committees to include one senior member from the party who, it was understood, would take the chair of that committee, and then the committees were expected to just elect them.

It didn't always work. Sometimes they chose some other member as their chair, which was fine too, as it was a good sign of independence. However, the government would then also try to leave the person off. There was a row in 2001-2002, when the government party tried to have two senior chairs not appointed to the committee at all.

Following that failed coup, the Wright committee said, "Why doesn't the House choose chairs? We will divide up the parties in advance; the parties meet in a small room and decide who gets which committee, on an arm-wrestling basis, which has always worked perfectly well so far. They then come forward to report that X committee is Conservative, X is Liberal Democrat, X is Labour, and then only members of that party can stand for election, with the electoral college—the House as a whole—voting by an alternative vote system." Members absolutely love it.

Well, you are members; members enjoy voting. They don't seem to mind competing against one another within parties, so for some chairs, we would have four or five candidates. You would think the caucus might say, "No, this is our Labour candidate for X committee", but it doesn't seem to work like that. They quite happily compete, without visible hard feelings, and then they have to canvass, of course, the other parties to get them to vote for them in a secret ballot.

The only voice on the Wright committee that said this would never work because, first, there wouldn't be any elections and it

would all be sorted out by the caucuses and we would look ridiculous, was me, and I was completely wrong. It has been a really great success.

I hope that's helpful.

• (1145)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Scott Simms: Yes, it's extremely helpful.

Mr. Scott Reid: It's not really helpful; it's provocative.

I want to ask a question to follow up on that.

First of all, are the chairs elected for the life of the entire Parliament?

Sir David Natzler: Yes.

Mr. Scott Reid: There must have arisen a situation in some committee of members of that committee expressing dissatisfaction at the chairmanship of their chair.

Sir David Natzler: Yes.

Mr. Scott Reid: At that point, is there any recourse, either for them or for the House of Commons as a whole, with regard to that chair?

Sir David Natzler: There isn't for the House of Commons as a whole.

Of course, in the Standing Orders, if they give due notice and there are members from both the two largest parties on the committee voting that way, they can express a lack of confidence in the chair. You can look in detail at the way we set it up in the Standing Orders. In other words, to prevent a party coup, you can say, "We're not happy with the chair."

Sure, we have had difficulties. It was my fear, to be honest, that these would be chairs parachuted in, and my experience with select committees was that they like choosing their own chair and feeling comfortable with them because they had chosen them and they could at any time unchoose them just by a vote, with notice. However, by and large, this has not happened, and chairs and committees have rubbed along together. Possibly the chairs are a little more powerful than they used to be, but members know they have that in reserve.

Evidently, we've had chairs resigning or wanting to step down. I'm not sure if we've had chairs dying. We do have changes of chairs, and then you have a by-election.

Mr. Scott Reid: Is the by-election again by the House as a whole?

Sir David Natzler: Yes, that is the same electoral college, the House as a whole.

Mr. Scott Reid: Effectively, if the committee finds a want of confidence in the chair, at that point the committee can no longer meet until such time as the by-election has occurred in the House as a whole, which might take a period of time, perhaps a day or two.

Sir David Natzler: No, we would be very quick. We can get a by-election going very quickly, and the Standing Orders were drafted quite carefully to give some freedom to the Speaker to abbreviate intervals. However, sure, you have to have time for people to agree to stand, because to stand as chair, you need a certain number of supporters and from more than one party.

If that did happen, the committee would not be completely helpless. These are scrutiny committees. They're not holding up legislation or anything. Their program might be briefly interrupted, but they can appoint a temporary chair at any time, and they do when the chair is away. Other people can take the chair, as happened this morning in your meeting.

Mr. Scott Reid: Right, but we have a system of deputy chairs to allow us to do that. We'd have two deputy chairs in addition to the chair.

Sir David Natzler: We don't appoint deputy chairs in advance, but every committee knows that it's usually, obviously, one of the senior members from the other side who will take the chair if for whatever reason the chair isn't there.

• (1150)

Mr. Scott Reid: I have one last question.

You said this is not for legislative committees, but only committees that are not dealing with legislation.

Sir David Natzler: Right. "Scrutiny committees" is what we call them, including, for example, the procedure committee. The chair of our procedure committee is directly elected by the House as a whole.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you.

The Chair: We'll go to Mr. Graham for the last question.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Thank you.

I have one final line of questioning. You said that Westminster Hall is very much independent, that it doesn't have much interference from the parties' structure.

Do the whips of the different parties try, or have they tried over the years, to interfere in the background with the operation of that chamber or take control of it in different ways? Have they just left it on its own all this time?

Sir David Natzler: As far as I'm aware, they haven't, but I don't want to be naive. It may be that they stipulate their members to put in particular subjects for debate, but I really doubt it. I think members spot that and don't like it on either side. This is their place. It is their home, more than the chamber in many ways, which is inevitably dominated by whips of both sides, by the government and by the opposition, who have 20 days a year, and by the parties. Backbenchers would resent it if the whips did do that.

It may occasionally be attempted. I detect that a smaller party may have tried to get a slot in Westminster Hall for what is really a pretty partisan debate, because they have less chance, so they raise a subject that is of interest mainly to them.

I think that is seen as fair enough, but by and large, this is backbench territory and it's respected as such.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Thank you.

Happy retirement. Thanks very much for this.

The Chair: As you'll have lots of time after retirement, if we needed you, could you appear again?

Sir David Natzler: I do have a successor who is taking over at one minute past midnight tomorrow and who will be at least as well qualified to answer, but when Canada calls, I will always do my best to help.

My very best to all of you, and thank you.

The Chair: We wish you the best in your last sitting in 45 years today. Thank you.

The clerk is here and can start early, but we'll suspend for a couple of minutes and start right after that.

• (1150)

(Pause)

• (1155)

The Chair: Welcome back to the 144th meeting of the committee. Our next order of business is a briefing on the implementation of changes to the petition system.

Members will recall that our 75th report, which was concurred in by the House on November 29, 2018, contains several recommendations concerning changes to the petition system. While some of these changes have already been implemented, others will take effect at the beginning of the next Parliament.

Here to brief us today from the House of Commons are André Gagnon, who is the Deputy Clerk of Procedure, and Jeremy LeBlanc, who is the Principal Clerk of Chamber Business and Parliamentary Publications.

Thank you both for being here. We look forward to hearing how our suggestions are being implemented.

Mr. André Gagnon (Deputy Clerk, Procedure): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, everyone.

I won't be retiring today.

[*English*]

This is not my last day.

Mr. David Christopherson: So you think. That's as far as you know.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. André Gagnon: That's as far as I know. Thank you for the vote of confidence. That starts the meeting very well.

Mr. David Christopherson: You're well on your way to 45 years in your own right—not bad.

Mr. André Gagnon: Yes. Thank you.

Our objective today, as Mr. Bagnell indicated, is to go through the different follow-ups to the 75th report, which was adopted last fall.

[*Translation*]

Today we will be discussing five very specific points, and we will conclude with a presentation of the Web drafts, which will be accessible at the start of the next Parliament.

[English]

The first item has to do with the number of days that petitions remain open on the website. Mr. Bagnell has referred to some items that have already been put in place. This one has already been put in place. It started on January 28, I think.

[Translation]

The fact that petitioners may ask that the petition stay open for 30, 60, 90 or 120 days makes things even more flexible for the different petitioners.

The first petition submitted by a member of Parliament was that of Mr. Blake Richards, who was a member of this committee at the time. That petition was authorized on January 28 and

[English]

essentially was closed for signatures yesterday, and it met the 500-signature threshold.

The second item had to do with sponsors. Members of this committee had indicated that having sponsors associated with a member of Parliament and associated with a petition could, in some instances, be understood differently by different people. This change has been made as well, so members are now authorizing the publication of a petition on the website.

The third item has to do with the format of paper petitions.

[Translation]

For those of you who remember, the origin of this recommendation by the committee was a point of order raised by Ms. Finley in the House. The objective of the recommendation is to have various types of petitions accepted, certified and tabled in the House. Obviously, this will increase the number of petitions submitted by members, and their representation of citizens' interests. This process has begun.

The fourth point we wish to draw to your attention is dissolution. When the committee, during the 41st Parliament, adopted the changes to allow electronic petitions, it asked that anything on the electronic petitions website at the time of the dissolution be considered to have lapsed. There are cases where ongoing petitions amass a large number of signatures.

• (1200)

[English]

Once dissolution arrives, the website is closed, and all of that is essentially moved. If you compare that to paper petitions, for instance, you see that paper petitions continue throughout the year, but clearly if we have a paper petition that has been certified by Journals Branch and provided to a member of Parliament and the member of Parliament doesn't table it in the House before dissolution, that member of Parliament or another member of Parliament can have it recertified for the next Parliament. Essentially, the signatures that were on that petition are not lost.

The committee could consider the idea of having, let's say, any e-petitions that had met the 500-signature threshold at the time of dissolution certified afterwards. This would not be possible now, but they could be certified afterwards for the next Parliament. That could

be a possibility, or any e-petitions that were certified but never tabled before dissolution could also be recertified for the other Parliament. This is a possibility that the committee could consider.

For instance, if today you had someone put a petition on the website asking that the petition be open for 120 days, essentially that would mean this petition would never be tabled in the House, because 120 days would bring us past the June 21 deadline. Let's say we only sit until that time and don't sit any later. That petition could not be tabled in the House, even though that petition could have met the 500-signature threshold. This is something that we wanted to bring to your attention.

[Translation]

The matter of the paper petitions that have been placed online is the topic of a large part of the 75th report we are presenting today, to provide information on what has been done.

[English]

We have worked very closely with the Privy Council Office to establish a way that all those paper petitions could be dealt with as efficiently as possible, and that's what we want to present to you today. This collaboration has worked very well, and we're very happy to say that this system will be in place at the beginning of the 43rd Parliament.

In a very practical way, this is how we propose it would work. As usual, any member of Parliament having a paper petition would send it to the Journals Branch to have it certified. The clerk of petitions in the Journals Branch would get the text of that petition translated right away. Rarely are petitions bilingual, so that text would be immediately translated and verification would take place to see if it's certified. Once it was certified, the clerk of petitions would download a certificate on the MP portal for petitions. That means the individual, the member, could immediately table the certificate in the House, exactly the same way we do for e-petitions.

Once the certificate is tabled in the House regarding a paper petition, the text of that paper petition would appear on the website, exactly as we do for e-petitions, and PCO would be informed so that a response could be worked on immediately, respecting again the 45 days afterwards that the government would have to respond to it, to table a response in the House, and that response to the paper petition would appear on the website as well. The response would be put with it at that time.

That would meet the request put forward by the committee, but in a much more efficient manner than having the paper petition circulating from the office of the member to the office of the clerk of petitions, back to the office of the member, then tabled in the House and then sent to the PCO, which was the case previously. Now what would happen is that only the certificate would be sent to the PCO, and only the certificate would be sent to members. Journals Branch would keep the paper copy of the petition until it's tabled in the House, as with e-petitions. On a regular basis, those petitions would be destroyed so that the private personal information found on those petitions would remain inaccessible to all.

That covers most of it.

To illustrate all of that, Jeremy is going to do a short presentation with mock-ups, and we'll be more than happy to answer all of your questions.

● (1205)

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc (Principal Clerk, Chamber Business and Parliamentary Publications): Thank you, André.

You have paper copies of those mock-ups in front of you, and they're on the screens as well. I want to take you briefly through what the new site will look like at the launch of the 43rd Parliament.

The look and feel of the petitions website is very much like what we have currently for electronic petitions. The difference is that we've rebaptized it so that it's just called "petitions" rather than "e-petitions", since we'll be having both paper and electronic petitions. You'll see very obvious buttons that stand out, quick-access buttons that allow you to get to the more popular sections of the website, notably the one in purple that brings you to all e-petitions that are open for signature, since we expect that's what the vast majority of people will be coming to the website to do, to sign an e-petition. That will take them there relatively quickly.

[*Translation*]

Next, there is a section that allows you to do a search in any of the petitions. There is more information on this site than on the actual petitions site. Also, the information is presented in a more user-friendly way so as to better respect access standards for websites, for instance for visually impaired persons.

We added a button to the right to identify the Parliament concerned. We will archive the petitions of the 42nd Parliament, which is the current one. You will thus have access to them, as well as to those of the 43rd Parliament. At this time, since the site only contains petitions from the current Parliament, there is no information near the button on the right, but it will be possible eventually to do a search in the petitions of a given Parliament.

There are also icons that will allow you to quickly find paper or electronic petitions. In the list, the small icon that looks like a computer screen indicates an electronic petition, and the icon that looks like a sheet of paper is for paper petitions.

[*English*]

Next, if you go to the detailed page for each petition, again it has a layout very similar to what we have currently. There are some small changes to improve a bit of the look and feel of it and make it more accessible. Most notably, we've added a few other elements as well. We've added what language the petition was originally submitted in. As André mentioned, it's very rare for us to receive petitions in both official languages. Usually they're in one or the other language. We'll indicate what the source language is, giving people an idea of whether the text is a translation or the original language.

We've also integrated the text of the government response to the petition directly on that page. Currently there's a PDF version of the response that you can click on, and it opens a new version. This is not great from an accessibility perspective. The text of responses is usually relatively short, a few paragraphs, so it's possible to integrate that text directly in the page of the petition. As we mentioned in the

fall, the last time we appeared before the committee, we have an agreement with the Privy Council Office whereby the responses to petitions are going to be transmitted to us electronically, so we'll be doing away with the reams of paper that represents.

As soon as a response is presented in the House by the parliamentary secretary, the Privy Council Office can transmit that text to us electronically. We can quickly upload it to the website, and there's an alert that is sent to the office of the member who presented that petition to let the member know that the government response is available. Rather than having to wait for a paper response to be sent to your office by messenger, which takes a day or two, you'll get an email alert that the response has been uploaded to the website and is available. That's something you can very easily share with people who may have been involved in organizing that paper petition through your own contacts. That's an improvement. The information will be available much more rapidly than is currently the case.

There's also an interesting feature at the bottom of the page. I'm sure you realize that there are often situations of the same paper petition being presented by multiple members or by the same member multiple times. We'll keep a running total of identical petitions at the bottom of the page.

In this example, it concerns health services. This is all fictitious data, but we've created examples of other members who may have presented that same petition, the date when they presented it, and a running total of the number of signatures collected. There were 148 signatures in this example, but also others that had been collected, for a grand total of 568, as you can see at the bottom of the page. It's a way of keeping track of the number of identical petitions that are presented, and also of the total number of signatures collected for them.

● (1210)

[*Translation*]

The next slide shows what the petitions website will look like on a mobile device. Since it was designed for the current site, it easily adapts to mobile devices, so that people will be able to consult it from various locations.

The next slide shows the government response section, which has now been integrated into the research section. This makes it possible to do a search in all petitions to which the government provided a reply. Here as well, we improved the display, and we provide more information on the status of the petition.

I also want to draw your attention to the small green button that is at the top of the page, right next to the menu. It is the "MP" button.

[*English*]

or "Member of Parliament" in English. That is the button that will allow members to access the MP portal, where they can find information about both paper and electronic petitions.

As André was mentioning, the process we envisage is that when we receive a paper petition in the Journals Branch and it's certified, we will send an electronic certificate that will become available in the member's portal. Rather than the entire petition being returned to your office through internal mail, which takes a day or two, it's uploaded electronically. You'll get an alert automatically to let you know there's a certified petition that's available. You just have to go to this MP portal. You or your delegated staff can then print the certificate and present that petition in the House. It will have the text of the petition and the number of signatories in the same way we do for electronic petitions, on a single sheet of paper.

Once the petition is presented in the House, that certificate will disappear from this section of the portal, so it's not possible to re-present the same petition over and over again.

Once it's presented, the certificate disappears and will instead be added to another new section, for the information of members, which gives you all the petitions that you have presented and information about them, including the latest update and where they are in the process. Has a response been received, and on what date? What date was the petition presented? You have that information there. You can also click on any of those petitions to get more detailed information about them.

That concludes what we want to show you. We're happy to answer any questions you might have for us.

The Chair: If it's okay, we'll just do this by open questions and answers.

Go ahead, Mr. Graham.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I have a number of questions to get through.

You're probably aware, André and Jeremy, of the study that's been at the BILI committee for the last five years about getting sessional papers onto the Internet. Can this process be used to get all sessional papers to the general public, and is there any intention of doing that?

Mr. André Gagnon: You have to understand the different categories of sessional papers.

You have those special and easy reports, let's say, from the Energy Council of Canada or whatever, which are tabled by the minister. There are responses to petitions, responses to questions on the Order Paper. There are responses to different categories of reports, committee reports, pursuant to Standing Order 109. Those different items are all considered sessional papers, and there are also orders for returns that are massive. This is clearly a start to the process of considering whether we could eventually envisage all of the information tabled by the government in the House of Commons, all documents tabled by the government, to be made accessible in an electronic format.

What we're doing here today is the first stage. As you can imagine, the documents tabled in the House—I think it's around 3,000 every year—amount to a lot of documents. As well, as we understand it—and people from Treasury Board and the Privy Council would be in a better position to answer that—sometimes, for instance, the format is not the same from one department to another, or perhaps there are tables in the documents that make it more difficult for people who have accessibility issues.

Those issues are not small. They're really not small. To get to that point could be a good long-term objective, but clearly what we've done today is just the first step. This committee, I think, has looked at that. The Library of Parliament has looked at part of that, asking for some sessional papers to be scanned, which is a completely different issue and certainly less accessible for people from the outside.

This is a first step, to answer your question.

● (1215)

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: In the same vein, if PCO returns a response to a petition that includes a spreadsheet, for example, and they happen to send you the Excel, would the Excel go up, or do you have to print that into a PDF to table it? How would you do that?

Mr. André Gagnon: The idea is that the information we would get—and I'm talking here about responses to petitions—from PCO would not be modified in any way, either for format or content, from the House of Commons. That's what we're working on: to have something agreed upon in terms of the software and the look and feel of what would be presented.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: While a petition is open, can anything happen to it? Can someone withdraw it? Can it be corrected if it has a mistake in it, or is it set in stone, and for those 120 or 60 days it is completely untouchable?

Mr. André Gagnon: Jeremy can correct me, but I think that's why the committee has decided to adopt the changes and permit the 30, 60, 90, 120 days. The idea is you're locked into those, and it's to have that initial choice.

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: I think the idea is that once it's published, it's very difficult to withdraw or change the text. If you were changing the text, then the people who signed it previously may not have signed the same thing. The change may seem insignificant, but for some people it might be a big deal, so we don't change the text and we generally don't withdraw petitions once they're published.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Even an Oxford comma might be enough to mess up the whole meaning of the thing, so yes, I get that.

When you log in as an MP to the financial portal and a number of other places, it accepts the identification of your browser and carries on. Is this going to have the same system, or are we going to have to have a separate log-in for it?

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: It's the same system. It will recognize you based on the account that you've logged in with.

Mr. André Gagnon: Or your delegate.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Okay, that's helpful.

If someone prints off an electronic petition and gathers signatures on paper, can those be used for anything, or does it have to be certified as a paper petition?

Mr. André Gagnon: It would have to be a paper petition.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: The two are completely separate processes? Is there no way of amalgamating the two processes?

Mr. André Gagnon: No.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Okay. This will be my last question for the moment. I might have more later.

When a petition is certified, does anyone check that the addresses are valid?

Mr. André Gagnon: Do you mean a paper petition or an e-petition?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I mean either one—or both, for that matter.

Mr. André Gagnon: This issue was considered at length during the last Parliament. Essentially we looked at how to attest to the quality of the signature, or the legitimacy of the signature, and at that time the committee adopted certain elements to determine which types of signatures are not acceptable, such as, for instance, all signatures that end with gc.ca, meaning people signing from their offices in government. A couple of filters like that exist to attest to the legitimacy of the signatures.

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: I would add that for e-petitions, when someone attempts to sign, they enter an email address. There's an email that's sent by the system to that address to validate that the address actually exists, and the person has to click on the link sent to that address before their signature will be counted. For an e-petition, there's a validation that the address exists.

For paper petitions, we don't go and see that Jeremy LeBlanc lives at whatever address was given. We don't verify to that degree. We just verify that the address format is accepted, the signature seems legitimate and doesn't look like it's in the same handwriting as all the other signatures on the page, and those sorts of things.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: If you find them all in the same handwriting, would you come back to say that you think they're all from the same person? You can't prove that either.

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: No, we can't, but there are suspicions.

Quite honestly, it would only matter in the case of a petition that was very close to the 25-signature threshold. Once you pass 25 valid signatures, whether there are 26, 226 or 2,026, it doesn't make a huge difference in terms of certification or not.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I have one final question on the electronic signatures.

Who receives the signatories' data? When somebody has signed a petition, who is going to have access to that data?

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: Staff in the Journals Branch are the only ones who would have access to it, and as André mentioned, it's destroyed at regular intervals. We have access to it for the purpose of validating or verifying if there's something suspicious about it, but outside the staff who are managing the process, nobody does.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: The members who have actually contributed the petitions won't have access to that data either.

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: They do not.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Thank you.

The Chair: Just before we go to Mr. Reid, can you tell me how you go back a screen from the one you have up now? If you go to the start, do you click on the petitions website thing at the top?

●(1220)

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: To get to the portal on the petitions website, if you're logged in as a member of Parliament, there's a button that appears at the top that says in green either “Member of Parliament” or “*Député, en français*”. Clicking on that button will bring you to the MP portal from the petitions website.

Also, whenever there's something that appears in your portal, you'll also get an email alert and you can click on a link that will bring you there.

The Chair: On that opening screen, if you click on “Create”, is that where you get the choice of paper or electronic?

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: That would be for creating an electronic petition. There's information available to people in the “About” section that has templates for creating paper petitions, but the “Create” link—

The Chair: You would go to the “About” section first.

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: There are links to a guide on paper petitions that gives you templates and information there. “Create” would really be for creating an electronic petition.

The Chair: This is just an idea, but don't you think it might make it clearer on that opening screen if it were to say “Create Paper” or “Create Electronic”, or something? It's something to think about.

Mr. Reid is next.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you both for being here. I congratulate you on these very thoughtful improvements. I particularly like the idea of keeping a running count of the number of signatures that have been accumulated so far.

There's a process that goes on at Parliament Hill that I think is ultimately frustrating. If I get a petition with several thousand signatures, I divide it up into the minimum number of pages possible and distribute it as widely as possible. Anybody who sits through the petitions period in the House knows that the same petition will be mentioned over and over again, presumably for the purpose of creating the illusion that there's a greater level of support for this concern than for the other competing concerns that are being expressed in other petitions.

In a type of tragedy of the Commons, similar to what happens when fishing grounds get overfished, we see people wasting a bunch of the House of Commons' time reiterating the same item over and over again. This change helps to perhaps get around that by showing how much actual support there is for each topic, so congratulations on that.

By the way, I'm as guilty as anybody else of participating in that type of thing in the House of Commons.

I want to ask some questions regarding a couple of technical areas.

If a petition is submitted in one official language, it's then translated. Does the originator of the petition get the opportunity to see the translation prior to it going up, or is it simply assumed that it is...?

Mr. André Gagnon: Are we talking here about the e-petition, or the—

Mr. Scott Reid: I'm sorry; it's the e-petition I'm referring to.

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: In neither case would we send the translation back for validation unless we received a particular request from the petitioner to validate it in advance. Typically, we don't.

Mr. Scott Reid: Let me ask something slightly different. If you get it in both official languages—I'm speaking of e-petitions, not paper petitions—do you confirm to make sure that it says the same thing in both languages? The obvious question is that if it doesn't, how would you deal with that?

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: If it is an e-petition, the user doesn't have the opportunity to enter it in both languages. The screen doesn't allow them to enter the text in English and in French. It's whatever—

Mr. Scott Reid: They must choose one language.

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: They choose the language that they submit it in, and there are rules prohibiting people from having two petitions open simultaneously that are on the same topic. If you tried to enter the same petition in another language, that wouldn't be allowed because it's the same petition, so they're stuck submitting it in one language.

However, as I say, if a petitioner expresses an interest in verifying the translation or wants to have a say in what the translation looks like, we can certainly co-operate with them. There's an email address that they can send questions to, and we get back to them.

Mr. Scott Reid: This committee held extensive hearings and published a report on the use of indigenous languages in Canada, and there has been considerable interest in the House in particular in the use of indigenous languages in the proceedings of the House of Commons.

As a practical matter, I've expressed my own reservations as to how easy it actually is to achieve a utopia in which a member of Parliament can pop up and begin speaking a non-official language in the House and expect to be understood. Although we've done our best to find a workable solution, the reality is that there are limits to what can be done.

When it comes to the issue of submitting a petition or having a petition available in one of our indigenous languages, is that an option that exists at the moment? If it doesn't exist, is it the sort of thing that could be made to exist if you got appropriate direction from the House?

• (1225)

Mr. André Gagnon: Clearly, today the only two languages that can be used in a petition would be French or English. That said, when a petition is tabled in the House, nothing would prevent an individual from speaking in an indigenous language.

In terms of having it appear on the website, if we're talking about

Mr. Scott Reid: That's what I'm asking about.

Mr. André Gagnon: —having it in another language, that would probably necessitate a change to the Standing Orders and certainly in practice, and also the different languages that would be permitted would need to be identified.

Mr. Scott Reid: I ask this in part because we just had a debate at second reading on the indigenous languages act. I can't remember what the bill number is, but I'm sure you're familiar with it.

Mr. André Gagnon: It's Bill C-91.

Mr. Scott Reid: Yes. My own intervention was to draw the attention of the House to the fact that in the case of one indigenous language in particular, Inuktitut, a very high proportion of people who speak that language are unilingual speakers. Not every indigenous language has a written form, or a consensus written form, but that's not true with Inuktitut, where there is a consensus written form in syllabics that are pretty much universally understood among Inuktitut speakers, who are numerous. It's literally the only language that many of these people understand or can read. If someone wanted to have a petition on something that's relevant to Nunavut, it would literally be not presentable, as things stand, in the language that is the only language spoken by a substantial proportion of the population of that territory, to give a real-life example.

Mr. André Gagnon: Let's talk about a paper petition, where it's much easier to implement. If that paper petition were written in an indigenous language and, on the side, in English or French, that petition could be received in the House. If we're talking here about e-petitions, that would probably require intervention from this committee in the form of a recommendation from this committee that was adopted by the House.

Mr. Scott Reid: That's really helpful, and as you've probably guessed, my comments were directed less at you than they were at the rest of the committee to think about. I very much appreciate that.

I have one last question. Not on this screen but on another screen, you showed keywords associated with a petition. I assume it's the case that if I were to search for a keyword such as “cannabis”, for example, I would essentially get to see all the petitions that have that keyword in them.

Mr. André Gagnon: Yes, or it could be “marijuana”, for instance, because there are some other terms associated with the different—

Mr. Scott Reid: Yes.

Now the screen's back up. I look down, and “cannabis” is a nice easy one. That was E-1528, the first petition. If I look at the second one, it has some keywords that might be non-intuitive.

How do you go about selecting keywords? Is there a protocol you follow?

Mr. André Gagnon: The same people who work on our parliamentary publications help us as well. We call them information management officers. They have a terminology book, if I could put it that way. Essentially, when we're talking about cannabis, you would also have “marijuana” or “drugs”, the different words associated with the different terminology presented.

Clearly, if the petition being prepared has defined terminology in it, this would appear there, as you imagine.

Mr. Scott Reid: Right, and that's a really good example of what I'm getting at. I'm glad you said that. An example here is that if I'm trying to encourage people to sign a petition, and the petition I have in mind is over pharmacare, and I'm directing towards something about... You can see how “drugs” is an issue, but they are prescription drugs, not illegal drugs, whereas somebody else is trying to get a petition signed that is dealing with the issue of LSD or heroin or whatever. You can see how there's a certain overlap that is inherently problematic.

I'm just throwing that out again as more of a comment than a question, but can I ask if the book they use is a source that's available for us to see if we ask for it? Is it the sort of thing we could take a look at? I don't doubt their objectivity or their best efforts; I'm just genuinely curious as to what it contains.

• (1230)

Mr. André Gagnon: This is a living document. I shouldn't have used the word "book", because it's more of a living document.

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: It's more of a database, really.

Mr. André Gagnon: It's more of a database to permit them to identify different terminology, and it evolves with the nature of the debates in the House. It's clearly related to the work done in the House and in committees.

Mr. Scott Reid: That's very helpful. Thank you very much.

The Vice-Chair (Mrs. Stephanie Kusie): Are there further questions?

Mr. de Burgh Graham, go ahead, please.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I have a couple of questions.

You were here for the previous panel when we discussed a secondary debating chamber and the idea of the 100,000 signatures to create a debate. Has there ever been any kind of practice like that in Canada in the past?

Mr. André Gagnon: In the last Parliament this issue was discussed significantly, and if I remember well, in this Parliament as well, when Mr. Kennedy Stewart presented a motion regarding that issue.

Regarding the possibility of having a debate in Canada on different legislatures in Canada, I'm not too sure if that is the case.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Would that require changes to the Standing Orders? I imagine it would.

Mr. André Gagnon: Most probably, yes.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I'm going to go slightly off topic to build on what Scott was asking about.

One of the things that's always driven me nuts as a bilingual person is that Hansard is available in either English or French, and there's no untranslated Hansard available anywhere online. It would be really helpful if there were English, French and floor as online options. I put that to you as a "please do this one of these years". I'd very much appreciate it.

In the same vein, when you're looking at an MP's profile page on the parliamentary website, motions are virtually impossible to track. They're not run through LEGISinfo, which they should be. Most of our private members' motions, which fall under private members' business, should be under LEGISinfo. If you could fix that too, I'd appreciate it.

Those are my comments. I don't know if you have comments on that.

Mr. André Gagnon: Jeremy's responsible, as his title indicates, for parliamentary publications, so he could speak to—

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: I've taken notes.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: We may chat longer.

Thank you.

Mr. André Gagnon: You're in trouble.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: He's used to it anyway.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mrs. Stephanie Kusie): Thank you Mr. Graham.

[*English*]

Does anyone have any further questions for our guests?

I will leave it to the chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Stephanie.

I sensed from your presentation that there's one item the committee could discuss and make a decision on, and that is what happens at dissolution. At the moment, you said that paper petitions can carry over, but electronic petitions can't.

Mr. André Gagnon: Paper petitions can be recertified. As for all the electronic petitions, they cannot. They're moot on the day of dissolution.

The Chair: If this committee was in favour of making them equal either way, would that require a change to the Standing Orders?

Mr. André Gagnon: Most probably it would just be a report to the House. Having that report adopted would be sufficient. It's not right now in the Standing Orders. It was in the report that was adopted by the House in the last Parliament.

The Chair: Do committee members have a view on that? Paper petitions can be carried over; electronic petitions can't. It would make sense to have some symmetry. It would make sense to have them both either yes or no, I would think.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I have a question about that.

On the issue of paper petitions, there are no dates on them, so you don't know when they were from. We just recertify them because there's a petition. You do know the date when they are created as an electronic petition, so there's always been the question of one Parliament binding the next one. Is there any impact of that with this question? Do you see it as one Parliament binding the next one, or is the petition such a separate issue that it doesn't fall under that precedent?

Mr. André Gagnon: That could be easily understandable, in the sense that if there's a change in government and one of the issues that is part of a petition from the previous Parliament has nothing to do with the next Parliament—because the new government decided to proceed otherwise—then it would be—

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: Or it deals with a bill, which would no longer be before the House.

Mr. André Gagnon: Exactly.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Perhaps the middle ground could be that the petition would still be available on the website and available for somebody to adopt, as opposed to automatically carrying over. I don't think it would require any rule changes to do that.

Is that something that you could do without a rule change? The website could simply say, “These are orphan petitions because Parliament dissolved. If you’d like to claim one of them as opposed to starting it afresh”—because it’s already been translated and things —“click here”.

•(1235)

Mr. André Gagnon: That could be a possibility, yes.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Is that something that requires us to direct it, or is it something you guys can just do?

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: As André mentioned, the previous committee in the last Parliament issued a report on how to set up the e-petition system that was very prescriptive. One of those clear directives was that at dissolution, the site was to be completely deactivated. All of those signatures were to be closed and there was to be no further action taken on them. I think to change that, which was a clear directive, would probably take another clear directive to us.

They’re not necessarily orphaned either, I would say. If a member is very much championing a particular cause and is involved or associated with a petition, which may or may not be the case, but sometimes is, and that member is re-elected, it may not really be orphaned. That member may still very much care about that issue and may still want to present the petition, or there could even be someone in their constituency who wants to do it. They’re not necessarily orphaned, although some will be, because there are members who won’t be returning to the next Parliament.

Mr. André Gagnon: But the signatures would be lost.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I think it makes sense to lose the signatures. If somebody really wants that petition to go forward, there’s nothing stopping them from taking the text and resubmitting it, if the text is still available.

Would an incomplete past petition still have the text available on the website, or is it clearly gone?

Mr. André Gagnon: It would be available.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: That’s all it needs.

Mr. André Gagnon: The issue at this point is the question of the signatures.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: The signatures have to go. I think that’s okay, in my opinion.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Jowhari.

Mr. Majid Jowhari (Richmond Hill, Lib.): When it’s electronic, and let’s say it’s past 120 days.... I specifically ask the question because I have a petition that I have chosen not to submit for a response because I’m looking for a right time to table it. If the House rises on the 21st, that petition is now gone, whereas if it was a paper petition, that petition would still hold, correct? Is it because the signatures on that are supporting that petition after it’s been verified, and then it’s lost?

Mr. André Gagnon: The difference is that the paper petition can be recertified, which is not the case for—

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Is it because the signatures are there that it can be recertified?

Mr. André Gagnon: It’s because that’s the practice that has always existed.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Okay. It does not have anything to do with the fact that the signatures are there that it could be recertified; it’s a procedural matter.

Mr. André Gagnon: Yes, it’s a decision the committee has—

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Just as a point of clarification, are we trying to bring parity between digital and paper petitions, or we are saying the digital petition is going to stay as is regardless?

Mr. André Gagnon: This has been a concern of the committee from the beginning. In the last Parliament, this issue was there. With the changes that were brought forward in the 75th report, for instance, saying that the text of both paper and electronic petitions should be on the website, it has always been quite a concern of this committee to make sure that the practices regarding those different types of petitions are as similar as possible. Going ahead with a change to permit those e-petitions that have gathered 500 signatures to be presented in the next Parliament would go exactly in that same vein.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Just so people understand the mechanics, if Parliament rises on June 21, petitions can still be presented on petition Wednesday, right?

Mr. André Gagnon: No.

The Chair: I thought petitions didn’t have to be presented in the House. I thought there was an avenue for that.

Mr. André Gagnon: The third Wednesday of each month when the House is not sitting—I think that’s the third Wednesday—

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: That would be the Wednesday after the 15th—

Mr. André Gagnon: Yes.

On that day, the government can table a response and it can table documents with the Journals Branch that are needed pursuant to either the Standing Orders or different acts.

The government cannot table documents that they wish to just share if these documents are not requested or based on acts. Similarly, paper petitions cannot be tabled with the Journals Branch on that third Wednesday of each month.

The Chair: I thought, in the old days—

Mr. André Gagnon: You can table petitions in the House with the Clerk. You can come to the table and give us petitions. Those petitions that are tabled with the Clerk are deemed to have been tabled in the House, but that’s only when the House is sitting.

•(1240)

The Chair: You’re saying you can’t mail it to the Clerk when the House isn’t sitting.

Mr. André Gagnon: Exactly.

The Chair: If we rise on June 21 and don’t come back, and then the writ drops in September before we come back, the paper petitions can be recertified in the next Parliament, but the electronic petitions can’t.

Mr. André Gagnon: Exactly.

The Chair: Okay.

I would like to get the committee's opinion and a decision or a recommendation to the House.

Go ahead, Mr. Graham.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: My recommendation on the signatures carrying over is status quo. I don't see the reason to change it.

The Chair: Why is your reason for having two different systems?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Signatures on a paper petition are undated. It's a simple form. If you have the form, you can resubmit it. Because we have the prescriptive timelines for the electronic petitions, the 120 days will for sure expire between parliamentary sessions. I don't see why we would bring it back and say, "This one is special because of the timing it had." You can resubmit the same text and ask for the same signatures again. I don't see the problem with that.

Unless someone else has a different opinion, I'm all ears, but that's my position.

The Chair: Are you saying that if the paper petition doesn't go through, it's sent back to the person and they can just bring it back to the next Parliament?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: They can bring it back once the new Parliament is in place. After dissolution, the new government is not in place the next day. There's a fairly significant period of time. There's no way a petition can generally span that time anyway. There are a small number of exceptions. I don't see why it would survive.

Go ahead.

Mr. Scott Reid: If I understand correctly, what you're saying is that a petition that as been started and has collected signatures but has been sent here for certification ought at that point to be sent back if the House has risen for whatever reason, as long as it has gone through all of those stages. That's the only condition under which it would get sent back. Is that correct?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: If the House is dissolved, it would be sent back, and if the person wanted to resubmit it following the election, they would be welcome to do so.

At the beginning I had the opposite perspective, but André made the point about the government changing, for example, and the issues no longer being pertinent. You don't want those things to automatically go through. There needs to be a way of saying—

Mr. Scott Reid: I agree. If the issue is something like, let's say, climate change, and there is change in government, a general petition that climate change be made an issue of priority might not be effective.

Who would it be sent back to?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: The original submitter, I would assume, would be notified that it had been killed, and the member of Parliament who sponsored it would be notified that it had been killed.

Mr. Scott Reid: Obviously, the member of Parliament might not be back.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Right, so a new member of Parliament would have to sponsor it in any case. Again it goes back to the issue we had before, about binding one Parliament from the previous one.

Mr. Scott Reid: We're talking about paper petitions right now, right?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: No, we're talking about digital ones.

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay, sorry.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I don't see any reason to change the status quo on either digital or paper on this one.

The Chair: The digital ones you can keep in your office and they can be recertified, right?

For paper, you hang on to them. In the new Parliament, if someone wants to recertify them, they come to you, and they can be recertified.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: If you submit a paper petition for certification, it comes back to you, signatures and all.

The Chair: They're just saying that you don't have to come back. You keep it and recertify it in the next Parliament if someone so requests.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Once it's certified, it comes back to us. We have it in our hands, and it's up to us to table it. Once it's tabled, it's a moot point, and if it hasn't been tabled, it's still yours. You take off the green sheet and you give it back to the clerk and you do it again.

It doesn't work the same way, because there's no time limit on petitions. The whole structure is different. There are 25 signatures, not 1,000, and there's no time limit. They are two totally different systems. I don't see why one should influence the other.

The Chair: It's in the MP's hands at dissolution.

Mr. André Gagnon: Exactly.

The Chair: How do you know it's one you're recertifying? Do they have a number or something on them?

Mr. André Gagnon: Yes. When you receive a certified petition, there is a number associated with it. I suspect that when members resubmit it for recertification, the green page is usually still on it, and if it's not, there are no issues about that, because the clerk of petitions will look at it in the usual fashion.

The Chair: If on June 20 a petition that had 120 days to go has 499 signatures, and Parliament's dissolved and we rise on June 20, and there's an election in the fall, those 499 people have lost it. They have to start all over again under the present system.

Mr. André Gagnon: The electronic petitions would continue during the summer until, let's say, September 1 or whenever—

The Chair: Parliament's dissolved.

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: It's not even if it's at 499. If it's at 40,000, and it hasn't been presented, those 40,000 signatures are lost.

The Chair: You'd have to start all over again.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: A hundred and twenty days after June 20 is October 17, I think, which is before the election in any case. In those 120 days, it's going to die no matter what.

•(1245)

The Chair: It's going to what?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: It's not going to happen in any case. Perhaps the compromise here, André and Jeremy, is for the petition system to say, "Warning: If you submit this petition, it has no chance of being presented", with this parameter. The website just says, "You can submit it if you want, but it's going to die."

A voice: We could have nicer words than that, but....

Mr. André Gagnon: That's a positive way to encourage public participation.

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: As André mentioned in his presentation, if someone were to open a petition today, February 28, and have it open for 120 days, it could never be presented, so we'd have to put that warning up now.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Yes, now, and that's my point.

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc: It's seven months before the election.

The Chair: If you guys were not clerks at the moment, do you have a personal opinion on...?

Mr. André Gagnon: We're always clerks, Mr. Chair.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: We should call David back.

The Chair: Do you see any rationale or fairness for the petitions not being the same?

Mr. André Gagnon: The question you may want to ask yourself is whether citizens see the difference. What we're talking about here, certification of paper petitions, is something that's probably not known by a lot of people, I would say. The difference between this type of petition and the electronic type of petition is a detail that's probably not known by the vast majority of the population.

The Chair: But is there any rationale, in terms of fairness, to have different systems for the two?

Mr. André Gagnon: That's for the committee to decide.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Jowhari.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Yes, thank you.

If I wanted to hedge, I would always go to the paper and make sure that I have more than 120 days left, because now that petition is always there. If the House rises, I get that petition back and I can give it to another MP or myself to table without having to go and get the signatures, whereas if I have an e-petition, as in the case that I explained, and now I've decided not to, there's no way it's going to be able to be tabled, so now, when it comes to the next Parliament, if and when I'm back, I have to launch another petition to be able to do that, whereas I wouldn't need to do that with the paper.

Mr. André Gagnon: Yes, that could be a—

Mr. Majid Jowhari: I'll just resubmit it for recertification.

Mr. André Gagnon: We're talking here about a very small window of time. It's usually at the end of a Parliament—

Mr. Majid Jowhari: No, I realize that, but what I'm saying is that with the paper, I always have the opportunity to recertify it, whereas with the electronic petition, it's gone.

Mr. André Gagnon: Yes. Some would say, however, that you're in a position to gather many more signatures with an electronic

petition. I think around 1,300 people a day sign petitions on the website. It's up to members.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: No, no, I agree. It is easier because it's across the country, while being able to get the paper across the country.... I totally understand and support digital.

The Chair: I'll take David's proposal as a motion that the status quo stay, and I'll open for debate on that.

Go ahead, Stephanie.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie (Calgary Midnapore, CPC): I believe we're in support of the idea.

The Chair: Is there anyone else?

I will call the question. All those in favour of leaving the status quo in place so that paper petitions can be reinstated in the next Parliament but electronic petitions cannot, please signify.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 4; nays 3 [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: That doesn't preclude our revisiting the matter, but that's your decision for now.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Changing it would have required changing the Standing Orders, right?

The Chair: No, it would just be a report from us to Parliament, and Parliament would have to approve it.

•(1250)

Mr. John Nater: Chair, we talked briefly about that letter to the next committee, our letter to our future selves. That could be something we could include for further consideration at the next Parliament.

The Chair: Sure.

Gentlemen, thank you very much. We always appreciate the great work you've done. This system is going to make it a lot more apparent to people.

Mr. André Gagnon: Thank you.

The Chair: On the Tuesday we come back, we have Bruce Stanton, Deputy Speaker of the House, who was here earlier today, for the first hour. The second hour will be the Centre Block rehabilitation witnesses from administration, related—

Mr. David Christopherson: Why is he here?

The Chair: He did a big article on this before we started the study.

Mr. David Christopherson: Yes, it was on the chamber. Okay, fine.

The Chair: The second hour will be our initial meeting on the Centre Block rehabilitation, and people from administration will report back from BOIE if they've met on this.

Mr. Scott Reid: That's actually happening right now.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Linda Lapointe (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, Lib.): When we come back on March 19, we will hear Mr. Stanton. Who else is there, afterwards?

The Chair: We will hear Mr. Stanton during the first hour.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: Yes.

The Chair: During the second hour, the topic will be

[English]

project rehabilitation

[Translation]

from the Centre Block.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: Fine.

The Chair: We will also discuss administration, and we will hear the witnesses' statements.

[English]

Related to Stephanie's study, the minister said she's available to come on April 9. Would that be okay?

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: If that's when she's available, that's great.

The Chair: It would be Tuesday, April 9.

Go ahead, David.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I have another topic. It's a question for the analyst. In the fall of 2016 we started a study on the Standing Orders, which resulted in that famous meeting 55. I'm just curious as to whether the standing order study is still technically open.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Andrew Lauzon): This committee has a permanent mandate to study the Standing Orders. Any element of the Standing Orders that interests the committee is open to study.

The Chair: Scott, can you remind me where your motion is?

Mr. Scott Reid: You mean the motion about the long-term vision and stuff. I have it right here. If you have a second, we can put it on notice.

A voice: It's not on paper, though.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: You can put it on notice early, Scott.

Mr. Scott Reid: We have it in both official languages.

The Chair: If we have unanimous consent, we can just discuss it. It's the one about carrying forward the study.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: It was about the committee's long-term vision and plan.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Bittle.

Mr. Chris Bittle (St. Catharines, Lib.): I asked Mr. Reid if he could send us an electronic copy. I don't perceive there being an issue, but if we can just get the copy sent to us, we can come back next time with an answer.

Mr. Scott Reid: We'll send it out to all members of the committee by email in both official languages today.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: I mentioned at an earlier gathering that in terms of the Standing Orders, the public accounts committee may be looking at forwarding a recommendation for change to this committee.

The meeting before this one was public accounts. I asked again if a majority is interested in getting those changes through. There is, so I would expect that shortly after we get back we will be receiving a request from that committee to look at some standing order changes vis-à-vis public accounts. It's not complicated and it shouldn't take a lot of time.

The Chair: In 10 words or less, could you give us a sense of what they're about?

Mr. David Christopherson: Yes, I can. There are two changes.

One is to insert into the mandate the word "non-partisan" to make it clear that public accounts is a different creature because of its oversight responsibilities.

Then the second one is to ensure that we don't repeat the absolute democratic nightmare that we went through—I won't say when—when a new government came in and wiped out all of the work that was being done by the public accounts committee.

There's a lot of tracking that goes on. There are commitments that are made from departments when they come, and some of those have timelines that can take up to a couple of years to be fulfilled. We have a system now that allows us to track every utterance, every promise and every commitment made, and we were halfway through developing some draft reports when all of that was just wiped out, based on the argument from the new members that they didn't know anything about it, so they weren't going to deal with it.

We want to bring in some changes so that no government can ever do that again when it comes to the oversight capacity of public accounts to hold the government of the day to account.

Those are the two major items.

● (1255)

The Chair: Could you try to urge people to do that quickly during the break time? Then we could do it on the 21st of April, maybe.

Mr. David Christopherson: All right. As fortune would have it, I've been tasked with bringing back the recommendations to the committee, so I'll get on that post-haste and see if I can meet that deadline.

The Chair: You can table them with the clerk so we have the 48 hours, and then...

Mr. David Christopherson: We're on it, Chair.

The Chair: Thanks.

Is there anything else for the good of the nation?

That was a good meeting. The meeting is now adjourned.

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