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# Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

EVIDENCE

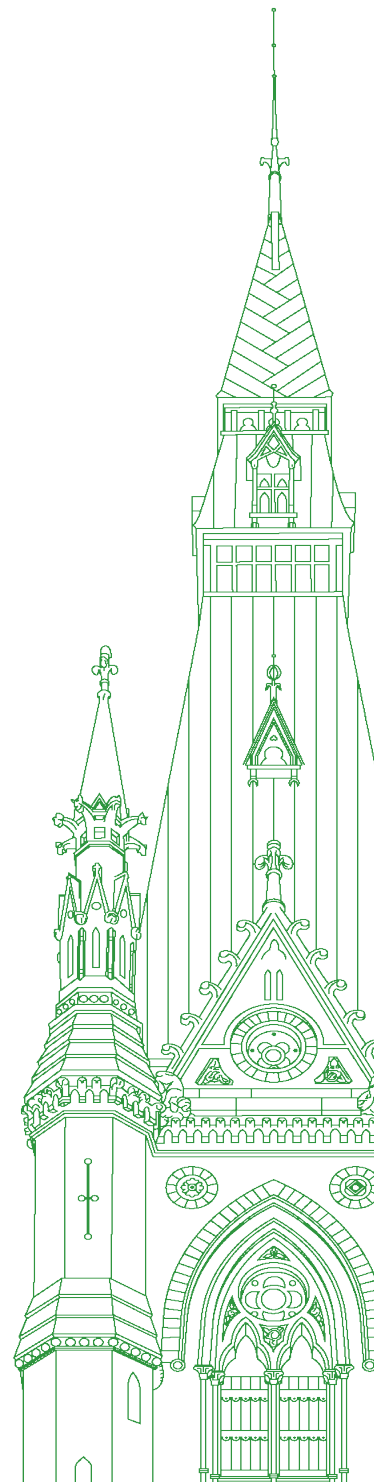
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Thursday, March 12, 2020

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Chair: Ms. Ruby Sahota





## Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

Thursday, March 12, 2020

• (1100)

[*English*]

**The Chair (Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.)):** Good morning, everyone. Welcome to the eighth meeting of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

I'd like to welcome those who are before us today: our chief electoral officer, Mr. Perrault; the deputy chief electoral officer, electoral events and innovation; and the deputy chief electoral officer, internal services.

Thank you, all of you, for being here today. We are meeting on the supplementary estimates. We'll start with a 10-minute statement and then continue on into our questioning rounds.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault (Chief Electoral Officer, Elections Canada):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

I am pleased to be before the committee for the first time during the 43rd Parliament.

Today, the committee is studying Elections Canada's 2019-2020 supplementary estimates (B). These estimates are related to the implementation of Bill C-50 and Bill C-76, which were passed during the previous Parliament.

This is also an opportunity for me to talk about the conduct of the general election and current priorities for the agency.

It is important to point out that my office is funded by two separate authorities: an annual voted appropriation and an ongoing statutory authority. The annual appropriation covers the salaries of all indeterminate positions at Elections Canada and at the Office of the Commissioner of Canada Elections.

The statutory authority covers all other expenditures, including administrative expenses, such as office space and IT infrastructure, and the cost related to the preparation and conduct of an election. The statutory authority is important both to the independence of my office and to its ability to conduct electoral events that may occur at any time. Planned spending under the statutory authority is included in the estimates for reasons of transparency.

The supplementary estimates (B) for 2019-2020 include an increase of \$2.3 million for the implementation of Bill C-50 and Bill C-76. While most of the changes required by those two bills can be administered with existing resources, the agency needs additional capacity for the administration of the new political financing

rules, the register of future electors and the administrative monetary penalties regime of the Commissioner of Canada Elections.

In addition, the supplementary estimates provide for a transfer of \$2 million from the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions to the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer for the transfer of the Commissioner of Canada Elections in Bill C-76.

On February 18, my report on the 43rd general election was tabled in the House of Commons. This report, which is the first in a series of three post-election reports, provides a factual description of how the election was administered and identifies issues that I think require further analysis.

While not without its challenges—and I will come back to this in a moment—the administration of the election was overall a success. In particular, the quality of the data in the national register of electors allowed for the most complete and accurate preliminary lists of electors for any federal election on record.

The quality of the lists impacts the overall delivery of the election. It ensures, first, that electors are assigned to the right polling location, second, that they receive the basic information they need on their voter information card and, third, that candidates and parties have reliable data for their campaigns.

Another positive aspect of the election was the conduct of the advance polls. You may recall that this was a major challenge in 2015, when voters experienced significant and systemic lineups across the country. This was the result of an ongoing trend, as electors have been increasingly opting to vote at advance polls.

Important steps were taken in 2019 to address this problem, including a streamlining of procedures at advance polls, a 25% increase in the number of advance polling divisions and a legislated 50% increase of service hours for each of the four advance polling days. No major lineups were reported in 2019, despite an increase in voter participation of 1.2 million voters, or 32%, at those polls.

A third area worth mentioning relates to cybersecurity and disinformation, which had been top of mind in preparing for the election. However, we experienced no cybersecurity threats of significance beyond those faced daily by any federal government organization.

Elections Canada also monitored social and traditional media for inaccurate information about the electoral process, and on some occasions contacted social media platforms or websites to bring inaccurate information or occasionally even inauthentic accounts to their attention. None of these instances were concerning in terms of their scope.

• (1105)

That said, I believe that the measures we took concerning cybersecurity and disinformation were important to protect the electoral process and reassure Canadians.

[English]

While the election went well overall as I indicated earlier, we did encounter a number of challenges. The delivery of a federal election is a major logistical event that relies on a very large temporary workforce. For this election, returning officers aimed at recruiting some 250,000 poll workers but were able to recruit only 214,000. They also faced problems as over 10,000 of these, having been recruited and trained, did not show up for work, which was a marked increase in the numbers from previous elections. In a number of locations, this resulted in polling locations not being opened on time. I'll come back to this in my next report, my retrospective report on the election. The issue of recruitment and retention is a priority for us as we prepare for the next election, but in the longer term, we will also need to look at ways to operate with a reduced workforce.

A second challenge for the election was the fact that polling day and a number of advance polling days coincided with Jewish high holy days. I made it a priority for returning officers to engage with the Jewish community in their ridings and to offer alternative options to vote either at an Elections Canada local office, at the returning office, or at special voting kiosks set up within the community at times and locations that were convenient for those members of the community. I intend to do some consultations this spring on the issue of conflicts between religious holidays and a fixed election date. This may result in recommendations to Parliament in the fall to try to avoid similar conflicts moving forward or, at the very least, to make sure they are resolved earlier in the electoral cycle.

Finally, there were an unusual number of quite severe weather incidents during the election, in particular in Manitoba, where extensive and prolonged power outages forced evacuations in a number of communities. We provided alternative or adjusted voting options for electors from the affected communities as well as for emergency workers. We are currently looking at preparing ourselves for more frequent weather-related events so that we can quickly respond to them.

As we are closing the general election, we are taking time to analyze these and a number of other aspects of the election. Our findings will be included in a second post-election report, which I hope to publish in September, early in the fall. This retrospective report will provide an analysis of the administration of the election in-

formed by a variety of data, including stakeholder feedback and public opinion research.

As part of my statutory mandate, a third and final report will be provided to the Speaker later in the fall, which will provide recommendations for improvements to the Canada Elections Act. I note that these reports are referred automatically to this committee for review. In that context, next month I will be releasing three discussion papers to engage experts and stakeholders, including political parties. The papers will address various aspects of the regime governing political communications in a federal election, notably the rules we currently have in the Canada Elections Act, the impact of social media platforms and concerns that have been raised about the privacy rights of electors in the digital age. Discussions around those topics could lead to some of the recommendations in my report.

As the general election resulted in a minority Parliament, our immediate priority is to ensure that the agency is positioned to deliver an election that could occur at any time. At a minimum, this means revising contracts, replenishing supplies and engaging with return officers so that contingency plans are in place.

In the current context, it also means engaging with government experts on the possible impacts of COVID-19—and we are doing that—on an election and developing some mitigation strategies. We will also be looking at improvements to our services and systems, but the extent of the changes will of course depend on the timing of the next general election.

Madam Chair, I look forward to working with this committee, and I'm happy to answer any questions the members may have.

• (1110)

**The Chair:** We will start our six-minute rounds.

Mr. Richards.

**Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC):** Thank you.

In your comments you noted cybersecurity and misinformation. You mentioned that you have experienced no cybersecurity threats of significance beyond those faced daily by any federal government organization. You also recently put out a report that indicated the same. I know this was something we heard a lot about from the previous minister in the previous Liberal government prior to the last election. There was a lot of concern about whether there would be foreign influence and that Russia and places like that would be trying to influence our elections. This was something they seemed to be quite concerned about. You indicated that you took some measures concerning cybersecurity that you think were important in protecting the process.

You're saying you didn't experience any threats. Can you give us examples of how those measures actually prevented that, or do you think it was just that nobody made the effort to try to interfere in our elections from outside of Canada?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** If you look at our systems, in the lead-up to the last election we had.... We were in a situation after 2015 where we had to renew a number of key elements of our IT infrastructure, in particular our data centre. We needed a new data centre, so we built a much more secure data centre. We worked with Communications Security Establishment Canada. We ensured that we had very high levels of protection.

Every department and every agency that has infrastructure in Canada receives, on a daily basis, hundreds of thousands of attacks of a generic nature. This was also the case during the election, as it is every day. There was nothing specific.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** What you're saying is that you didn't see anything that was outside of what would ordinarily be experienced in a government department on a regular day, week, month or whatever.

I guess what I'm trying to determine is that there were all of these.... We seemed to get a lot from the Liberal government in the last few years leading up to the election that there were going to be all of these threats from outside of Canada—all these foreign threats—that would be impacting our election in some way. What I think I'm hearing from you is that that didn't materialize. You put measures in place.

You're not telling me that you saw anything outside of the ordinary. Is that what you're saying, that as far as you can tell, there was no attempt by Russians or other foreign countries to try to interfere in our elections?

• (1115)

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** As far as I can tell, that is the case.

My role is to protect Elections Canada's infrastructure. The government has a different mandate, a much broader mandate, and they do their own things.

From my point of view, there was nothing that we detected.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** I appreciate that.

In terms of foreign influence and interference in our elections, one of the things I kept trying to point out was that maybe we needed to look a bit at how foreign money was coming in to third parties and how that was allowing foreign influence in our elections. There was certainly some talk in 2015 that there were organizations that claimed they changed the results of the election with money from outside of Canada. In the 2019 election, obviously there were some new rules put in place around third parties and their funding.

Are you able to give us any indication as to whether that prevented foreign money from coming in and influencing the election, whether it be in the pre-writ period, or in what I call the "pre-pre-writ" period, or even during the writ period? Tell us whether you think that foreign money was still able to be utilized by these organizations to influence our elections or whether you think that was completely prevented.

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** I can't speak to the pre-pre-writ period, but for the period for which there was reporting, we are currently reviewing the reports. There were 147 third parties that were registered. There may be more that needed to register, and we're following up on that. Most of the reports have been filed. If you go on our

website, you will see.... I think it's about 115 of the reports that are currently filed, and we will be doing a review of that.

I can say that the rules around foreign funding of third parties have been reinforced and clarified. I also said, when we examined Bill C-76 in the last Parliament, that the regime was reinforced considerably but was not an airtight regime. The regime does not trace the money back to individual contributors. That is the choice of Parliament. There are charter issues around going into a much tighter regime, and—

**Mr. Blake Richards:** I've been told I only have a very limited amount of time left. I think I basically have what I needed in terms of that. Obviously you're right. Parliament does have to consider whether that's still occurring or not.

During the last election, you chose to pay some people you called "social media influencers", and that was I guess to try to promote the 2019 election. There was a bit of an uproar about that and you pulled back on that. It was, I think, because there was some discovery that maybe with at least one of those individuals, there had been some partisan activities that had taken place.

Can you tell us a little more about the criteria for choosing those influencers, whether those were Elections Canada employees and whether you would consider doing that kind of initiative again?

**The Chair:** You have five seconds.

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** I'll start with the last point, which is I think the bottom line—

**The Chair:** There's no further time.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Does he not have time to answer?

**The Chair:** There's no further time.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.):** Somebody else can pick up on it.

**The Chair:** Somebody else can definitely pick up on it, and I'm sure there is an answer to it.

Mr. Gerretsen.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'll try not to ask you a question when you have no time to respond. I want to start by saying first that what you did in Elections Canada to encourage voting in educational institutions, post-secondary institutions, was hugely successful, at least in my riding of Kingston, where we have Queen's University.

What we saw were record numbers, at least from our anecdotal perspective, of individuals going out and voting and also having the opportunity to vote back in their home ridings so easily. I have a number of students from Alberta, for example, who had the opportunity at Queen's University to vote in their home ridings. There was a very easy way to do it, rather than a complicated process.

That was very much appreciated, and I want to applaud you on that work.

I do want to ask about election preparedness. You said that you're ready, given a minority government. I have to be completely honest with you, in that I don't know how ready we were this year.

When the writ dropped, there were some stories about people showing up the next day and saying they wanted to vote by special ballot and the returning officers saying, sorry, they were not ready for that yet. Can you comment on that at all?

• (1120)

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** I'd like to find out a bit more about that.

We had the offices open on the first of September to be prepared—because we had a fixed-date election—for any time when the writs would be dropped, and we knew it would be after September 1.

I know that in some ridings we had issues with the installment of the technology with the telephony in terms of a few days of delay. I'm not aware of that in your riding, but I will follow up on it.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** I'd encourage you to do some exit interviews with your returning officers, maybe, to find that out, because it's not just one riding or another. Also, I'm not even referring to my riding. I'm referring to what I've heard.

Another interesting thing that I found personally—and this was in my riding—is that the returning officer in my riding was extremely capable and did an excellent job. I just don't know if they had the resources that they needed in time, but I've also heard about this in other ridings.

For example, on the day the writ was issued, I went to file as a candidate and was told that they were not ready for anybody to file as a candidate. I know that this happened in other ridings too. We had to wait about five or six days. Where this poses a problem is that we can spend money in the pre-writ period through our EDAs, our electoral district associations, and that's properly recorded. We can spend money as a candidate during the writ period, and that's separate, but there's this four- or five-day window between them, where, technically speaking—and you can correct me if I'm wrong—we shouldn't have been spending money.

First of all, is that correct?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** Let me clarify that.

You are entitled to spend money prior to being registered. You will have been deemed to have been a candidate, going back to when—

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** There is provision for that. Okay. Great.

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** There is no stoppage of spending.

I would also say that we did—and I'm sorry to hear that you were not able to file immediately, because that's our goal—introduce a novelty in this election, which was not as well received, I think, the link—

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** Online...? I'm sorry to interrupt, but I did try the online link. I was set to go. We were ready to hit the click button and then were told, “No, we don't have your special code that you need to enter.” We said that was fine, that we would come and do it in person. When we went to do it in person, they said, “No, we're not ready for you to do this in person yet.”

Again, I want to stress that I would not be saying this if it was just my riding. I've heard this from multiple ridings.

I guess there's a bigger question here. I have two minutes and I want to give you time to answer this. There was a majority government. We knew four years in advance exactly when the election date was going to be. This is a minority Parliament now. We don't know.... The election could be called this afternoon, for all we know, but hopefully not, for our sake and yours. If it is called, how can you reassure Parliament that you're ready to go and all the systems are in place? I'd like to give you the remaining minute and a half to answer that.

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** I'll have to be honest with you. In a snap election, the start will not be as smooth as an election that is planned four years in advance.

We are getting feedback from returning officers. We're trying to do the analysis of how we can improve the process, but we have to expect that in any snap election, it takes.... Returning officers first of all have to sign a lease, and we have to set up the office. There will be a few days in a snap election when the physical office is not set up. That's a standard.

However, one of our goals is to improve the online services so that campaigns do not have to rely on face-to-face interaction. If they want to file early, they can do that. If they want to apply online for a special ballot, they can do that. The virtual service offering is really important in those first few days when returning offices are being set up, but the reality is that in a snap election it does take a few days. Our goal I think is 48 hours for all offices to be set up—

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** I have 30 seconds remaining. Have you done or will you do any kinds of exit interviews with returning officers to discover best practices and to learn?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** Every returning officer has written to us a post-election report on their experience, positive and negative. That's critical to us. We have a summary of that and we can share it if you're interested.

We were planning, until yesterday, to have face-to-face meetings with all returning officers in April, but with the current COVID-19 situation we've decided to cancel those. We'll be having teleconferencing and video calls. We've had to adjust, but we have reports from every returning officer.

● (1125)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Madame Normandin. Welcome to the committee as well.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Christine Normandin (Saint-Jean, BQ):** Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I would like to begin with questions on party funding. An article published in *La Presse* on April 1, 2019, unless I am mistaken, talked about the possibility for a minor to fund a political party. The article reminded readers that the situation is different in Quebec, where only adults can donate to a party.

The Bloc Québécois has censured itself, in a way, by accepting only donations from people aged 16 and over, as that is the minimum age for acquiring a party membership card.

I would like to hear your comments on the possibility of amending the federal legislation to avoid minors being able to participate in the funding of a political party, as we can assume that this could lead to the practice of using other people's names in some cases.

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** I don't have a definitive stand on that issue, but I am certainly not against the legislation being reviewed in that respect. Donations can be a way for young people under the age of 18 to participate in the democratic process, as in the case of membership cards that can be obtained starting at the age of 16. Care must simply be taken not to set an age that is too high.

Furthermore, as you say, we must avoid people using other people's names. If someone's age seems to be implausible at first glance, it will give rise to suspicion that could lead to an investigation by the elections commissioner.

**Ms. Christine Normandin:** To your knowledge, have there been cases where very young people were investigated? Do you have any statistics on that?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** I don't have any statistics, but I don't recall any investigations that led to penalties in cases where young people were using other people's names.

I remember the case of a minister whose 16-year-old son made a political contribution, which was reported in the newspapers. That situation is not unusual because there are indeed 16-year-old donors, but I am not aware of any relevant investigations.

**Ms. Christine Normandin:** My next question is also about public funding. We know that the public funding system that provided subsidies to parties in proportion to the number of votes they had received has been abolished. Do you occasionally conduct studies on the potential cost of reinstating that public funding system for parties?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** It would be fairly easy to do that, but the result would depend on the chosen variables and conditions, which may not be the same as those used in the past.

A while ago, we published a study on the impact of various political funding reforms from 2004 to 2014—there were several during that period—including the system of quarterly allowances you are referring to. We also analyzed the consequences of those changes on the party's finances. All that is available on our website.

**Ms. Christine Normandin:** I will keep to the issue of public funding for parties. I may then move on to another topic.

We see that the vote tends to be increasingly fragmented. We are currently in a context of a minority government, and the parties are splitting votes quite a bit.

As we know that a candidate must obtain 10% of the vote in their riding to be entitled to a reimbursement, would it be a good idea to carry out a study on voting trends—in order words, on the way the vote manifests and the consequences of that minimum threshold of 10% of votes on the party's funding? Should that be reviewed and those requirements adjusted based on the type of electorate?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** My role consists in providing basic data, and it is up to parliamentarians to examine the issue and determine the correct threshold.

That said, I intend to prepare a cyclical report in order to publish much more data on political funding, among other things, and on trends. We have to leave it to parliamentarians and others to study that data and draw conclusions from it that would help determine whether the current reimbursement ceilings or thresholds are too low or too high and whether they should be reviewed.

I think those conversations can only be held based on evidence.

**Ms. Christine Normandin:** I will continue on the same topic.

Correct me if I am wrong, but, to obtain a reimbursement on a national level, a party must have secured at least 5%—it may be 2%, I'm not sure—of votes in all the ridings in which it ran a candidate.

In addition to the vote fragmentation, there seems to be some sort of vote regionalization, where regions like the prairies vote mostly Conservative. In those conditions, it seems to be more difficult for a party to reach that threshold in all ridings in which it runs candidates.

On the one hand, do you believe that could also be subject to review? On the other hand, do you have any figures related to that trend?

● (1130)

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** I could pull out figures and we could look at them because we have the voting results. Without getting into financial reports, we can know which parties reached those thresholds.

The threshold is 2% nationally—so 2% of the overall vote or 2% in ridings in which a party ran a candidate. In the case of the Bloc Québécois, the threshold of 5% is likely more relevant. That threshold has been in place for a very long time. The data will enable us to see whether, compared with previous elections, there has been an evolution in terms of parties' eligibility to reimbursements.

**Ms. Christine Normandin:** Thank you, Mr. Perrault.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Perrault.

There's not very much time left, 10 seconds.

We'll go to Ms. Blaney.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP):** Thank you, Chair.

I thank you all so much for being here today.

You talked in your report about Manitoba. I know that in the election of 2019, the Interlake region within the riding of Churchill—Keewatinook Aski in Manitoba had to be evacuated due to a severe snowstorm that hit a lot of communities. The storm impacted largely indigenous communities. As the evacuations took place during early voting, hundreds of voters were not back in their home communities on election day, which meant many first nations were not able to vote. Really, to me, that means they were disenfranchised.

I'm just wondering how Elections Canada has moved with this. Has there been any internal investigation done on what went wrong leading up to this election day in that particular area?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** I'll say a couple of things. If you look back at what happened in Manitoba, what was unique in this election compared with others in the past—because there have been floods in Manitoba, and there have been evacuations in the past—typically the evacuation was mandatory. This meant that the entire community was brought into, typically, Winnipeg at a single location. What we would do in those cases was essentially transfer the polling place to that location, and we had the entire community. We had the poll workers and the voters.

What was extremely challenging in this election is that the evacuation was not mandatory. Some people left; some people stayed. That was true of voters, and that was true of poll workers. Those who left did not all go to a single location. They were spread out around the Winnipeg area, not in a single location, so we could not use the traditional approach. Also, in some cases, the power was not back on, even on polling day, so it was a prolonged period.

We had a central megapoll in Convocation Hall in Winnipeg for all of the displaced voters, but they had to travel there. There was transportation organized. We also opened the polls in the evacuated communities for the people who stayed behind. Where there was no power, we had to have reduced hours because it was getting dark, there were security concerns and we needed to coordinate the process.

I think, in these very difficult circumstances, we did quite well. If you look at the turnout, there was a small dip in turnout in the communities. Churchill was the most affected. There was an 11% dip,

but for the others, we're talking about 3%, which is in line in some cases with what you see in other provinces, and it depends on which province.

I think there was tremendous work done at the local levels. Returning officers shared their staff. They coordinated their work. I'm extremely satisfied with the work that was done.

Looking forward, we had three major weather incidents during the election, and we need to plan for more of that. We had one out east when we tried to open the polls, the RO offices. We had one in Montreal on polling day, and we had Manitoba. This is a significant challenge on the organization and on the workforce, because when these things happen, you lose not just the voters but the workforce as well.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** There was also a record that Elections Canada officials from Ottawa were making decisions and not really listening to the people who were there locally. I'm just wondering how you figure out that process to make sure, because I think this is really important when looking at rural and remote communities, even if they are in a more urbanized Winnipeg area. There are specific things that local people would know and it doesn't sound like the communications.... I'm just wondering. What are you doing to look into improving that communication line?

• (1135)

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** I can assure you that I was on the phone with each returning officer of the affected communities and their teams every day, and sometimes twice a day—every day during the storm period—to understand exactly what the situation was and the extent of the impact on their operations and on their teams. We also had the returning officers from other neighbouring ridings who were not necessarily affected but who were on the calls to help and share polling locations and staff. This happened on a daily basis all the way from the beginning of the storm during the advance polls to the polling day.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** You said transportation was left out after voting. You said earlier that it was not as organized because of the nature of this particular issue. I understand it wasn't mandatory but I'm sure Elections Canada didn't want to decide for people how to make decisions about their safety and well-being.

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** Of course.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** I'm just wondering. How did you coordinate to make sure that these people actually had access to the transportation? I would like to hear more on that.



**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** I'll let my colleague Michel add to my comments, but just to come back, of course, in the past when the evacuation was mandatory it was not mandatory by Elections Canada. It was the local authorities that created a mandatory evacuation. In this case, there was a provincial state-of-emergency but the evacuations were not mandatory, so we had a fluid situation with people basically going everywhere.

Also, through our connections with the Government of Canada security organizations, the RCMP and the GOC network, we had some intelligence on the situation of the power, on the situations on the ground. We had a network of partners that helped us understand exactly what the situation was.

On the transport, Michel, perhaps you have information, but we can come back to this with more information.

**Mr. Michel Roussel (Deputy Chief Electoral Officer, Electoral Events and Innovation, Elections Canada):** It was arranged by the Red Cross in Winnipeg. In the various locations where we knew there were evacuees, we made arrangements with the Red Cross to provide transportation a number of times during election day to take them to Convocation Hall to vote.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Blaney.

Mr. Brassard.

**Mr. John Brassard (Barrie—Innisfil, CPC):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'm going to pick up where Mr. Richards left off with Mr. Perrault. I'm going to ask a straightforward question. Would you agree with me that Elections Canada is non-partisan in nature and an independent body of Parliament?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** That is the overriding consideration, and absolutely at all times we need to maintain the reality and perception of our non-partisan nature.

**Mr. John Brassard:** How did we get to the point where Elections Canada paid \$650,000 to social media influencers who were proven to act in a partisan nature from previous posts that they made on social media? Who made the decision to engage in that type of activity within Elections Canada, and why was there no vetting done of these influencers?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** There are a number of elements here. I think I need to step back a bit to describe what the issue was that we were trying to resolve. In 2015, we had what I call a 30% gap in youth registration. There were 72% of first-time voters, aged 18 to 24, who were registered. This means that 28% did not get a voter information card, which gives them basic information about where and when to vote. That is a big challenge and I think it's critical for us to make sure that all Canadian voters have that basic information. In the lead-up to this election, there was discussion on how to address this and we decided to have a pre-writ campaign, a segment of which was going to involve the use of those influencers.

**Mr. John Brassard:** How are these influencers vetted? That's my question. I know there was a gap and I know that the mandate of Elections Canada is to engage Canadians. I get that. The \$650,000 was spent on these social media influencers who clearly had a partisan bias in their history. My question is this: Who made the decision and why weren't they vetted?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** We did work with a private ad company that provided—

**Mr. John Brassard:** What was the name of the ad company?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** I think it's Adcart but I want to make sure.

Ultimately, I'm accountable for that. The ad company is not accountable. We did ask them to clearly and carefully vet all the influencers and I asked my team to do the same. Obviously, that vetting did not perform to my satisfaction.

• (1140)

**Mr. John Brassard:** Was the ad company paid?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** We did not pay \$200,000 to the ad company that would otherwise have been paid. They agreed not to ask for that money in their own fees. The only thing that was paid were out-of-pocket expenses for the production and mostly the money given to the influencers themselves.

**Mr. John Brassard:** What was the name of the ad company again?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** Ultimately, it's my accountability.

**Mr. John Brassard:** Right. Could you provide that to the committee?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** I can provide it to the committee.

**Mr. John Brassard:** Where are they based?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** I'll provide that, but it is my accountability; it's not their accountability.

**Mr. John Brassard:** Would you consider doing this type of campaign again?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** I want to be clear on that. This is not part of our playbook moving forward. We have no plans. In fact, I do plan not to have that moving forward.

**Mr. John Brassard:** The second question I want to ask is related to a fundraising event in New York City with the now Minister of Indigenous Services, Marc Miller. It happened on October 10, 2019. My understanding is that he was in New York City for business and that there was a fundraiser for an election campaign. However, in his disclosure to Elections Canada, there's no mention of any contributions made from any Canadian living in New York, nor any contributions over \$200.

Does this seem odd to you?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** His return is being audited as we speak. If there's an anomaly, as in any case when we see something that warrants the commissioner's attention, we involve the commissioner.

**Mr. John Brassard:** Just to confirm, his return is being audited at this point. Is that correct?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** My answer is a generic one because I do not comment on specific cases. Whenever we see something that warrants review that goes beyond the nature of an audit, then it's the role of the commissioner. I should mention that he also, on his own initiative of course, is aware sometimes of circumstances or receives complaints and he will decide whether an investigation is warranted. It's his decision, not mine.

**Mr. John Brassard:** Thank you.

Madam Chair, I am asking that the commissioner table to the committee the name of the ad company, where they're located and exactly how much they were paid.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Mr. Alghabra.

**Hon. Omar Alghabra (Mississauga Centre, Lib.):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you all.

Mr. Perrault, good to see you. Thank you for being here. I want to thank you and your entire team across the country. Elections Canada is the guardian of democracy, and it's very important that you continue to maintain public confidence in what you're doing. We're all grateful for the work you do.

I want to give you the opportunity to talk about what happened in the last election. There was an issue of election day falling on a Jewish holiday. I'd like to give you the opportunity to explain what happened and also discuss, moving forward, what your plans are in dealing with the potential conflict of holidays, especially in our increasingly multicultural country.

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** As we said earlier, this was a fixed-date election with a majority government, so we had many years to plan. Of course, when you have those years to plan, you take advantage of that.

In the summer leading up to the election—so in the summer of 2018—we considered the situation of the conflict with Jewish holidays. We had some conversations with members of the Jewish community. Our impression there, at that point, was that having some accommodation for observant members of the Jewish community would be satisfactory.

Based on that—and I'll come back to that in a moment—we began a number of planning exercises that were important for the population as a whole. We began having conversations with school boards to have PD days to allow access to schools, which are accessible, and to have young workers, who are typically good workers. We examined the polling divisions and used some technology to do some proximity analysis in terms of potential polling locations. The entire planning of the election was based from that point on—basically from September 2018—on a fixed date of October 21.

In the spring of 2019, I started receiving representations that there should be a move of the date, that it would be preferable—that, in fact, it would be necessary—for some voters, and particularly one potential candidate, to have a different voting day.

At that point, I made what I consider a very difficult decision: to maintain my recommendations, to basically not recommend to the

Governor General a change of polling day, but to have a very ambitious action plan for accommodating observant Jewish electors. In 54 ridings where there was a 1% Jewish population, we engaged with the representatives of the Jewish community. We offered a range of services, and they determined for their community what was most suitable to them.

I can say, looking at the turnout, that there was a small downward variation, but not a major variation. It was a 2% or 3%, sometimes 4%, variation in the top 10 ridings where there was an important Jewish community.

I think the way forward is that we need to do a better job at engaging earlier. If we're going to have a fixed-date election, we need to clarify these issues well in advance. The law currently provides that I can make a recommendation to the Governor General until, I believe, some time in August—August 5 or something like that. That is much too late in the calendar, so we will need to revisit that. We need to do a better job of consulting, but we need a process that provides certainty for everybody a year out from the election.

• (1145)

**Hon. Omar Alghabra:** Thank you, Mr. Perrault.

The last question I have is also.... I'd like to give you an opportunity to talk about the confusion that happened towards the election day about NGOs advocating for causes or issues that they care about and whether that would have been considered an election interference or expense or not.

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** It was a bit of a unique circumstance. There was confusion as we got close to the issue of the writ. During the pre-writ period, there was confusion on the rules governing third parties. This was what I would call second-hand confusion in the sense that, because of the new rules on third party expenses other than advertising—especially for the pre-writ period but also the new rules during the writ period—we did a fair amount of outreach and information to alert third parties, which can be anybody, individuals or groups, about the new rules and the fact that they need to be sure to comply with the new requirements.

Through those training and awareness sessions, some people became aware—through second-hand confusion—of the rules, and the confusion that arose concerned pre-existing rules, rules that have been in place for 20 years that have not changed regarding issue advertising. There was this impression that nobody could talk about the environment or a particular issue without running afoul of the legislation.

**The Chair:** Mr. Duncan.

**Mr. Eric Duncan (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry, CPC):** Thank you very much.

As per usual, I have about 10 questions. I won't get through all of them today, I know, but....

My previous experience before being a member was being a campaign manager three times at the federal level and at the provincial level, so some of my questions are a little more technical. I know that we're meeting later this month, and I have a full list to go over with you on some things.

I want to build a little on the social media influence and your comments on voter registration and getting people there. I agree with the initiative or the goal. I think that the way of going about it—obviously, you pulled back—wasn't the best way.

From a technical perspective, what work do you do with post-secondary institutions in advance? Are there privacy rights issues that you have in terms of going to, for example, Carleton University, where I went? Do you go to the residence organization or association and say, "Give us a list two weeks before the writ drops of the people who are currently in this building", or does privacy mean that they can't give you that information? Is that an issue? There are seniors homes—and it goes on and on—where this is an opportunity. Can you outline what that is?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** Privacy rules—typically provincial privacy rules—restrict the ability of institutions, be they seniors homes, be they universities, to give us information about their communities, their students or their residents in some cases.

We do have our own data from the voters list of course, and we do target revision in seniors homes. On campuses it's a bit different. On campus, students sometimes live in residence and sometimes they live in the city. In the city they may be in their home riding or they may be in another riding. It's a much more fluid—

**Mr. Eric Duncan:** [*Inaudible—Editor*] to vote in that case.

Just knowing the limited amount of time, you don't go to a university residence and ask to be given their list, or you don't have the power to do that.

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** No, we don't.

**Mr. Eric Duncan:** Could there be something, a recommendation or a willingness you would like to have? Wouldn't that eliminate the problem of your having to go door to door, if we could get through the privacy issues, by just asking if they could provide a list at certain times?

If the legislation says you have the right to do this for electoral purposes, would that not solve a lot of time and work and effort?

• (1150)

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** It may create other issues, because the provincial legislation would bind the authorities. The federal one, if it's written properly, would override the provincial ones, but in practice this may cause confusion and concern.

I'm not closed to it. We can look at that. Again, the issue of youth registration is an important one. We've made some good progress. We've gone from 72% to 78%, which is significant. We do have polling places in university residences, and that works well. The issue is more about the others who are not in residence.

**Mr. Eric Duncan:** That's fair.

Also I will say that I equate the exact same challenge of university residences to seniors homes as well. It's a little different in terms of how to get those lists, and I'll comment on that further.

What's your relationship with the provinces? Do you have any form of relationship whatsoever, in any way, with Elections Ontario, Élections Québec, Elections B.C.?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** Absolutely. We have ongoing discussions with each of the electoral management bodies. We've created a secretariat to collaborate more closely.

**Mr. Eric Duncan:** Do you share any data, not just voter statistics per se, but again, the national list of electors? Does that go back and forth? Is there tight cohesion with that?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** There is. It varies from province to province. There are some slight variations, but for the most part, yes, we do receive and give data on the voters from the national register of electors.

**Mr. Eric Duncan:** On cybersecurity, you mentioned that there weren't many issues. That's good. Part of the challenge is... I'm wondering if it's going to be in your report. In my understanding the Ontario election in 2018 used more technology. They had computers at voting stations. They used voting tabulators. You had done a trial with that, and I believe you pulled back on going further with that because of cybersecurity concerns.

Can you elaborate a little on that? Can you confirm that the experiment or that aspect will be included in your report on why it didn't work and what we might need to do to get there to try that going forward?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** I'm happy to talk about it, but it won't be in my report. It isn't in my report because we never even made it to the pilot, which is why I didn't use it in the election.

The solution, which was an electronic poll book, not for tabulation but for processing the voters, was not ready to be used, partly for security reasons but for other reasons as well, in pilots, in by-elections in the year leading up to the election. That being the case, I was not prepared, not having tested it, to deploy it in a general election.

Moving forward...and again, in a minority there is a limit to what we can do, but we will need to pursue that avenue, do some by-elections and see how we can leverage that to reduce the footprint of the workforce.

**Mr. Eric Duncan:** Again, in our meeting I may be advocating to include some sort of aspect on that, because it is an important point going forward for future elections, those challenges and how it didn't get there.

I'll just note that in Ontario tens of thousands, I will say, of polling sites used this technology, I don't think without issue, yet at the federal level it couldn't even get to a pilot, so if you had concerns and did not get to a pilot, how did Elections Ontario have thousands of these in use in the province in June 2018?

Again, that may speak to some differences they have in what they consider cybersecurity, but I do think it might be something to pick up on.

**The Chair:** We're over time at this point, though.

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** That's my fault, sorry.

**The Chair:** Thank you. They were good questions.

Go ahead, Mr. Turnbull.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.):** Thank you.

Mr. Perrault, I just want to say thank you for being here and for the work that you do. To echo my colleague, Mr. Alghabra, we really appreciate the work you do.

So far in your answers I've heard a real commitment to constant improvement, which I really appreciate. I have three questions. Let's see if we can get through all of them, but I'll definitely probably get to ask two.

Related to contingency planning, I know there were extreme weather events. In Ontario we actually had the potential for a teachers' strike leading up to the election, which would have caused quite a bit of reshuffling to identify additional sites for polling stations, etc. For me these were top of mind. I found the returning officer in Whitby, in my riding, to be incredibly responsive to the concerns we had and very communicative in terms of identifying potential alternative sites.

With coronavirus being a major topic of discussion right now and a cause for concern, and the possibility at any time of a snap election, I wonder if you could go a little more in depth and tell us about any situational analysis or scenario building that you do and how you come up with mitigation strategies specific to the kinds of things we might anticipate, such as the outbreak of a virus, for example.

• (1155)

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** A federal election is a very large undertaking, and you can't easily pivot on a dime. You referred to the strike. We had issued voter information cards all across Ontario when the strike emerged, and we came very close to having to reissue three million VICs in the Toronto area. I was personally calling all the schools and school boards to make sure we had the.... It's very hard to pivot.

There is provision in the legislation for cancelling an election, which is the last thing we want to do. In Manitoba we had to consider that. The question is whether or not we can offer voting services to Canadians in a particular electoral district. We go out of our way and we adapt the rules, which I can do under legislation, to adjust the service offering.

Right now we have two tasks. One is beginning to look at how we could better adjust to weather incidents. I think what we did in this election—for a range of reasons, not just weather incidents—

was to use special ballot kiosks for the Jewish communities but also in Manitoba for the line workers and the emergency workers. We used special ballots to create kiosks where they could vote out of riding.

We'll need to explore how we can better prepare for that. One of the challenges is the workforce. In Manitoba we had to fly our headquarters staff into Manitoba because there was nobody left on the ground to work at those polls. We were literally pulling people from the floors in Gatineau and putting them on flights to Manitoba, so there's a limit to what we can do.

In terms of the virus, we are in contact with health authorities. I know that next week, for example, in France they're having municipal elections. They've decided to go forward. They will provide some hand sanitizer and they're asking their voters to bring their own pencils and pens to vote, so we'll examine how that works.

One of the questions I have is—and I don't have the answer yet—does it make sense for Elections Canada to procure a whole lot of hand sanitizer at a time when it could be better used in hospitals or other places in the country? Is it for me to stockpile masks or hand sanitizer, or should it not be for the government? We have to have those discussions and decide what the best way forward is.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** Thank you for that answer.

One other thing that you mentioned and that I saw in your report was that there was a larger proportion of workers who were recruited and who did not show up—between 5% and 15% as I understand it. I think you made a comment about maybe operating with fewer people in the future. I don't know if that's the overall strategy for how to move forward, or whether it's just increasing engagement and ensuring that people show up.

Could you tell us a little about what you plan to do to address that gap, which is probably a major concern for you?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** It is a major concern and the answer would be both.

We need to look at our recruitment strategy. There were possibly—and again, we'll do the analysis for the next report—a lot of unintended consequences. For this election, returning officers were allowed to hire from within neighbouring districts. We know anecdotally—and we'll get some data on this—that some people signed up to work in two different districts and then chose to go to one at the last minute because their friend was working at the same one. We need to have systems in place that flag these issues more centrally to avoid this. These are the kinds of issues that we need to look at.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Perrault.

We'll go with Madame Normandin, for one minute please.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Christine Normandin:** I have a general question on the possibility for a voter to vote without a piece of identification if someone vouches for them.

Do you have any statistics on that? Our wallets are getting thicker every year, and we have more and more pieces of identification. Do you have any statistics that would help establish a trend in terms of the number of people who use that method to establish their identity?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** We will carry out an analysis on votes where vouching is used. I am not sure it will be ready for the next report because we are conducting several analyses on bags. Each bag must be opened and it must be checked how things went. So it is a very time consuming process.

We will have data. PricewaterhouseCoopers, which has election observers, conducted an external audit. We asked them to provide a bit more information on the use of certain pieces of identification, including the voter information card, which, at the last election, was allowed if the person provided another piece of identification. We will have a bit more information on those issues.

As for the question on vouching, I will have that information, but I cannot guarantee that it will be included in the next report.

• (1200)

**Ms. Christine Normandin:** Thank you.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Ms. Blaney.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** In my riding, hiring people for Elections Canada was really a significant challenge. I'm just wondering if in any of your reports you'll be looking at the difference between hiring in rural and remote communities as opposed to urban ones. One of the challenges was that some of our communities are smaller and have multiple challenges. There were fewer people to hire. I'm just wondering if you will be looking at that.

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** We're going to break down the numbers. We're going to slice it and dice it and see by age group and look at all possible correlations. Remote communities may well be one of those. Perhaps, Michel, you have something to add to this.

We will be looking at this very closely because that was and will continue to be a major challenge.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

This ends the time that we had slotted.

Thank you, Mr. Perrault, Mr. Roussel and Mr. St-Pierre. It was lovely to have all of you before us. I know that we will meet again not too long from now. There will be regular occurrences where you will be able to advise us on the work that you are undertaking.

Thank you so much.

**The Chair:** We will move in camera for the next part of the meeting.

We will suspend while we are going in camera.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** Thank you.





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