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# Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

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Chair: Ms. Ruby Sahota





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Thursday, November 19, 2020

• (1100)

[English]

**The Chair (Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.)):** I call this meeting to order.

Good morning, everyone. Welcome to meeting number 11 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

I'd like to start the meeting by providing you with some information following the motion that was adopted in the House on Wednesday, September 23, 2020. The committee is sitting in a hybrid format, meaning that all members can participate either virtually or person. The witnesses, however, must appear virtually.

The committees' power to sit is limited by the priority use of House resources, and all questions during committee must be decided by a recorded vote, unless the committee disposes of it with unanimous consent or on division.

Finally, the committee may deliberate in camera, provided that it takes into account the potential risks of participants participating remotely.

Today's proceedings are being made available via the House of Commons website. This is a reminder that only the person speaking is being webcast and not the entirety of the committee. Because we do work past the lunch hour, I understand that we don't even take the breaks we used to sometimes when we were all physically present, so feel free if you need to take a quick water or food break. I know sometimes that's important, depending on different health conditions as well. Don't feel obligated to be on at all times when the camera's not on you.

Members and witnesses may speak, as you know, in the official language of their choice and interpretation services are available for this meeting. However, I want to emphasize—as I have stated before—that it is mandatory to wear a headset with a boom mike. These headsets have been provided by the House of Commons. If you're missing a headset, they are very quick at getting you another headset.

I understand that the headset does not plug into phones or iPads. I can understand maybe having to do that in an emergency situation, but please try your best to use the provided headset. Also, I believe an adapter can be sent over. I don't know if that is exactly the best choice, though.

Try to use your desktop or the Surface Pro that you might have, because the interpreters are having problems. I'm not just saying

this today because I feel like filling the time. I am saying it because there have been real concerns. They will refuse to interpret if you are not wearing a mike and they cannot hear you appropriately.

Our official languages, and being able to speak in both official languages, are very important. Our committee would not be able to proceed without the work of the interpreters, so let's please try to do our best to make sure we follow their guidelines and their requests, because this does make it a lot easier for them.

I want to remind you to, as always, unmute yourselves before speaking. It's not being done for you. Unmute yourselves and then put yourselves back on mute afterward so that there are no interruptions.

If any technical problems arise, please let the chair or the clerk know immediately, because we may need to suspend to ensure that everyone can participate fully.

Speak slowly and clearly.

I think that is about it, so we can start.

Today we have—

• (1105)

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP):** Madam Chair, on the point about interpretation, if I could briefly interrupt, I believe the whips' offices of the respective parties have access to information about the injury rates among our interpreters. I'm wondering if you might be able to obtain that information and table it for the committee, because members might find it informative.

It might be a nice way to encourage all members to make sure they are using a proper headset. The numbers are actually quite impressive in a bad way, when you see them laid out on paper.

**The Chair:** Absolutely. Even when we had the association appear before us as a witness previously in the virtual House of Commons study, that testimony was surprising. I don't think a lot of us realized the stress and the injuries that can be caused to those providing these services.

I will ask for that information. Thank you, Mr. Blaikie, for letting me know that is available.

I think that would be encouraging to members. I know sometimes we think it sounds okay to us and therefore it shouldn't be a problem, but we should definitely be following the guidelines they have set out for us when possible. I understand emergencies do occur, but those are exceptional circumstances. It shouldn't become a routine practice to not use the headset.

Let's start. On the main estimates today, we have Monsieur Perrault back before our committee. He is from Elections Canada, the Chief Electoral Officer.

Thank you so much, Monsieur Perrault, for being back again.

We have Michel Roussel, deputy chief electoral officer for electoral events and innovation, and we have Marc Limoges, chief financial officer.

We will start with opening remarks. I believe the opening remarks are from Monsieur Perrault.

Monsieur Perrault, you have five minutes. Thank you for providing the remarks in advance.

[Translation]

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault (Chief Electoral Officer, Elections Canada):** Madam Chair, thank you for the opportunity to present to the committee Elections Canada's 2020-2021 main estimates today.

I will also take this opportunity to briefly reflect on the conduct of the October 26 by-elections and the need to swiftly pass targeted legislative change to deliver a general election in these very challenging pandemic circumstances.

Elections Canada is funded under two distinct of authorities: an annual appropriation and a standing statutory authority.

Today, the committee will vote on the annual appropriation, which amounts to \$48.2 million and represents the salaries of some 530 indeterminate positions.

The agency also has a standing statutory authority to draw directly from the consolidated revenue fund for all expenses related to its mandate, other than the salaries of indeterminate staff.

This funding model allows Elections Canada to access the funds required to plan and deliver elections, which, as we know, may occur at any time, and ensures its independence. Planned spending under the statutory authority is reported for transparency and accountability.

The statutory appropriation for the fiscal year 2020-2021, as reported in the main estimates, totalled \$85.5 million. However, the main estimates for 2020-2021 were submitted before the end of the 2019 general election.

As a result, they do not reflect the costs associated with remaining ready to deliver a general election in a minority government context. Nor do they reflect the additional costs resulting from required measures for the pandemic.

[English]

Being ready to administer an election is at the core of Elections Canada's mandate. In the situation of a minority government, maintaining a constant state of readiness involves additional costs. These costs include, for example, preparing and deploying IT hardware to regional warehouses and replenishing electoral supplies, as well as hiring and training a contingent of temporary personnel.

For the current fiscal year we have incurred to date additional expenses totalling \$99 million from the statutory appropriation in order to be prepared to deliver an election at any time in this pandem-

ic context. Of this, \$52 million relates directly to the pandemic, including the purchase of protective equipment such as masks and hand sanitizer, improvements to vote-by-mail capacity, a new voter information campaign on the safety measures and a more extensive campaign to recruit election workers.

The pandemic has also affected our ongoing activities. Most Elections Canada staff now work from home. To support this transition to telework, we have invested in tablets and other equipment. While not without challenges, this arrangement is working well. We are equipped to deliver the next election with most, if not all, staff working remotely, if that is required.

Since I appeared last before this committee, Elections Canada has administered by-elections in Toronto Centre and York Centre. These are two regions with high rates of COVID-19. While the by-elections were delivered successfully, they also demonstrated the challenges presented by the pandemic, including the need for coordination with three public health authorities: the City of Toronto, the Province of Ontario and the federal government.

A general election during a pandemic will be even more complex in this regard and will require engaging with health authorities at the local, provincial or territorial, and federal levels, as well as with over 600 first nations reserves, some of which have their own COVID-19 protocols.

The experience of the recent by-elections only strengthens my conviction that the conduct of a federal election during a pandemic requires an ability to adapt to changing circumstances. This is why I can only reiterate the importance of the recommendations that I presented earlier this fall, and the need to act on these recommendations so that we are able to implement them in a timely manner.

Madam Chair, I am happy to work with the committee, and of course answer any questions the members will undoubtedly have.

• (1110)

Thank you.

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

I have definitely informed the committee as well that we need to get working and take care of those recommendations so that we can get you working on making sure that you can provide a safe and secure election.

We will start the first round of questions with Ms. Vecchio.

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC):** Thank you very much.

Once again, thank you so much for returning to our committee. It seems like months and months ago, because with COVID everything is always full tilt ahead.

I want to start off with a very simple question. I know a lot of times with registrations a lot of that information comes from sources such as Canada Revenue Agency. Have there been any issues with getting that information downloaded from different agencies to Elections Canada for the registration of voters?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** I am not aware—and Mr. Roussel can jump in if he is aware—of any situations where there have been difficulties with the flow of data with our partners. We have some 40 data partners that we interact with, and we haven't had any difficulties that I can report to the committee.

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** Those are some of the things that I really want to talk about because I was just thinking of specific things with COVID. Due to COVID, we've allowed Canadians to complete their taxes at different times. We know that the information is downloaded from CRA to Elections Canada. I was just wondering how the flow of information is when there has been a change to deadlines and a change to many things that are happening right now.

Could you check to see if there have been any changes?

What are some of the other organizations that you currently get this registration information from for this data bank in terms of the registration list?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** I don't have the full list in front of me, but I would be happy to provide that. Certainly we get a lot of information, for example, from the motor vehicle bureaus of the provinces. This is in all provinces except one. We have motor vehicle data, so that is quite useful.

We exchange data with provincial electoral management bodies. It's a two-way exchange, so we help each other in keeping the registries up to date. There are variations depending on the province, but we do interact with all EMBs.

I will perhaps let Mr. Roussel jump in because he knows much more about some of the other partners that we have.

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** That would be great. As he does jump in, I just want to look at that, because with regard to motor vehicle agencies and places like that, I'll be honest, I'm driving with an old sticker. Our place is still not open yet, and we've had some delays.

I'm thinking about the COVID restrictions with regard to getting plates and different things like that. How are you working with these agencies to ensure that the registration is correct and that notifications, such as death or moving notifications, are all up to date?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** Before Michel Roussel speaks, I'll just say that of course one of the virtues of having online registration during the election, or in the lead-up to the election when it's coming, is that we do push voters to go online and verify the accuracy of their information and keep it up to date. That's an important tool.

Michel Roussel, go ahead.

• (1115)

**Mr. Michel Roussel (Deputy Chief Electoral Officer, Electoral Events and Innovation, Elections Canada):** Thank you.

In addition to what was mentioned by the Chief Electoral Officer, we also have partnership with provinces' vital statistics so that

deceased electors can be taken off the voters list. We also have partnership with Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada for the purpose of adding new citizens and also validating that people are actually Canadian citizens. These are regular partnerships and these are ongoing.

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** Awesome.

I want to ask about vital statistics. That is such an important part when it comes to deaths. How often is that information downloaded? Is it every 30 days, every six months...? Can you give me some information on that, if you don't mind?

**Mr. Michel Roussel:** I could get clarification on the pace, but it's more on a quarterly basis with vital statistics.

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** Okay. I just think that's really important stuff. I think making sure we have accurate lists is one of the most important things coming from the Elections Canada side. I do recognize that you can do it on registration, that you can go online, but sometimes those lists are.... I've seen people on them who unfortunately have been deceased for multiple years. I'll tell you that, as a candidate calling those homes, it's very embarrassing when you find out that poor Fred has not been with us for 10 years, yet he's still on an election list. If we could look into that, I would really appreciate it.

This will probably go back to you, Mr. Perrault. I see on the table the amount of \$3,230,000 for electoral boundaries. I'm looking at the readjustments of the boundaries for 2020-21. Has any work started on that yet?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** Work is only beginning. We are starting to put together a team to plan the work, but there has been limited work on that project so far.

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** With the allocated amount of over \$3 million, I assume you're hoping that some of that will then be rolled over into the next year's budget, that we should not actually be spending over \$3 million on a project right now. Where are you sitting with that?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** I would expect that is the case: correct.

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** Okay. That's good to know.

During a minority government and when we recognize that so many people are working from home right now, what are some of the additional costs, other than computers and tablets? What other things are we helping with so that people can get this work done in those remote areas, such as Elgin—Middlesex—London, to ensure that we are ready? What else are we putting into work?

That's for Mr. Perrault.

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** I think we have to distinguish between the work that takes place at headquarters.... We've equipped all of our staff to be able to work effectively from home. As I indicated, I think that is working generally very well.

We also have to equip returning officers. Returning officers are working from their homes all the time. In a way, that's normal for them. In a minority context, what we do is provide them with tasks—for example, to look in the area for potential polling places or to start engaging with local care facilities or indigenous communities. We have a schedule of tasks that they do, but they are working remotely in an ongoing way normally, so for them it is not that much of a change. What's important is that they have guidelines from health authorities and understand what they need to do to remain safe at all times.

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** Excellent. Thank you so much.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Turnbull, you have six minutes.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.):** Thanks, Madam Chair.

Thanks, Mr. Perrault, for coming back. It's always great to see you. I know you have a busy schedule and lots of important work to do, so we appreciate your being here.

My questions are related to expenses or the estimates. To recap your opening remarks, you said that the statutory appropriation was calculated prior to the current context. In other words, you couldn't have predicted the pandemic and the added costs of even operating within a minority context at that time. Is that right?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** That's correct. One of the reasons we have a statutory appropriation, which is an ongoing authority, is the unpredictable nature, to a certain degree, of the electoral cycle, whether it's by-elections or general elections in a minority, and in this case, of course, the pandemic. It is a very significant advantage to be able to draw on this over and above anything we may have planned, report on it and, of course, account for it. That's how we use it.

• (1120)

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** I appreciate that. Thanks. I just wanted to clarify it and make that clear.

It's \$99 million that would be the additional expenses that are being proposed or that you're estimating. Is that correct?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** Most of it has been engaged, in the sense that we have procured, for example, supplies. We've not necessarily paid for those supplies, but the money is engaged.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** Good stuff, so in some of those categories, you've sort of committed funds based on those contracts.

I want to get down to some specific questions now.

We've heard from multiple stakeholders—and you included when we heard from you earlier on—that with the vote-by-mail process, in terms of the capacity for dealing with a large influx of electors who may want to vote by mail, we can anticipate that influx ahead of time.

To what degree is that increase being prioritized in your estimates of costs? How are we increasing the capacity? Could you unpack that a little more for me, from a budgetary perspective?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** I certainly can do that.

You won't see a lot of the costs in the estimates. There's some of that money.... For example, there's roughly \$10 million that's earmarked—Mr. Limoges will correct me if necessary—for the mail itself, including prepaid postage. For the first time, we will have prepaid postage for the mail-in ballots, so that people do not abstain from voting due to that reason. That's one expense.

We've also procured additional machinery to prepare and assemble the kits before they're sent out. There's an additional expense for that. I believe it's around \$900,000, but we can confirm that.

Most of the work is not about expenses. It's about designing the process and reviewing the procedures. We will have a decentralized process. I think I explained that when I appeared last time, so I apologize if I'm repeating myself.

It's critical for us to be able to manage what we think will be up to five-million mail-in ballots, and to break that down in chewable chunks. To deal with that, we will deal with it locally. Each returning office will have additional staff and space to receive and process applications and then to process the count. That's essentially the strategy for the national election.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** Thank you very much. That's very helpful.

I think many of us believe in a streamlined process—making that as easy as possible—and being able to deal with the large number that will be coming in effectively.

The other thing I've been concerned about and asked many witnesses about is the information campaign and reassuring voters about the safety of the different methods of voting. Obviously there are additional costs to following the public health guidelines in terms of how we set up sites and deal with foot traffic coming through the various polling locations, but I think the information campaign is probably also going to increase or will need to increase. I'm anticipating that, and I'm kind of assuming that.

I think that's maybe one of your other expense categories that will increase. Is that correct? Can you tell us how much and what the plans are for that?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** Absolutely. I think it's a very important question.

The amount is \$3 million that we have earmarked for that campaign. It's a lot of money. It's a very important aspect of the election in the pandemic. It's also related to mail-in voting. To all extent possible, we want people to vote in the regular way. If they feel that they can safely go to their local polling location as they normally do, and they are reassured that they can do so in a safe way, they will do so, and it will facilitate the work for everybody, including our poll workers.

The two things are very, very closely tied. It's one thing to prepare for a large mail-in vote, but you do not want to push everybody to vote by mail because they don't understand the safety measures in place.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** That's a good point.

Can I check with you on what percentage increase that would be compared with a normal general election outside of the pandemic context?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** We could come back with the details, but it's roughly \$20 million in a general election.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** Is it increasing by \$3 million?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** Yes.

We'll come back with those numbers, if you'll allow me, to be clear.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** That would be great. Thank you.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

**The Chair:** Mr. Therrien, you have six minutes.

• (1125)

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alain Therrien (La Prairie, BQ):** Good morning, Mr. Perrault, Mr. Roussel and Mr. Limoges. I am very happy to have you joining us virtually.

You take care of the funding issue for political parties, of course. Is that right?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** Yes, absolutely.

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** The Bloc Québécois was the only party that did not apply for the emergency wage subsidy. In the beginning, that subsidy was not intended for political parties. As far as I understand, when regulations were passed, a breach was created allowing political parties to use the wage subsidy to fill their coffers during the pandemic.

The Liberal Party received that subsidy, and it apparently stopped doing so in September. The Conservatives did the same thing, but they also stopped receiving the subsidy in September. Those two parties will not repay what they received.

The Green Party and the NDP continue to receive money through the wage subsidy, even though that was intended for struggling businesses at risk of closing. Yet I have never seen a political party shut down because of insufficient funding.

Were you told by the government that political parties could receive money through that subsidy?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** We have not discussed this issue with the government. Unless I'm mistaken, a political party did ask us a question on the topic, but I could check.

According to the rules governing the funding of political parties, not all income necessarily comes from contributions. Parties have various sources of income. That may include investment income and income from bank accounts, though there is not much income from those sources nowadays. There can also be goods and services tax, or GST, credits for all sorts of things.

As long as it is income to which much larger groups have access and is not provided to parties because they are parties or for reasons specific to their role, those are not regulated contributions.

I know what the Bloc Québécois' position is and I know that Parliament will have to deal with this matter. According to the regime

in place, those are not contributions, but a source of income among those provided for in the legislation.

• (1130)

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** I understand, but you are talking about political parties' investment income. It's fine if they decide to make investments or deposit money into an account to get a return. Political parties can manage their coffers as they like. However, we are here talking about public money coming from taxpayers' dollars being used to fund political parties' election activities. What's more, this will lead to additional costs for the government through the chief electoral officer, or CEO. That is duplication of funding because the money filling political parties' coffers will lead to an increase in funding provided by the CEO.

I understand the parallel you made. You are talking about the Bloc Québécois' position. I can tell you that we are very proud not to have taken taxpayers' money. We expect only our sympathizers to fund our election activities. We are confident in them and they in us, obviously.

The current system does not provide for the public funding of political parties. However, the pandemic has led to the appearance of public funding.

Should we question public funding through such misappropriation? We should check what political parties would like to have and how to provide them with public funding, instead of finding roundabout ways to receive funding, which favours parties that do not deserve it.

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** I won't take a position in the debate. This questioning is certainly legitimate.

There are other tax credits the parties, like other entities, can have access to—for example, GST credits. This should perhaps be considered. In any case, that is money from public funding, and political parties are entitled to it, but the money is not regulated. It is money that contributes to parties' financial capacity.

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** I will ask a question, even though I think I know the answer. I'm not a fool.

As the great cherub of this election legislation, are you not uncomfortable with the situation?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** My role is to enforce the act and its rules, and not to take a position on things that are not part of the regulatory framework. I think that was the answer you were expecting, right?

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** Yes, that's right.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Blaikie, go ahead please.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** Thank you very much.

I take your point that the estimates were submitted in advance of the pandemic, so they don't reflect additional pandemic spending. There is quite a bit more spending projected under the statutory authority.

I'm wondering if you can speak a little bit to why the projected statutory spending is as high as it is and the extent to which.... I know you talked about—and correct me if I'm wrong—some of the pandemic preparation coming out of your statutory authorities. Because I noticed there is no submission for your office in the supplementary estimates (B), I'm wondering how that works.

Do you anticipate needing any further voted authorities from Parliament, or are you comfortable that you can respond to the possibility of a snap election and the pandemic within existing statutory authorities?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** Just to be clear, I do not expect to ask for additional funds from the annual vote, which is for the permanent staff, so that will remain. I don't think I will be needing additional money there.

For the rest of the statutory authority, I am not required to go through Parliament. In the past we have sometimes made projections through the supplementary estimates in terms of transparency. In recent years, the Treasury Board has indicated that we need not go there, that typically our amounts are not sufficiently material to go through the estimates, so I don't know how that will take place this year. They are only there for transparency reasons.

I'd like to come back to your initial question because there are a few elements to it. The first point I would make before I go there, however, is that the estimates were submitted not only prior to the pandemic but prior to the results of the last election. Therefore, the minority status was not factored in.

There are two aspects. What was factored in was \$85.5 million. I can break that down a little bit. If you look at that, there is, for example, \$9 million for licences and leases, \$15 million for the salaries of terms and casuals, and \$17 million for professional services. There is also money related to the last election in there, so there are expenses that were still being paid in this fiscal year for the last general election.

If you look, then, at the \$99 million I indicated in my remarks, there's \$52 million for, essentially, protective measures and adaptations for the pandemic. The balance of that, the main items—and I'd be happy to provide details to the committee—has \$7.3 million to deploy hardware in regional offices. That's the package, including all of the IT equipment that's used in our offices, the installation of the software and deploying it locally. There's also a Canada Post monthly fee to maintain that in the local so that we're ready if an election is called.

We have \$7.5 million in expenses for returning offices, regional meetings, training and special assignments, such as engaging with indigenous communities and engaging with long-term care facilities.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** On that point, if I may, because it's a good segue to some other questions I have, I might just ask if you could table that breakdown with the committee. That would be very much appreciated.

I know you just mentioned engagement with first nation communities. We had the Assembly of First Nations here at committee, which you may well know. I imagine you're following our study closely.

One of the things they indicated was some frustration on the part of particular first nations that had wanted polling stations in their community and didn't feel that they were able to get them. I'm wondering what you are planning to change in terms of outreach.

The other thing we heard was that the earlier you're able to start in terms of that outreach and the earlier that you might be able to identify and begin to train some people in local first nation communities who would like to have polling stations, the better off they'll be in order to be able to respond.

I'm wondering what work you're doing now and what kinds of resources are being dedicated to being able to prepare first nation communities that want to have polling stations in their community in the context of this pandemic we're all living through. What can they expect from Elections Canada?

● (1135)

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** Those are very good, important questions for us. The issue of having polling sites on reserves has been an ongoing challenge for us over the years. It's something that we tried to improve in the last election. We did try to engage, and we did engage ahead of the last election with local first nations reserves in order to increase the presence.

Now, first nations do not always wish to have a polling site. I know for Monsieur Therrien in his riding that this has been a historical situation where we have not been successful in having a polling site there. We have to respect that, but we do have to make efforts to make sure we can respond to the demands of first nations and that they're engaged earlier rather than later.

In the last election there was an increase, but not as much as we would have liked. We had 389 reserves with polling sites, compared with 366 in the previous election. It was a small increase. There were a few instances where first nations would say they did not want to have a polling site, and once the edicts were issued and there were local discussions, then they wished to have a polling site. This is a challenge, but to the extent possible we've adjusted to that. I do not know of a single case where we were not able to accommodate a request for a polling site at a first nations community.



In terms of what we're doing, we will have returning officers engaging locally. We plan to have them start in January or February, after Christmas, with first nations reserves. Whether or not there is an election—this is not an indication—they will be starting to engage with first nations to talk about sites, but also to talk about safety measures and recruitment.

We want as much as possible to have first nations serving their communities, so the more we can recruit locally, the better it is for us. It helps simplify the process for everybody.

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

We have Mr. Doherty for five minutes.

**Mr. Todd Doherty (Cariboo—Prince George, CPC):** Mr. Perrault, thank you for being here again.

Can you clarify for me the comment that you made to Mr. Blaikie that these estimates were prepared prior to our previous election. Would that have been in Q1 or Q2 of 2019?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** If I'm not mistaken—and Mr. Limoges knows this, of course, and he'll answer—I think they were prepared in either late September or early October. That's when they were submitted to Treasury Board.

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** Have they been updated?

I'm a small business owner. I also ran budgets for a federally operated operation. I know that situations change, such as a global pandemic. Have they been adjusted accordingly, or is this a case where you are going to report back to the committee in Q2 or Q3 of next year and say, "We were under-budgeted by hundreds of millions of dollars?"

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** It depends largely on the events. I'm reporting today, for example, on how much in addition we've incurred so far, depending on whether there is an election or not. Certainly when we report on our results we will be reporting on how much at the end we will have spent, and there are always some variations between the plans and the—

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** Especially during a global pandemic.

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** Especially during a pandemic and especially during a minority situation. For example, the by-elections are never budgeted, and we just had two by-elections.

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** I really appreciate that comment. It's still shocking for me, a little bit.

Mr. Perrault, you indicated during your last testimony that you had not consulted with the Prime Minister on how a snap pandemic election would be conducted. We are seeing increased rates right across our country, especially in my province of British Columbia. Yukon just announced severe measures. I think we're going into another lockdown. In Saskatchewan the rates are going through the roof.

Have you had any chance to consult with the Prime Minister on that?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** No, and we would not normally do that. The calling of an election is the prerogative of governments. I have 15 years at elections. We've never had any discussions about the likelihood of an election.

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** Have you consulted with Dr. Theresa Tam?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** I spoke with her personally in September, but there are ongoing discussions, of course, with her team and members of my staff.

● (1140)

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** Has she outlined any specific concerns in terms of conducting a federal pandemic election?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** Not that I'm aware of.... The nature of the advice they provide is advice on how to deliver an election and what measures to put in place, not whether to deliver an election.

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** Okay.

The minister appeared before committee for two hours on Tuesday and was very generous with his time, but he also spoke of concerns regarding foreign interference. We are seeing lots of talk of that south of the border.

The job of this committee, and I see it as this study, is to provide assurances to the Canadian public that it is safe, it is secure and our democratic institutions are going to be intact.

Have you budgeted any money in terms of any foreign interference, and in what terms could there be foreign interference in a weakened state during a global pandemic, in your thoughts?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** We established in the lead-up to the last election a working group, well in advance of the last election, because of the emergence of foreign interference as a phenomenon and the use of social media. We have a working group that involves government security partners, including the Communications Security Establishment of Canada and the centre for cybersecurity.

We have done in the past and we will continue to do, with plans to do so this fall, tabletop exercises to look at different scenarios. The only difference this time is that we've included the Public Health Agency because of potential disinformation about health.

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** Great.

Mr. Perrault, I want to talk about mail-in ballots during a pandemic election situation. As you stated before and as you stated this time, it's five million mail-in votes, almost a hundred times more than the last election. What are we doing, and how much money has been spent, to prepare for that? Are you confident that Canada Post will be ramped up to be able to handle that capacity?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** We'll have to follow up on the details of the amounts. As I indicated earlier, most of the work will be done locally, so the planning does not necessarily involve major spending. There is \$10 million earmarked for the postage itself and some additional machinery, but the plan is on the logistics and how to simplify the process, especially for—

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** Okay. I have one last question. It's with regard to a suggestion made to me by somebody who's probably listening in. There's been a lot of talk in the election south of the border: Did my vote count? How can I be assured with the mail-in counts?

I'm wondering if there's something we could institute, maybe as a recommendation, where those who are putting in mail-in ballots can go online and see, just like with tracking a parcel, that, hey, the vote counted. It's registered.

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** Unfortunately, we can't do that. We are looking at options to inform voters that their kits have been sent to them. We are working with Canada Post. Their parcel service has a tracking option, but not for general mail delivery.

There are ways that this can be done. It's something we could explore in the future, but if we're looking at a spring election, this is not something that we could implement in the short term. What we will be doing is informing voters, as clearly as possible, on the timelines and the importance of submitting their ballot kits on time. Again—

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

We've gone well over time—

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.):** On a point of order, Madam Chair, does the witness know that we're having a spring election?

**The Chair:** I think I can answer that one.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** I'm just kidding.

**The Chair:** The role of Elections Canada is to be prepared at any given moment, and they do a fine job at that.

We will move on to Mr. Alghabra for five minutes, please.

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

Welcome back, Mr. Perrault.

Let me congratulate you and Elections Canada on being retweeted by President Trump and getting the most viral tweet ever for Elections Canada.

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** Can I comment on that?

• (1145)

**Hon. Omar Alghabra:** Please go ahead. Don't take too much of my time, but go ahead.

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** I was hoping to get a question on that, because I welcome the opportunity to clarify some points there.

We were responding to very, very high levels of questions, confusion and misinformation about how federal elections work. The goal of our communications team was simply to put out the facts and not to make any comments on tabulation technology or any particular service provider.

I do want to add that there are some very good reasons for election management bodies to use various types of technology in support of election services, including, but not necessarily, tabulation. In Canada a number of provinces...and we have people here from

New Brunswick and Ontario. A number of provinces, including those two, have been leading the way in this area, and frankly quite successfully. We are working with them and learning from them. At Elections Canada we have been exploring, and we will continue to explore the use of technology, not necessarily tabulation but the use of technology to improve electoral services.

I do believe that the future of elections will involve some technology and that this can be done in a safe and secure way. I find it unfortunate that the impression is given that technology is not secure or cannot be secure.

**Hon. Omar Alghabra:** No, I think I understood, and most of us understood, that the reason Elections Canada posted that was that you were responding to questions about the methods. I can tell you that Canadians are watching what's happening down south and are reflecting on how grateful we are to have a reliable federal agency that conducts our elections.

I'll move on to my questions. Have you finished tabulating the costs you incurred for the by-elections that happened in October? How much more do you think you spent on those by-elections?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** We have not quite finished. Roughly, it was about \$3 million, which is certainly more than an average by-election, but these were Toronto by-elections, so some of the expenses there relate to the fact that media-buy in Toronto is more expensive and that rates for rental are a lot more expensive. Normally, a by-election is on average around just under \$1 million. This is significantly more.

Some of the cost related to that was certainly tied to the protective measures we put in place. On the other hand, we did have fewer polling locations than we would normally have in a general election. Certainly one area of concern for me from those by-elections is the challenge in finding polling places. That's one of the reasons we're recommending Saturday and Sunday voting, and we saw that in Toronto.

In terms of the cost, when we have all those marked down we will be reporting on that, but I can say it's around \$3 million.

**Hon. Omar Alghabra:** In your last appearance you talked about the collection of signatures that candidates need to become a certified candidate. You talked about considering other ways, because right now going around to voters and asking for their signatures might not be ideal under the circumstance.

Are you considering an online way for electors to sign this document?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** We are looking at different options right now. I can tell you that there are challenges with the legal requirement for a witness, and that makes the online submission process a very cumbersome one.

I am looking at adapting the rules, and again this is a good example. My power to adapt the rules does not include adapting for reasons of security. It's adapting for voting or for counting of the ballots. This is a lesson from this by-election. If I need to adapt, for example, to the signature process for security reasons, then this cannot be done. In my recommendations report, I have a recommendation to have a bit of a broader power to adapt, but I will be looking at ways to have an online submission. That may require tweaking some of the rules.

**Hon. Omar Alghabra:** By the way, you may want to look at the House of Commons. For a couple of years now we've been accepting e-petitions where citizens can submit their signature online.

The reason I'm asking this question is that as we expect mail-in ballots to increase—or what we call a special ballot—the earlier we have candidates firmed up, the better it is, so that we have their names printed on the ballot. If you start sending ballots way too early, where names of the candidates are not printed and the voters are expected to write in the name, that may create another form of confusion. I was hoping, because of this situation or scenario, there's a way for us to require that candidates are certified earlier so that the mail-in ballots can have the names on them.

**The Chair:** Thank you. That's all the time we have.

I guess you can take that as maybe more of a comment or a suggestion at this point. We'll maybe get a response to it later on.

I was going to say, and I won't obviously take this out of the time, that the tabulator issue and online voting systems were looked at by the electoral reform committee and the procedure committee in past Parliaments. Obviously, everyone has probably read and heard that online is not considered to be completely secure at this point. In the few countries that have done it, there have been some issues.

Previously we did have Mr. Perrault as our deputy at that time. Tabulators are being used in Ontario and smaller jurisdictions so that we can properly assess the effectiveness. Just like he said, perhaps we may move to them one day, but at this point I don't think we foresee our going in that direction.

It was interesting that the President mentioned that, because the U.S. has been using tabulators for a very long time, not just in this election. I don't know what it had to do with tabulators in his election per se. I think it was more about whether they desired to count the ballots or not. Anyway, it was interesting to see that tweet.

• (1150)

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** Madam Chair, can I add a few words to that?

**The Chair:** Yes.

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** Thank you very much.

No, we're not looking at tabulation, but we are looking down the road at the very least of having a solution: to scan VIC cards to strike from the list. You can process voters much more efficiently this way.

More importantly, we can allow voters to vote anywhere in polling stations, for example, for official languages reasons. If you have one table that's bilingual, anybody who needs servicing in that

minority language could go to that table. Right now, you are confined as a voter to your table where your name is on a particular list. There's lots of flexibility with very simple technology. It doesn't need to involve tabulation, although there's nothing inherently wrong with tabulation, but technology can enhance the service considerably.

**The Chair:** That's interesting. That makes a lot of sense.

Mr. Therrien, go ahead for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Perrault, you talked earlier about La Prairie, the riding I represent. That resonated with me because I was wondering why Kahnawake did not have a polling station on its territory.

I would like you to use 30 seconds or a minute to tell me about the history of this situation. I would like to know it because, as you know, it is of personal interest to me.

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** I don't know the details of the history. What I do know is that, at every election, we addressed the community to try to establish a polling site. As I said before, that must be done very respectfully. We understand why, for historic reasons, certain communities prefer not to have polling sites.

During the last election, we communicated with community leaders. We were very hopeful: for the first time, there was openness, initially. However, for reasons I am not exactly familiar with, they, within the community and at the last minute, decided not to have a polling site. So people voted in Sainte-Catherine. Am I wrong?

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** That's right, in Sainte-Catherine.

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** So that's a bit of history, and I don't have much detail on it.

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** So two voting stations are reserved for the Kahnawake community at the Sainte-Catherine polling station, right next door. That was intriguing to me. Thank you for clarifying.

I will put a question to you, and I hope I won't look too stupid.

I wanted to know how that works in minority situations.

You have an enhanced budget, since we have a minority government. So the budget has increased by \$99 million, and it includes money set aside for the fight against COVID-19.

Did I understand correctly?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** That budget is actually a forecast because, as I said, I have a standing authority to draw money from the consolidated revenue fund of Canada. I report on that to this committee and, should you have questions, I would be happy to answer.

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** Okay.

I will ask another question.

Let's imagine that an election was to be held in February. I would like to know what mechanism would enable you to seek out money that is not budgeted, but that you could in all likelihood obtain.

What mechanism gives you access to that money you need?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** Provisions of the Canada Election Act provide direct legal authority to draw from the consolidated revenue fund of Canada to ensure the holding and preparation of an election.

Budget cycles lead to budget legislation, which provides annual appropriations. However, certain agencies—not very many—sometimes benefit from a permanent authority under the law, such as employment insurance. So Parliament voted on it once and could amend it. In our case, we are talking about a very useful authority for the reasons you mentioned.

We make adjustments based on expenditures and events that occur.

• (1155)

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** I have one last short question. I hope the chair will be nice to me.

[*English*]

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

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** We could cut the next one, couldn't we?

[*English*]

**The Chair:** We're very over time. I was trying to be kind so that you got your response.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** Thank you anyway, Madam Chair.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Mr. Blaikie, go ahead.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** Thank you very much.

Mr. Perrault, I want to come back to a question we addressed a bit with you the last time you were before the committee. It is the question of telephone voting.

When we heard from folks in the disability community, particularly the Canadian National Institute for the Blind, there was a lot of enthusiasm about the possibility of phone voting. I know it's something you weren't looking at in your interim report and recommendations.

I wonder if you could speak again to whether that was a principled objection on the part of Elections Canada or it was a logistical objection, either because the legislative framework right now doesn't permit it or because the infrastructure isn't there. Could you

give your thoughts about telephone voting in general, and whether that's on the medium-term or long-term agenda for Elections Canada?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** Absolutely.

We do not have, in our legal framework, provisions for telephone voting. They exist in British Columbia, though, so they were able to use that.

There's a valid question as to whether I could adapt legislation in the pandemic to deal with unique circumstances. We have to look at that.

There are other options as well that we need to look at. For example, homebound voters who cannot fill a ballot and cannot even fill an application can have somebody assist in their homes. In a COVID situation, that's not ideal, but could we use a ZOOM interchange? I know in seniors homes, for example, there's often ZOOM capabilities. They've begun to use that to link families with seniors.

We have to look at those options and see how we do this. The key thing for me is how to make it safe and secure for the integrity of the vote.

Using the telephone raises a question of how you provide identification. Federally, every time we vote we rely on identification documents. If you vote by phone, you're straying more significantly from the framework because it would require some form of identification—

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** Could the framework we use for mail-in ballots be adapted for phone, if you applied and got a package, for instance, with some kind of unique identifier?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** Yes, that could be applied, in which case you could provide photocopies of your documents, for example, or upload documents on the web. It could be done, but that's of little assistance. For me, the usefulness of phone-in ballots is at the tail end of the period, when, after day six, say, you're getting very close to polling day and it's too late to submit an application for a special ballot kit.

But you're right that there are windows of opportunity, and we are exploring this to see how much we can stray from the regulatory framework in the act right now to allow that. Then there are the logistics of planning for that in a nationwide election. Again, timing may be everything.

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

Mr. Tochor, go ahead for five minutes, please.

**Mr. Corey Tochor (Saskatoon—University, CPC):** Mr. Perrault, thank you again for coming to our committee.

I'm still on the procedural side of the mail-in ballots. We send them out and mailing them is prepaid. If they are put in the mail system, do they go to Ottawa and then back to the returning officer?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** No, not if you're voting from your district. If you're a local elector voting from your home and you're not away from your home, the mail will return to your local returning officer's office. That's one of the features for cutting down on some of the travel time in the process.

For a national election, having a centralized process would have added additional travel time.

• (1200)

**Mr. Corey Tochor:** You could always drop off your ballots at the returning officer's actual office. Is that correct?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** You're correct.

**Mr. Corey Tochor:** Is there a plan to have secure ballot drop-off boxes during the pandemic so that people don't have to interact with anybody and can put ballots in a special mailbox that would get collected and then given to a returning officer?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** We don't have a plan in place, but it's certainly on our list of things we are looking into for the next election, because it is much safer if we can have a drop box, for example, very close to the returning office and people can drive in or walk and drop in their ballots, especially if it's late in the cycle on polling day.

**Mr. Corey Tochor:** That would be helpful. It would also be helpful for the budget because you don't pay for the mail if it doesn't get mailed. As a cost-saving measure, that would be one way of reducing some of the costs safely. Is that correct?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** I believe that's the case, yes.

**Mr. Corey Tochor:** I would strongly encourage you to consider that a bit more, because I think it would be one way of not spending taxpayers' dollars on something we could do in a different way.

I'll go back to the tracing of mail-in ballots to create certainty that a voter's ballot at least got to a returning officer. I understand that Canada Post has difficulties with tracking the mail and how it's set up, but what if the voter could go on to a database and search their poll and an ID number to see if the package has arrived?

How tough would that be to set up, and is that something you're considering?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** We are looking at ways of informing the voters when their kits are issued. We'll have to come back to that. We're having these conversations.

The work we did this fall was just to get ready for a snap election. Now we're looking at all these kinds of issues in order to improve the service offering for a possible—I said “spring” before and I got into trouble—upcoming election.

**Mr. Corey Tochor:** I know you will be ready whenever it is.

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** Yes. The—

**Mr. Corey Tochor:** I trust you to have a fair election. I think we need to be very careful, given the experiences coming out of the States. It's a perception, not reality. It's to make sure that people perceive this election to be on the up and up. I know your office, and everyone who works within your office, is working on that. I would encourage you to....

This could also be after the fact. Political parties receive the strike list or the votes that have been cast. Is there anything in the act that would prevent you from releasing that list to the public after the election so that people can go back to find out if their ballots were actually counted?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** I'd have to look into that. There may be, possibly.... The Privacy Act allows you to have access to your personal information.

I think there is...but I'd have to look into that.

**Mr. Corey Tochor:** I'm assuming that there would be—

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** I would say that it's a bit unfortunate at that point. I understand there's some satisfaction in confirming that your ballot made its way, but I think voters would ideally like a system so that, during the election, they're informed that in fact it has been delivered. That would be an ideal solution.

**Mr. Corey Tochor:** Ideally it would be during but if it's after, it goes back to keeping that perception and the reality of every ballot being counted, every ballot getting in.

I think that would go a long way if, after the fact, we can release to the public who voted. It would be blacking out different information on addresses or anything private, but you could go down to even a poll number, first initial and last name. That would give assurances that those ballots that were put in the mail.... As much as we all trust Canada Post, it would be a second line of certification that those ballots are there.

Quickly—I have limited time—on the cost savings, you talked about there being roughly 500 employees at Elections Canada. What was it 10 years ago, roughly? Have we ramped up that much in the last 10 years?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** I don't have the numbers in front of me. There has been an increase.

Some of those numbers.... The 500 number is indeterminate employees. It does not include terms or casuals. A lot of these fluctuate during an election period. The total number in the low end of the cycle is more around, I would say 800 staff, and it goes up from there. If you're talking bums in seats, so to speak, including contracts, it goes up significantly—almost double—during an election. There's quite a fluctuation.

In recent years, we've—

• (1205)

**The Chair:** That's all the time we have, unfortunately. We're over time. I wanted you to be able to get in a sufficient answer for that.

Dr. Duncan, you have five minutes, please.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Perrault. Thank you to all our guests. You're always so gracious with your time.

I have a limited amount of time, so I'll be looking largely for a yes-or-no answer.

Monsieur Perrault, could you table with the committee how many employees, contract, etc., were hired during the national election, how many mail-in ballots were printed and how many mail-in ballots were submitted, both in Canada and internationally, for both the 2015 and 2019 elections, please?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** I could certainly do that.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you.

Could you table with the committee how many people voted in the advance polls, the number of advance polls used and over what time period, for both the 2015 and 2019 elections, please?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** Absolutely, I have some of these numbers in front of me.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** I will wait for the tabling. Thank you so much.

Do you believe that the nature of the coronavirus outbreak varies across the country, yes or no?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** Of course. Absolutely.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you so much.

You mentioned that you've been doing your projected costs. Is it possible to table these projections with the committee?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** We don't have a projection for the election yet. I think that will depend on some of the preparations we're discussing today. I'm hearing suggestions and we're working on those. It's an evolving number.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** I understand that.

Could we see where that evolving number is? I guess what I'm really looking for are the new costs: PPE, barrier protections. Is that possible?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** Right now, it's \$52 million for that.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** What is the percentage increase, please, over the last election then?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** The cost of the last election was \$507.9million or \$507.8 million.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Could you table that with the committee, please?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** Of course.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you.

Do you accept that long-term care and retirement residents may require special protocols to ensure people's right to vote?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** That is why I've requested some special powers.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you very much.

Could you table with the committee the financial reports—I don't know if this is possible—for the 2015 and 2019 elections? I'm looking for the comparison between a usual election and a pandemic election, the difference and the percentage increase or decrease in costs.

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** You're asking for the past two elections and the cost of those.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Yes, please.

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** Yes, we can.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you so much.

Now I'm going to ask, if I may, about the Toronto by-elections.

Did we use schools?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** No, schools were not available for pandemic reasons.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you. That's what I wanted to hear.

Did you install any protections in the polling stations to protect poll staff and voters?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** There was a range of protective equipment installed in the polling stations but not physical barriers, in the by-elections. We had shields and masks and of course hand sanitizers and stickers. We are procuring shields for a general election.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Could you table with the committee what protections were used in the Toronto by-elections, please?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** Certainly.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you.

Did you have to purchase PPE?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** Yes, we did.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Could you table the cost for that, please?

Did you have to increase or decrease the number of polling stations, advance polls and polls?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** There was a significant decrease because of the lack of available areas. We had larger polls, but fewer polling locations. It was very difficult to find polling locations.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you for that information.

Did you increase or decrease the number of people you hired?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** I believe there was a decrease because of the number of polling stations. There was additional staff in the polling stations for health and safety, but we reduced the single poll worker number for distancing reasons. It's a mixed answer.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Could you table that with the committee, please?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** Absolutely.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Did you have people sign in when they came to vote?

• (1210)

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** We had a voluntary contact tracing protocol in place.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Could you table the volunteer contact tracing protocol in place, please?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** We certainly can.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you so much.

Was there contact tracing by the City of Toronto at the time while the two elections were held?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** I believe there was not, but I will verify that.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you so much.

Do you think that during an election, should there be one during a pandemic, it will require more polling stations in order to increase physical distancing?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** It will require either more or larger polling stations so that the desks within the stations and the people within those areas have sufficient space. It can be a mix of the two.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you.

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

Next we have Mr. Lukiwski, for five minutes.

**Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Moose Jaw—Lake Centre—Lanigan, CPC):** Thank you very much, Chair.

Good afternoon, once again, Mr. Perrault.

Mr. Perrault, you've mentioned on a couple of occasions that your first priority in a minority situation was to prepare for a snap election. I would assume that you are fully prepared, if there were to be a snap election, even if it were called tomorrow. Is that correct?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** What I have said is that we are prepared to do an election if it were called tomorrow. We were prepared earlier in the fall.

The extent of the services available will vary as we move forward. We can improve and adapt what we have in place to deal with a pandemic, but certainly all the basic elements of election delivery would be there.

**Mr. Tom Lukiwski:** Thank you.

Of course, there is no guarantee, even if we were in a majority situation, that the government wouldn't call an election before the fixed election date. I would assume that you would have to be fully prepared for an election, or even by-elections as we've seen, at any time. Is that correct?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** I would want to nuance that. We always have to look at the situation.

If we were 100% prepared at all times, there would be considerable cost. For example, right now we have 50% of our elections staff. These are the additional workforce we bring in during the elections. We staff up to 50%, not 100%.

Normally in a fixed date election, we don't deploy the technology in the regions until late in the cycle or if there are signs that there may be an election. There are ongoing, monthly fees that are quite significant, in terms of maintaining, for example, that software and hardware deployed regionally.

There are all kinds of decision points we make on an election cycle, minority or majority, and we manage the risk in this way. We are not 100% prepared at all times, certainly not during a majority.

**Mr. Tom Lukiwski:** It must give you some form of comfort, Mr. Perrault, that when Minister LeBlanc was before our committee just two days ago, he clearly stated and committed that this government would not be calling a snap election. Your predictions, or at least your observations and ruminations, that there may be a spring election should probably be somewhat allayed right now.

I personally don't think we're going into an election any time soon but that's only my opinion. I would ask you this because I'm just, frankly, curious. We all hope that there's going to be a vaccine that can be found quickly, and we hope that there can be a vaccine that is proven to be effective and can be distributed across Canada so that every Canadian who wishes to be vaccinated can be vaccinated.

If that were the case, if every Canadian hypothetically was vaccinated, what impact would that have, in your opinion, on your office and your budget? For example, there would be obviously fewer health protocols required, but would it have an impact, in your opinion, on things like mail-in ballots? If everyone was vaccinated, would there be as many mail-in ballots? What would your opinion be as to the voter turnout if a vaccine was completely distributed across Canada? Can you give me just a couple of observations on the future as you see it?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** One observation certainly is that, for example, the voters in B.C., who experienced mail-in ballots, may not all return to a traditional in-person voting. Even if in that jurisdiction, for example, we were to have a federal election post-pandemic, I would expect to see increased use of mail-in ballots in B.C. because there were so many people who did that.

It's difficult to predict exactly how this will play out. Certainly after the pandemic we will dispose of our protective equipment, and some of it can be put back into the cycle and we can recover some of that money through Procurement Canada and they'll put it back into the distribution cycle. Others may become obsolete or the value may go down. Things will evolve and we'll have to adjust. I must say it's a bit difficult to predict how that will evolve.

• (1215)

**Mr. Tom Lukiwski:** If some of your observations prove to be correct, Mr. Perrault, that the voter turnout, whether it be through mail-in ballot or on-site voting, actually increases because Canadians become more accustomed to participating in a general election, I think obviously that would be good thing.

We've seen voter turnout—and you and I have discussed this before—continuously decline over the last several elections. Anything that can be done, perhaps, to increase the voter turnout would be welcomed, I'm sure, by everyone in this country. However, should there be increased turnout, Mr. Perrault, what impact do you think that would have on your budgets going forward?

Do you see that there will be a day, perhaps in the next budgetary cycle, that you would be requesting more money for election preparedness, or would there be a decline to take you back to nominal figures and nominal budgets of years past?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** I don't see the ebb and flow of participation as having a major impact on the cost of delivering an election. We always have to assume that there will be a large number of electors, much more than actually do turn out. For example, the estimate of the number of ballots, the number of electors at a polling site on a particular poll, the number of workers and sites, are all done taking into account to a certain degree an inflated participation because we can't assume people will not show up to vote.

I don't think this will have a significant impact on the financial aspects of preparing and delivering an election.

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

Thank you, Mr. Lukiwski.

Mr. Gerretsen, you have five minutes.

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

Mr. Perrault, thank you very much for joining us. I apologize for the comment I made in jest earlier. I, of course, know that you have no idea when an election will be and you were speaking hypothetically.

I was actually going to ask you about the tweet that had come out from Elections Canada a few days ago in response to the Rebel News outlet's claims of Canada using the Dominion Voting Systems. I know that you explained that you thought it was necessary to correct the information, but I'm just curious if you can expand on why you thought it was necessary for Elections Canada to correct this disinformation and prevent it from being spread online.

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** In hindsight, we can debate whether it was the right thing to do or not. Certainly there was a very high level of confusion and misconception about the federal process and people were using that in such a way and in volumes that we felt were undermining the confidence in the election. One of our principles is that we want to be an authoritative source of information about the election, and if there's a significant amount of misinformation, then naturally we want to correct that.

Now unfortunately, that tweet was used—and I would say misused—to imply, and that was not our intent, that technology—

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** Okay, that's great. Thank you.

Speaking of tweets from Elections Canada, you also tweeted a couple days ago about about the mail-in voting system and you said that, to keep the vote by mail secure, eligible Canadian electors must apply to vote and then provide documents showing their identity. Then after you validate them, the information will be accepted.

I've been asking a lot of witnesses this question. Do you have any reason to believe that mail-in voting contributes to any more fraudulent voting activities than voting in person?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** I'm not aware of any evidence that would support that concern.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** Perfect.

I'll switch gears a little bit. In one of the first questioner's answers you said something to the effect that you wanted people to come if they felt safe to vote in person. You're basically saying you want to create the environment, and if people feel safe, you want them to come in person, but otherwise they could look to mail-in voting or something like that.

I'm concerned about the comment because I think it goes against what some health organizations are saying during the pandemic. For example, Ontario is about to go back into lockdown—at least it's being reported—and the word that's being given in Ontario is to not go out unless you absolutely have to, which is a little bit different from, come if you feel safe.

I wonder if you can clarify your position on that? I'm assuming that ultimately you would encourage people to take the advice of the health officials. Is that correct?

• (1220)

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** You just stole my punch there.

Canadians should—and we do—follow the advice of public health authorities. What I meant to say is that we want to provide a voting environment that meets those recommendations, and we want people to know that our voting environment will meet those recommendations.

The pandemic situation will evolve, and whether there is a lockdown and the extent to which people are advised to not go out will depend on the circumstances and region. We want people to know that we will have put in place measures aligned with public health guidelines so that they don't have to vote by—

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** If those public guidelines are to the effect of “don't go out unless you absolutely have to” and mail-in voting is one of the options that you have, it could be argued that you don't have to go out.

Getting back to Mr. Doherty and Mr. Tochor's questions about what can be done, I know that you said you don't think anything can be done between now and the spring, but what if it's between now and the spring of 2022?

Based on the information that's been given by chief electoral officers in provinces, they've really been saying that they wish their mail-in voting system had been more streamlined, easier to use and easier to access. Are you looking toward being able to do that so that people really understand and can utilize the system?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** My priority is twofold. First of all, we're currently building an online application system for all Canadians to apply online for a kit. This does not exist at the moment. It exists for certain categories, so we're improving that.



Online application does involve the uploading of documents, and not all Canadians can do that. There have to be other ways of voting.

My priority in terms of simplifying is to make sure that confined electors, in particular people in long-term care facilities, are able to vote in a simpler way than is the case right now. I am concerned about the complexity for these electors. I'm concerned that it's unduly complex. We need to look to make it easier for them.

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

Next we have Mr. Therrien for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Perrault, I would like to put a question to you about attendants in long-term care institutions. Last time you came to see us, you told us that, in case of a pandemic, you would use those attendants to oversee the conduct of the vote. That is what I understood, and I felt that made sense, as well.

Is that right?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** To the extent possible, yes.

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** People will have to undergo training. How will that work? Will they receive extra wages from Elections Canada? Will that lead to additional costs?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** I will answer you by bringing up the most important considerations.

There won't be a single way to operate because there won't be a single appropriate way for all long-term care centres. That's key. In some cases, adapted voting procedures by mail will be used. In other cases, adapted mobile voting procedures will be used. There may not be mobility, but the same instruments will be used. What is more, the hours will be flexible. We will need to take a number of variables into account.

We will first have to present a range of more flexible and simpler options. Then, at the local level, we will have to communicate with long-term care centres to find out what their preferences are. We have started to do so, and we will do it more and more after Christmas. We will also have to come back to this during the election, since the situation involving staff and seniors will have evolved.

So, a great deal of flexibility will be needed. However, I cannot tell you how much it may cost.

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** Okay.

So there may be additional costs.

However, you are confident in this measure and you think you will be able to manage various situations with a fairly limited budget.

• (1225)

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** My concern is not financial in nature. I don't think those factors will have a major financial impact.

What I am concerned about is whether those people will have an opportunity to exercise their right to vote.

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** I saw in the document that changes to rates and fees will be announced.

Can you elaborate on that?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** We have prepared a submission for the Treasury Board, but it has not yet been considered. I hope it will be as soon as possible, as this must be coded into the pay systems. We do not play with the pay systems during an election.

The faster we get the green light from the Treasury Board, the better we will be doing.

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** Thank you, Mr. Perrault.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you. That's all the time we have.

Mr. Blaikie is next.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** Thank you very much. I'm coming to committee today from Manitoba. As Mr. Doherty mentioned, there are many places in the country—Manitoba stands out among them, unfortunately—that are really under siege when it comes to COVID-19 right now. It's been getting out of control, frankly, and our medical system is getting to the limit of its capacity. We've all been advised not to go out if we don't have to, as Mr. Gerretsen was saying.

I'm just wondering if, as some provinces begin to lock down quite seriously again, you've been reaching out to provincial health officials to start talking to them about what kind of advice they might be giving you now if there were an election under way, so that you can get a better sense of what public health orders might be in place and how they might affect an election if the kinds of severe restrictions we're seeing now were in place for a federal election.

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** It's a very good point. Health is fundamentally a local matter. There's a provincial-federal working group of senior health officials from agencies, and Monsieur Roussel has been engaging them. We have a working group in place to establish the connections, not just provincially but also locally. We find it's critical that, ahead of the election, returning officers know exactly who they need to engage locally, and the local authorities understand what will be happening during an election and what kind of support they can provide to returning officers.

There's quite an extensive network of connections to be implemented as we prepare for this election. I mentioned first nations. That's a very vast and diverse group.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** Do you have anything like a standing request in place to provincial health officials to notify you at any point if the situation in their jurisdiction gets to the point that they feel their public health orders might substantially interfere with the discharge of an election?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** Unfortunately, we do not have that, though, as I said, we have connections through the Public Health Agency of Canada and there is ongoing engagement. We have a sense of the evolution, but things can happen fairly quickly. We have to accept that we may not get much notice. If things change and health authorities feel they need to intervene, it may be at the last minute.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** I'm looking to hear from you that you won't be waiting until there is an election. We're seeing lockdowns now. I'm wondering if that outreach could happen now so that lockdowns don't come and go, when public health officials might have given advice to say, "We don't think you could actually safely hold an election right now." Then, once the lockdown is over, that advice is never issued so we won't know that we got to that point. It was never on their radar because the question wasn't asked.

I'm just looking for some reassurance from you that you might be asking that question so that we can learn from some of the lockdowns in place that are happening now, in terms of what their consequences would be if a similar situation were to occur within the window of a federal election.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Blaikie. That's all the time we have.

We went over a little while ago, but I wanted you to finish your thought.

Mr. Tochor, you're next for five minutes.

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** No, it's me.

**The Chair:** I'm sorry. You're next, Todd.

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** Thank you.

I want to go back to the line of questioning that Mr. Blaikie and Mr. Gerretsen brought in. Clearly, we're moving down a path where the provinces are seeing increased numbers. I've said before, and it's been repeated a number of times, there is real concern. I think, Mr. Perrault, you said the same: You want to make sure Canadians can actually exercise their democratic right to vote.

If voting in person were not a safe option for Canadians, wouldn't it be irresponsible to conduct a federal election? I understand that it's a hard question to put to you, but to both Mr. Gerretsen and Mr. Blaikie's point, at what point do we advise those above you that this is not a good idea?

• (1230)

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** As I think I said in perhaps my last appearance, we have a regime that contemplates a range of voting options. I do not foresee a federal election where there is only vote by mail. That, to me, is not what the regime contemplates. The regime contemplates the main option being voting in person—

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** Yes, but how can you say that with—

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** Let me finish. If there is a situation in a district where I cannot have poll workers and where voters cannot go to the polls, I think this dramatic scenario is one where I could invoke the power to make a recommendation to the Governor in Council to cancel the election.

Now, that said, this is an extreme scenario. We've seen in previous lockdowns that Canadians were allowed to go, for example, to

grocery stores, and that there were ways to allow voting in person. However, should health authorities feel that in-person voting is not possible, then I do not see an election in that particular location.

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** Okay.

On that, I'll go back to the mail-in ballots question and ensuring that the vote is received. Ballots are bar-coded, are they not?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** They are, but it's not the ballot itself. The outer envelope is coded.

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** Is there not a system in place right now, so you're not recreating the wheel, that the ballot itself could be bar-coded? Then electors could log on to whatever system. It should be fairly easy, I would think, to implement. Many online services and courier groups have this. It could say your vote was received and could provide that assurance to Canadians.

Again, that just builds more of a robust mail-in opportunity for Canadians.

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** My answer is that I'd love to do that, and we will be looking at that, but right now my priority is putting together the building blocks of a mail-in system that can handle five million. I think this is, in the order of priority, something that we'll get to at some point. I certainly endorse the benefits of that, but I can't commit to that.

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** Okay.

You've spoken a couple of times now on the identification requirements for those who are doing their mail-in ballots. Is that not discretionary? I mean, what are the identification requirements? Bill C-76 came through, and I believe some of that made those identification requirements discretionary.

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** Bill C-76 has not changed that, but it's a very good point. If you vote in person, there's no latitude in the act. I can prescribe the documents, but you have to provide the documents to vote. That's in-person voting. If you vote by mail, the law gives me the authority to establish the means of identification that I deem to be sufficient. I do have on the vote-by-mail system a greater flexibility.

We don't necessarily want a system where one way of voting has a certain degree of integrity and the other one has it to a lesser degree.

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** Right.

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** This is why if you vote by mail, I require documents. However, we have a situation where we have people in long-term care facilities. When you think about it, most of them waited for more than two years to get there. They are now confined in those places. We know who they are. They're not going anywhere, so why would we want to have them upload documents—

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** No, I agree.

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** What I'm saying is that there are spots in the country where there are problems and we need to be more flexible.

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** I'm focusing more on the five million mail-in votes and the three million Canadians who live abroad. How do we do that given the circumstances we're in?

• (1235)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

I believe Mr. Alghabra and Dr. Duncan will be sharing their five-minute slot. This will be the last slot.

Go ahead, Mr. Alghabra.

**Hon. Omar Alghabra:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Perrault, in our discussions with provincial returning officers—and I can't remember which province it was, either B.C. or Saskatchewan—we heard a returning officer had set up an advisory group made up of other parties, given the nature of having an election in a pandemic. It was consulted on a regular basis about changes that may be required.

How do you feel about doing the same for a federal election?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** We have that in place. It's in the legislation as well. We meet fairly regularly with the advisory committee of political parties.

We met late in the fall and showed some of the plans for a fall election, should there be a fall election, including protective measures. We are in the process of sending out invitations, which may be getting sent as we speak, for a late January meeting to see how the situation has evolved and whether legislation is coming, and to have discussions about the measures in place.

**Hon. Omar Alghabra:** That's good to know.

We are hoping to invite Canada Post before us to continue our study. Are there any questions you'd like us to ask them that you're curious about? We would be happy to pose those questions to Canada Post. We will have our own questions, but certainly our intent is to make sure they have the right capacity to do this job.

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** I'm sure you'll have some pointy questions for them, but we have an ongoing relationship. I have the privilege of making sure my staff can ask all the questions we need to ask of them, so I'm not going to suggest questions for the committee.

**Hon. Omar Alghabra:** I have one last question, which I think Mr. Blaikie touched upon.

When we invited a representative of the Assembly of First Nations, there was talk about a need for additional training as early as possible. I'd like to draw your attention to that. Even though we don't know the timing of the election, and I know you answered that, I just want to emphasize that it would be really necessary to coordinate with first nations on reserve to make sure they have the right training and the right representation there.

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** I want to make a nuance here between training and engagement and information. As we prepare for the election, we certainly need to engage and share some information, but actual training, of course, depends on who's going to be work-

ing and what exact procedure will be in place. That has to take place during the writ period and not before.

The basic point is true. We need to engage beforehand, and that's our plan.

**Hon. Omar Alghabra:** Thank you.

Dr. Duncan, it's your turn.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you so much to my friend and colleague, Mr. Alghabra.

Mr. Perrault, the greatest tragedy of this pandemic is the lives lost in long-term care homes. Should an election be called, I want to ensure the health and safety of those living in long-term care.

We have long-term care outbreaks in multiple provinces. I can talk about my own province. We had 100 long-term care homes in outbreak, with over 700 resident cases and 500 staff cases on November 13.

We've heard many recommendations, such as no polling stations in long-term care, no election workers in long-term care and not taking residents out of the home to vote. I want to know if you could table with the committee what you are looking at in terms of protections in long-term care and ensuring people's right to vote. Who are you listening to when it comes to protecting their public health?

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** As I indicated, we are working on various options to bring in more flexibility for voting by mail or in-person voting in the homes. We have no plans to take seniors out of long-term care facilities during a pandemic, of course.

We are developing those options, but in the end, as I said, there will be local variations. We have to adapt to the reality of the staff and the people there. There will not be a crystallized final set of procedures that is going to be applied everywhere. We really need to be flexible.

• (1240)

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** I understand that, and I assume you'll be listening to local public health. No one wants infection from the community into long-term care.

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** Absolutely, of course that is our goal.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you so much.

That is all the time we have today.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** Madam Chair, if I might.... I'm sorry.

Before our witness leaves, I'm wondering if I could ask for a response to my last question in writing to the committee.

**The Chair:** Yes, that's right. Would you like to remind M. Perrault what that question was?

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** Sure. It was just looking for some reassurance that they'll avail themselves of the unfortunate opportunity of current lockdowns to get a sense from provincial public health officials of the conditions under which they might make public health orders that make the administration of an election impossible.

**Mr. Stéphane Perrault:** We'll be happy to respond to that.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Monsieur Perrault, Mr. Roussel and Mr. Limoges.

You haven't even had an opportunity to speak at all today. Is there anything either of you would like to say before we adjourn for today?

**Mr. Marc Limoges (Chief Financial Officer, Elections Canada):** I have nothing to add.

**The Chair:** It was a pleasure to have all of you here today.

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** I have a point of order. Are we going into committee business? What is the plan now that it's 12:40 p.m.?

**The Chair:** I wanted to say goodbye to the witnesses and then we would discuss.... We have a budget to—

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** Great, as long as we're going into committee business. That's what I wanted to ensure. Thank you.

**The Chair:** Yes.

Thank you for being here to all of you. We really do appreciate it. You're always here for us.

In terms of committee business, we have one small thing. We have a study budget that was sent around to everybody. We need approval on that budget.

After that, I thought we could use this time—because before we go in camera, it takes a little bit of time to switch to in camera—to go into our subcommittee meeting for the prorogation study. I don't know if the clerk has provided everyone with a calendar. We do have witnesses slotted in for the remainder of this study. We wanted to be able to discuss that as well in the subcommittee meeting.

Justin, I'll let you take it over for the study budget.

**The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Justin Vaive):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Yesterday I sent a draft study budget to the members of the committee. This is essentially a budget that covers costs associated with the current study that the committee is engaged in on conducting a federal election during the COVID-19 pandemic. It's in the amount of \$6,000. Most of the costs associated with that are to cover costs for the dial-in phone lines that we use in this hybrid committee set-up, as well as the provision of headsets to our witnesses who we've been inviting and hearing from in the committee.

There is also a smaller amount with respect to expenses relating to working meals that have been ordered for the members who are showing up in person to the committee.

Essentially, in order to cover these costs associated with the study, the committee does need to formally approve this budget. It then ultimately gets signed by the chair and then it will be sent off to the House of Commons financial administration people to ensure

that these bills can be paid, which are the ones associated with this study budget.

**The Chair:** Does everyone have the budget before them?

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** Madam Chair, unless there are any questions from any of our colleagues—I'll ask that they speak up—I have no problem with this budget. So I move—

**Mr. Corey Tochor:** I don't have the....

**The Chair:** Mr. Tochor, you don't have the budget?

**Mr. Corey Tochor:** No, I don't have it in front of me. I just want to know how much was on it for these free lunches.

**The Chair:** It was \$750, it looks like, in total.

● (1245)

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** The total is \$6,000 for the budget as a whole. It's \$750 for the working meals.

**The Chair:** It was \$750 for the meals.

**The Clerk:** Madam Chair, I could provide further explanation for that. Since the committee has moved into hybrid sittings, we have had two or three members showing up in person, so the meals that have been ordered have ranged from about three to four meals per meeting for those members. There is a unit cost associated with each of the catering orders, which is the minimum that the House budgets for. However, I can also assure you that the actual unit costs that are being charged to the committee are significantly less, and that generally the meals are consisting of sandwiches, a drink and a little side order of vegetables.

**The Chair:** Yes, this is a much smaller budget than we generally ever pass in committees when we're—

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** Can I say something, Madam Chair?

I think it's harder to get your attention in person, which is what I'm learning.

**The Chair:** It is. That's what I was saying at the beginning too. I wish everyone who's present in the room had an individual camera, because it's really hard to see gestures there.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** Next time I'll come and sit here and put Zoom on my computer.

I am slightly offended by the fact that Mr. Doherty was here with us two days ago, but now he's not. Mr. Lukiwski thinks I scared him away, but—

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** I assure you, you didn't.

**Some hon. members:** Oh, oh!

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** In all seriousness, what I can say is that the lunches provided are basically exactly the same as what we would get if we were to go into the cafeteria room they have for us in West Block. Anybody who's done this would know that, I guess.

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** As part of this discussion, I understand the meal concerns, and I think if we actually look at it, let's be honest, I am probably one of the people who eats the lunch the most because I'm there so much of the time. I do enjoy my ham and cheese sandwiches, but I don't know if everybody should have to pay for that. As Mark mentioned, there is food available to us, so if we're done at one o'clock, we can still get food. That might be something we want to contemplate. I recognize it's only \$750, but I don't know if it's up to the committee to pay for two or three. I do thank everybody for paying for my lunches for the last few weeks, but I don't know if it's up to the committee to pay for everybody when there are just two or three of us there all the time.

I just wanted to put that into a point. Thank you.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** To be honest, I was raising it more like if I wasn't here, I'd be getting the exact same thing across the street and it wouldn't be coming out of the committee's budget. I don't understand the logic behind the committee having to pay for the exact same thing that I would get across the street. I'm on House duty right now, and I'm also here, I could literally be.... I don't want to belabour the point because I realize that it all comes from the same bag.

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** Mark, you and I could go for two meals.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** There you go. Exactly.

**The Chair:** Anyway, we have to pass the budget that's before us now. I think when it comes to the meals, someone is always paying. At the end of the day, it's all coming from the same place. It just gets divided into different budgets.

Yes, Mr. Tochor.

**Mr. Corey Tochor:** On a point of order, I would make the motion that we remove the free lunches. Someone has to pay—it's the taxpayer. There are people going bankrupt across Canada, and we're talking about free lunches for parliamentarians. I get it that there's another place for free lunches for parliamentarians. We don't have to have additional resources. Take care of the nickels and dimes, and the dollars take care of themselves. Yes, it's only some \$750. I would ask that it get removed from the budget.

**The Chair:** Okay.

I guess what I was saying was that if you went to get that free meal in the lobby, the taxpayer would still be paying for that lobby, so you're just shuffling where it's coming from. Just so we're completely transparent, parliamentarians do get free meals in the lobby when they're on House duty, so it's still coming out of the budget somewhere.

Mr. Therrien.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

I had already raised the point my Conservative colleague just brought up. I agree with him. However, I must say that Mr. Gerretsen is right. In other words, regardless of where in Parliament we were, we would have had access to free lunches. Ms. Vecchio, among others, and I were there once. We ate the same thing we would have eaten if Ms. Vecchio, Mr. Gerretsen and I had stayed in our offices.

Honestly, I think the situation is in no way problematic. I don't know whether you are understanding me correctly, but I really don't see any issues here. However, I do believe that the total amount is problematic, as it is high. Is the parliamentary cafeteria asking for that amount? I don't know whether it is, but I think the amount is a bit high, considering what we eat. As I already said, we eat what we would have eaten at our office.

• (1250)

[*English*]

**The Chair:** How do we go about this? I think there are slightly different views on the same thing. We could vote to—

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** Can we move to suspend the lunches?

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** I'm happy to vote in favour of Mr. Tochor's motion.

I know we had this discussion when we resumed in September. We raised this point, but we decided to continue paying for them. Then, ironically enough, when I subbed in on another committee that was doing the same thing, members were saying that PROC did this and PROC did that, but we hadn't suspended them.

I'm happy to vote in favour of it, but to Mr. Therrien's point, I don't see how voting to remove them really affects anything, because the exact same thing is available across the street. If we're doing this for the purpose of signalling the importance of it and, to Mr. Tochor's point, of counting the dimes and nickels so we don't have to count the dollars, then I'm happy to support it.

**The Chair:** Okay, so—

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** If I may, Madam Chair, I'd like to offer a contribution to the discussion. It actually comes from the experience of my father in the 1990s, when the Reform Party came to Parliament.

Prior to that, meals were subsidized in the parliamentary dining room. Parliamentarians didn't get any free lunches in the lobby, but they could go to the parliamentary dining room and pay a reduced price for the meals they ate on the Hill. When the Reform Party came to the Hill, they did a big political song and dance about that and ended it. It was shortly after they ended it that the Reform Party began advocating for free meals in the lobby for MPs. That's when and how it all began.

**The Chair:** That's interesting.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** I think there's something to be said for transparency in the real costs. Sometimes in these kinds of discussions around committee tables and elsewhere, we end up pushing what's going on off the books instead of having a very open accounting about how it all happens.

I'm not casting any aspersions on current members. I'm, of course, speaking about what happened in the nineties, but sometimes the members who want to benefit from a public conversation about stopping something are the people who advocate later for it to come back in a way that's less transparent. I would say we ought to be careful.

I'm comfortable endorsing a way of doing it that is at least transparent. I'm saying this as somebody who has yet to participate in an in-person meeting of this committee. I'm certainly prepared to support a way that's transparent about which committees are using how much in resources to pay for things such as food. As I think Mr. Gerretsen mentioned, this is about the House paying itself, and this is a way of documenting how much of the resources are being provided to this committee specifically.

There's something to be said for transparency here. I am concerned that we will end up pushing under the table information about the consumption among members, rather than proceeding in a way that documents it clearly.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** Madam Chair, I totally agree with what Mr. Blaikie said. He's absolutely correct, but we also have to think of the people who aren't going to be taking that lunch. Are they going to be claiming the per diem, and is that actually going to cost more? I appreciate where Mr. Tochor is going with this, and I think he's on the right path, but there are other sides to all this stuff that I think have to be considered.

To Mr. Blaikie's point, I think he's absolutely correct about transparency. It has to be across the board.

• (1255)

**The Chair:** We were going to move into subcommittee but Mr. Lukiwski is next.

**Mr. Tom Lukiwski:** I wasn't going to join in on this for a number of reasons, but I would point out that, if we're talking about transparency and being cost efficient and the taxpayers' dollars, all of which I agree with, we have over the years seen a lot of abuses with what's been going on. I will not name the former member of Parliament, but many of us know him, who used to come and eat a lunch in the lobby every single day, even though he was only on duty one day a week.

Other MPs have done the same thing. To Mark's point, you are not supposed to, by the rules, claim per diems if you're eating in Parliament. With me personally, I don't eat in Parliament. I eat one meal a day and it's always on my own dime outside of this office, but there are many, many MPs who have lunches at committees, lunches in the lobby, and still claim the full per diem. You are supposed to, by the rules, if you have a lunch in the lobby, eliminate that lunch from your daily per diem. I don't know how many members are doing that.

If we're going to talk about cutting down on costs, let's go all the way. Let's really talk about saving taxpayers' dollars.

**The Chair:** Absolutely. That is my understanding. Sometimes we expect people to understand this and it's not said enough. I do appreciate this conversation, although I didn't realize we were going to have such a lengthy conversation on this at the onset.

I've seen a whole bunch of points of view here and that is what I was trying to say originally. Are we taking something from one place and just shifting that cost somewhere else because we're upset that this cost is showing up here? Think hard about that.

Mr. Turnbull, you have your hand up as well. If you'd like to have a vote on removing it, then we could perhaps have that.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** I wanted to ask a very quick clarification question. Is this a projected budget for future meetings or is it costs that have already been incurred in a way, in the sense they've already...? We can't vote to take something out of a budget expense claim that's already in a way been spent. It would be moving forward in the future.

I wanted that clarification on what's before me, which says request for project budget. What I want to know is whether that is for future costs or is that for past meals. We seem to be having a really lengthy discussion about working meals, which I wasn't anticipating. I do find the basic amount of \$250 for meals, and I don't know how many people are attending, is quite high.

I just wanted clarification.

**The Chair:** Sure. The clerk can clarify.

**The Clerk:** Madam Chair, to Mr. Turnbull's question, these are costs that have been already incurred by the committee because there have been several meals that have been ordered already and consumed, as well as the use of the phone lines and headsets that have been shipped out.

In order to proceed, there would need to be a decision made on this current budget that's before you. The committee can always also then adopt a separate motion to essentially refrain from ordering any more catering going forward.

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** It's money spent already.

**The Chair:** Yes.

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** I move to adopt this and then maybe one of our colleagues could move a motion to suspend meals after we do this, because it's money spent.

**The Chair:** It's a lot less than previous budgets we've ever approved. We don't have people flying in as witnesses, so we're saving quite a lot. I haven't had a single meal, that's for sure, and quite a lot of people haven't because most of us are virtual.

Mr. Doherty has moved the motion. Does everyone agree on passing the budget we have before us?

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**The Chair:** Seeing as there's no one opposed to the budget, the budget passes.

Would anyone like to move the motion?

**Mr. Corey Tochor:** Madam Chair, I make the motion that we suspend all free lunches for committee going forward until the end of the pandemic.

• (1300)

**The Chair:** Okay. Would you like a recorded vote on that? Is everyone in agreement?

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** I'm in agreement, but what does the end of the pandemic mean? When we start meeting in person again? Is that what you meant?

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** In person...yes.

**The Chair:** Okay. I guess the motion is to suspend meals while we're in the hybrid sitting.

**Mr. Corey Tochor:** Sure.

**The Chair:** As long as we're in this type of hybrid format, or even if it were to become all virtual, obviously, we wouldn't have meals. Depending on what's happening within this context, as long as we're not all sitting in person we will have meals suspended.

I see no opposition to this.

(Motion agreed to)

**The Chair:** The clerk has noted this. Moving forward we will not order any meals for anyone.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** Madam Chair, sorry, if I may, I don't need to move this now because I respect that we want to get into the committee business portion, but a lot of the testimony we heard today, I think, would be quite germane to the study we're doing on pandemic elections. I'm just wondering if you'll need a motion at some point in order to allow the testimony that we heard today from the Chief Electoral Officer to be included in the body of testimony for that report.

I'd be happy to move a motion to that effect at a time that you think is appropriate. I'll just leave that with you for now. I didn't want to pass it over and then forget to do it later.

**The Chair:** Andre, how would we go about doing that? Is that all that would be required, that we have the motion stating we want to use testimony from the estimates towards our study?

**Mr. Andre Barnes (Committee Researcher):** Thank you, Madam Chair. To start with, I suppose Justin would be better placed to discuss the procedure for doing it.

My colleague Laurence and I discussed this possibility. We were waiting to hear from the committee as to its thoughts on the matter. We'd be more than happy to include it. It would be a matter of the committee giving us the say-so.

**The Chair:** Yes, I don't know if we need a formal motion.

Go ahead, Justin.

**The Clerk:** Madam Chair, strictly speaking, to formalize it the committee could definitely adopt a motion to adduce the testimony from today's meeting, which was on the study of the main estimates, for the purpose of using it in the other study on conducting an election during a pandemic. It doesn't have to be done immediately, today, but at some point before the report is adopted it could be done.

**The Chair:** Is there any opposition to doing that? If there's any debate on that matter, perhaps we should move it to another day. If there's no debate, maybe you should just move the motion, Mr. Blaikie, and that would be taken care of.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** Okay, provided that there will be no undue delays, please consider that motion moved.

**The Chair:** I don't see any opposition to that motion.

(Motion agreed to)

**The Chair:** Perfect. Thank you so much.

Everyone who is a member of the subcommittee, please log in with the separate login instructions, password and link that was provided by email. I will see you back in a few minutes.

To everyone else, farewell. I'll see you next Tuesday.

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