



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

43rd PARLIAMENT, 2nd SESSION

Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 005

Tuesday, October 27, 2020

Chair: Ms. Ruby Sahota



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• (1115)

[English]

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

Welcome to meeting number five of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

I'd like to start by saying that we'll set aside about 10 minutes at the end of this meeting so I can inform you about our next couple of meetings and whom we have scheduled as witnesses. If you have any comments about the witness lists that have been circulated to you by the clerk, we'll talk about that in the last 10 minutes of the meeting.

Also, I just want to mention that there has been a motion put on notice by Mr. Doherty, which will be debatable at our Thursday meeting. I'll set aside about 30 minutes for committee business during that meeting from 12:30 to 1 o'clock so that we can discuss that motion and figure out how it works within our working plan, and we might want to get into more details of our working plan at that meeting as well.

For now, since our witnesses have been waiting, we'll carry on with what is scheduled for today's meeting, and they are the chief electoral officers of New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island.

I'd like to start by providing you with some information following the motion that was adopted in the House on Wednesday, September 23, 2020.

The committee is now sitting in a hybrid format, meaning that members can participate either in person or by video conference. Witnesses must appear by video conference. All members, regardless of their method of participation, will be counted for the purposes of quorum. The committee's power to sit is, however, limited by the priority use of the House resources, which is determined by the party whips. All questions must be decided by a recorded vote, unless the committee disposes of them with unanimous consent or on division. Finally, the committee may deliberate in camera provided that it takes into account the potential risks to confidentiality inherent to such deliberations with remote participants.

Today's proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website. A reminder that the webcast will always show the person speaking, rather than the entirety of the committee. To ensure an orderly meeting, I'd like to outline a few rules.

For those participating virtually—that includes our witnesses—members and witnesses may speak in the official language of their

choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting. You have the choice, at the bottom of your screen, of either the floor, English or French. Before speaking, click on the microphone icon to activate your mike. When you are done speaking, please put your mike on mute to minimize any interference.

A reminder that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair. Should members need to request the floor outside of their designated time for questions, they should activate their mike and state that they have a point of order. If a member wishes to intervene on a point of order that has been raised by another member, they should use the “raise hand” function. This will signal to me their interest to speak and create a speakers list. In order to do so, you can click on the “participants” section at the bottom of the screen, and when the list pops up you'll see the “raise hand” icon. When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. Unless there are exceptional circumstances, the use of headsets with a boom microphone is mandatory for everyone participating remotely. Should any technical challenges arise, please advise the chair.

Please note that we may need to suspend for a few minutes, as we need to ensure that all members are able to participate fully. For those participating in person, proceed as you usually would when the whole committee is meeting in person in the committee room. Should you wish to get my attention, signal me with a hand gesture, or state my name at any appropriate time. Should you wish to raise a point of order, wait for an appropriate time, and indicate to me clearly that you wish to raise a point of order. With regard to a speaking list, the committee clerk and I will do our best to maintain a consolidated order of speaking for all members, whether they are participating virtually or in person.

With that being said, I'd like to welcome our two witnesses, who will have five minutes each for introductory remarks.

From Elections New Brunswick, we have Kimberly Poffenroth, the chief electoral officer of New Brunswick. From Elections P.E.I., we have Mr. Tim Garrity, chief electoral officer of Prince Edward Island.

I'm not sure if you have decided in which order you will speak. Would one of you like to go first—Mr. Garrity or Ms. Poffenroth.

Okay, go ahead, Mr. Garrity.

Mr. Tim Garrity (Chief Electoral Officer, Elections Prince Edward Island): All right, if Kim doesn't mind, I can take the lead on this one.

First of all, I would like to say hello to everyone and thank you for the opportunity to come to speak to you today. It was nice to get the invitation.

We're in the middle of a by-election here now and we have some busy days, but today is a bit of a down day, so that's a good thing.

We are the smallest province to run an electoral event during the pandemic. I hope I can highlight some of the challenges we've had and some of the challenges we've overcome as we're going through this, and the successes we've had.

Once this pandemic began, as in most places, we decided to work remotely and we all started working from home. We were able to do that without too much of a problem here.

We've been very fortunate here in P.E.I., within the Atlantic bubble, to have little to no community spread of COVID-19. We decided at that point, with an office of only three staff, and in a minority situation, that we would reopen the office with very limited public access and physical distancing rules in place to plan for the possibility of a pending election. Again, being in a minority situation we always have to be ready within our office, and with the COVID pandemic that was going to be a new challenge, so we wanted to be sure we had everything in place were that to happen.

We really began just in the background, just slowly preparing things. We weren't very concerned about a snap election being called here in P.E.I., unlike some other jurisdictions. The minority government has been working very well collaboratively here, and there was not much sign of a snap election taking place, but we still needed to be prepared in any case.

Then, in early September, one of our members of the legislative assembly from district 10 decided to resign, and that's when our office started planning for a pending by-election. The clock started to tick for us. We essentially had a six-month window, and playing that election bingo on the calendar, we began trying to calculate when the next date for the election would be. Of course, there was the possibility of a full general election if the government decided it wanted to take that route as well. We were preparing for both, but mainly thinking we were just going to be looking at the by-election in one of our districts.

We started to work right away with the chief public health officer of P.E.I. to draft a plan for how an election would be run here. We did have a requirement in our legislation to do a full door-to-door enumeration process for that district, but we were able to get that waived. I have some authority under the act during such a time to be able to bypass certain sections of the act. We had agreement from our legal...as well as from all four parties here that were planning to put candidates forward, that we could bypass that. There was that requirement that says if it's further than seven months away from the previous one, and we were 10 months away from doing one in our last election, so everyone agreed that we could get away with that, which was very nice.

We started to procure some supplies. As we all know, it became challenging to get some things, and we would need them in larger numbers, so hand sanitizers, disinfectant wipes, face masks, shields, stickers for the floor, plexiglass barriers, all of this we started to procure, as we could, in order to get ready for this.

Once the writ period began, we started to work on obtaining the workers that we would need at the polls, developing training sessions that could be COVID-compliant with social distancing and things taking place. As well, we worked on the voting location itself to make sure there was a separate entrance and exit, and that we would have ample space to house the workers, the electors and the scrutineers.

We've had two advance voting days so far, one of them being just yesterday. We've had very good turnout with people all in all wearing their masks. They are being very compliant. They're being very understanding. We haven't had any wait times, which is very good, and we're up to about a 30% turnout so far after just the first two days of voting, which is great.

Anyway, I'm happy to answer questions that come up going forward, and I hope to be able to offer some insight.

Thank you very much.

• (1120)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Poffenroth.

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth (Chief Electoral Officer, Elections New Brunswick): Good morning, everyone. First of all, I would like to thank all of you for the invitation to appear before the standing committee today and to participate in the important discussions that are going on.

New Brunswick's election management body is the first in Canada to hold a provincial general election during the pandemic and I hope that sharing our experiences will assist you in your deliberations on the report submitted by Chief Electoral Officer Perreault.

I don't plan to use the full five minutes allotted to me for an opening statement and I'm looking forward to answering any questions you have.

What I do want to raise is that in the spirit of full disclosure, Elections New Brunswick is pursuing legislative changes as a result of our experiences with the provincial general election, specifically around municipal elections. Unlike most elections bodies across the country, Elections New Brunswick is responsible not only for administering and conducting provincial elections but also for administering and conducting municipal elections and elections for district education councils and appointments to regional health authorities. Those elections are coming up in May 2021. They were delayed due to the pandemic. They were supposed to have been held in May 2020. As a result of our experiences during the provincial general election, we are requesting amendments to the Municipal Elections Act that, if accepted by government and passed by the legislative assembly, would provide my office and me with greater flexibility in administering those municipal and local elections in May 2021.

What our experience during the provincial general election last month showed us is that clearly the prescriptive nature of the elections act limited my ability to respond to challenges that arose from holding an election during a pandemic, particularly given that, as you all know, at this point it is a very fluid situation—and that applies right across the country.

So I'll be asking for more flexibility to modify and adapt election procedures as required in order to run those municipal elections, and also to limit that flexibility, because there's good reason legislatively why you want relatively prescriptive legislation when it comes to elections. The flexibility that I'll be looking for will be limited to cases where the province is either in a state of emergency or a local state of emergency has been declared, and that would include a public health emergency such as we are currently in.

The ultimate goal of requesting that flexibility is to ensure that no elector is disenfranchised as a result of unforeseen obstacles that may arise as a result of the pandemic and as we continue to administer elections during this very unprecedented time.

Those are my short opening comments and I'm looking forward to the questions from the committee this afternoon.

• (1125)

The Chair: Thank you. Both of you were very succinct and efficient. I appreciate that. I think we'll get a lot of chances for questions.

We're going to start with our six-minute round with Mr. Tochor.

Mr. Corey Tochor (Saskatoon—University, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair, and I'd like to thank the witnesses for providing information today.

Ms. Poffenroth, congratulations on running the first province-wide election during this pandemic. I'm sure there are things to learn from your experiences and hopefully suggestions on how we can get through this all together.

I'd like to talk a little bit about the authorities that you would have in your province to revoke a writ, be it in an individual riding or a constituency, or if a regional outbreak occurred. Walk us through how that process would work.

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: Thank you. There is no authority to revoke a writ once it has been issued. In the spring of 2020, we were actually in a situation where we had municipal elections that were about to commence, which don't use a writ, but we also had orders already issued, directing me to issue writs for provincial by-elections that would be held in June 2020. The only option available was for the legislative assembly to direct that I not issue a notice of election for the municipal elections and order me not to issue the writs of election as directed by the Lieutenant Governor in Council.

The only option available in New Brunswick is legislative intervention. There is no authority under the elections act to revoke a writ once it has been issued, or even to not issue the writ once the order directing me to issue the writ has been given.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Once the legislature is dissolved, there's no power to reconvene, because the train is going.

What would have happened if your provincial health officials declared a state of emergency?

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: We were already in a state of emergency. There had been an order declaring a state of emergency in the province of New Brunswick as a result of the pandemic. I know every province is using different nomenclature, but we were in the yellow phase in New Brunswick at the time the writs of election were issued, which is the lowest phase below green, which would be once there's an actual vaccine for the virus.

Had the province or an area of the province moved to a higher state of emergency—such as is now in place in one health region in the province—there is no mechanism to halt that election. However, we did consult with the chief medical officer of health and we were, I would say, relatively confident that the measures we put in place to protect both the electors and our election workers were sufficient regardless of whether the area was in the yellow or orange zone.

Red would be a different issue.

• (1130)

Mr. Corey Tochor: If we went to a worst-case scenario, like this region we're talking about right now.... What if the snap election was called for a little bit later and the election would be next week and you had a stay-at-home order. What would happen to those voters? You couldn't bring back the writ, so what would be your plan if that occurred?

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: To be perfectly honest, we didn't have a plan in place in the event that the state of emergency went back to red. It was a question that was asked. I knew what my authority was, which was very little.

There was discussion at the political level as to whether or not there was authority for cabinet to take measures under the Emergency Measures Act for New Brunswick. I was not privy to those discussions.

Mr. Corey Tochor: If it was up to you—it's kind of a loaded question because some people might grab the power when provided—would you like that authority to rest at cabinet, provincially or federally, or do you think that power should rest with you in the office?

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: Personally, even with the legislative amendments that I'm requesting, I do not feel comfortable as the chief electoral officer to have the authority to revoke a writ to stop an election that's already proceeding. I believe that authority needs to rest either with the Lieutenant Governor in Council or with the legislative assembly.

Mr. Corey Tochor: I'd like to talk briefly on additional costs. Comparing this election to the last general election, was there any increase in costs?

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: There was most certainly an increase in costs.

I have to apologize. One thing I wanted to do this morning was to run off the most up-to-date numbers from this past election. Unfortunately, other work requirements got in the way of my getting those numbers.

Before the writ was even issued for the election, we had spent about a million—I shouldn't say already spent. We estimated that the cost would be about an additional million dollars. The election budget for 2018 was \$12 million, so we were estimating a little under a 10% increase.

At this point I'm quite confident that the increase was actually larger. At that time, we were looking at what we had already ordered for personal protective equipment, what we had identified as additional staffing costs—we had created two new positions for every polling location—and the costs associated with mail-in ballots.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Poffenroth. That's all the time we have.

Mr. Turnbull, you have six minutes.

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

Thanks to Ms. Poffenroth and Mr. Garrity for being here today. I'm really happy that you could be with us because there's a lot we can learn from the challenges you've experienced in your provincial elections and how you overcame some of them. I really appreciate your time and your opening remarks.

I have a few questions.

Ms. Poffenroth, I understand that in New Brunswick you actually had a fairly low number of cases at the time of the election. Is that correct? Could you tell me roughly how many cases you had at the time?

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: Off the top of my head, I'm not 100% confident of the number, but I believe that at certain times during the election it may have been zero. We were definitely in single digits. I believe there may have been one or two active cases.

I believe that, at times during that four-week period, we may have been at zero. It was extremely low by comparison.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Mr. Garrity, would you say that it was around the same for your province? You said your case numbers were low as well, right?

• (1135)

Mr. Tim Garrity: Yes. Currently we have zero active cases in the province. We've had zero cases of community spread. All of our cases have been travel related.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: That's great to hear, to both of you, that people are safe and healthy.

Given the rising case numbers throughout the country, and certainly in the four largest provinces, a national federal election would likely require special measures to account for communities that have a higher number of cases or a possible rise in cases at any point. It's very hard to predict. As you said, Ms. Poffenroth, it's a very fluid situation.

I know that, even though your case numbers were low, you were probably preparing for potential rises in cases. During the writ period—Ms. Poffenroth, I'll ask you first—did you have any special measures you put in place that can maybe be recommendations for our committee to consider?

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: Yes, absolutely.

We followed the advice of our public health officials, which was very similar to the advice that public health officials across the world are giving when they're talking about any sort of public gathering. We were essentially putting in place the same sorts of measures you would see at any retail establishment. We ordered plenty of personal protective equipment. We provided advice to our returning officers that they should be looking, both for their returning offices and for polling locations, at larger spaces to accommodate social distancing and limiting the number of people who are at a location at any time.

We had ordered more face masks than we actually needed, because most people brought their own. Of course, like Mr. Garrity, when we were home during the period when things were in lockdown, we began thinking about how we were going to run an election during a pandemic. We were in a minority government situation. We had postponed both provincial by-elections and municipal elections. We had to immediately start thinking about those things. At that time the advice was very fluid, even on masks. We ordered enough disposable masks for every elector in the province. By the time the election came around, people were wearing their own masks.

We had quite a robust media campaign encouraging people to vote early and to take advantage of other voting opportunities. We were using the term “flattening the election curve”. In New Brunswick you can vote at any returning office in the province. We were encouraging people to vote at the returning offices, which were available from the time the writ was issued, to take advantage of advance voting days and to vote by mail.

We used a modified vote-by-mail option for our residents in long-term care facilities. That's really going to be an area that has to be looked at and considered in quite a bit of detail. It will be different. Every province has different rules in place as to what's permissible in terms of visitors at long-term care facilities. In speaking with other colleagues, even what's considered a symptom that keeps people excluded from, whether it's public spaces or...

It's really about taking seriously those recommendations that public health is making with regard to any retail establishment, particularly when you're looking at long-term care facilities, and being prepared for a large increase in individual voters taking advantage of those opportunities.

We didn't see the increase in the numbers of mail-in ballots that they did in British Columbia, for example, but it was an exponential increase in demand. In New Brunswick, normally we don't even keep track of the number of mail-in ballots. They have been lumped in with other special voting opportunities. We'd be lucky if we got 100. We processed 13,000 mail-in ballots. In comparison to B.C.'s 700,000, it sounds like nothing, but when you have a system that's designed to handle one or two in an office, it does have a large impact. Managing voters' expectations of what can be done with mail-in ballots is very important as well.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Yes, these are great comments. You actually answered some of my other questions.

Maybe I'll ask you to go a little deeper and then, Mr. Garrity, I'd love to give you a chance to respond as well.

Long-term—

The Chair: You have only 10 seconds, though, Mr. Turnbull.

• (1140)

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Do I?

I'll just say thank you very much. I appreciated your remarks. I'm sure we'll have many other good questions from my colleagues.

The Chair: Had you already gotten to the question, maybe there would have been some leeway for the witnesses. I always give some leeway.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Therrien, you have the floor.

Mr. Alain Therrien (La Prairie, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I welcome our two witnesses. We are very grateful to them for being with us.

My question is for Ms. Poffenroth.

We heard from Mr. Perrault last week. He said he would prefer to have as long an election campaign as possible. Unless I'm mistaken, the election campaign in New Brunswick can last between 28 and 38 days, and the government decided it would be 28 days.

Ms. Poffenroth, did this cause you more problems? That's my first question.

My second question is this. If you had to choose between 28 and 38 days, based on your experience, what would you have chosen?

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: Thank you for your question.

[*English*]

In the case of an unscheduled election in New Brunswick, the period can be anywhere from 28 to 38 days.

The 28-day election period presented us with a number of challenges. Some of them would have been presented regardless of the pandemic.

Setting up a modern election office with all of the technology and telecommunications that are required was very challenging with our service provider. We had a 28-day election period and we were at the end of the second week of that four-week period before every office had phone and Internet. Given that we used a digital voters list, allowing people to vote early was challenging because we didn't have access to that digital list. Receiving calls requesting mail-in ballots was a problem.

With the COVID challenges, of course, there was a large increase in the volume of requests for mail-in ballots. We require a signed application; they can't be sent by email. A lot of people who weren't leaving their homes didn't have access to printers, email and whatnot, so getting those requests, processing them, sending out the ballots and getting those ballots back in a 28-day period proved very challenging.

The only word I can come up with is “unfortunate”, which I think is an understatement when it comes to one's franchise and the importance of the vote. We know that ballots arrived late. They arrived too late for people to get them back in time. That was a challenge.

Certainly, if it were my choice I would select a 38-day election period.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien: Thank you for your answer, which was very clear.

I'd like to ask you another question about this general election. After the election, did you see an increase in COVID-19 cases? Was there an increase in infections following the election?

Have you studied the public health implications of this election? I'm not blaming you at all. You had no choice...

[English]

Mrs. Karen Vecchio (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): A point of order, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Yes, there is currently no interpretation.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Justin Vaive): Madam Chair, we'll look into it.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): Maybe you can give him his time back to re-ask that question, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Absolutely.

[Translation]

Mr. Alain Therrien: Should I repeat the question, Madam Chair?

[English]

The Chair: Yes. Now we can hear it.

You can start over again.

[Translation]

Mr. Alain Therrien: Given that a general election was recently held in New Brunswick, did you notice an increase in cases after the election year? Have you looked into this? I don't want to point the finger at you, because I know you've done a great job.

That being said, were there any public health implications?

[English]

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: Yes, absolutely.

We were following that very closely because we didn't want to be the cause of an outbreak, and there were no new cases within 14 days of the election day. We were following both our advance voting days and from the opening of the returning office. We did have an increase in cases in New Brunswick, but that was probably more than a month after election day. I personally felt comfortable that this wasn't a result of the election.

• (1145)

The Chair: You have two more minutes, Mr. Therrien.

I stopped your clock in between.

[Translation]

Mr. Alain Therrien: Thank you for your response and congratulations. If you didn't have any more cases, it means you did a good job. With regard to sanitary measures such as disinfectant, mandatory masks and so on, did you have any difficulty getting the necessary equipment, given that you were in a general election?

In the same vein, I'd like to ask you a question, Mr. Garrity. How much money did you budget for the implementation of these health measures?

My question is for both of you.

[English]

Mr. Tim Garrity: Thank you very much for the question.

We did have some challenges in procuring enough PPE, but due to the smaller size of the by-election, we were able to manage that. As I said, we did start to gather up some of those supplies in advance. On my part and some of the staff in the office, if we saw some Lysol wipes at the grocery store, we were buying as many as we could and bringing them back to the office so that we would have them available.

We did work with our provincial authorities in the chief public health office because they had started to procure face masks, face shields, and hand sanitizers, so we were able to jump on board with them to get some supplies. To run a full provincial election, we gathered up enough masks to provide them to electors within the district, which is around 4,200 electors just for this one small district. If we were to do it provincially, it would pose some additional challenges, although I think and I hope we would be able to get there. It would be more with the cleaning supplies and such things that would be a little more challenging to have enough. It is a significant increase in cost as well, as was highlighted earlier by my counterpart from New Brunswick.

The Chair: Okay.

[Translation]

Mr. Alain Therrien: Thank you, Madam Chair.

[English]

The Chair: Next we have Mr. Blaikie.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): Thank you very much.

Thank you to both of our witnesses for sharing your time with us here today.

I'm curious to know, throughout the course of the election or subsequently, if either of your electoral authorities identified challenges for particular groups, either people with disabilities, indigenous people—urban indigenous or people living on reserve—or students, who oftentimes will vote on campus, for instance. Are there any particular groups that stand out as having faced challenges above and beyond what everyone is facing in a pandemic context? Were there additional barriers or a worry that particular groups of people had been disenfranchised because those barriers were just too high?

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: I will answer that first.

New Brunswick generally has quite a robust campus voting program. I believe that in 2018 we were on 18 university and community college campuses, which for a small province is quite significant. We did not have any on-campus voting during this last election. That was in large part due to the fact that it was an unscheduled election more so than to the pandemic. However, the pandemic did come into play because we really were uncertain as to how many students would even be on campus, and that varies quite significantly from university to university here even in New Brunswick.

That was a concern that the student groups expressed—our not having that presence—but in all cases there were polling locations very close to the universities, so I don't know, ultimately, that they had as large a problem accessing.

A bigger issue would have been for those individuals, whether seniors or those with underlying health conditions, who were concerned about going out to the polls to vote, whether to advance polls or even to a returning office, and so were accessing mail-in ballots. It's the issue that those who are most vulnerable, be they seniors or those with disabilities, may not have the technology at home, particularly around the type of mail-in application processes that we have in New Brunswick. If you don't have a printer, it becomes very difficult. You need to sign your application even if you can email it.

Then it's getting those ballots to people. We were doing everything we could to facilitate that delivery because we knew there was a short turnaround time, so we were allowing friends and family to pick up and deliver ballots for folks. If they didn't have that, we had returning officers and their staff going out and hand delivering ballots, and then going back and picking them up. I would say that the field staff went above and beyond to try to ensure that everyone was able to vote.

Another challenge, of course, was individuals in long-term care facilities. We facilitated and tried to make the mail-in ballot process as easy as possible for those individuals, but it was a challenge. It relied on the staff of long-term care facilities to assist the residents, and as you all know, during this pandemic they are quite overworked as it is. In some cases, there was a lack of understanding of what needed to be signed. We have a certificate envelope in New Brunswick with the ballot inside that needs to come back, and they weren't signed and that sort of thing, so there were individuals who exercised their right to vote, but by the time the ballots got back, the procedures hadn't been followed correctly. That's one of those things that we want to look at—how we can simplify the process—for our elections in May because we do anticipate that those will be held during the same situation.

• (1150)

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Mr. Garrity, was your experience substantially similar, or is there anything you want to add to Ms. Poffenroth's testimony?

Mr. Tim Garrity: I would like to highlight the challenges around—and I know she did; she did a very good job of it—the long-term care facilities. We have one long-term care facility that's within this small district, and even here with zero cases right now in P.E.I., there still are restrictions to going into those places. They

are even restricted to certain family members and things like that, so it's very challenging.

The reality is that I had the luxury of happening to know the administrator of the facility. I was able to contact them. I personally went with full protective equipment on—a face mask, face shield, gloves—and with enough applications, enough new pens, enough certificates, to register any of the residents myself. I was able to help them with that process. However, just as Ms. Poffenroth was saying, we have the requirement that those applications be signed. That can be very challenging for people. I was able to go out. I was able to bring the applications, have them pre-filled, and just have them sign them, and I was able to get those back. I hand delivered the ballots so that those folks would be able to vote. However, that, going across Canada with approximately 10,000 long-term care facilities, will be one of the major challenges of the next federal election.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: When we talk about the challenges facing people who were trying to vote from home, particularly when it was an issue of technology, are there any best practices that emerged in the course of your experience that you want to share with the committee that you think might be of use to Elections Canada in the conduct of a federal election? By the end of the election, was there anything about which you thought, “Wow, I wish we had thought of this at the beginning because now that we have learned how to do this, it has really made a difference?”

The Chair: In 10 seconds if you can, please.

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: There are two things. I don't know if they'd work as well at the federal level, but I think that simplifying the process, which we didn't have the option of doing under our legislation, such that people could either have a signature on file or provide ID so that they wouldn't have to sign the application would be one way.

We also probably would have in-office couriers, but I don't think that works in large federal districts. We have 49 districts in New Brunswick; federally there are only 10, so I just don't think that's scalable to a federal election.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you very much.

I'm going to have to suspend for a short amount of time before we start back up with Mr. Doherty, for the five-minute rounds. We've lost connection, I think, on our webcast. While they get that resolved, we'll have just a short suspension. Hopefully, it's only a minute or two.

• (1150)

(Pause)

• (1155)

The Chair: The webcast problem has been resolved, so we're going to move forward.

We're going to start the meeting back at the second round with Mr. Doherty, for five minutes, please.

Mr. Todd Doherty (Cariboo—Prince George, CPC): Thanks, Madam Chair.

Thank you to our guests today.

I do want to first apologize to my colleagues, as well as to the guests, for the technical difficulties we had on our end here.

Ms. Poffenroth, what was your voter turnout this year versus other years?

• (1200)

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: We actually had virtually identical voter turnout compared to 2018. I'm trying to remember now. I think 2018 voter turnout was 67.4%, and in 2020 it was 67.14%.

Mr. Todd Doherty: And, Mr. Garrity, you're just undergoing yours right now.

I have a question for both of you. Did either of your premiers provide advanced notice to you or work with you or consult with you or your office prior to calling the election?

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: No.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Okay.

Mr. Tim Garrity: No, not here either.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Not there, okay.

I do really appreciate both of your speaking about the long-term care and the costs and challenges associated with the mail-in ballots. I know that in response to the questions we asked earlier of the Chief Electoral Officer, somehow because we're Conservative, my colleague across the way took offence, thinking there was going to be some conspiracy. However, you both keyed in on some key areas, both the long-term care challenges we have in ensuring that those ballots are filled in properly and, let's say, somebody working out of province who wants to vote.

There are questions I want to ask both of you. These questions pertain to both.

How many mail-in ballots were cast most recently in New Brunswick. I believe you said there were 13,000. Is that correct, Ms. Poffenroth?

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: Yes—

Mr. Todd Doherty: The 13,000.

Sorry, go ahead.

Mr. Tim Garrity: Sorry, Kim. Here in P.E.I., we just had 235 applications for the mail-in ballot process from the 4,200 electors. I'll let Kim speak to New Brunswick.

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: We had approximately 13,000, but that included over 7,000 mail-in ballots to long-term care facilities. In the interest of full disclosure, it's not a precise number because when our mail-in ballots are counted, they are counted with all other special voting opportunities. It was taken from returning officers going through their records. It's not an exact number, but it's accurate.

Mr. Todd Doherty: How many would you say—

The Chair: Mr. Doherty, I just paused your time. There is a problem with your mike. It may not have been selected. It's not connecting.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Can you hear me now?

The Chair: I can hear you, but the main thing is for the interpreters.

The Clerk: Mr. Doherty, if it's not an issue of it not being plugged in, it might be on your interface. You need to select your audio headset, and then it will go through the Zoom meeting itself.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Can you hear me now?

The Clerk: They tell me that's better, so that seems to have fixed part of it.

The Chair: Mr. Doherty, I'll start your time again.

Mr. Todd Doherty: I'm trying to remember where I was now.

Ms. Poffenroth, of those 13,000, you did mention there were some that would be spoiled or not eligible. How many of those would you say that were not—

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: I cannot tell you that because what I saw was just anecdotal, going into returning offices when they were being processed. They'd be included with all other spoiled ballots.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Okay.

How does a voter obtain a mail-in ballot?

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: In New Brunswick?

They had to fill in an application for a special ballot, which is available on the website or you can pick up a paper copy. It requires a signature in addition to the other information. The signature is the most important piece.

• (1205)

Mr. Todd Doherty: Did they have to photocopy a piece of ID and include that in there with the signature?

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: No. In New Brunswick, legislatively there is no requirement for photo ID if you're already on the list of electors. If you're not already a registered voter, then you would have to provide up to two pieces of ID that have three pieces of information: your signature, your civic address and your name.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Did either of you have a plan if there was a considerable spike during the election—like two weeks in or a week in—and things had to be shut down?

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: This would have been when you were unavailable.

In New Brunswick, there's no option under the Elections Act to stop an election once the election writ has been issued or once I've been directed to issue the writ, for that matter.

Mr. Tim Garrity: In Prince Edward Island, I have the authority for certain reasons to put forward a recommendation to postpone...to withdraw the writ of election. It is the Lieutenant Governor in Council who, upon my advice, may withdraw the writ. It would have to be reissued within three months of that happening. I currently have that in our legislation.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Did either of you consult with your local health authorities?

The Chair: Unfortunately, that's all the time we have. That will have to be a follow-up question maybe.

Dr. Duncan is next for five minutes.

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

I'd like to begin by thanking our witnesses. Thank you for joining us today and bringing your experience and expertise.

For this first question, I'm looking for a yes or no answer. It's both to Ms. Poffenroth and Mr. Garrity.

Would each of you please table with the committee the range and the number of cases from the lowest and the highest number, as well as the average number of cases, for the election period?

Mr. Tim Garrity: Yes, we would be able to do that. I believe in P.E.I. it's been zero.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you.

Ms. Poffenroth, could you table please?

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: Yes, I can do that. Similarly, I think it was zero.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Ms. Poffenroth, would you please be willing to table with the committee the health and safety measures for each of your yellow, orange and red levels?

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: We only have one document, so I can table that.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you so very much.

Mr. Garrity, you mentioned you were an office of three. Did you have to hire new people, yes or no?

Mr. Tim Garrity: Yes, we did hire additional people within the office and poll workers.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Could you please give us an estimate for your office of what the increase was for the poll workers?

Mr. Tim Garrity: We had two additional people here in the office and we still do. We have hired five additional people to work at the poll.

We call them "COVID compliance officers". Essentially they're...a bit of traffic, as well as sanitizing. They're cleaning surfaces after every elector votes. They clean the voting compartments.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Mr. Garrity, how many people would you normally have in the polls? What per cent increase does that represent, please?

Mr. Tim Garrity: That would probably be almost a 20% increase at the poll itself.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: I'm wondering if you would both table with the committee the percentage increase in spending for the election by item. Was it on supplies, poll workers...?

Ms. Poffenroth, would you be willing to table that, please?

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: Yes. We are still receiving the invoices, so I can't guarantee when we would be able to have that available.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you.

Mr. Garrity, are you able to share that?

Mr. Tim Garrity: Yes, I will, but of course we still have a week left before our vote is done. Once we get all the numbers we absolutely will.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you.

Mr. Garrity, could you share how your protocols were different between a usual election and this election, using two columns? Would you be willing to table that with the committee, please.

• (1210)

Mr. Tim Garrity: We have an election COVID document that really details all of the things we're doing differently, and I can table that.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: That would be terrific. Thank you.

Mr. Garrity, did you have different protocols for different locations? For example, I don't know if you included schools, community centres or long-term care.... Were there different protocols? Yes or no, please.

Mr. Tim Garrity: Yes, there were.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Are schools being used?

Mr. Tim Garrity: No, schools are not being used, and haven't been used in the past in P.E.I.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: I appreciate that.

Ms. Poffenroth, were there any areas where electors were disenfranchised as a result of unseen obstacles, please?

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: I'm just trying to understand. When you say "areas", do you mean for patients or...?

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Were there any electors who had difficulty voting as a result of the pandemic that we should be aware of? You've talked about long-term care.

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: Did you say "unable to vote"?

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: I said "had difficulty voting".

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: Oh, I guess I would have to say it was likely, but it's case by case.... I can't speak for individual electors.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: In your words, you were worried where electors were "disenfranchised" as a result of unseen obstacles. Could expand on that, please?

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: Well, these are issues with mail-in ballots, including whether or not they received ballots on time and were able to get them back on time. For individuals who lived in long-term care facilities, we know that we were facilitating and reaching out, but I have no way of knowing if every individual in those facilities who wanted to vote was able to vote.

Then, there would be individuals who were just concerned about going out to vote at all. It's more of a general sense. I can't speak to whether or not individual voters chose not to vote because of the pandemic.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Next, we have Monsieur Therrien for 2.5 minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien: Thank you.

My questions are addressed to both witnesses, and I would like to have short answers since my time is limited.

Long-term care facilities are a problem. You said that attendants could eventually replace poll officials because of the pandemic. Is that true in both cases?

[*English*]

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: I'm not sure I understand the question, actually.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien: Will the attendants in long-term care facilities be called upon to replace people representing the returning officer for the vote?

[*English*]

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: No, they didn't replace the returning officer so much as they were assisting voters with making sure their ballots got into their envelopes, and distributing the applications to make sure they got signed. They weren't so much replacing the work of the election workers, but there was an extra burden put on to them to make sure that things got distributed to the electors and collected.

Mr. Tim Garrity: That would be the same in P.E.I. as well.

The Chair: Mr. Therrien, could you hold your mike up a little bit closer to your mouth?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien: I see.

Can attendants, unbeknownst to the voters involved, cast a vote for people who are not qualified to vote and who live in a long-term care facility?

Could there be a situation on the verge of electoral fraud that would be facilitated by mail-in votes?

• (1215)

[*English*]

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: In New Brunswick, the individual voter has to sign both the application and the certificate envelope,

and we compare those two signatures. That's our test to ensure that the person requesting the ballot is actually the individual who's voting.

Mr. Tim Garrity: We have that same policy here in P.E.I. You have to sign the application and the certificate envelope, and they are compared. Again, that is the level of security that we would have, although people can have assistance in completing the ballot if necessary. However, they at least have to make their mark on the certificate envelope.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Blaikie.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: I respect that, obviously, neither of you is involved in any partisan campaigning yourselves, but as close observers of the elections and as people who have had a lot of interaction with partisan actors during the election campaign.... The other part of this study that we haven't talked a lot about so far is what kinds of practices campaigners could adopt that would be useful in limiting the spread of the virus.

I'm just wondering if, in the conduct of your elections, you noticed any intentional forums where the partisan political actors were convening to discuss these matters, or if they adopted any kind of conventions or practices to reach some agreement on what acceptable and unacceptable campaigning methods are.

Mr. Tim Garrity: Here in P.E.I. it's very split. We have four candidates running, four different parties. We have two parties that decided to do door-to-door campaigning, and we have two parties that opted not to do that, but to offer some more virtual platforms and more campaigning via telephone. The two parties that decided to do door-to-door campaigning did have to submit a plan to our chief public health officer to ensure that it met with their standards and guidelines, and it had to be approved before they were able to proceed.

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: In New Brunswick, the chief medical officer of health prepared a document that she asked that I circulate to the political parties about guidelines around acceptable and unacceptable or recommended and not recommended practices. I wouldn't say that there was an agreement among the parties about what they would or would not do. Much like Mr. Garrity said, certain parties made it very clear that they were not going to do door-to-door campaigning.

I think some started doing door-to-door campaigning but received a negative reaction from householders. I cannot recall whether they stopped or dialed it back somewhat, but there was an initial negative reaction. When the premier called the election, he indicated that his party would not be doing door-to-door campaigning, and I think there was a misconception that that was a rule we had implemented that applied to everyone. We did get some calls about that, and we said, "No, that's up to individual candidates and parties to determine."

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Would you say—

The Chair: Thanks.

Mr. Lukiwski, for five minutes.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Moose Jaw—Lake Centre—Lanigan, CPC): Thank you Mr. Garrity and Madam Poffenroth for being here.

I have question for both of you.

Is there either a formal or informal association or alliance of electoral offices across Canada?

Let me tell you the reason for my question. Both of you have given some recommendations for best practices, as Mr. Blaikie has already mentioned. Mr. Garrity, you said you have a COVID-19 document. It would be helpful for the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer in Ottawa and all provincial electoral offices if there were a compendium of best practices manuals that each province could put together that could be shared. Each province could take a look at some of the best practices being employed by their provincial counterparts.

The question goes directly to you, Mr. Garrity, to start off.

Are you aware of any kind of alliance or an association of electoral offices, province to province?

● (1220)

Mr. Tim Garrity: Yes, we do meet as a group. Now of course, we're doing it virtually.

We do come together on certain projects across the country. Elections Canada is part of that group as well.

We have been sharing since this process began. We have been actively sharing any type of documentation, best practices and challenges that we've had. We have been actively sharing that information amongst ourselves.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Excellent. That's good to hear. Thank you for that.

I want to turn now to a question that was asked before by one of my colleagues about voter turnout. Madam Poffenroth, I believe you said that in New Brunswick it was roughly 67%. Mr. Garrity, I'm not quite sure what it will be in your district in P.E.I.

Even though you employed a bit of a media campaign to get out the vote, Madam Poffenroth, it would appear to me that an extensive get-out-the-vote awareness campaign would probably help or at least assist in driving up the voter turnout.

I look south of the border as an example. I see massive advertising imploring people to vote, utilizing well-known celebrities and athletes. They're not giving a partisan message; they are asking people to just get out and vote. What I've seen—at least what I've read—is that the early turnout of registered voters is significantly higher than it has been in past years. Of course, there are probably many reasons for that.

Nonetheless, have you done any extensive media in the past in your respective provinces to try to encourage people to get out and vote? If not, would you at least consider perhaps adding that to your budgets, provincially, for the future?

Madam Poffenroth, perhaps we'll start with you first.

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: In our campaign during this last election, it wasn't a get-out-the-vote effort precisely. It was about encouraging people to take advantage of early and alternative voting opportunities to flatten the election curve. Our campaigns in the past have been about informing people about the when, where and how they can vote.

Where it gets into issues with quite large get-out-the-vote campaigns is that election management bodies have to be very careful in what they do, particularly when they enlist, say, celebrities or athletes. Even if it's a non-partisan campaign, those individuals always come with some partisan leanings of their own. Then it tends to get the election management body into some sort of trouble.

We take our role in encouraging individuals to vote very seriously, and making sure they know there are opportunities. We do have to be very careful trying to thread that needle of non-partisanship. Enlisting others to be involved in that messaging can be very difficult for an election management body and often ends up putting them in a difficult position.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Thank you.

I would appreciate it if, in your best practices manual that I hope you both will be developing, you might include some mechanisms by which you would recommend that voter turnout increase. I take your comments very seriously. I appreciate those about the challenges you would face by employing celebrities or others because of the blowback that might occur to your offices.

I think we all agree that the higher the voter turnout, the better for democracy. If you can come up with some recommendations or thoughts—whether it be an educational campaign or a media campaign—I think that would be helpful for all of us across Canada.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lukiwski.

Mr. Cormier.

Mr. Serge Cormier (Acadie—Bathurst, Lib.): Thank you everyone. It's good to be with you.

Madam Poffenroth, thanks a lot for organizing this election. Coming from New Brunswick, I appreciate your work. I know it was not easy for you.

Going back to remote voting for a little bit, I've been a candidate in two elections and have organized some others, and I never realized it was so complex and difficult to vote remotely. On top of that, you had a pandemic to deal with.

Looking at this, I see it was four round trips by mail, and the election was for 28 days, as you said, during a pandemic when Canada Post was also operating at a slow pace. Is there any other way of voting that you know of? In your mandate, and your vision also, it said that you were trying to look at new models of voting. In 2020, we have a lot of new technologies. We have some iPhones or other devices with face recognition. Is there some way that you're looking at so that we can have safe voting for electors on their phones or any other way?

• (1225)

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: Elections New Brunswick is not currently exploring those options. I guess that's the short answer, and I know you don't have a lot of time.

Mr. Serge Cormier: Okay.

In your mandate, again, it's written that you're looking for innovation. That is something that Elections New Brunswick will probably need to look at, as well as maybe in other jurisdictions. Having a pandemic like this will probably force us to look at other ways of voting. Are you saying that you will certainly look at that and other ways of voting remotely?

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: It's definitely something that needs to be explored, but at Elections New Brunswick, we don't feel confident that those.... I guess, if you're looking at things like Internet voting and that sort of thing, we don't feel confident that the technology is where it needs to be. Those are the sorts of systems that, in addition to the process, are taking a long time to develop. It's a longer-term process. Unfortunately at Elections New Brunswick, we've been so constantly running elections over the last three or four years that looking at those longer-term visions is just not something that we've had an opportunity to do. We are looking at other technological improvements but nothing of that manner.

For our next election, we are looking at doing voting over the phone for long-term care facilities. That's taking someone's vote over the phone and still having a paper ballot.

Mr. Serge Cormier: Okay.

During elections now, we all know that we can vote almost every day when polling offices open. In my riding, we have six provincial ridings. Some of those offices were not even open nine days after the election was called. Some people were turned away at offices. I know it's not your fault. You're having to deal with a pandemic. However, we all know that the service providers across the country, for phones or internet, for example, are operating at a slow pace.

Were there a lot of polling offices throughout New Brunswick that were faced with that challenge? Nine days after an election is called, I think it's time that we look at it. I'm sure that some people were not able to vote, or were just turned away at the door, or had to go out to work somewhere and didn't have time to vote. Were there a lot of offices that experienced that problem?

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: Yes, absolutely. With our telecommunication service provider, the election started on Monday, August 17. The first office didn't have phone and internet until that Friday. The very last office to receive phone and internet was the following Friday, so it was almost two full weeks. They were able to process some voters, but that was a significant problem for us.

It was exacerbated by the pandemic, I understand from the service provider. We are looking at other alternatives than our current operation so that if there are unscheduled elections we can be up and running more quickly. It's simply not an issue when you're looking at a fixed-date election.

Mr. Serge Cormier: Okay.

You said that Dr. Russell consulted you regarding the election going forward, but you said that Premier Higgs didn't consult you.

Would you have liked the premier to at least consult with you and get your feedback on calling an election in a pandemic like this? Would it have helped you to better prepare yourself?

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: In general, it's just not something we expect in general that the political arm will consult us on calling an election. From the time we started working from home, we were planning and preparing for a potential election during a pandemic because of the minority government situation and the fact that two sets of elections had been postponed. So we were making what plans and preparations we could make, but we didn't expect and don't ever operate from a place where the political arm would be consulting with us on—

• (1230)

Mr. Serge Cormier: Really quickly, what will be—

The Chair: That's all the time you have, Mr. Cormier. Thank you.

Mr. Serge Cormier: Ms. Poffenroth, thank you very much.

The Chair: Next we have Ms. Vecchio. I think we have enough time to go through the second round one more time and we will still have some minutes at the end to talk about some future meetings.

Ms. Vecchio, go ahead, please, for five minutes.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Thank you so much.

Thank you so much to the witnesses.

As a member of Parliament who resides in Ontario, I have listened to the information and data you've provided and am almost jealous when I hear that you're sitting with zero cases when I know that in this area we are closing in on numbers like a thousand per day, which is really concerning.

I want to look at this using two methods. I want to look at the fact of our population density. When I look at the city of Toronto, we're talking about 630 square kilometres compared to New Brunswick, which is over 73,000 square kilometres, so we know that social distancing is probably a little bit easier there but there are also the populations. In the city of Toronto there are approximately two million more people than there are in the entire population of New Brunswick.

Taking those two things into consideration, what are some things you would suggest? You've just gone through an election in New Brunswick in some of your main centres or larger city centres. What would you recommend in those highly populated areas that are densely populated?

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: That's a difficult question to answer, because the circumstance we experienced in New Brunswick was so different from what we had planned for. I think what needs to be kept in mind is that you need to have large polling locations regardless of the size of the province or the city. You need to have large polling locations to allow as much physical distancing as possible. You need to encourage people to vote and to take advantage of all of the opportunities for voting so that you do not have those large lineups. It's the same, once again, regardless of the size of the area, and it's probably more important in those densely populated areas. It may be a matter of having smaller polls with fewer people reporting, so you end up with more polling locations.

Those are the sorts of things that I think are equally applicable and probably even more important in large areas.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: That's awesome.

Just one of the considerations that I've heard about is that in P.E.I. they don't use schools. I know that when we have been speaking about it here, we have been looking at schools and having an election on a weekend when the schools wouldn't be open. The schools aren't open in the first place.

Even in my own community, not all of our municipal facilities are open, so if we are looking for those large spaces, a lot of times those are public spaces. What are your recommendations? If public spaces are not available to us, what would you be looking at?

Also, since I know my time is running out, I want to talk about the workers. I'm looking at the fact that Elections Canada mentioned having, in the country, one person per polling site, who would work as both the poll clerk and the DRO. I know, however, that in P.E.I. you've actually increased that so that you have more election workers there. What is that right fit so that we can make sure that we have the most democratic election possible, looking at those voting locations so that they are easy for people to get to and also at the safety of our poll clerks and DROs and making sure that we have space for them as well?

I'm just going to throw that off to you guys.

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: The first thing I would recommend to facilitate that social distancing is the New Brunswick model for voting, in which we don't require two election workers to process a single voter. It would take far too much of the time allotted to explain it, but we only need one election worker to process a voter. We don't have the DRO/poll clerk model. That way you can actually process more people more quickly and can have social distancing between workers. We don't use schools in New Brunswick either, and I certainly don't expect that, even if we did use them, they would let us in during a pandemic to hold an election.

I would say that some of our most successful locations in our larger cities in New Brunswick were arenas and exhibition grounds. Those are typically really large buildings that allow a lot of room for the electors and for the workers. We had at least two extra workers for every poll in New Brunswick as well.

● (1235)

Mr. Tim Garrity: We had the extra workers simply for the sanitizing, making sure that people were maintaining that social distance, distributing masks and things like that. It's really that we wanted to ensure the electors here.... We met with the chief public health officer to say that between every elector voting, the surface area where they voted behind the voting screen would be cleaned. We guaranteed that.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Thank you.

Finally, I have one more question specifically on the recruiting of poll workers. Could you talk about that sometime in your next answers?

Thank you.

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

Thank you, Ms. Vecchio, for that.

Next we have Ms. Petitpas Taylor.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe, Lib.): Was Mr. Gerretsen wanting to take that spot? I'm a bit confused about the speaking spots.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: I'd take it if you offered it.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Mr. Gerretsen, I will go at the end. How's that?

You can proceed.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Thank you, Ms. Petitpas Taylor.

In my first question, I want to link back to a couple of things I heard.

Ms. Poffenroth, when you were describing to Mr. Tochor that you had no plan in an emergency and you went back to the red category, that's not to say that you don't have plans on how to deal with emergencies altogether, right? Most emergencies are unforeseen. You don't have the luxury of even being able to predict that you might go back to red; they just pop up.

You certainly have measures to deal with emergencies writ large, right?

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: Yes, absolutely. For example, there was a fire that took out the Internet connection of several polling locations on polling day. We had a location where the power was turned off because the building owner hadn't paid the power bill. We had procedures in place for that. One of our locations is on an island that is only accessible by land from the United States, so we had plans in place in the event they lost power, lost water, those sorts of things.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Okay, so you do have those plans. That's great. Thanks. I just wanted to clarify that.

Either of the witnesses can comment on this. In the discussion you were having about best practices, it appeared clear to me, based on your answers—but I think with some of the discussion that followed, it's not clear to all members—that you hadn't necessarily created the plans for being safe when campaigning. You were taking your health adviser's information and passing it along to candidates, right? Or were they actually your plans and best practices on safe campaigning and stuff like that?

Ms. Poffenroth, do you want to start?

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: I was facilitating the communication of that documentation from the chief medical officer of health to the parties.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Mr. Garrity, was it the same on your end?

Mr. Tim Garrity: We just put our parties' official agents in contact with the public health officer because we knew the contacts.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: You were aware that there were some best practices out there and you were just linking people with the right places. Okay, great.

Mr. Tim Garrity: Correct.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: I'm going to the mail-in ballots now.

Mr. Garrity, you said you had 235 mail-in ballots, of roughly 4,200 electors. Is that correct?

Mr. Tim Garrity: Yes, that is correct.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: You're at about 5% there.

Mr. Tim Garrity: Yes.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Ms. Poffenroth, you said there were 13,000 mail-in ballots—although you did specify that that lumped in some special ballots—out of approximately how many electors?

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: Approximately 380,000. It was just under 380,000.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Okay, we can get the percentage from that 380,000.

My last question for both of you would be a very straightforward one relating to mail-in ballots. Do you have any concerns that a mail-in ballot contributes to electoral fraud in any way?

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: No.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Mr. Garrity.

Mr. Tim Garrity: No.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Thank you very much.

Those are all of my questions, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Next we have Monsieur Therrien.

You have 2.5 minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien: Thank you, Madam Chair.

To vote, you had to wear a mask. Were there any cases where a voter did not wear a mask and where this created a dispute or raised problems at the polling place? If so, was that individual expelled or did he or she comply with the mask rule? Did this situation occur?

• (1240)

[*English*]

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: I'll go first on that one.

In New Brunswick at the time of the election, individuals were required to wear masks only when social distancing could not be maintained. As the election body, we encouraged all voters to wear masks. I had a lot of, I'll say, "earned media". I did a lot of interviews during that election, and I made it clear that no elector was going to be turned away from the polls, from voting—a basic democratic right—for not wearing a mask.

We did have individuals who showed up at polls and said they weren't going to. I'm very proud of the work of our poll workers. They made accommodations for those individuals. They spread out the vote. If a person came and wasn't going to wear a mask, they kept people back so they weren't entering the poll as closely behind that individual, and they made sure everything was wiped down after that individual went through and voted.

Mr. Tim Garrity: Here in P.E.I. there is no mask mandate. Masks are just being recommended. They are strongly recommend-

ed at the polling locations. We have them available. We also have face shields for those who present and choose not to wear a mask.

We haven't encountered any issues with this, but nobody would be turned away. We would do the same thing. We would offer a little bit of extra distancing in between, if that were to happen.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien: We saw that the voter turnout rate was pretty much the same.

Ms. Poffenroth, were there more spoiled ballots than usual in this election because of the voting process?

[*English*]

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: I'm sorry, but I don't have those numbers right in front of me. I don't believe it was significantly different, but I can't say for certain.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien: At first glance, you didn't see a big difference.

Did I understand you correctly?

[*English*]

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: That's correct. There may have been a few more mail-in ballots that couldn't be processed, but not a significant number.

The Chair: Do you have an answer, Mr. Garrity, as well? That's pretty much all the time we have.

Mr. Tim Garrity: No. We are not at the point of counting the ballots yet—that will happen next Monday night—so we can't really make a comment on that right now.

The Chair: That makes complete sense.

Thank you, Mr. Therrien.

Next is Mr. Blaikie.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: When voters who present at a polling station with a mask on are there to get their ballot, are they required to take their mask off for the identification process?

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: No. In New Brunswick there is no facial identification process. If you're on the voters list, you say your name and your address. If you're on the voters list, you vote.

Mr. Tim Garrity: We do ask people to present with identification, but if they do not have it, they can take what's called an "oath of elector". It's a form they fill out to attest that they are who they say they are. Then they're able to proceed.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: If they're wearing a mask and they present ID, would they be asked to take the mask off?

Mr. Tim Garrity: No, they would not.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Is there any concern that this has led to any kind of voter fraud in your elections?

Mr. Tim Garrity: We have had no concern here on P.E.I.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Ms. Poffenroth.

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: No.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: To return quickly to the question about political parties and campaigning, we heard that there was no agreement between parties. Different parties were doing different things. Did that present any challenge for you in conducting the election? Are there things you think might have gone more smoothly if the partisan actors within the electoral process had come to agreement about certain things, and, if so, what things do you think would have been helpful for partisans to agree on?

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: We didn't see it having an impact on the conduct of the election itself from our perspective.

Mr. Tim Garrity: It's the same here on P.E.I. There was nothing that we could see.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Next is Mr. Tochor.

Mr. Corey Tochor: I'd like to talk a little bit about emergencies. My colleague brought up some of the emergencies that might confront an election. One reason we would be considering a snap election right now is that the Prime Minister would like to somewhat brush aside a lot of the emergencies that he's been facing and that have been, I would say, poorly managed.

When we talk about long-term care facilities in Canada—and I was surprised to hear that there are as many as 10,000 facilities across Canada—we know what happened in the spring. We had to send the military into some facilities. I think it would be a travesty to call a snap election; some of those people wouldn't be able to exercise their democratic right—

• (1245)

Mr. Todd Doherty: On a point of order, Madam Chair, the French translation is coming through on the English channel.

The Chair: Mr. Clerk, can you help us with that?

The Clerk: Yes. We'll look into it to see what's going on.

The Chair: Let's pause for a second.

The Clerk: Madam Chair, you can proceed. We'll see if the problem has been addressed.

Go ahead, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Tochor, could you repeat your question? I'll start the clock after you're done.

Mr. Corey Tochor: I was referring to the emergencies that we were talking about earlier today and the emergencies we found in the long-term care facilities across Canada. The fact of the matter is that we had to call in the military to restore order and safety for our loved ones.

I think it would be a complete travesty for those individuals, who have been so put off because of the inaction of the federal government, to not have the right to vote in the next election. I think that is probably the most discouraging thing I've heard today; that long-term care facilities, depending on the zone they are in within New Brunswick, or in other parts of Canada, could be under other restrictions and that elections could not take place at those polling locations. I think that is something that we should all be on with protective measures, to make sure that it doesn't happen.

My question, though, is this. The chief medical officers in your respective provinces probably made some requests of you to change your behaviours. What were the toughest policy changes that the chief medical officer asked each of your respective provinces to do?

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Poffenroth.

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: We submitted a document with our plan to the chief medical officer of health. Her office provided some minor comments. There really wasn't anything that was difficult to adapt to. We had already prepared what our changes and procedures would be. She simply reviewed those on a couple of occasions and provided comments. There was nothing significant that was difficult to adapt to.

Mr. Corey Tochor: If I may, another question just popped up here. Quickly, for Ms. Poffenroth, how would you have treated someone who was in quarantine? The writ has been dropped and an individual has to be self-quarantined for 14 days. If, say, it was past the mail-in ballot portion, how would you have ensured that this person were able to vote in an election?

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: We dealt with a number of those individuals. They could email their application, and then we actually used staff at the returning offices to hand deliver and pick up ballots. It was done in a number of ways. They usually took a ballot box or they put the ballot in the individual's mailbox, called them and let them know it was there. They stayed in their car while they watched that it was picked up, and then they put a box on the step and the ballot was dropped in.

It was very much about the returning offices figuring out what worked for them. Every effort was made. I'm very proud of our staff for making every effort to ensure those who were in quarantine could vote.

• (1250)

Mr. Corey Tochor: I think some of the testimony today is that if we have low numbers or zero numbers, as we've said, elections can be held. On a smaller scale, you can make sure people's votes are actually counted, but on a large scale across Canada, I think the experiences were showing that if you have zero numbers you can hold an election, but if you have anywhere near what we're facing now, I think we're going to have a vast majority of Canadians being disenfranchised by having to vote during a pandemic.

Another question I have is, on election night, how did the scrutineers watch the count? This probably goes back to Ms. Poffenroth on the actual counting of ballots.

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: We use tabulation machines in New Brunswick so there's no hand counting to observe.

Mr. Tim Garrity: We do have a plan in place here where legislatively there are allowed to be two scrutineers per candidate per poll. We have nine polls within the district we're doing. We've made a formal request to the parties that it be limited to, at the very most, one scrutineer. Also, they are required to wear masks or face shields while they are there. We will do our very best to have the social distancing, but plexiglass, masks and face shields will be used.

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

Ms. Petitpas Taylor, you have five minutes.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you so much, Madam Chair.

I'd like to take this moment as well to thank Mrs. Poffenroth from New Brunswick for being with us today and also Mr. Garrity from P.E.I. We truly appreciate your time and your testimony today.

Being a fellow New Brunswicker, I have to say I'm extremely proud of the work that Elections New Brunswick did last month. You certainly stepped up to the challenge, and I have to say that I was quite impressed at how everything worked out, so thank you so much again for the work that was done.

I missed part of the testimony today. I was tied up with another meeting, so if this question has already been asked, I sincerely apologize.

I think the goal of members of PROC and all parliamentarians is really to ensure that we encourage Canadians to fully participate in our electoral process. That said, with an election perhaps being anticipated during a pandemic, we certainly recognize that there could be an increase in mail-in ballots.

My concern with regard to the province of New Brunswick, though not only New Brunswick, is that 20% of its have a literacy level below the national average. We also have many New Brunswickers who live with disabilities.

I'm wondering what system has been put in place to make sure that individuals will have access to mail-in ballots, because we certainly recognize that those can look complicated for some. How can we ensure that people will have access to mail-in ballots if using those is their choice?

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: That's a bit of a complicated question to answer.

We were very open to providing assistance over the phone if individuals had questions. This is something that came up earlier. We do have, I'd say, a bit of a luxury in New Brunswick in that we have 49 returning offices, so we have more staff than we would if we were to have a federal election, in which there would be only 10.

We provide a lot of information on our website, but with mail-in ballots, there is a bit of a challenge for those individuals with literacy issues. In New Brunswick there are systems in place to provide independent voting for individuals with disabilities, but those are actually not available for the mail-in ballots. They are used in the returning office so that individuals with various mobility challenges

can vote in person in a returning office independently, and individuals can have assistance either marking their ballot or reading the ballot instructions. That's something that's available regardless of a pandemic, and regardless of whether it's a mail-in ballot or someone is voting in person.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: With the high level of illiteracy in the province of New Brunswick, has any thought been given to making sure additional services would be available for those folks?

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: I have to be honest. There hasn't been any consideration of additional services.

• (1255)

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: During your testimony, you indicated that the Province of New Brunswick had relied heavily on long-term care staff to help our seniors vote, and you also indicated that you're looking at ways to simplify the voting process for the upcoming municipal elections that will more than likely happen in May in New Brunswick.

I'm just wondering, when you talk about simplifying that voting process, whether any thought has been given to how we would do that and what steps would be taken to simplify that process.

Ms. Kimberly Poffenroth: We're in the very early stages and are obviously still debriefing and looking at lessons learned from the last election, but before this election, when we thought we were going to have provincial by-elections, we had actually received approval from the advisory committee to pilot a system adapting a telephone voting process that was used in British Columbia for those with visual impairments. Basically a pair of voting officers take the vote of an individual over the phone during a pre-arranged appointment. That was the process we had looked at for long-term care facilities. We have to sit down and discuss whether or not we wished to implement that for the municipal elections.

Also, because every province does things a little differently with the applications for mail-in ballots, we're going to take a look at those to see if there are some best practices that can simplify the process, provided the amendments to the Municipal Elections Act provide me with that flexibility. The processes around mail-in ballots are quite prescribed in legislation, so I need some legislative flexibility to implement any of those processes that would simplify things for residents in long-term care facilities.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Poffenroth.

Unfortunately, that's all the time we have today, and I want to thank both of our witnesses, Ms. Poffenroth and Mr. Garrity. I know this is a very busy time for you, and we really appreciate your taking this much time out to help make sure that we better understand what needs to be done if there is a federal election.

Thanks for all your tips. You're free to log off if you wish. We're just going to discuss some housekeeping matters.

The Chair: Mr. Doherty, I'm sure your colleagues may have notified you. I know you logged on a little bit later. We did wait for some time. I just wanted to let you know that we're going to discuss your motion, which has been put on notice in committee business, at the next meeting on Thursday. I'll set aside around half an hour for us to discuss that.

Mr. Todd Doherty: That's fine.

The Chair: In the upcoming meeting this Thursday, we have PHAC and the B.C. chief medical officer of health, Bonnie Henry, as witnesses. Right now we have the B.C. and Saskatchewan chief electoral officers on November 3, and the Saskatchewan and New Brunswick chief medical officers at the November 5 meeting. That's how we have the meetings slotted in for now, and then it's a break week.

I'm assuming that upon discussion of Mr. Doherty's motion, since there's a timeline for that, we may delve into how we're going to arrange the meetings so that we can meet that deadline perhaps, and meet our interim report deadline of December 1 as well. If you can, please come prepared this coming Thursday to discuss the work plan in a little bit more detail and also to incorporate Mr. Doherty's motion.

That's it for today. Are there any comments or suggestions before we end?

Mr. Todd Doherty: Again, I just apologize for the technical difficulties on my end, guys. I know it's an inconvenience.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Mr. Doherty should know that Ms. Vecchio really wanted to continue, but I told her we had to wait.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: That is true. That is true. I'm sorry, Todd. That's three under the bus.

● (1300)

Mr. Todd Doherty: I actually heard that. That clunk that you might have heard—or maybe you didn't—was me falling out of my chair because you actually did that, Mark.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: I'm glad to see you've recovered from that fall.

The Chair: Mr. Doherty, had there been something to vote on or something like that happening, I think we would have just chosen to suspend for longer, but we knew that wasn't really the case for today's meeting. That's why we, with the help of your colleagues, made that decision, so we apologize as well.

Mr. Todd Doherty: The IT gentleman was kind enough to put the volume of his phone on high so I could hear what was going on.

The Chair: Okay, perfect. Have a good—

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: I'm sending you virtual shovels for the snow.

The Chair: Yes, I really feel bad for you. It's too soon.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Let me tell you, it's another 15 centimetres, so there'll be a foot of snow.

The Chair: I guess we always know that at this time of year we need to brace ourselves for that.

Everyone, have a good day tomorrow and the rest of your day today. I'll see you on Thursday.

Thank you.

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