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Chair: Ms. Ruby Sahota



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• (1305)

[*English*]

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

Welcome to meeting number 33 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, for clause-by-clause consideration of Bill C-19.

The meeting will be webcast on the House of Commons website. Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of January 25, 2021. Therefore, members can attend either in person or remotely using the Zoom application. I'd like to take this opportunity to remind everyone that taking screenshots or photos of your screen is prohibited.

Since I don't see anybody attending in the room, I will just remind everyone who's participating virtually to select your language of interpretation at the bottom of your screen. Ensure that you are on gallery view so that you can see the entirety of the committee. As well, you will have to mute and unmute yourselves throughout the meeting. Please raise your hand on the toolbar below if you wish to speak to an amendment.

(On clause 10)

The Chair: At our last meeting, we left off with CPC-17.

Ms. Vecchio, maybe we can have you reintroduce it. I know that you already moved CPC-17. If you wish, you can speak to it again, just to give the committee a refresher on that amendment.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Thanks so much, Ruby. I'm happy to do so.

This amendment would limit the Chief Electoral Officer's ability to accelerate the implementation of the provisions, which would be enacted by clauses 2 through 5, to prevent those provisions from coming into effect prior to September 20, 2021, which is the first scheduled sitting day of the House this autumn. In other words, if the Prime Minister wants to call a summer election, it would be under the current rules that are there.

I have just a couple of things. I'll be honest; I know that some members, specifically Daniel, would really like to see this go through—not necessarily this amendment, but this bill—because he recognizes that there's a good chance the Prime Minister will pull the plug. Let's be honest. The only way he can pull the plug is if there's a non-confidence vote, and we have not seen a non-confidence vote that was lost in this House of Commons.

Since we already had a motion indicating unanimously that we do not want an election, this is something that we thought about. Let's get back to work in September and do the job that Canadians are expecting of us.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Vecchio.

I know that there were maybe some questions for the clerk or maybe Elections Canada. That's why last time you wanted to have that extra time.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Absolutely.

The Chair: I completely understand. I apologize for trying to rush you—

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: No, it's okay.

The Chair: —to get it done last time, but I was coming from the perspective of maybe not having an extra meeting. Now that we do, now that you were able to help secure that time.... I appreciate, I guess, all the administrative staff in the whip's office who made this possible for us today.

You have that time now. Please go ahead.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: I really appreciate that, Ruby. Thanks so much.

As I was saying yesterday, about 15 million Canadians will be voting in this next election. The fact is that this is all about our democracy. We want to ensure that there is safety, but at the same time, we talked about the fact that, if we're in a pandemic, we know that voter turnout might be a question. There's a variety of things that way. Those things are really important.

That said, there is a good chance that this amendment will go through. I wanted to speak to Ms. Lawson or Michel or Andrew about the bottom line here, about going into this election without this legislation. We heard from the Chief Electoral Officer that he would be able to hold an election during the pandemic currently under this legislation. I just want to confirm that this is the case.

The Chair: Under...?

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Under the current laws of Elections Canada.

The Chair: Okay.

Monsieur Roussel.

Mr. Michel Roussel (Deputy Chief Electoral Officer, Electoral Events and Innovation, Elections Canada): Thank you, Madam Chair, for the question.

I wish to reassure the members that Elections Canada is prepared to deliver a safe election under the current existing legislation.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Excellent.

I think those are some of the things we need to highlight here. The biggest concern we have, of course, is that we don't want a pandemic election. That is what we'll continue to indicate. Any sort of barrier that we can put up for the Prime Minister, for perhaps the safety....

I'm never wanting to use "the safety of Canadians". That's not where I'm going with this one, but any time there is something the Prime Minister may have to question himself on—i.e., "Is this going to be good for Canadians?"—we don't want him to be opportunistic. That is why we're looking at this.

Thanks very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Vecchio.

Is there any other discussion on this?

Mr. Blaikie.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): Mr. Roussel, can you confirm for the committee that when you're talking about Bill C-19—Elections Canada obviously and rightly has an important public health focus—that you don't consider turnout to be part of your mandate? When you comment on C-19, you're not providing comment on whether turnout would be likely to be better under a C-19 regime versus the existing regime.

• (1310)

Mr. Michel Roussel: Thank you for your question.

Through the measures that we put in place, we wish to ensure that there's a minimum level of barriers, administrative or otherwise, to voting for the electors. You're correct. We don't measure our success by the level of turnout.

The Chair: Are there any further questions or debate on this amendment?

Mr. Kent.

Hon. Peter Kent (Thornhill, CPC): I wonder if Mr. Roussel would reaffirm the comment that I believe he made at the last meeting, that to fully implement all of the provisions of Bill C-19, Elections Canada would require the full 90 days.

Mr. Michel Roussel: Thank you.

I am pleased to reaffirm that. I would add, Madam Chair, that the Chief Electoral Officer had once indicated that it might take at least 120 days to fully and properly implement Bill C-19, so it will certainly be at least 90 days, to reassure the members.

The Chair: That was a good question, Mr. Kent.

Mr. Blaikie.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Along that same line, in the event that Bill C-19 did not pass Parliament before the summer, and passed, let's say, sometime in September or October, it would then likely take 90 to 120 days from that point in order to implement the provisions of C-19, or would you expect that these provisions would be implemented by September, whether the bill passes or not?

Mr. Michel Roussel: We will do whatever is possible to implement the provisions of the bill within the deadline that will have been set by law. I cannot speculate on where we will be in September, as you can understand.

The Chair: This is a question from me.

In the past, with election legislation, I know that your office has worked toward figuring out how to implement certain things before the legislation has passed. Is that something you would be looking at doing? Would you be figuring out what would need to be in place if the legislation was to pass ahead of time?

Have you already been doing some of that work?

Mr. Michel Roussel: As you may know, in the context of the current legislation, there are things that the Chief Electoral Officer can do to adapt the current provisions of the act to effect a certain number of adaptations to the procedures. These would probably be put in operation—might be ready—before the 90-day deadline, and I would expect that. However, some of the more fundamental provisions.... When you talk about three-day voting, it is clearly at least 90 days' worth of work to put that in place.

The Chair: Okay. Some aspects could be done sooner than others. Thank you.

Ms. Petitpas Taylor.

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

Also, thank you to the officials for being here.

Monsieur Roussel, I have a question for you. I come from the province of New Brunswick and we had an election last year. Again, the government of the day was in a minority legislature and we didn't really know when an election was going to arise. I spoke to the New Brunswick chief electoral officer, who indicated that they had to be ready at any time for a potential election regardless of whether there was a pandemic or not.

I'm just wondering, because we are in a minority Parliament setting and knowing how efficient that you guys always are with respect to putting things in place, whether we would be prepared for an election should one arise at this point in time.

Let's be clear. None of us wants an election. I always say we are certainly not the ones voting against our government right now, so our voting record shows that we don't want a pandemic election. However, I'm just wondering if we would be prepared if one was to arise.

Mr. Michel Roussel: Thank you for your question and your kind words.

I wish to reassure you that we would be prepared to hold an election should one happen.

• (1315)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Roussel.

Are there any further questions, or is there any further debate?

Ms. Petitpas Taylor.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: To qualify that, you could run an election. For the record, could we have an election run safely?

Mr. Michel Roussel: Yes, we would have an election run safely. We are prepared for that.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Mr. Turnbull.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.): I just want to also clarify that there are powers. The adaptation powers and measures around long-term care facilities come into effect upon royal assent for Bill C-19. I know that those must be extremely important for moving forward. I know this amendment doesn't explicitly deal with that, but the challenge I have with this amendment is that it seems to go contrary to the CEO's ability to actually prepare for an election, which is the whole intent of this legislation, to be as prepared as possible for a pandemic-context election, should one arise. That's my challenge with this.

Maybe I'll ask Mr. Roussel. How important is it to have those powers in place immediately?

As to the other part of my question, my understanding is that you don't have to wait three months. If you can make things happen sooner, you would do that. Would you not? I think it's incumbent upon Elections Canada, within their mandate, to be ready at any time to do this as quickly as possible.

Regarding the timeline of putting this into the bill, it seems very counter to the intentions of the bill. It seems counter to even the mandate of Elections Canada. Would you not agree?

Mr. Michel Roussel: What I would say on this is that the Chief Electoral Officer is prepared to adapt the Canada Elections Act in the event of an election so that provisions respecting voting in long-term care facilities could be enforced. We have already instructed our returning officers to get in contact with administrations of care facilities and examine the ways in which there can be more flexibility to the voting process as is contemplated in Bill C-19. I am confident that under the current legislation we would make that happen.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Turnbull.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: I'm sorry. I have to clarify, though, that this amendment makes it so that you can't do certain things until after September 20. That is my understanding.

You're saying both that you're in the process of doing things to get ready now and also that the added powers and amendments to the Canada Elections Act within Bill C-19 are enabling you to do those things.

If an election were to arise at a point before September 20, I guess you would have your hands tied, because you wouldn't actually be able to do certain things until that time. Is that right?

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Roussel.

Mr. Michel Roussel: On this one, perhaps Madam Lawson might answer better than me.

The Chair: Ms. Lawson.

Ms. Anne Lawson (Deputy Chief Electoral Officer, Regulatory Affairs, Elections Canada): Thank you, Madam Chair.

As was pointed out, there are certain provisions of the Canada Elections Act that come into effect on royal assent, and one of those would be around specific measures in the act that would permit the CEO to take certain actions with respect to long-term care. Another one would be the gentle expansion, if you like, of the adaptation power that would allow the CEO to take certain adaptations to protect the health and safety of electors.

I think Mr. Roussel was saying that those provisions would either come into force on royal assent, or in the case of the long-term care changes that are proposed in Bill C-19, we have taken some steps because we believe those changes can be implemented already under the adaptation power in the Canada Elections Act. If those changes were needed in a pandemic, they would be facilitating voting on the part of long-term residents according to the terms of the current act. We have taken some steps to discuss those opportunities in the field in order to be able to deliver them in an election without Bill C-19 being in force. That's one piece.

The other part that Mr. Roussel was talking about, which the CEO has also talked about, has to do in particular with the three-day voting, but there are other aspects as well, which would only come into force after 90 days, and rightly so, because we would need the 90 days to bring those provisions into force. We would not expect to be able to deliver three-day voting in any election that took place before the 90 days had expired.

I hope that's helpful.

• (1320)

The Chair: Ms. Vecchio.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Thanks very much.

The thing is, even when this gets royal assent.... First of all, when we're looking at this, most of Bill C-19 could be brought into force by the CEO between zero and 90 days after royal assent is received, so if this receives royal assent, it can go there. That doesn't change with this amendment. It just says that it can't bring them into force before September 20.

We're focusing on what this actually looks like, and we're saying that when we come back, the opportunity... We can go to voting, and C-19 could be implemented if there was an election. I think the most important thing is whether we could have a safe election. That's the most important thing that we want to look at. I am very grateful to hear from Mr. Roussel that this is what the focus is. I think what we're recommending here.... Let's not forget that we're talking about whether there should be a summer election versus actually getting back to work and doing our work in the House of Commons.

If, at that time something happens to the government, and the government does fall in a non-confidence vote, these provisions would be in place. We're saying that we do not believe that there should be a summer election, and that would be at the turning of the Prime Minister. That is one of our greatest concerns.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Turnbull.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: I just have one more comment to make about this, and I'm sorry to belabour it. When I read this, this explicitly ties the hands of the CEO around two specific things: three-day voting and the mail-in ballots. I realize that you're saying it's going to take time to get ready for those things, but if you should be able to accomplish those earlier, and within a pandemic context, and an election happens to be called, I guess the point I don't understand is that this would essentially limit you from being able to do those things before that date. That's the problem I have with it. It just doesn't seem to make sense.

You're still going to do the preparations you need to do within that 90 days, and obviously, in my view, Elections Canada—I'm putting myself in your shoes now—would be doing it as expeditiously as possible to get ready. We all trust that you would do that.

I guess this just doesn't make sense to me. If you happen to be able to accomplish it early, then this essentially ties your hands so that you're not able to actually implement the three-day voting and mail-in ballots, because you happened to get it done earlier than September 20.

The Chair: Ms. Vecchio.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: This truly comes down to whether we're back in the chamber, we're in the House of Commons, where there would be a non-confidence vote, or whether this would be a decision of the Prime Minister, where he unilaterally decides, just like he did with prorogation, that we would be going into an election.

This is where the government would not be held to account due to a non-confidence vote where the majority of the opposition parties disagree. Those are things like that.

This is about letting us get back to Parliament and letting the government do its work, or try to do its work, but this is just the situation and us saying that we do not need a summer election. The only person who can call it—because none of us will be able to go to the Governor General after Wednesday, June 23—would be the Prime Minister. He would be the only one who could trigger an election. I think that's what is extremely important here.

The Chair: All right. We will go to the vote on CPC-17.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: I would like a recorded vote, Mr. Clerk.

(Amendment negatived: nays 7; yeas 4 [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

(Clause 10 agreed to: yeas 11; nays 0)

(On clause 11)

• (1325)

The Chair: We are now on CPC-18.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Finally, this amendment would add a firm sunset date of December 31, 2022, for the provisions that will be enacted by clauses 1 through 5.

I think one of the most important things is that, as we're looking at this, there is not a sunset clause in the legislation. There has been stuff in the preamble, but there has not been a full dictation on how

things go here. There needs to be something we can fall back on. Let's say we go into a 5th or the 6th.... That's not what we're expecting here in Canada.

We do need to have an end date to this. This gives it lots and lots of time, a year and a half, to be in effect. I believe we've already talked about what would happen if there was a pandemic and it ended earlier what could we do. I know that's been discussed as well.

We think there needs to be a firm date at the very end, and we just wanted to put that in there.

Thanks very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Are there any comments or debate on this?

All right. Shall we have a recorded vote on CPC-18?

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Yes, please.

(Amendment negatived: nays 7; yeas 4 [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

(Clause 11 agreed to: yeas 11; nays 0)

The Chair: Shall the title of the bill carry?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

• (1330)

The Chair: Shall the bill carry as amended?

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Why don't we do a recorded vote and then it's happy joyful, if that's okay. It will take 10 seconds.

(Bill C-19 as amended agreed to: yeas 11; nays 0)

The Chair: Thank you very much. I appreciate everyone's cooperation.

Shall the chair report the bill as amended to the House?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Shall the committee order a reprint of the bill as amended for the use of the House at report stage?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: We've completed our study of Bill C-19. It will be reported back to the House at the earliest convenience.

I'll work with the legislative clerk and his team to figure out how long it will take to have a reprint of this bill. It all depends on the number of amendments we have now passed. The more amendments, the longer it can sometimes take. Hopefully, I'll be in a position to report it back on Monday or Tuesday. We'll see.

Thank you, Mr. Méla, for being here and helping us through this process.

Mr. Blaikie.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Maybe I could just start by offering some congratulations to you and to the committee, and a big thank you to all the staff who have made this happen. In the final analysis, the timeline was very tight and it wasn't clear if we were going to get there. There is a fair bit of blame to go around on that. I won't belabour that point, Madam Chair. I think anyone who is interested in that question can look at the record, and there are many comments by many people to that effect.

I want to take the opportunity to recall what I thought was an important committee and discussion that took place in the last Parliament around changes to our electoral system, changes that haven't been made. We continue to have a first-past-the-post voting system here in Canada and frankly, I think we're witnessing some of the damage that system can do.

Here we sit. We've finally dispensed, at committee, with a pandemic election bill in the context of a lot of speculation about an election. Of course the government has denied that's what they want, but the Prime Minister also refuses to say that he won't call one during the summer, so the country is left wondering whether or not we'll be plunged into an election.

Why is that? We have a voting system under which a political party that is riding around 40% in the polls can hope to squeeze out a majority government. If we had a more proportionate voting system, you wouldn't have a governing party in the position of believing that it might get a majority with 40% of the vote. That would likely mean we wouldn't be facing the same kind of election speculation that we have been and which has been dominating Parliament in the last number of weeks.

As I say, I hope it's much ado about nothing. I hope it comes to naught and that we don't have an election during the pandemic, but I am proud of the work that the NDP has done to try to prepare the country for that eventuality in the case that the Prime Minister chooses not to do the right thing.

In any event, what I am trying to say, Madam Chair, is that our voting system is actually contributing to this anxiety and all of the dysfunction, frankly, that I think election speculation has been causing in Parliament and elsewhere in government. I think it's quite timely to recall that discussion about changing the electoral system. I know there are many Canadians out there who were disappointed when the government walked away from their commitment to electoral reform and essentially tossed the Special Committee on Electoral Reform's report in the dustbin. They would like to see that conversation continue and for us to try to do that in a way that's productive and that could lead to meaningful results.

Right or wrong, fortunately or unfortunately, one of the lessons that a lot of Canadians took away from that conversation at the special committee, and particularly the government's response to that conversation, which did actually issue a majority report with a path forward towards changing the electoral system.... Everybody put some water in their wine, on the opposition side anyway, and came up with a plan and a proposal—a recommendation, if you will—to have a referendum on a mixed member proportional system.

Even though it was a majority Parliament, at the NDP's suggestion that committee was not a majority Liberal committee. It actual-

ly represented parties in their right proportion, according to the percentage of the vote they got in the last election. Even the Green Party had a member on that committee, which of course members here will all know is quite exceptional. That was to try to model what New Democrats have envisioned for a long time under a mixed member proportional system, where parties have a voice in proportion to the votes they get.

It's an important conversation to keep going. Many did, and as I say, unfortunately I think part of the lesson—and more unfortunate still is that it may be true—that Canadians took from that was that elected politicians who are part of a partisan political system can't be trusted to have that dialogue in good faith and come out with workable solutions for how to get to voting reform.

Where the conversation has gone in the voting reform community across the country since then has been to renew the emphasis on the need for a citizens' assembly in order to tackle some of these questions.

• (1335)

The hope is that by doing that, we can avoid a rehashing of what happened in the Special Committee on Electoral Reform last time. In particular, we could avoid a situation where a prime minister feels that he's at liberty to simply dismiss those findings because other people who belong to other political parties had a part in crafting them.

The hope is that a citizen process that's independent of partisan politics would be able to provide advice that is harder to ignore, both for the government of the day—because it would be very hard to accuse such a body of any vested political interest—and also for Canadians. Their trust in politicians to navigate these issues was seriously injured by Justin Trudeau in the last Parliament, and those ministers he appointed in order to throw the work of that committee under the bus, so to speak.

It's in that spirit of keeping that discussion alive on the floor of Parliament and its various committees within this Parliament—which hopefully will continue past the summer and provide more time in order to consider these kinds of questions—that I want to move the following motion, Madam Chair.

I'll read the motion out for the benefit of the committee:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(a)(vi), the committee undertake a study on the advisability of establishing a National Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform to make recommendations about how to improve Canada's electoral system, including the question of how Canadians elect Members of Parliament and how the make up of Parliament reflects the votes cast by Canadians; that the committee's study shall include an examination of: (a) the terms of reference for such an assembly; (b) the composition of such an assembly; (c) a timeline for the completion of such an assembly's work; (d)—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien (La Prairie, BQ): How?

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: You are not on mute, Mr. Therrien.

[*English*]

Shall I take it from the top?

The Chair: If you feel your presentation has been disrupted, that's fine.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: That's all right. I'm sure those listening are patient.

The Chair: Actually, now that we have been interrupted—I figured you were going to move your motion, which has been put on notice for some time—maybe I could just take a second to allow our witnesses to clear. I'm sure they have other business to attend to.

I'd like to thank Mr. Roussel and the whole team from Elections Canada. You guys are always doing an amazing job for us and improving our electoral system every step of the way. I know that Canadians and parliamentarians have a lot of faith in you and a lot of faith in our process.

Mr. Méla, thank you so much. They have just informed me that the reprint should be ready to be tabled on Monday. I think that is fantastic. They are probably going to have to work throughout the weekend to make that happen as well, so thank you for that.

To PCO and Ms. Paquet, thank you for being here to answer our technical questions on the legislation.

As far as the committee meeting goes, I think at this point you're all free to go since we are moving on to another matter. Thank you.

Mr. Blaikie, go ahead.

• (1340)

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I think I will indeed take it from the top, just because the interruption was a little longer than planned—or foreseen, as the case may be. I don't think it was planned.

I'll just start from the top with the motion, Madam Chair. The motion is as follows:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(a)(vi), the committee undertake a study on the advisability of establishing a National Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform to make recommendations about how to improve Canada's electoral system, including the question of how Canadians elect Members of Parliament and how the make up of Parliament reflects the votes cast by Canadians; that the committee's study shall include an examination of: (a) the terms of reference for such an assembly; (b) the composition of such an assembly; (c) a timeline for the completion of such an assembly's work; (d) public reporting requirements for such an assembly; (e) the resources required to support the work of such an assembly, including measures to ensure comprehensive and effective citizen engagement throughout the process; (f) any other matters the committee deems pertinent to voting reform; that the committee report back to the House; and that the committee's report either (I) recommend not to proceed with such an assembly or (II) recommend to proceed with such an assembly and include a detailed plan for how to proceed that provides for the issues raised in items (a)—(f).

That's the motion, Madam Chair. What it's meant to take in and the reason the last part is prescriptive is that—frankly—one of the challenges with the special committee's work in the last Parliament was that while it did lay a path for how to proceed, it was, in my opinion, too vague. When we get the attention of parliamentarians on this issue, if we are to lay a path forward, we have to get beyond the point where there's a lot of discretion left to government on how to proceed.

This is something we should be taking on as legislators. I think this is a question, first and foremost, for the legislative branch. While under a citizens' assembly we, as legislators, won't be leading the process—which I think is one of the virtues of this propos-

al—we need to lay out a clear path. We need a clear mandate that comes from the legislature, not from the government, on what citizens who are participating in this are going to be asked to do and what authority they will be granted to make detailed and specific recommendations on a way forward.

I think, to date, one of the points of concern, and where efforts at electoral reform have sometimes fallen apart, has been around controversies around the government's sincerity in its engagement or how it's laid out that process. I think it would be better to see much of that decided by people who are not in government.

First, we need a mandate from legislators for a citizens' assembly that clearly delineates their scope and authority in order to empower them to be prescriptive and to set out a determinate plan within that scope and within that authority. We need to make it clear coming out of that citizen-led process what the next step is for the country, who needs to make a decision, how that decision is going to be made and what the questions are going to be to get to that decision.

It's not an accident that this is prescriptive in terms of how things ought to proceed.

If I could, Madam Chair, I also want to offer a few remarks.

I've already talked about the extent of the current election speculation and the madness of going to polls while we are still in a pandemic. I'm coming to this committee from Manitoba. We're in serious lockdown. We still have some of the highest numbers in North America.

To be hearing that we might be going into an election right now is insulting, frankly. It's reminiscent of Jean Chrétien calling an election during the 1997 flood. People here were very unhappy about that, because it showed a blatant disregard for what Manitobans were going through.

• (1345)

While I'm very happy for people in other parts of the country who are seeing lower rates and whose lives are getting somewhat back to normal, when you're talking about a federal election, and when you're a federal leader who's responsible for the entire country, it's not enough to say, “Oh, well, Manitoba's just a small province. We don't care what's going on there. As long as Ontario, Quebec and B.C. are doing well, we're off to the polls. We'll sort out the rest later. The smaller provinces can just put up with it.”

Here we find ourselves in that situation. I think the first-past-the-post system is clearly contributing to that situation of anxiety, but I would say also, to the extent that some people are wary of mixed member proportional representation because they're concerned about minority Parliaments, I would point to this Parliament as an example of where Canadians got better results for the real and more meaningful dialogue that's taken place in this Parliament.

It's not always perfect. I haven't always been satisfied with the results. It's a challenge when there's give-and-take. Let's face it. In a majority Parliament, it's easier to get up and just say what you want to say when you know that the government is going to do what it's going to do anyway. The government doesn't listen very much. I think it could have listened more in the context of this Parliament, but having a minority Parliament actually forced more listening. It forced more negotiation and more compromise. I think Canadians are the better for it.

To those in this debate who have often said that we need majority governments because they're strong and they're decisive, I would say that this minority Parliament has put paid to those concerns. In the face of a once-in-a-lifetime public health crisis, it was challenging not only for Canadians in their day-to-day lives, but it was also challenging for Parliament in the very mechanics of how it works. It's one thing to have a crisis and still be able to assemble in the chamber. It's still difficult to make the right decisions, do it in the right way and do it in a timely way, but we had the added factor of Parliament not being able to meet in its normal way.

Even in the face of that serious challenge and the administrative and logistical challenges of having a Parliament meet virtually, we were able to rise to the occasion. As I say, there are aspects of the response that I wish were different or that could have been better, but I know that we got a better response because I was part of the NDP negotiating team that leveraged real results out of the government, which they would not have done on their own. If we had had a majority government, Canadians would not have been as well served. If a minority Parliament can generate those kinds of results and that kind of steady leadership in the context of a global pandemic, surely to God they can do it in normal times too.

I'm hopeful that people, that we as a country, will see this as an example of how we can move past the concern about minority Parliaments and get more comfortable with the idea that Parliament really is a place not just for people to go to expound their views on matters and then have the party that happened to get the most seats, usually with only 40% of the vote, do whatever it is they were going to do anyway, but that it be a place where people come and express their points of view and then have some legitimate back-and-forth debate and negotiation and come up with a way forward that is perhaps different from what either party suggested at the outset but hopefully is better for the input and some of that give-and-take that happens in the context of this Parliament.

There may be people who say that electoral reform is the last thing you need to think about during a pandemic. Certainly, there are some pressing concerns, but I think the pandemic has shown how that background infrastructure of a first-past-the-post system can make things far more challenging, as it has in the case of this summer and the speculation about a possible election while things are still not great.

It has also, on the positive side, shown just how well minority Parliaments can work. I think that ought to give Canadians cause to think hard about what kind of voting system they want, what kind of change is possible and how well things can work if we adopt some of the practices that aren't new and theoretical but are being practised elsewhere.

Well-functioning democracies have other ways of voting. The first-past-the-post system is only one way of doing it. It's not a particularly good way of doing it. It's a way of doing it that is designed for a two-party system, which is not what Canada has. I think it's about time Canada had a voting system that was well adapted to the actual political preferences of Canadians and to the political practices of our elections and of our Parliament.

• (1350)

That's why I'm excited about this motion. I'm really glad to have worked collaboratively with Fair Vote Canada to design this motion. I look forward to, I hope, a good proposal for how we can have a truly citizen-led process that engages Canadians and brings us to the point where we can move beyond the first-past-the-post system to something that will serve Canadians better.

Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you for that, Mr. Blaikie.

Mr. Turnbull.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Yes, I wanted to thank Mr. Blaikie for moving this motion. I remember when he tabled it, it definitely piqued my interest on a number of different levels. I'm not looking at this through exactly the same lens as Mr. Blaikie, but I appreciate his commitment to electoral reform and the really in-depth thoughts and suggestions he has around that.

I wasn't in the last Parliament to witness all of the work that was done on that, and I know that it didn't maybe move forward in the way that we had all hoped, but I do want to say that I'm very supportive of this study, this motion. The thing I want to point to, which for me is really important, is just the use of the tool of a citizens' assembly or a citizens' jury, as it is sometimes called. Coming from a background steeped in social innovation, I see how these participatory action research mechanisms or processes can really lead to a much healthier democracy and have citizens really truly engaged in a way that perhaps they don't get to engage with government.

I want to just express my support for the tool. I think what's intriguing about this study and the way that Mr. Blaikie has crafted it is that it does enable us to actually think through how we might use a citizens' assembly, because of the way it's structured, with the terms of reference, the composition of such an assembly and a timeline for completion of such an assembly.

I'm thinking about how this could also be a tool and a study, if we were to undertake it, if it is indeed the will of the committee to undertake this, where we could apply some of the learnings from this to topics other than electoral reform. Where I'm looking at this is not to take out that aspect of it, but I wondered if Mr. Blaikie would be at all supportive or consider it friendly to slightly broaden the language so that we can get the most out of it.

That's one of my thoughts, to have it also at least be open to looking at the use of citizens' assemblies on other persistent social issues. There are ones that come to mind for me that are particularly important, and I know citizens' assemblies have been used within Ontario, for example, on local health integration networks in the past. It was a tool that was in use for various purposes. I think it's a really exciting opportunity to look through that lens and consider how we can do things a bit differently and get citizens truly engaged in the process and innovate new policy solutions, etc.

I'm excited by that prospect. I'm really supportive of the motion overall. I would just ask if Mr. Blaikie wouldn't mind giving me his thoughts on whether he would be willing and open to perhaps a friendly amendment that might just slightly broaden it so that we could get even more out of it.

The only other thought that I have related to this is that, obviously, we're coming to the end of our session so our timeline is short. How do we really get started on something like this? I can't foresee our doing this throughout the summer. That's not my sense, so how do we get the most use out of what we have left of our time before next Wednesday? I wonder about your thoughts on that.

• (1355)

The Chair: Maybe we can hear from Ms. Vecchio as well, and then if Mr. Blaikie needs to respond, he can do it to both.

Ms. Vecchio.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Thank you very much.

Daniel, thank you very much for putting forward this motion. I know since we've started this PROC committee we have not actually had a lot of opportunity to discuss motions. I think I took the floor on two motions where, I apologize, Daniel, none of yours got forward because we had a filibuster. I'm sorry, Daniel, that we haven't been able to discuss other things.

I also would look at this committee meeting today and just recognize that we came here for special business. I appreciate all of the work that we're doing, and I think that returning to this great discussion would be best for Tuesday. I don't want to move a dilatory motion right now, but at the same time I kind of do, to say let's get back to this on Tuesday, because I think this is the first opportunity we've been able to talk about it.

I'm sorry, Daniel. I'm going to ask if the meeting can be adjourned just for the day and that we get back to this on Tuesday.

Thank you.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: I have a quick point of clarification on that, Madam Chair, before we have the vote. I recognize it's a dilatory motion, and I won't be debating it.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: It's middle dilatory.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: I want to know, if the meeting does adjourn in this fashion, does that mean we'll come back to this topic at the beginning of the next meeting?

The Chair: Yes, if you've moved it. It seems like there's some will there. We're seeing a lot of thumbs-up from fellow members.

We'll vote to adjourn.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 11; nays 0)

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: I know we're adjourning, but I've never seen an adjournment so nice in the last number of months. How happy and joyful.

The Chair: We're generally all very nice to each other. I've had some comments from people who have subbed in and have said that. Despite our being in the filibuster or other difficult matters, we still have been able to maintain some level of composure and collegiality, so I appreciate that from everyone.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: If I could, Madam Chair, I just want to offer apologies to Mr. Barrett and Mr. Tochor, who I'm sure subbed in today anticipating a longer and more joyful conversation about electoral reform.

The Chair: I know I will enjoy this on Tuesday.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Perhaps they'll have to visit us again on Tuesday.

Mr. Corey Tochor (Saskatoon—University, CPC): I'll come back if asked, for sure, any time.

The Chair: I will be enjoying this on Tuesday. I'm probably the one member here who was on the electoral reform committee, so for me this will be somewhat of a flashback as well. I'm happy to have had that experience.

We will adjourn for today, and we'll see you all back on Tuesday.

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