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# Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

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Chair: Mr. Ben Carr





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• (1105)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Ben Carr (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.)):** Welcome to the 132nd meeting of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

[Translation]

Welcome, Minister LeBlanc.

[English]

Welcome to the officials and others who are here today.

I'll give a very friendly reminder to those who may not appear in front of committee often to please respect the well-being and health of our interpreters and make sure that if your earpiece is not in use, you have placed it on the sticker in front of you.

Colleagues, we have two separate hours here. The first hour today will be on the minister's mandate, broadly speaking. The second hour will be more specific and will relate to Bill C-65, which we have been undertaking a study of, as you know.

We have a few witnesses with the minister today.

Welcome to Daniel Rogers, who is the director of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service.

From the Department of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, we have deputy minister Tricia Geddes. Welcome to you.

From the Privy Council Office, we have Mala Khanna, deputy secretary to the cabinet, governance; and Allen Sutherland, assistant secretary to the cabinet, machinery of government and democratic institutions. Welcome.

Minister LeBlanc, you'll have the floor for five minutes to provide opening remarks, after which we will go into our regular line of questioning. Thank you for making yourself available.

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Minister of Public Safety, Democratic Institutions and Intergovernmental Affairs):** Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, colleagues, for the invitation.

I was, as you kindly noted, Mr. Chair, a couple of minutes late. I had a discussion with some people in Montreal last evening around an issue that's important to all of us—gun control. I came back from Montreal this morning, and as some of our colleagues from that great city will know, the traffic sometimes is relentless. I apologize, but I arrived directly from Montreal, Mr. Chair.

I'm very happy to be here. Thank you for inviting me to talk about the mandate. Thank you for introducing my colleagues. Al Sutherland, I think, is a frequent flyer before this committee and does great work on democratic institutions, as does our deputy secretary, Mala Khanna.

For the new deputy minister of public safety and the new director of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, Trish and Dan, it is their first time to be with me before a committee. They've been in the important functions in the jobs they have now but for a week or 10 days.

Trish and Dan, thank you for joining us.

[Translation]

Democracies around the world are being tested. In this turbulent context, the fact remains that Canadians have many reasons to be proud of our democracy and the integrity of our electoral system.

Of course, democracy requires our attention every day, not just at election time. We must always ensure its health and vitality, because our democratic institutions and traditions are the very foundation of our values; they reflect who we are as Canadians. As elected officials, we have a responsibility to look after our democratic institutions and traditions and to keep them healthy, of course.

We won't always agree on how to do that, but our democratic institutions and traditions exist precisely to help us overcome those differences and to keep the public interest at the forefront.

[English]

Over the course of the next two hours, I look forward to discussing, through that frame, what we can do together to keep our democracy strong. Over the last number of years, our government has put in place a range of measures to protect democratic institutions and, in particular, address the evolving and growing threat of foreign interference. In advance of the 2019 election, as colleagues know, we established the plan to protect Canada's democracy, bringing together all agencies and departments that have a role in ensuring our elections are secure, fair and transparent. To ensure our measures remain adaptable in the face of new and evolving threats, the plan was updated ahead of the 2021 federal election. We're going through that very exercise again ahead of the next federal election.

All of this work is being coordinated by a group at Privy Council Office known as the protecting democracy unit, which our government established in 2023 to ensure there is a central coordinating body for all things related to threats to our elections. We've also put in place the security and intelligence threats to elections, SITE, task force. You've heard about these groups, I'm sure, in many of your proceedings. They are composed of experts from CSIS, the Communications Security Establishment, the Department of Foreign Affairs, of course, and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. This is the principal mechanism to monitor the threat from hostile state interference during elections and by-elections.

The SITE task force works closely with the members of the panel that governs the critical election incident public protocol. In the event of a threat to the integrity of the general election, the protocol lays out how political parties and all Canadians are informed of that threat. The panel is chaired by Canada's most senior public servant, the Clerk of the Privy Council, and is composed of senior public servants who bring experience in national security, foreign affairs and democratic governance.

• (1110)

[Translation]

Taken together, these measures have significantly strengthened our ability to address threats to our democracy, but we must always ask ourselves what more we could do. That's why, in September 2023, as our colleagues are well aware, the government announced the launch of the public inquiry into foreign interference in electoral processes and federal democratic institutions. The establishment of this commission, chaired by Justice Hogue, followed extensive consultations with all recognized parties in the House of Commons. All political parties agreed on the terms of reference and the appointment of Justice Hogue. For its part, the government has ensured that the commission has unprecedented access to classified information and cabinet confidences. You will recall the extraordinary discussion we had in June on this very topic. As members of this committee are well aware, the commission submitted an interim report on May 3, 2024, with the final report expected on December 31, 2024. We look forward to reviewing the commissioner's final report and recommendations to better protect federal democratic processes from foreign interference.

[English]

During the second half of my appearance today, I'm looking forward to discussing Bill C-65, which proposes amendments to the Canada Elections Act to further remove barriers to voting, encourage voter participation, protect personal information and, of course, strengthen electoral safeguards against foreign interference.

[Translation]

Once again, Mr. Chair, thank you to you and your colleagues for this invitation. You can't imagine how much I look forward to the next two hours.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you.

[Translation]

I can imagine, Mr. Minister.

[English]

Thank you, again, for being here.

Mr. Cooper, the floor is yours for six minutes.

**Mr. Michael Cooper (St. Albert—Edmonton, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister and officials.

Minister, we learned at the public inquiry on foreign interference that your cabinet colleague Bill Blair, while serving in your current role as Minister of Public Safety, sat on a CSIS warrant for 54 days. National security officials testified at the inquiry that such a warrant is typically signed off by the minister in only a handful of days. Suspiciously, the target of the warrant was none other than a former Ontario Liberal cabinet minister, and a key organizer and fundraiser for Justin Trudeau in the GTA.

Why did it take 54 days to sign the warrant?

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** Through you, Mr. Chair, that's an interesting question, Mr. Cooper. I was asked a similar question at the public inquiry. I was not the Minister of Public Safety. I have not seen that warrant. I can't speak to the circumstances around that warrant at all.

In fact, I was told by CSIS—and the director is here—that I'm not even allowed to discuss the existence of a particular warrant, although that one, as you know, is already in the public domain. I'm not in a position to address any of the circumstances around that particular warrant. I wasn't involved at all.

• (1115)

**Mr. Michael Cooper:** Minister, will you launch a departmental review into what happened in this 54-day delay?

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** I look forward to hearing Justice Hogue's conclusions with respect to this issue. I think the bureaucratic term is that it was “well ventilated” at the public inquiry. The judge may have some—

**Mr. Michael Cooper:** Minister, aren't you concerned that there was this 54-day delay in your department, slow-walking for 54 days a national security investigation?

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** I have a lot of confidence in the work done by CSIS and their national security partners. I regularly have briefings on warrants that I'm asked to sign—

**Mr. Michael Cooper:** CSIS went to the minister's chief of staff after no action was taken on day 13. After the minister's chief of staff was briefed, the minister continued to sit on that warrant all the way to 54 days. Isn't the real reason you're unwilling to undertake a departmental review that you know Bill Blair and his chief of staff put the partisan interests of the Liberal Party ahead of national security? Isn't that why you're so disinterested?

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** Absolutely not, Mr. Cooper. You can make up a series of suppositions and allegations here. You have—

**Mr. Michael Cooper:** Why not undertake a review?

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** Again, Mr. Cooper, these are amongst the most sensitive intelligence instruments that CSIS and the public safety department have. I've never heard of an internal departmental review with respect to a specific warrant.

The department provides me advice with respect to every warrant that I'm asked to sign, and again, I've taken note, because I have no information myself—

**Mr. Michael Cooper:** It's really quite—

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** Mr. Chair, Mr. Cooper asked a question.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.):** I have a point of order.

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** Maybe the member from *Matlock* would allow me to answer the question.

**The Chair:** Minister, I have a couple of things happening here.

Here's what I've got. I've got some interrupting, and I'm going to ask Mr. Cooper to afford the minister the opportunity to finish. I've got the minister taking an opportunity to himself provide some remarks, and then I've got a point of order from Mr. Turnbull, which I presume is in relation to what I've just said.

If that's the case, Mr. Turnbull, perhaps, we can just continue, unless you feel the need to speak to this more specifically.

All right.

I paused the clock.

Minister, I'm going to turn the floor back over to you. I'm not even going to start the clock again for just a few seconds, to be fair here, to allow you to answer Mr. Cooper's question. There are two minutes and 40 seconds remaining once I start the clock.

Minister, the floor is yours.

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** Mr. Chair, thank you.

As I said, I have no personal insight into that particular warrant. I've taken note of public comments where Mr. Blair indicated that he signed that very quickly when he himself became aware of that warrant.

I think that Director Vigneault, the former director of CSIS, also noted—

**Mr. Michael Cooper:** Minister, Minister, Minister—

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** I'm sorry, Mr. Chair. Is there a problem on your left?

**The Chair:** Minister, I'll handle the ongoings. I'm going to permit you about five—

**Mr. Michael Cooper:** Mr. Chair, with the greatest respect, it's my time—

**The Chair:** First of all, Mr. Cooper, you don't have the floor. Second of all, I've paused the clock.

Minister, in about 10 seconds, can you wrap that up, please? Then I'm going to start the clock again to be fair to Mr. Cooper and allow him the opportunity to continue with his line of questioning.

Go ahead, Minister.

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** Mr. Chair, thank you.

I would just draw the committee's attention and Mr. Cooper's attention to public comments that I had noted from former director Vigneault about his level of comfort in terms of the time that this has taken, but my only insight into that are public comments I've seen. We look forward, of course, to Justice Hogue addressing this issue, should she decide to do so.

**Mr. Michael Cooper:** Did Bill Blair, his chief of staff or anyone in the minister's office tip off the former Ontario Liberal cabinet minister that he was a target of a CSIS warrant?

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** Again, I congratulate you, Mr. Cooper, on your fishing expedition. I was Minister of Fisheries and Oceans myself. I understand that kind of activity.

Again, Mr. Chair, I have no insight into that.

I would of course, Mr. Cooper—

**Mr. Michael Cooper:** I would note, Minister, that PMO officials were caught tipping off the member for Don Valley North, or at least he was tipped off and the only persons briefed were officials within the PMO who had national security clearance, so this has happened before.

I put it to you again. How can you be certain that the former Liberal cabinet minister was not tipped off, after a long 54-day delay, when you haven't even bothered to undertake a review?

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** Again, there's no evidence, Mr. Cooper, of what you just alleged around PMO officials tipping off MPs—

• (1120)

**Mr. Michael Cooper:** Then just undertake a review. Why not clear the air and undertake a review? Fifty-four days of delay to protect this Liberal kingpin....

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** Again, Mr. Cooper, those are your suppositions. I get that you're doing this so that you can have nice clips for social media. It doesn't mean that what you're saying is in fact accurate or real.

**Mr. Michael Cooper:** It is accurate that there was an unprecedented 54-day delay involving a national security investigation that was slow-walked, that just happened to concern a former Liberal cabinet minister, a key organizer and fundraiser for the Prime Minister. Was this just a coincidence?

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** What is a coincidence is that you keep making up things—for example, that somebody tipped off this particular individual—

**Mr. Michael Cooper:** No, I asked you if you have any information in that regard. Can you provide the assurance that it didn't happen?

**Ms. Jennifer O'Connell (Pickering—Uxbridge, Lib.):** I have a point of order, Chair.

Out of respect for the interpreters, it's incredibly difficult to have two people speaking at one time. The member opposite can ask his questions and then allow time for a response, or else we're not going to have interpretation and they'll lose their time altogether.

I think it would suit everyone to allow that respect here.

**The Chair:** Colleagues, I would tend to agree with Ms. O'Connell. We do have to be respectful of the fact that we have interpreters who are trying to do work that serves us and the public interest.

I have tried to be very fair in pausing the clock here in order to not allow points of order to take away. However, at some point we'll have to keep going; otherwise, the minister is going to have to go back to Montreal and get himself a Schwartz's sandwich for lunch.

Mr. Cooper, the floor is yours for 20 seconds.

**Mr. Michael Cooper:** Minister, again, why not undertake a review?

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** Mr. Chair, the deputy informs me that there have never been reviews around the particular issue of a specific warrant. There's a well-known process by law in terms of how these warrants are handled. We think Justice Hogue, who has ventilated this issue in public hearings—perhaps also in in camera hearings, I don't know—would be in the best position to offer views on this.

Again, Mr. Chair, I think it's important to note that Mr. Cooper made a series of assertions about people potentially tipping off somebody who was—

**Mr. Michael Cooper:** Minister, you are mis-characterizing what I said.

**The Chair:** Mr. Cooper, you don't—

**Mr. Michael Cooper:** You're mis-characterizing what I said. I asked you whether you could provide assurance that this didn't happen—

**The Chair:** Michael. Order.

**Mr. Michael Cooper:**—and you have been unable to provide an answer in that regard.

**The Chair:** Mr. Cooper, you will be respectful of the role that I have to play as the chair of this committee to keep order. I have on three occasions this morning paused the clock, which is not common practice, in order to allow you to continue a line of questioning when you yourself have interrupted the minister. Your time was up. I provided the minister with an opportunity to respond, which is why we fought tooth and nail to have him here in the first place.

The clock has run on your opening line of questioning. The next time I open up the microphone, I would ask you to be respectful of my role as chair.

Mr. Duguid, the floor is yours.

**Mr. Terry Duguid (Winnipeg South, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's good to see you, Minister LeBlanc. I want to thank you and all the officials present for all you do to keep us safe and to keep our country safe. Thanks for being with us today.

Minister, it has been suggested by the Leader of the Opposition that obtaining a security clearance and getting briefed on possible foreign interference would muzzle him. I wonder if you would just share with us and those who are watching today why this is important for the Leader of the Opposition's party and for his MPs, particularly in light of the significant foreign interference that we are seeing going on in our country.

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** One of the things our government has done, which preceding governments have not done, is specifically ask, in the context of an election, for example, for representatives of the recognized parties to be security cleared during the context of an election, so they are in a position to receive classified briefings from intelligence officials about potential threats during the context of a writ period.

We believe that should be an ongoing process, where intelligence officials in a non-partisan way can share appropriate information with political parties, so they can, in fact, be more resilient, and better prepared to counter threats of foreign interference in their democratic institutions.

The same thing would apply to the leader of a political party. It's well-known in the public domain that certain hostile state actors target parliamentarians, not only in our House but in the other place, as well. I am briefed regularly on these threats. I have a lot of confidence in the work done by the RCMP and CSIS.

A political leader who wants to be able to say to Canadians that he or she is confident that his or her political party, candidates and caucus, are the best persons to represent that party in an election or in the House of Commons, and that he or she has taken all the steps necessary to insulate, and protect them from the threat of foreign interference, would be well-advised to get that clearance.

For example, the leaders of the NDP, Bloc Québécois, and Green Party have received that clearance. It allows CSIS officials, in their judgment, to talk to these political leaders, so they can be best positioned to resist any particular threat.

• (1125)

**Mr. Terry Duguid:** Thanks for that.

I sit behind you in the House of Commons, Minister, a few rows back. I have a pretty good view of the opposition in front of me. Any time the issue of security clearance for the Conservative leader comes up, I hear taunts about naming names in the NSICOP report.

You've been very clear on why you can't do that. You've made some humorous comments about the RCMP carting you away in handcuffs. Again, would you give a few reflections on that? I know you don't want to be carted away in handcuffs.

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** Well, at least it won't be for that, Mr. Chair. If I'm going to be arrested, it probably won't be for that.

As I said, it was a funny moment. Deputy Commissioner Mark Flynn, who handles federal policing at the RCMP, was in a meeting with me in the days following the release of the NSICOP report. I think Tricia, who was then our associate deputy minister, was there, as well as a number of officials.

I was coming to question period, and I said to the group that was there with me, including the deputy commissioner, “What do we say, when we’re asked about releasing names?” It’s a silly sort of thing the opposition members can do. They know it’s against the law, and I’m not going to use parliamentary privilege to violate national security legislation, or put the lives of people who do this work at risk.

The deputy commissioner very helpfully said to me, “I’ll tell you what you can say, and you can quote me. You can say that if you were to release those names, I will personally start the criminal investigation into your behaviour, and it may very well end up in you being charged.” If you’ve spent any time with Mark Flynn, he’s a pretty serious senior police officer. I took his intervention to be extremely helpful.

As you said, Mr. Duguid, I don’t expect, or plan, to be arrested for violating national security legislation. A good place to start would be resisting the silly taunting, as you say, to release a series of names. It’s irresponsible, it’s reckless, and it’s also illegal. Justice Hogue, interestingly enough, came to the same conclusion when she was asked about her report naming names as a follow-up to the NSICOP report. Again, I’d be governed by the judgment of a senior justice of the Quebec Court of Appeal, as well.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Michaud, welcome to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

You have the floor for six minutes.

**Ms. Kristina Michaud (Avignon—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia, BQ):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Minister, thank you for being with us. We are always very grateful for your presence at the committee.

You began your opening remarks by saying that democracies around the world are being put to the test. Since last Tuesday, I have the impression that many things will be tested in the United States, particularly the safety of people on American soil. Before being elected, Donald Trump promised to expel several million people. It would be mostly illegal immigrants or asylum seekers, which could be as many as 20 million.

We can imagine that many of them will want to come to Canada. The number of Google searches on how to immigrate to Canada has increased dramatically since Tuesday.

You will probably tell me that the safe third country agreement between Canada and the United States provides that Canada can automatically deport people who arrive at the border if they have already claimed asylum in the United States. However, there’s a loophole in this agreement, namely the 14-day rule. A person who enters Canada secretly without being detected within 14 days can

make a proper asylum claim by presenting themselves to the authorities or making a refugee claim through the Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada portal.

This rule is rather unique, because it means that, in order to comply with the law, people must first break it by travelling to Canada illegally, by hiding.

We’re already seeing smugglers getting ready to hide people and getting ready to make a lot of money. We can think of young women who are hidden in apartments across Canada for 14 days. God knows what the smugglers will do with these women so that, 14 days later, they can claim asylum in Canada legally.

I know you’ve just been appointed vice-chair of the cabinet committee on Canada-U.S. relations, and I’d like to congratulate you on that.

In that role, what will you do to prevent a significant number of migrants from arriving in Canada not irregularly but outright illegally, since Canada’s intake capacities have almost already been reached?

• (1130)

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** Mr. Chair, through you, I thank Ms. Michaud for her question.

If congratulations are on the agenda, and you give me 30 seconds, allow me to congratulate Mr. Terry Duguid in person for the news I read about him on Radio-Canada’s website this week.

I am a very happy for you, Mr. Duguid.

Ms. Michaud, you raised a very important question. In fact, it has been a very important challenge. Everyone is aware of the Roxham Road saga. I’ve spoken several times with my counterparts within Quebec’s government.

The good news, as you said, is that we amended the agreement to close what was a worrisome loophole. I recognize, as you described, the terms of the agreement pertaining to the issue of the 14 days.

There are two things. First, I do not think we need to picture the arrival of hundreds of thousands of people before it becomes a threat. It is definitely under discussion.

Then, once we are certain—as I am—that border services and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, or RCMP, are completely ready, it must be reassuring for Canadians. When it comes to operational plans, I myself received briefings from border services and the RCMP; I fully trust them on that level.

We will continue to work with Mr. Biden’s administration which, as you know, will be in place until January. When the new administration takes the reins, we will do what is necessary to work with it.

I was reassured by the plans presented to me by border services and the RCMP. However, we are also on alert and on task. We will continue to share intelligence with our American partners, who are very up to date on the challenges with their southwestern borders.

When I talked with the United States Secretary of Homeland Security, Alejandro Mayorkas, he said he was satisfied with the co-operation between Canadian authorities and their American counterparts at their northern border. Nevertheless, I do not underestimate the importance of being visible and of reassuring both Americans and Canadians by telling them that we are ready.

**Ms. Kristina Michaud:** If I may, Minister, I remind you that staff at the border was in fact reduced over the last year. At the Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security, it is not unheard of for border officers or the border officers' union to come and tell us that they don't have enough staff. We know that the Canada-U.S. border is extremely long. Roxham Road was closed, yes, but people can still wander just about everywhere along the border.

To reassure Canadians, can you give us details about this famous plan from the RCMP or Canada Border Services Agency? Refugee defence groups and lawyers are already getting photos of backpacks of people in the United States who are ready to cross over into Canada. That is a reality we will be facing soon. I get the impression it's being discussed now, if it is not already. The plan must be solid for us to monitor that border. Premier Legault said he does not trust the federal government when it comes to protecting the border. He said he intends to deploy staff there himself.

What is your response to that? What do you have to say to the provinces?

• (1135)

**The Chair:** Minister, you have 20 seconds.

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** It is an interesting discussion.

Mr. Legault often reminds us that there are federal jurisdictions and provincial jurisdictions. I'm surprised he wants to send Sûreté du Québec officers to the border, an entirely federal responsibility, which we are completely ready to handle.

As you know full well, Ms. Michaud, when it comes to our areas of jurisdiction, we take them very seriously. We are ready and I have full confidence in the plans. The RCMP and our public safety partners will always share their plans with their partners in Quebec. The Sûreté du Québec is a key partner.

I continue to fully trust our ability to deal with every eventuality.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

[English]

Ms. Barron, welcome back to PROC. The floor is yours for six minutes.

**Ms. Lisa Marie Barron (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, NDP):** Thank you very much, and welcome to the minister. I'm happy to be here.

Minister, as I'm sure you're aware, Ms. Lauren Chen appeared at the public safety committee recently. She did not answer the questions that were being posed to her around alleged collusion with

Russia to deliberately spread disinformation as a social media influencer.

What assurances can you provide that disinformation originating from the U.S. is being intercepted and shut down?

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** I did not follow the details of the committee testimony, although journalists asked me about it.

The United States Attorney General called me when I was with some colleagues in Brampton looking at backscatter scanners. We were looking for stolen vehicles in containers at intermodal terminals. The U.S. Attorney General called me to thank Canada for the work that CSIS and the RCMP had done with their American counterparts on this really alarming case of disinformation and funds originating in Russia, as was reported publicly in a news conference of the U.S. Attorney General about the indictment and attempts to use Canadian corporate structures to funnel this money to promote disinformation and certain extremist views.

With your indulgence, Mr. Chair, perhaps the director of CSIS can answer specifically questions that Ms. Barron asked—

**Ms. Lisa Marie Barron:** Minister, with all due respect, could I get a written briefing with some more information? That would be helpful so I can continue on to my next question.

Minister, I think it's important, when we talk about strengthening our elections, that we understand where we came from in order to better prepare for how to move forward. Can you indulge me a little bit around what was often known as Harper's unfair elections act, specifically Bill C-23 from June 2014?

We know that this legislation was a direct attack on Elections Canada and the Chief Electoral Officer. Could you speak to the implications of that and how we are trying to move forward from that legislation?

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** I was a member of the House when the Harper government, with the current Leader of the Opposition as the minister responsible for democratic institutions, proudly introduced legislation that was rather bizarrely named. It pretended to make elections and voting, for example, more accessible. That was the Fair Elections Act. In fact, as shared by a number of academics and civil society members, it included a series of measures, such as around pieces of ID, to make voting harder to access. I have a largely rural riding in New Brunswick. People show up to vote with the card they get in the mail. Everybody at that polling station knows a person is called Mr. So-and-So and where they live, but there were specific requirements around photo ID. In New Brunswick, for example, you don't have a photo on your provincial health card as you do in other provinces.



It was a series of things designed, in our view, to suppress the vote. We were happy that Parliament corrected many of those measures in the “unfair elections act”. The bill we’re going to talk about in the next half of this conversation, we think goes even further in strengthening our electoral system and making it accessible and resilient to foreign interference.

• (1140)

**Ms. Lisa Marie Barron:** Thank you, Minister.

I’m happy you brought up the former minister of democratic institutions at that time in 2014, who is now the leader of the Conservative Party.

I was hoping you could provide your thoughts on the implications of a party leader who wants to become prime minister but refuses to get vital information about national safety with a security clearance. I know you’ve spoken about this a bit already.

Can you drill down a bit further into the implications for Canada as a whole when we are looking at a potential prime minister who refuses to have the information necessary for Canadians to remain safe?

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** Ms. Barron, thank you for that question. It follows on our colleague Terry Duguid’s question.

In my job as public safety minister, I regularly have updates from CSIS or the RCMP around particular threat vectors or hostile actors seeking to undermine Canada’s economic or democratic security, or about some national security threat regarding violent extremist behaviour.

I think that, if you want to lead a political party, you have to get the appropriate security clearance—as your leader did—so that, when there’s a need to know, CSIS officials can update you about potential threats to your caucus or candidates. This is information that, one assumes, somebody who wants to be prime minister would want to know. I can’t speak to why the current Leader of the Opposition refuses to get that clearance. Others have surmised a whole series of things. He must know why he doesn’t feel comfortable getting that clearance. I can’t speak for him.

**The Chair:** Thanks very much, Ms. Barron. That’s all the time we have.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Berthold, you have the floor for five minutes.

**Mr. Luc Berthold (Mégantic—L’Érable, CPC):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here with us.

You said earlier that if you even revealed the existence of a warrant for someone that your office is dealing with, it could be considered illegal. Is that right?

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** I was told I did not have the right to discuss the existence of a warrant I was asked to sign off on. As you know, there is a process to follow before the Federal Court—

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** The answer is that it is illegal.

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** I am not an expert on the law for intelligence services, but Mr. Rogers can provide you with some details, if you want.

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** Thank you.

Isn’t the role of government and its security agencies to, in fact, protect democracy and MPs against any threat of foreign interference?

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** You are absolutely right. That is a responsibility we accept, as the first government to set up measures along those lines.

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** Who authorized the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, or CSIS, to give Michael Chong a defensive briefing, as per subsection 12.1 of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service Act?

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** Again, you’re asking a very technical question. I will answer you, but I will ask the Canadian Security Intelligence Service director to add some details.

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** So, you do not know.

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** I was answering your question, Mr. Berthold, when you interrupted me.

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** You wanted to ask Mr. Rogers to answer my question.

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** That is not the case. I was going to answer you, and I was going to kindly suggest that the expert—

**The Chair:** One moment, Minister.

Ms. O’Connell already talked about this issue.

Minister, I will give the floor back to Mr. Berthold, but if he doesn’t give you the opportunity to answer his questions, I will allow you to finish your answer.

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** I was about to answer Mr. Berthold’s question when he interrupted me.

**The Chair:** I will give you a few seconds to finish your answer.

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** There are two types of threat reduction measures, meaning two ways the Canadian Security Intelligence Service can inform someone about a threat to their safety or to national security.

I do not have to approve the service’s decision to meet with anyone, unless the context is deemed to be very high risk, based on four very specific criteria. I do not know if, in Mr. Chong’s case, the risk was considered high. I did not have to approve that process.

In certain cases, my approval is requested, but only when the risk is considered to be high.

• (1145)

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** Mr. Chair, I want to note that my question took eight seconds. I would like for the minister—

**The Chair:** In fact, Mr. Berthold, I gave the minister enough time to answer, but that does not impact your speaking time.

[English]

The most important thing here, colleagues, is that we have the time to have a good, solid discussion, so I'm not going to penalize us for that.

[Translation]

Mr. Berthold, the floor is yours.

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, to your knowledge, can the Prime Minister face prosecution if he willingly discloses or reveals classified information?

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** Again, that is a legal question that should be directed to a prosecutor or an investigator. I am not in charge of the Public Prosecution Service of Canada.

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** So, you have little knowledge of the Official Secrets Act and who can or cannot disclose information. That is very concerning on your part, Minister.

The Prime Minister already revealed that Conservative MPs were on the list of members being threatened or targeted for foreign interference.

Do you think the Prime Minister broke the law by revealing that the names of MPs of a certain party were on the list, when he refuses to give the names of MPs from other parties who are also on that said list?

Is that not a purely political use of his power to disclose classified information if he wants to?

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** No, but if you want to present it that way for partisan reasons, nothing is stopping you, Mr. Berthold.

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** I am asking for your opinion from a legal standpoint.

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** If you are looking for a very specific legal opinion, I suggest you hire a criminal lawyer who specializes in this kind of prosecution or investigation, which I unfortunately am not.

That said, the director of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service is here today. Mr. Berthold claims to want answers to his technical questions, and the good news is that Mr. Rogers is entirely ready to provide them.

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** It wasn't a technical question. It is very important to know that the Minister of Public Safety is aware of Canadian legislation on the security of classified information. It seems that you are unable to answer my question.

In closing, I want to talk about the following. To date, the last party leader to get his security clearance is the leader of the Bloc Québécois. On November 5, Mr. Yves-François Blanchet was asked a question in French. Since he now has this security clearance, he was asked if he read the report by the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians.

The leader of the Bloc Québécois answered as follows in English, which is rather bizarre:

[English]

"Tuesday morning, 10:30, but do not rejoice yourselves. It's not about what I will tell you; it's about what I will not tell you, so I will tell even less after than before."

[Translation]

The leader of the Bloc Québécois therefore confirmed that obtaining this security clearance prevented him from talking about information and disclosing it to Canadians. However, that is information the Prime Minister allowed himself to disclose to Canadians.

Don't you find that disrespectful and completely unjustifiable, Mr. LeBlanc?

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** I think it is somewhat shameful for you to mock Mr. Blanchet's answer in English. It is regrettable. He had the courage your own leader did not, Mr. Berthold, meaning that he got his security clearance.

I think Mr. Blanchet acted responsibly as the leader of a political party, and if you are embarrassed—

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** Now, he can't talk anymore.

**The Chair:** Very well.

Mr. Berthold, I will give the minister a few seconds to answer and that will be the end of your round of questions.

● (1150)

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** If you are embarrassed, Mr. Berthold, by your leader's behaviour, I think attacking the leader of the Bloc Québécois is not entirely dignified. I suggest you focus your efforts on your boss, who is the one in charge.

For my part, I fully trust Mr. Blanchet's judgment in this matter.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

[English]

Colleagues, just before I turn it over, I will say this. Maybe I'm going back to my teaching days here, but it seems to make sense to me that if we stop arguing over the amount of time that each person gets to respond, forcing me to respond to points of orders, etc., we would be okay.

Trust that if the minister has a longer response, I'm not seeing that as some attempt on his part to filibuster and I'm not taking that time away from an opposition member. I'm letting the clock run. The clerk can verify this; she's right here beside me.

If you have a concern about the way the clock has been running, then, for all colleagues, time yourselves. I've been saying that for the last six months.

Please trust that I am allowing for a fair exchange of questions and answers. I am not allowing a response or the length of a question to take away from the quality. If you don't trust that, time it yourselves.

Ms. O'Connell, the floor is yours for five minutes.

**Ms. Jennifer O'Connell:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you all for being here.

Minister, I'm just following up on what Mr. Berthold had said. He suggested that as public safety minister, because you don't prosecute and lay charges, somehow you're unaware of the laws.

Could you complete your thought on that? I found it quite disturbing that the Conservative Party somehow thinks the Minister of Public Safety is also the prosecutor and judge. It should be foretelling of what Conservatives think the role of a public safety minister is.

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** Ms. O'Connell, I, too, was surprised that it seems to be the approach they offered up.

Not to correct a senior parliamentarian like you, Ms. O'Connell, but they also think I should be the investigator. One would investigate the case, prosecute your own case and come to a conclusion. Then, if you say you're not willing to do that, to say, "You're not an expert in Canada's security law" feels rather amateur as an approach.

What's interesting—our deputy minister and the director just confirmed this—is the very existence of a threat reduction measure. Again, Mr. Berthold confused Mr. Chong's interview with CSIS officials. These are undertaken in the judgment...the director of CSIS can approve a threat reduction measure within his authorities. I have total confidence that they do this in an entirely appropriate way. There's a very narrow, rare category of high-risk threat reduction measures for which I'm asked to provide approval, but we don't actually discuss those particular threat reduction measures or those meetings.

This is my view; I'm obviously not speaking for the public servants. I think it's somewhat irresponsible to receive that and then to go and talk about it in the House of Commons. The reason one gets that confidential—and highly sensitive, in many cases—threat reduction briefing is to reduce the threat, as opposed to parading around in front of a television camera. I don't think that's entirely consistent with best practices in terms of national security.

**Ms. Jennifer O'Connell:** Thank you, and thank you for explaining to those who are trying to mislead the public on your role in these matters.

I want to move to something that is critically important to me and, I think, to all parliamentarians, and that's the safety of MPs and our staff, including those working on the Hill. We've recently seen a number of incidents involving protesters. Everyone has a right to protest, but sometimes they cross the line.

I want to speak about your role, keeping in mind that we have different layers. We have the Parliamentary Protective Service. We have the Ottawa Police Service. Then, when we're in our ridings, we have local police. I want to specifically ask about your role. Yesterday I saw one of our parliamentary colleagues being escorted across the street while people screamed at her that the PPS can't save her and that she'd better bring in the RCMP, which I found to be a direct threat of intimidation. I want to have a serious conversation about that. While Mr. Cooper goes to happy hour with some of these folks, I think it's crucially important that all parliamentarians take this matter seriously. Within your mandate, recognizing that there are several police jurisdictions, what are you and your department doing to help ensure that there's safety for our elections and

safety for parliamentarians and our staff when there are threats like that? They are not being called out by the Leader of the Opposition and members who are, as I've mentioned, having drinks with those people?

• (1155)

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** Ms. O'Connell, you raise a very important issue. I know that you've done a lot of work in this area, as have a number of colleagues. I am deeply concerned about the rise of threats, intimidation and hate speech directed at people who step forward to serve their constituents and their country. I, too, walk around Parliament Hill. I walk back and forth to the hotel where I stay and to my office in the Confederation Building. I see some of those same people with their megaphones—I sort of hope that their batteries die because it's going to get colder, and the batteries don't last as long in the cold weather—yelling really offensive things, and they tend to focus much of this vile on women and on racialized people. I understand that this circumstance is a problem. The Sergeant-at-Arms is doing, in our view, a very important job in this area. The RCMP work with him. We gave, as a department, many millions of dollars to the Ottawa Police Service to take responsibility, and I see that our colleague from Ottawa-Vanier was involved in that effort, too, around the security of Wellington Street.

I share your concern. We have done a lot to increase..., as has Parliament itself, but I think we all need to be thinking about what more we can do, heaven forbid that there's a violent or very unfortunate incident. I worry about that every day.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Michaud, you have the floor for two and half minutes.

**Ms. Kristina Michaud:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, I want to come back to the very possible influx of migrants from the United States. You do not seem to share either my own concerns or those of several experts and analysts who are already talking about it in the media.

I know you are one of Mr. Trudeau's close friends. In 2016, when Donald Trump was elected for the first time, Mr. Trudeau sent out an invitation on Twitter that was addressed practically to the whole planet. In fact, it invited people to come to Canada if they felt persecuted because of what was happening in the United States. I don't know if you are going to give him a little friendly advice this time around, and tell him to be a little more discreet on social media. In fact, rather than inviting people to come to Canada, he should make it known that our intake capacity is already rather saturated. That's the case in Quebec, at least.

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** I take note of what you said about Quebec's civil society. Over the last months and years, groups have indeed done incredible work. I saw it with Jean-François Roberge just a few months ago. You are right: Quebec received more than its fair share in terms of intake. Quebec's health and social service agencies were extraordinary. Other provinces also took in asylum seekers; you know the context of recent years as well as I do. It's a challenge for Canada, and we do not underestimate it. We allocated funds to Quebec's government in that file.

Ms. Michaud, you say I do not share your concern. I understand the risk or the way Canadians express their concerns when it comes to the possibility you are talking about. I advise everyone to be careful and not feed any ill-advised fear. I am certain that the Border Services Agency and the RCMP have taken the necessary steps and are completely ready to face any and all eventualities. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security and the government of Canada have many opportunities to share intelligence.

**Ms. Kristina Michaud:** If I may, Minister—

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** I do not want to—

**The Chair:** You have 15 seconds left, Ms. Michaud.

**Ms. Kristina Michaud:** I just want to know the following. When it comes to the 14-day loophole in the Safe Third Country Agreement, do you plan to talk to the Americans to find out how to close that loophole and ensure the safety of people who want to cross the border irregularly or illegally to enter Canada?

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** When you asked your first question, you even congratulated me on my appointment as vice-chair of the new cabinet committee. We haven't had our first meeting yet. The Prime Minister called me last night when I was in Montréal to talk to me about it. I don't know what will be on the agenda. However, I place a great deal of trust in the amendments we made with the Biden administration and which, in large part, solved the situation at Roxham Road. I don't want to presume....

I may not share your concern about the 14 days representing a threat or an invitation for people to come here. However, in every possible eventuality, we are ready to shoulder our responsibilities and work with our allies. We will wait to see what happens over the next months, without speculating on any agreement of that nature.

I understand the technical detail you raised, but I do not think we are at the point where we have to discuss a purely hypothetical situation for the moment.

• (1200)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Michaud.

[*English*]

Ms. Barron, the floor is yours for two minutes and 30 seconds.

**Ms. Lisa Marie Barron:** Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister.

We've seen the horrific impacts on Canadian soil of Sikhs who have had violence inflicted on them. We know that there's information that is shared between Canada and India and that this information is being used to directly provide information that people need to be able to inflict this violence on Canadian soil. It's a big con-

cern, obviously. I'm wondering if you could please share a little bit about what that looks like until we get to the bottom of it and make sure that Canadians are safe.

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** I certainly share your concern and the concern of those in the Sikh community and the Hindu community. There's this disinformation that the Government of India is fuelling that can create these divisions. It's turning Canadians against each other. It's saying to communities that their safety is in question. I have a lot of confidence, again, in the local and regional police. The RCMP work with them. I share your concern about this escalation and work as hard as I can to ensure that these people are safe and free from this intimidation and violence.

The director of CSIS just said that the idea that we're sharing information with the Indian government that then boomerangs back to create or to fuel, directly or indirectly, the circumstance is not accurate. There are very careful provisions around information sharing in order to protect human rights. There's an act of Parliament that specifically prevents the sharing of information if there's a risk of mistreatment. Again, the director of CSIS can talk about that. I don't participate in that information sharing on a daily basis with allies or other countries. He's in a position, I think, to reassure people that we would not share with the Government of India information that would in any way be possibly used to create this unacceptable circumstance on Canadian soil that we've seen.

**The Chair:** Thanks, Minister.

Ms. Barron, there's very little time left. Do you want to allow the director the remaining time, because there's not going to be much time for a follow-up?

Director Rogers, is there anything you want to quickly add here?

**Mr. Daniel Rogers (Director, Canadian Security Intelligence Service):** I think the minister summarized it well. There is an act that we have to comply with called the Avoiding Complicity in Mistreatment by Foreign Entities Act. We have strict information-sharing protocols within the service to assess information before it's shared with any foreign partner, and that takes into account their human rights record. The minister is correct. We take great efforts not to share information that could result in mistreatment.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Calkins, the floor is yours for five minutes.

**Mr. Blaine Calkins (Red Deer—Lacombe, CPC):** Thank you, Chair.

Minister, since 2015, total violent crime in Canada is up 49.84%. This isn't my number; this is Statistics Canada's. Homicides are up, as of last year, 43%. Gang-related homicides are up 78% as of last year. Total sexual assaults are up 74%. Total violent firearms offences, which is use of, discharge or pointing a gun, are up 116% since 2015. Extortion is up 357% since 2015. Auto theft is up 45%.

Minister, I was there when you and your cabinet colleagues voted for Bill C-75, voted for Bill C-21 and Bill C-5 as well. One of the impacts of voting for the legislation that your government has tabled was to reduce minimum penalties for a number of offences. One of them was extortion with a firearm with a mandatory minimum penalty of four years. That was the initiative that your government had and that you voted for. In your home province of New Brunswick, extortion is up 301%.

Why do you continue to pursue an agenda that goes after law-abiding firearms owners instead of an agenda that targets criminals and reduces crime on our streets?

• (1205)

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** Mr. Calkins, it won't surprise you that I don't share your view that our agenda goes against law-abiding sportspersons or firearms owners. We certainly share the concern that you articulated that's shared by many Canadians around recent incidents involving violent crime.

Some of these extortion circumstances that we've witnessed in recent months.... If I stick to the news conference of the commissioner of the RCMP on Thanksgiving Monday, some of this rise in extortion in the South Asian community, for example.... The mayor of Edmonton has talked to me about it and the mayor of Brampton—perhaps you're familiar with Patrick Brown, who was a colleague of ours here in the House of Commons—has talked to me about this.

A lot of good work is being done by our law enforcement authorities. They rely on partnerships with provinces and territories and municipal police forces. This work is done collaboratively. I have a great deal of confidence in that work, but I don't minimize the concern of Canadians.

In my conversations with the Ontario Solicitor General, we try and figure out ways that we can work better together to bring down those very statistics that you spoke about.

**Mr. Blaine Calkins:** Minister, it's simply not true. Your government has spent millions of dollars to confiscate the firearms, the lawfully owned property of vetted firearms owners across this country. Tens of millions of dollars have been spent so far. Millions more will have to be spent in order to achieve your goal to take property away from people who are simply not the problem, and yet your government has continued to pass legislation to make it easier for people to get out on bail, to make it easier for people to get out on parole. Even with the recent bill, I will applaud the fact that the only thing your government has done to unite the country is that the premiers of every province have written a letter saying that they would like you to reverse the bail provisions that your government made in Bill C-75.

You continue to focus on the wrong people, Minister, which is who you're focusing on right now. I know this because I am inti-

mately involved in the community. I am a hunter. I am an outdoorsman. I have actually been a law enforcement officer in the conservation enforcement field. I deal with people with firearms all of the time, and they will tell me, and your Prime Minister has even said in interviews, that they're going to confiscate some of the guns that are being used by hunters.

Your leader is even being trolled by police associations. When he celebrated the two-year handgun freeze transfer, Toronto Police and Vancouver Police basically said that everything your government is doing to reduce gun violence and the optics of going after law-abiding citizens is not working.

When will you reverse course? When will you go to your leader and say, "Reverse course. Leave law-abiding citizens alone. Let's focus on criminals, and let's focus on the borders and keep Canadians safe"?

**The Chair:** Minister, you have about 25 seconds.

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** I have 25 seconds because Mr. Calkins conflated a whole series of issues from removing military assault-style firearms—

**Mr. Blaine Calkins:** You haven't removed any firearms. The firearms that were in our lockers four or five years ago are still there.

**The Chair:** Mr. Calkins.

**An hon. member:** I have a point of order, Chair.

**Mr. Blaine Calkins:** They're still there. You haven't banned anything, Minister.

**The Chair:** Mr. Turnbull is rising on a point of order.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** It's the same thing here, running roughshod over the witnesses. If you wanted the minister to be here for two hours and he has come, it would be nice if you gave him a chance to answer the question. An answer would be helpful.

**The Chair:** The real tragedy here is I was just about to hold the minister and Mr. Calkins up as a fantastic example of how we can have an exchange without interruption.

Mr. Calkins, you took a good chunk of time to ask the question. I'm going to give the minister a few seconds to respond.

I'm going to ask colleagues that we try not to interrupt, and we'll be out of this round before we know it.

Minister, I'll give you a few seconds.

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** Mr. Chair, thank you for your indulgence.

Mr. Calkins conflated bail reform. We also work with the provinces. The House passed legislation, in fact, to provide reverse onuses on some violent repeat offenders in terms of their access to bail. He forgot that piece of it.

Our government made a commitment in 2021 to remove assault-style firearms from the streets of Canada. Mr. Calkins says he's a hunter. He knows a lot of people who are hunters. I know a lot of people who are law-abiding gun owners as well who are sportspersons or go hunting. They don't normally go hunting with an assault-style military firearm. We think that it's in the public safety—

**Mr. Blaine Calkins:** That's because they're restricted.

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** I'm sorry, Mr. Chair. I'm hearing some background noise here—

• (1210)

**The Chair:** Yes—

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** I've given a great answer, and I'm happy to leave it at that.

**The Chair:** There is a bit of noise, Minister, but I was about to cut you off anyway.

Thank you, Mr. Calkins.

Okay, colleagues, we've just about made it through. Madam Fortier will have the floor for five minutes, and then we will have completed our first round here.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Fortier, you have the floor for five minutes.

**Hon. Mona Fortier (Ottawa—Vanier, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, thank you for being here with us today.

Congratulations on your new role as vice-chair of the Cabinet Committee on Canada-U.S. Relations. I know these committees are very important. I had the privilege of sitting on a few of them. It's another way of making sure you have the opportunity to fulfill your mandate, which is exactly what we are discussing right now.

I would like you to talk about your role. You are responsible for certain large government agencies whose mission is to ensure everyone's safety. Could you tell us about the impacts on public safety due to the cuts made by the former government to our public safety agencies? How did the investments we made to reinstate funds cut by the Conservatives ensure all Canadians' safety?

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** Ms. Fortier, thank you for your question.

You are right. As the Minister of Public Safety, I have the privilege of seeing the very impressive work of men and women at, for example, the RCMP, the Canada Border Services Agency, the Correctional Service of Canada, the Parole Board of Canada or, obviously, the Canada Security Intelligence Service. I also have the privilege of seeing the work of officials at the Department of Public Safety, who try to coordinate some of those large agencies' operations.

There's always financial pressure on those agencies, who do their best with the budgets they have. Our government decided it was worthwhile to increase, for example, investment in the Canada Border Services Agency and the Canada Security Intelligence Service, who had not received an increase. The context of their work has changed. I see the important and essential work these agencies do, which is—as it must be—not necessarily visible for many Canadians. We therefore decided it was worthwhile to increase those budgets.

Ms. Fortier, you referred to the fact that the former government cut—I think—800 border services officer positions during the last two years of its mandate. I do not know if it cut 1,000 jobs with the intention of cutting 800 more, or if it was the opposite. Did it cut 800 or 1,000 positions with the intention of making more cuts after an election which, thank goodness, they lost? I don't remember, but I was very surprised, especially because our colleagues here talked mistakenly about cuts we could have made at the Canada Border Services Agency, when it was their government that decided it was a good idea to cut the budget.

I recognize we can always do more with more money. I often tease my colleagues about it. My work consists of convincing the Minister of Finance, my colleagues and my boss to invest in the right places as much as possible, specifically to give agencies the tools they need. I trust the work being done, but I also accept the idea that we can always work on adding resources and staff. We do so based on changing threats, in a context of foreign interference, and in a context of concerns regarding border security.

We will really support this kind of process, specifically to build Canadians' trust.

**Hon. Mona Fortier:** We were just talking about foreign interference. We also found that it happens in other countries, including our G7 allies.

I don't have a lot of time left. In a few seconds, could you explain how Canada works with other countries, specifically the United States and the United Kingdom? What do we now know about the new system being implemented to deal with this situation?

• (1215)

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** Once again, Ms. Fortier, I think it is a very important issue. Canada is facing an increased threat of foreign interference. We talked about it publicly. However, the situation is just as visible and known among many of our allies. We have meetings with the Five Eyes.

[*English*]

It has a cooler title in English: Five Eyes, but there are actually 10 eyes. When we have a meeting with the different ministers, there are 10 eyes in the meeting.

[*Translation*]

These meetings, Ms. Fortier, often focus on threats or shared risks, and I must conclude that it's a matter of transnational repression. We see it in the case of China and India, for example, and it also happens in the United Kingdom or United States. Unfortunately, it is a common problem. We often share very important intelligence. I had interesting conversations with ministers from Australia or New Zealand. Even though the context is not the same, the threat is often relatively common. It is a means for us to talk about our respective ways of protecting our fellow citizens; specifically, to do the work people expect of us.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Ms. Fortier.

[*English*]

Colleagues, we are going to briefly suspend. Because we don't have any witnesses appearing virtually, it should be a relatively quick turnover.

There are a couple of witnesses who won't be with us in the second panel. I'd like to thank Deputy Minister Geddes and the director of CSIS, Mr. Rogers, for being here.

Thank you very much.

Colleagues, we will be suspended for about two minutes and we'll come back in to our second round.

• (1215) \_\_\_\_\_ (Pause) \_\_\_\_\_

• (1220)

**The Chair:** All right, colleagues, we are going to get into our second round of questioning here.

Minister, you are afforded the opportunity to provide remarks for up to five minutes.

I'll turn the floor over to you to begin.

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** Mr. Chair, thank you, and I'll try to be brief. I won't introduce my colleagues, two of whom were here for the previous hour, but our colleague, Rachel Pereira, who is the director of the electoral and senatorial policy unit at Privy Council, has joined us.

Mr. Chair, this is to discuss with your committee Bill C-65, the electoral participation act.

[*Translation*]

As members know, in my mandate letter, I was tasked with reviewing the Chief Electoral Officer's recommendations; strengthening safeguards against foreign interference and disinformation; and examining the link between technology and democracy in order to protect Canada's elections and democratic institutions. Bill C-65, which is before you, is the culmination of these three priorities. It proposes, among other things, two additional advance polling days, improvements to the special ballot voting process and making the popular vote on campus program permanent.

I am very proud, as the member for Beauséjour, to represent New Brunswick's Mount Allison University in Sackville. During elec-

tions, I see students proudly voting at their campus polling stations. We want to make this opportunity permanent.

[*English*]

However, election day still remains the single most popular and traditional way for Canadians to vote. For that reason our government in Bill C-65 proposed to move the October 2025 fixed election date by one week forward to avoid a conflict with Diwali and certain municipal elections in provinces like Alberta.

That being said, I've certainly taken note of comments from colleagues and I'm happy to reiterate the comments I made at the second reading debate that the government will of course happily respect the will of this committee should there be a desire to amend the legislation and move the date forward even further, or move it back to October 20. I'm happy to see the work of this committee.

I trust that we can move forward on the many important amendments proposed in this bill that we think improve safeguards for our elections. Take, for example, the proposed improvements for long-term care residents and persons with disabilities, which seeks to give electors the ability to select an individual to assist them. This was recommended by the Chief Electoral Officer with the existing integrity measures in place. I think of persons in my riding who may have limited reading skills who may want a trusted person with them to help them ensure that in fact they're casting the vote for the person they intend to vote for.

The second priority of Bill C-65 is the protection of personal information. This legislation proposes new privacy policy requirements as a condition of registration for federal political parties, with the Canada Elections Act continuing to be a national, uniform and exclusive regime for federal political parties dealings with personal information.

Finally, and this is an important one that picks up on our previous discussion, Bill C-65 proposes a number of measures to continue to meet the evolving threats of foreign interference and disinformation. This would be done through measures that would, for example, extend the existing bans on foreign influence and misleading publications so that they apply at all times and not just during the election period, and add a new ban to protect against intentional disinformation about candidates and the facts of our electoral process, such as polling locations and the mechanics of the electoral process.

• (1225)

[*Translation*]

Protecting elections in Canada should never be a partisan issue. Bill C-65 includes many important measures Canadians want to see implemented before the next election.

I hope that as parliamentarians, we can work together and improve the bill, as we should.

It may be up to your committee to assess the importance of passing this bill. It will ensure accessible and transparent Canadian elections that are able to withstand the threats weighing on our democracy.

I see you shaking your head, Mr. Chair. You probably want to tell me that you would like for me to wrap up the absolutely extraordinary remarks I just shared with you.

I would be pleased to answer my colleagues' questions.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

[*English*]

Mr. Duncan, the floor is yours for six minutes, please.

**Mr. Eric Duncan (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair and thank you to the minister for being here. I want to get into the details for Canadians to know exactly how this bill came together in full co-operation with the NDP.

I don't want to get too personal, Minister, but do you remember this year on Valentine's Day who you had dinner with?

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** I do. It was a very romantic moment. I live in New Brunswick. I was in Ottawa. I was away from my family and it was a February night and we went to a great place called Colonnade Pizza. It's at the corner of Metcalfe and Gilmour. It's a great pizza. I would invite you to go. My date for that evening was a great guy. You maybe remember him. Daniel Blaikie was his name.

**Mr. Eric Duncan:** Thank you.

Daniel Blaikie was the lead negotiator for the NDP on this bill and as a matter of fact he stood right behind you in March when you made the announcement. You had said on multiple occasions that this bill was part of the coalition to secure the continued support of the NDP. You even said at the press conference that you gave in response that the Prime Minister and Mr. Singh agreed to these important measures.

Whose idea was it? Was it a Liberal idea or an NDP idea to change the date of the election so that dozens of soon-to-be-defeated NDP and Liberal MPs would be guaranteed their pension?

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** Mr. Chair, allow me to correct some of the falsehoods in the premise of that question.

You referred to a "coalition". I know your leader's office wants you to keep using that word. We don't have a coalition with the NDP. It's called a supply and confidence agreement. Mr. Blaikie wasn't the "lead negotiator". I'm surprised you're using union terms, Mr. Duncan. It's great to see the Conservative Party embracing the labour movement. Mr. Blaikie was a partner with me as we developed this legislation—something our leaders agreed to transparently, through a supply and confidence agreement that was posted on the Internet. I know you look for secret meetings. The Valentine's Day dinner was so secret that we posted it on Twitter. Our leader—

**Mr. Eric Duncan:** Minister, here's the thing: We got information just minutes before this meeting started, in fact, about secret meetings that took place. It was only after Conservatives asked. We found information that, on January 25, there were NDP headquarters representatives having a meeting with the Prime Minister's Of-

fice, staff from your office and Elections Canada, in order to get information and briefings behind the scenes. It was only revealed afterwards.

Do you think it's appropriate that, on two different occasions, NDP headquarters staff—not just MPs—got access to the Prime Minister's Office and Elections Canada in order to get briefings that were not offered to any other party? I don't think Canadians find that very funny. It was secret until we asked for details.

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** Again, you're a very experienced sleuth, Mr. Duncan. I congratulate you on that investigative work.

This is absolutely normal. Do I think it's appropriate? Absolutely. Do I think it's normal in a Westminster parliamentary system when there's a supply and confidence agreement? Of course it is. These were routine meetings among senior officials of the Privy Council Office. Mr. Sutherland was in some of these meetings. I was in meetings with Mr. Sutherland and the Chief Electoral Officer himself—with Mr. Blaikie present—so we could understand the advice of both the Privy Council officials and Elections Canada as we worked together to develop this legislation.

You find it shocking that parliamentarians work together in a collaborative way. We think it's something Canadians would find very positive.

● (1230)

**Mr. Eric Duncan:** What Canadians would not find positive is that NDP headquarters staff were invited to and attended those meetings. What happened there was completely inappropriate. One political party was given access to information and documents, and crafted a bill.

I'll go back again.

The whole point the NDP absolutely wants to ignore and forget about is the changing of the election date.

Was it a Liberal idea or an NDP idea to move the election back by a week so it guarantees any defeated Liberal and NDP MP their pension? Whose idea was it, the Liberals or the NDP?

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** Again, you just got a very clever clip for some post you may do later.

However, I think it's important for people to understand that pension entitlement has nothing to do with the decision to move the date. I'm lucky enough. I was elected in 2000, so it certainly wasn't my idea to be concerned about pension entitlement for myself. We think Diwali is an important moment for a very significant community in Canada. There are municipal elections in Alberta on that date. We worked with Elections Canada on a number of different scenarios with different dates.



As I said, Mr. Duncan, in order to reassure you that the little premise of your question—which you fabricated—wasn't the case, we welcome this committee's judgment in moving the date. When you get to clause-by-clause, feel free to work with colleagues, if you're so outraged. If you want to explain why Diwali or the municipal elections in Alberta aren't important, go ahead.

Any time you move the date, you're going to bump into a problem somewhere.

**Mr. Eric Duncan:** Here's the thing, Minister. It's not about Diwali. What happened was that, when you moved it back a week, it then coincided with a territorial election and overlapped into Quebec. What you could have done was move the election earlier, if that were truly the reason. It's not. It's about securing pensions through the election happening a week later. People know that. Just last week, when we asked your own officials why they didn't call it earlier, including into the summer, we heard, “the sorts of considerations that were made.... You wouldn't want a break with summer holidays through Labour Day”. That was the reason your officials gave for it not getting moved earlier.

Minister, I'll ask you this: You don't want to have an election that coincides with Labour Day. When was the last time that happened?

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** I haven't taken note of every election. I remember one—

**Mr. Eric Duncan:** Let me answer for you, Minister. It was the last election.

**The Chair:** Mr. Duncan—

**Mr. Eric Duncan:** The Prime Minister called it when it was opportunistic for him, and now suddenly you've forgotten when the last election was called. That's interesting.

**The Chair:** Mr. Duncan, this is the second time today I have had members around this table not respond to my intervention. You guys are going to flip out in 45 minutes from now, or in 40 minutes or 30 minutes, when I try to end this meeting, because you'll say there wasn't enough time for the minister.

Respect the authority of the chair to try to operate the meeting in an effective and efficient manner.

Minister, there's no time left for a response. There's no time left for a question.

Mr. Turnbull, the floor is yours for six minutes.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** Minister, it's good to see you.

The Conservative leader is the only federal party leader who has been unwilling to get his security clearance. I would describe it as if he's doing a bit of the “wiggly worm” trying to get out of it.

First, we heard the Conservatives say he can't because he would be muzzled. We know that's not true, because every other party leader has gotten the security clearance and has received the briefings.

We also know the next excuse that was given was he already had the clearance from back when he was in the Harper cabinet. We know that's not true, because I asked the former clerk of the Privy Council, Michael Wernick, when he was here many months ago, and he said that if there's a change in life circumstances, a change

in job or it has been five years, those background checks have to be redone.

Can we quickly clarify that the current Conservative leader does not have a top secret security clearance?

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** That is my understanding, Mr. Turnbull, for the reasons you just enunciated.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** Thank you.

The other thing we've heard from the Conservatives recently is the background check is too intrusive for them, which is kind of hilarious considering every other person who takes national security seriously would go through the same intrusive background check to be able to get those briefings.

Now the latest version of this is that the Conservatives say, “Oh, we need to use the threat reduction measure”.

**The Chair:** Mr. Turnbull, I'm sorry, but there is a point of order.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Berthold, you have the floor.

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** What is the relevance of those remarks, Mr. Chair?

• (1235)

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Colleagues, this is just a reminder that we are here on Bill C-65 specifically.

Mr. Turnbull, if you can try to direct your question to how it is relevant to Bill C-65, I would appreciate that.

I'll turn the floor back over to you.

Thank you.

**Ms. Jennifer O'Connell:** I'd like to speak to the same point of order.

**The Chair:** Yes, Ms. O'Connell. Go ahead.

**Ms. Jennifer O'Connell:** Mr. Chair, I recognize the meeting is on Bill C-65; however, this is directly related to foreign interference, which is part of the bill.

I would also argue that Mr. Duncan brought up party officials of the NDP. Part of this bill is also talking about—

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** They are part of the bill.

**Ms. Jennifer O'Connell:** Sorry, did I interrupt you? I was able to maintain my composure. I would suggest you do the same.

Mr. Chair, without being interrupted, Mr. Duncan brought up party officials. Mr. Turnbull is discussing the Conservative Party and, I suspect, the leadership race that has been called into question with foreign interference, so I think it's relevant.

**The Chair:** Thank you for your insight, Ms. O'Connell.

Mr. Turnbull, I'll turn the floor back over to you.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** Now we have the Conservatives saying that, "Oh, we should just use a threat reduction measure," but wouldn't that be subject to the same limitations in terms of the Security of Information Act?

In a way, it doesn't get around this idea that somehow the Conservative leader could get a briefing through a threat reduction measure, which would allow him maybe a briefing that is more narrow in scope, but it would still be subject to the Security of Information Act, would it not?

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** Mr. Turnbull, you're absolutely right. The threat reduction measures—and we talked about that earlier in the meeting—allow CSIS officials to brief somebody because of an imminent or an ongoing threat to national security. The information they would share in a threat reduction measure, for example, with the Leader of the Opposition, whether or not he obtained a security clearance, would absolutely be subject to the Security of Information Act.

What that means in more simple terms is that a person who received highly sensitive information as part of an authorized threat reduction measure would legally be bound to keep that information secret. As you know, Mr. Turnbull, in fact, the Security of Information Act is a criminal statute. Violation of it brings a criminal prosecution.

It's done very specifically to protect the ability of CSIS to protect human sources. It's to protect their investigative capacities.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** Thank you.

My understanding is the briefing for a threat reduction measure would be only on the need-to-know information. It would be limited in scope and specific to a personal threat against, perhaps, a member in the Conservative caucus, in this particular case. It wouldn't be equivalent to a broader intelligence briefing that one could receive if they had the top secret security clearance.

Is that correct?

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** You're absolutely right.

That briefing, as I understood from the director of CSIS, would reveal the minimum information necessary, in the CSIS director's judgment—none of this is decided by a partisan person—for that particular leader to take measures to reduce the threat. That's why it's called a threat reduction measure. However, it would not provide, in that particular threat reduction measure interview, a broader threat landscape briefing or a broader briefing about certain threat vectors than one would get if one were to have the top secret security clearance.

Again, Mr. Turnbull, what's important is that all of that information that would be shared, whatever instrument was used to legally share that information, would bind the person receiving the infor-

mation to the provisions of the criminal statute known as the Foreign Interference and Security of Information Act.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** This is the last question.

We had the Conservative MP who is actually on NSICOP, which is the committee of all parliamentarians, come to this committee where he presented a private member's bill. He said that he wants all members of Parliament to be able to get a security clearance. When he was here, he actually said that he thought, if he had his way, he would make it mandatory for all MPs to have a security clearance.

I find that slightly ironic, given the fact that the Conservative leader is the only leader in the House of Commons who has not been willing to get his security clearance.

Minister LeBlanc, do you find that slightly ironic?

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** Of course I find it ironic, and I'm happy to discuss Mr. Ruff's bill at another point. However, it does lay bare, I think, the hypocrisy, Mr. Turnbull, of what that particular Conservative member's leader is doing.

Thank you for raising that important point.

• (1240)

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** The Conservatives have always talked down our government's efforts on combatting foreign interference, yet when I look at the facts and when I read all the reports, which I have done for many months as we studied it on this committee, it seems as though what they're claiming is patently false. Our government is actually a leader in stepping up and providing an ecosystem approach that really looks at how we can combat and prevent any interference in our democracy.

Minister LeBlanc, can you please talk about how Bill C-65 adds to the tool box and gives us an even stronger ecosystem for preventing foreign interference?

**The Chair:** I'm sorry, Mr. Turnbull. We don't have time for the response. We're well over time.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Gill, welcome back again.

You have six minutes.

**Mrs. Marilène Gill (Manicouagan, BQ):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I also thank Minister LeBlanc for being with us, as well as Ms. Khanna, Mr. Sutherland and Ms. Pereira, who are with him today.

I would like to discuss a matter with you, which certain witnesses even mentioned several times. Bill C-65 would indeed lead to greater accessibility and, ideally, voter turnout. What worries us, at the Bloc Québécois, is the overlap between the federal election and Quebec's municipal elections.

During your opening remarks or various other statements, you said several times you were taking this matter into account, particularly in Alberta's case. However, I did not hear you say if you were taking into account Quebec's municipal elections. Representatives from the Union of Quebec Municipalities, the UMQ, reached out to us at the committee. They told us they were worried about it.

In order to keep them informed on this issue, could you tell us what you think of the situation?

In a very brief letter, they expressed their concerns about a specific measure in section 5. It indicates that an overlap will occur on October 27, 2025. According to the UMQ's representatives, it would have a negative impact on voter turnout in Quebec.

I would like to know what your response is to them.

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** Thank you for your question, Mrs. Gill. I am very pleased to see you at the committee today.

I really took note of the concerns raised by the Union of Quebec Municipalities. When I was the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, Infrastructure and Communities, I think the mayor of Gaspé was the president of the organization. I know the quality of its work and the importance of ensuring, as much as possible, that a federal election does not coincide with another fixed-date election. It applies to a large number of municipalities. However, based on my understanding—although you know better than I do—in the case of your province, it has to do with advance polls.

I would imagine your committee is going to look into the issue of the date. That is in fact the challenge with a fixed-date election. The fall is a very busy electoral period. There were four provincial elections this season. Political parties want our government to fall and to call an election right now.

We can talk about Nova Scotia's case.

**Mrs. Marilène Gill:** I do not want to interrupt you, Minister, but you are actually not quite answering my question. I understand, however, that you noted it, that you acknowledge it. You've taken note of the UMQ's concerns, but I am asking you to respond to them as well.

To put everything back in context, it is not just about the actual day of the election. It's often a matter of needing the locations and election staff. They are often the same, be it for a federal, municipal or provincial election, or for one in Quebec. The difficulty is perhaps greater in this respect. That is one thing.

Furthermore, I would also have liked for you to talk about another aspect that worries us for several reasons. We talked again about accessibility, about the idea of increasing voter turnout. Last week or at the beginning of this week, unless I'm mistaken, I had the opportunity to talk with Mr. Sutherland. We talked about accessibility, which gives people the opportunity to vote; even those celebrating Diwali, for example. I do not want to put words in his mouth, but, mathematically speaking, everyone could vote without having to delay the election, given the current changes.

I was therefore wondering why we are maintaining a date no one here wants, because everyone could vote, whether or not they are celebrating Diwali. Everyone could celebrate and vote at the same time.

Why keep this date if, mathematically, everyone can vote?

• (1245)

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** That is a very good question.

My comments on keeping the date were perhaps not clear enough. We are fully aware of public commentary from several MPs, as well as the suggestion or intention of possibly changing the date. We would be completely fine if the committee decides it must change the date.

You are right. In theory, everyone can organize to vote by mail, and that in fact applies to Quebec's municipal elections. Everyone can vote at advance polls. However, it remains that election day is still very interesting for millions of Canadians. We saw proof of that in the United States, two days ago. Tens of millions of people went to the polls.

Listen—

**Mrs. Marilène Gill:** I will interrupt you once more.

I understand, but I want to clarify something. We keep coming back to election day. As I was saying, people can, of course, go vote, but resources need to be allocated. It is not just one election day. For it to be more accessible, it is necessary to have more resources and locations for a greater span of time. In fact, right now, we don't even know what the impact will be of the overlap between two elections. If people want to vote at any time, that is one thing. But to be able to hold two elections at the same time and have enough resources, be they human or material, that is another thing.

I understand that the committee will study the matter, but I wanted us to talk about it because, obviously, you are the one who worked on this bill. I would imagine these kinds of questions are likely to interest you.

**The Chair:** There is not a lot of time remaining. If we want an answer, we have to give the floor to the minister.

**Mrs. Marilène Gill:** Yes, but I have to finish the question if I want a specific answer. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** I understand, but it is one or the other.

Minister, we are listening to you.

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I fully share your concerns about locations. We added two days of advance polls. Community centres and municipal spaces will necessarily be rented for longer periods of time. You are correct about that, Mrs. Gill.

I once again note your wish to have an election right now. I noted your leader's comments. You are working to make sure we don't get to the fixed-date election in October next year.

Regardless of the fixed date set by the law, there will necessarily be these kinds of tensions. You are right to say it is not ideal. Whether it is a religious celebration, a municipal election or a provincial election, we do our best and people adapt.

What is positive is that there's a great deal of resiliency among voters.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mrs. Gill.

[*English*]

Ms. Barron, the floor is yours for six minutes, please.

**Ms. Lisa Marie Barron:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister.

Minister, as I'm sure you've seen here, and in many other meetings, we know that facts just don't seem to matter to our Conservative colleagues, which is really upsetting to see.

They are very good at making clips, though, and I want to acknowledge that often those clips are posted before we even leave the meeting, so I will give them credit for being exceptional clippers. My colleagues are agreeing that they are very good at clipping, so that's good.

Mr. Chair, my question to the minister today is around the election date. At a risk of repeating myself, as soon as the implications to MPs' pensions was brought to my attention, and to the attention of my NDP colleagues, I was immediately up in the House of Commons proposing a solution to remove the clause that would make that come into effect.

My colleagues, on the other hand, stood up to try to have the entire bill completely delayed, and not put into place, because they didn't want to see improvements to our elections process. They want to keep it exactly the way it is, because it benefits them.

My question to you, Minister, is in regard to an amendment put forward on June 18 by my colleague, MP Mathyssen, to remove the clause that would put this unintended benefit—at least I would assume it would be an unintended benefit—to MPs' pensions.

Would you be in support of that amendment to see that portion removed?

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** I won't be voting at this committee, when you do your clause-by-clause work. You can speak to my Liberal colleagues to see how they will vote. I have said that, as a representative of the government, if the committee decides to change that date, return the date seven days earlier, that's entirely up to the committee.

The pension consideration was not the consideration in the numerous so-called secret discussions that I would have had with your former colleague, Daniel Blaikie, who stood with me, when we announced this bill, including the date. I would just draw your attention to that.

However, the controversy is such that if people want to change the date, that's fine. I totally agree with you, Ms. Barron, that the Conservatives use that...Again, I was fisheries minister. There's an expression in English, "red herring". The Conservatives use that as

an excuse to ensure that some of the things that the NDP caucus and our government worked on to make voting more accessible....

Do you think the Conservatives, Ms. Barron, want to have campus voting? Of course they don't. Do you think they want to ensure that mail-in ballots are more accessible? No. Everything they have done, when Mr. Poilievre had my job at Democratic Institutions, was to make voting more difficult.

You're right, they'll *contourner*. They'll frame the argument around a date to distract from what I think—and I don't know if you agree with me—is a desire to ensure that we don't strengthen the elections regime to resist foreign interference, as recommended by the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada, or deal with some of those accessibility issues that all parliamentarians should be interested in.

• (1250)

**Ms. Lisa Marie Barron:** I agree with a lot of what was said. I believe it is vitally important for us to be sitting around this table, and talking about how to strengthen our elections. I'm happy we are discussing this bill today.

There are some concerns that have been brought forward that I wanted to ask about. When we had representatives from the CLC and PSAC here, they were nervous that the existing legislation was too broad, and that it didn't specify the right for unions to be able to communicate freely with their members.

Do you share that concern? Do you see any concerns with us making any amendments to this bill to ensure those rights are protected?

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** Again, I certainly wouldn't purport to offer advice to a standing committee of the House that hasn't begun its clause-by-clause on what amendments, in the judgment of the committee, would be appropriate to pass, but I do share your concern.

Maybe Mr. Sutherland has more technical experience than I would have in terms of the origin of this particular measure, but these particular elements of the bill were specifically to ensure that unions or other third parties—we're focusing on unions, but other third parties—that can participate in communications with their members in an election have obligations under the act to register. I think it's important that there be transparency in terms of what unions would be doing in terms of third party spending—advertising—and in terms of communicating with their members.

I think the concern was around not having a foreign actor use a particular union or other third party participant in the election as a front to inappropriately or illegally interfere in the Canadian election.

There's a long history of unions participating in the democratic process, which is something we support. We would certainly share the concern that you have expressed and that union leaders would express around not inadvertently restricting what is a long-standing practice of unions being able to participate in the election.

However, it has to be done in a transparent way, so that foreign money wouldn't flow to a union or.... It's not one of the big unions that you mentioned, which might have been at this table. They're long-standing, reputable organizations that have existed for a long time. I think the concern may be around a smaller group that would suddenly.... We've seen it with respect to the earlier conversation around some Russian influence.

One has to be careful to ensure there's transparency and rigour, but in no way would we seek to limit what has been a historical right for them to participate in an electoral process—unions or other third parties—and we think that's a good thing.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Cooper, the floor is yours for five minutes.

**Mr. Michael Cooper:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, with respect to the clause in the bill that pushes back the date of the next federal election, you have stated that the reason for that was to avoid a conflict with a holiday. You've said that before. You said it at committee. However, the date that was selected conflicts with the territorial election in Nunavut. The Chief Electoral Officer came before this committee and indicated that this would significantly strain electoral resources in Nunavut.

You talked about the holiday being important. I agree, it is important. I agree the Alberta municipal elections are important. Do you not think the territorial election in Nunavut is also important?

Why is it that of all the dates that were chosen, you chose that specific date?

• (1255)

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** This identifies, again, something that I said is an ongoing challenge with a fixed election date.

I hope that Mr. Cooper, in the House of Commons, in any of his questions, hasn't been using the silly phrase about time being up.

Mr. Cooper, you would, of course, want to have an election right now, so you shouldn't be worried about a fixed election date next October, but I'm glad you're turning your attention to that.

**Mr. Michael Cooper:** Minister, in solving this problem, you've created another problem in terms of a date that conflicts with a territorial election, which will have an adverse impact on the territory in terms of conducting two elections on the same date.

It does solve one problem. It's not a problem that Canadians have, but it's a problem that NDP-Liberal politicians have, which is that soon-to-be-defeated NDP and Liberal MPs, who would not qualify for their pensions, will suddenly collect their pensions. They're going to pad their pockets. That's what the effect of it would be. It's to pad the pockets of soon-to-be-defeated NDP and Liberal MPs.

The fact that you profess ignorance of that fact is only because you've been caught. The fact that you're willing to back down is because you've been caught. Canadians have realized that this is exactly what you did or tried to do.

I'm going to put the question to you once again. It's a question you refused to answer when Mr. Duncan asked you.

Whose idea was it to pad your pockets? Was it your idea or was it the leader of the NDP's idea?

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** Congratulations, Mr. Cooper, on your clip. I hope you can get it up before the end of the meeting.

**Mr. Michael Cooper:** Just answer the question.

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** In the premise of your question, again, you had a series of....

I find it very arrogant, Mr. Chair, that one would say “soon-to-be-defeated” MPs. I wouldn't purport to decide how the voters in St. Albert—Edmonton will deal with Mr. Cooper in the next election. There's a certain arrogance, I think, from the Conservatives to say that...first of all, their members who would have, in their obsession with the pension focus, have benefited also. The idea that none of them might risk being defeated is the supreme arrogance that I find—

**Mr. Michael Cooper:** Minister, answer the question: Whose idea was it? Was it your idea? Was it the leader of the NDP's idea? I've asked you a very straightforward question. Answer the question.

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** Mr. Chair, we explained when we introduced the bill that we had worked on this bill with the NDP caucus, in this case with Mr. Blaikie, with respect to an agreement that Mr. Singh and the Prime Minister made. We have noticed the manufactured indignation from the Conservatives around this issue—I agree with Ms. Barron—to perhaps prevent them from dealing with what we think are substantive and positive issues in this—

**Mr. Michael Cooper:** When you had your behind-closed-doors secret meeting with the NDP, we see in response that Al Sutherland attended that meeting, but who in the PMO sat in on that meeting with officials in the NDP?

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** Again, Mr. Chair, it was such a secret meeting, at a great pizza place on Metcalfe, that we posted it on Twitter, but—

**Mr. Michael Cooper:** I'm referring to the meeting on January 25, where the Chief Electoral Officer, among others, met with officials in the NDP. The question we had asked was this: Who in the PMO, who in your office, was at that meeting—if anyone?

**The Chair:** There are 15 seconds left.

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** Again, Mr. Sutherland addressed that. He was at that meeting. By recollection, I think the meeting took place in my office in the Confederation Building. Nobody from the Prime Minister's Office was in that meeting. I certainly don't have a recollection of that.

I was working with a parliamentarian from another caucus who shared our objective in preparing this legislation. We were lucky to benefit from the non-partisan advice of both senior public servants and Elections Canada. There's no mystery. The Conservatives find it shocking that people would work together to try to improve our electoral system. I don't think Canadians find it shocking that parliamentarians would work together to strengthen our democracy as opposed to try to vandalize it like Mr. Cooper would do.

• (1300)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Minister.

Ms. Romanado, you have five minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Sherry Romanado (Longueuil—Charles-LeMoyne, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the minister for joining us today.

I just want to bring up one thing.

Minister, the next municipal elections in Quebec are scheduled for Sunday, November 2, 2025.

My colleague, Ms. Gill, quoted from the letter received from the Union des municipalités du Québec. I'll read you an excerpt from that letter: "We propose to set this date for December 1, 2025. This would considerably reduce the period of overlap to 8-22 days, depending on when the federal election is called."

Even the Union des municipalités du Québec has called for the municipal elections to be moved to December 1, so later than planned.

[*English*]

What I wanted to talk about, Mr. Minister, is that—

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** With your permission, Ms. Romanado, I would like to make a comment.

You're right. I had forgotten about that. Maybe the Conservatives will see this as a plot by the Quebec municipalities to make sure that certain members of Parliament receive their pensions. I didn't think that they were part of the plot, but we might see a post on social media about this.

You're quite right. This shows the challenge posed by a set election date. Fall is obviously a busy time for elections.

Ms. Romanado, you and I aren't trying to trigger an election right now. Other political parties around the table want an election immediately. This shows a considerable lack of respect for the people of Nova Scotia, who are currently going through a provincial election.

**Mrs. Sherry Romanado:** Thank you, minister.

[*English*]

On that note, I just wanted to say, as said by Madam Barron, my colleague across the way, that the NDP will be bringing forward an amendment to this when we get to clause-by-clause. As I said in the last meeting, should that amendment be brought forward to keep the date of October 20, I'd be prepared to support that.

With that, this bill is 48 pages long. We've been focusing a lot on the date, but there are so many more important things. As you said yourself, it's called the elections "participation" act. I want to talk a little bit about the measures in this bill that talk about increasing voter participation.

One part you talked about a little bit is one that I would like to get more feedback on from you. That's with regard to legislating campus voting. I know that we were not able to do that in the last election because of COVID. Could you elaborate on the importance of helping students who may be at universities outside their home province and their home riding to have the ability to participate in that? We've heard previously that when voters start voting at a young age, they're more likely to continue to vote.

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** Through you, Mr. Chair, Madame Romanado, thank you for, again, focusing on what we think should be a very positive, non-partisan element of this bill, for the exact reasons you enunciated—encouraging young people on campuses to be able to vote. It's proven to be effective. It's easier for students to vote on campus.

I think of Mount Allison University, in my riding. It's largely an undergraduate campus. I think 30% or 40% of the students may come from New Brunswick; 60% would come from other provinces, including a number of them from your province.

When I visit the campus, there are students from across the country whose ability to be able to vote in an October election is very important. Some of them have been on campus for maybe only for a month and a half. We think it shouldn't be at the discretion of a local returning officer, in the case of my riding, in Beauséjour.

Parliament should clearly express its view that Elections Canada and the returning officers in every constituency have an obligation to ensure that the polls can be accessible on university campuses. There are measures in the legislation around making it easier to get mail-in ballots. I spoke about some of the measures in terms of persons in long-term care homes.

Many of these recommendations come, as you would know, from Elections Canada itself. Elections Canada does terrific work. It's world leading and recognized globally as one of the most effective, secure, competent, non-partisan administrators of national elections in four-and-a-half time zones, in 10 provinces and three territories. It does terrific work, including with its provincial counterparts. We should, as a committee and as a Parliament, be very sensitive to the non-partisan suggestions and recommendations that it would make, and we've tried to do that as much as possible to validate the great work that it does.

• (1305)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Gill, you have two and a half minutes.

**Mrs. Marilène Gill:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to come back to the two questions that I asked earlier. I want to say that the date change actually means two things. It isn't just a date. It means giving religion precedence over democracy. This date change may also adversely affect turnout

Mr. Chair, when a witness doesn't have time to answer our questions, they can also submit their responses in writing. I obviously encourage the minister to do so if he has more to say on these matters. We'll take this into account in our proceedings.

My next question concerns, once again, voter turnout, particularly with regard to subclauses 38(1) and 38(2) of Bill C-65. These subclauses would amend subsections 243.01(1) and 243.01(2), respectively, of the Canada Elections Act. These provisions concern the fact that a person may accompany an elector who requires assistance to vote. You talked about this in your opening remarks, I believe.

Subclause 38(1) proposes to expand the eligibility of people who may accompany electors into the voting compartment. I would like to know the reason for this proposal.

In addition, subclause 38(2) proposes to repeal a provision concerning the solemn declaration of the person accompanying the elector into the voting compartment. This person used to need to sign a solemn declaration stating that they wouldn't disclose the vote or try to influence it. I would like to know the reason for the proposal to simply repeal this provision.

I have a great deal of respect for voters who need assistance. However, if we really want to make their vote legitimate, I don't understand why we would make this change. I would like to hear your explanations.

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** That's a good, but also technical question. Many of these fairly technical changes were inspired by the work and recommendations of Elections Canada.

Ms. Pereira can provide further details.

**The Chair:** Ms. Pereira, time is running out. Please answer quickly. You can send us a full response later.

**Mrs. Rachel Pereira (Director, Electoral and Senatorial Policy Unit, Privy Council Office):** Thank you for your question.

[English]

There are two things that are being done in the bill. For electors with disabilities or who need assistance marking their own ballot, the bill removes the restriction on who can help them. Right now, it's limited to family and friends, but those electors will be able to choose anyone, including a personal support worker or someone else, to help them.

The other measure in the bill is that an individual who assists an elector who needs assistance can help more than one person. That's the restriction that's being removed. The integrity measures are still in place. They cannot influence that vote. They cannot share the vote. It has to be secret. That allows, for example, in a long-term care institution, a personal support worker, a health care worker, to help more than one elector if they need assistance marking their ballot.

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

Ms. Barron, two and a half minutes go to you.

**Ms. Lisa Marie Barron:** Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister.

Minister, I want to first reiterate that even though I wasn't directly the lead—my colleague, former MP Daniel Blaikie, was—I'm incredibly proud of the work that has been done to increase participation and improve our elections. This is vitally important work that we all need to be focused on.

Instead, the Conservatives want to focus on an aspect of this bill that, from the sound of it, is going to be resolved in the clause-by-clause study, if all of my colleagues follow through with what they are saying today. I want to reiterate that I'm happy we were able to talk about some of the positives of this bill, as well as the concerns, because there's still time for those concerns to be mitigated in the clause-by-clause study.

I want to take the time to ask you about an incident I just recently found out about. A former Conservative MP—his last name was Butt—in 2014 claimed he saw voter cards being misused, and he deliberately misled the House. He later retracted these comments.

In this bill, we're talking about false statements being made. I know you talked about the mechanics of the bill. I'm wondering if you have any thoughts of any mechanisms that could be put into place to ensure that Conservative members of Parliament, or any members of Parliament, cannot deliberately mislead the House and Canadians.

• (1310)

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** You're right. There is a lot in this bill that speaks to shared objectives our leaders have to make the electoral system more accessible and ensure the continued confidence of Canadians in the electoral system, so I look forward to the committee's work in this regard.

I don't remember that specific incident, although I was in the House 10 years ago, but I remember the so-called “unfair elections act” that the Conservative government introduced. I think I mentioned it in an answer to a previous question. It deliberately tried to restrict the ability of persons to show up at a polling station with the card they received in the mail saying, “This is the advance polling date. This is the election date. You vote at this location.”

We've all received those cards. When we're canvassing before an election, people get their card to ask questions about it. This is a normal thing. We thought that was a reasonable way for people to present themselves at the polling station and confirm their identity. The Conservatives sought to make it more difficult.

**Ms. Lisa Marie Barron:** Minister, before I run out of time, were the Liberals consulted on this change to the Elections Act that was being put forward? Were any other parties, aside from the Conservatives, consulted when this bill was being put forward? Do you recall this from 2014?

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc:** Again, I can't speak to other parties. You have some long-serving colleagues who could answer with respect to consultations with your party or your caucus, Ms. Barron, but Mr. Harper's government would certainly have had absolutely no interest in hearing from opposition MPs on strengthening the Elections Act.

Mr. Harper's government was focused on making voting more difficult and more restrictive, and on suppressing the vote. We were the third party in opposition in 2014. It certainly didn't consult us

when it sought to bring in a series of those sorts of restrictive amendments.

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

Colleagues, that's the end of today's meeting.

Minister, thank you for making yourself available.

Officials, the same goes to you.

The meeting is adjourned, colleagues.

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