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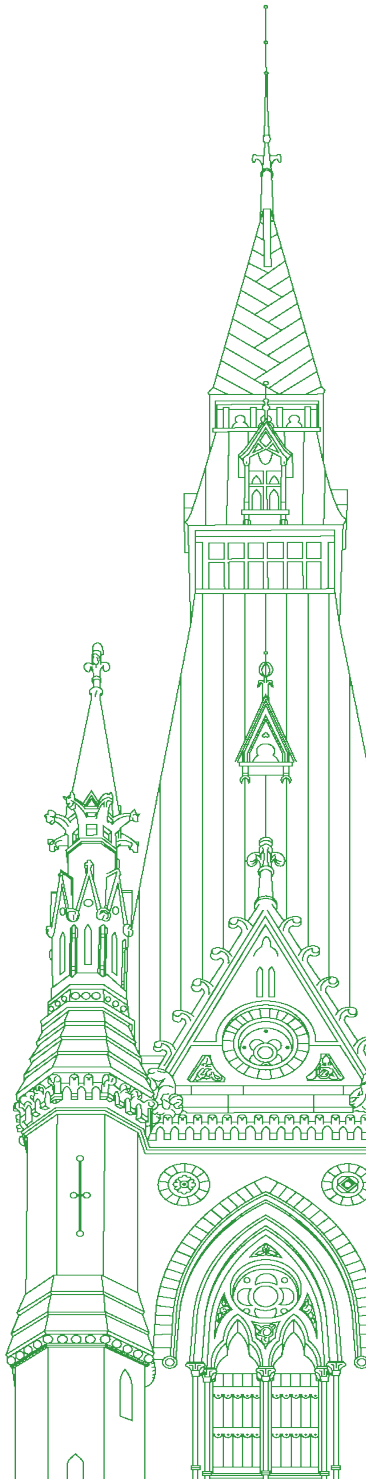

Chair: Chris Bittle

Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

Tuesday, March 10, 2026

● (1145)

[*English*]

The Chair (Chris Bittle (St. Catharines, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 24 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3), the committee is meeting today on its study of the current state of civic resilience in Canada. We will go in camera later to consider the report of the actions of the longest ballot committee.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. I ask all in-person participants to consult the cards on your table to prevent audio feedback injuries. As a reminder, if you're on Zoom or in person and wish to speak, please raise your hand.

I would like to welcome today's witnesses. I would also like to thank them for their patience and for rearranging their schedules as votes happened.

From the Democratic Engagement Exchange, we have John Beebe, director. From MASS LBP, we have Peter MacLeod, principal, who's attending by Zoom. From Resilient Societies, we have Maiwand Rahyab, founder and chief executive officer.

All three witnesses will have five minutes to deliver their opening remarks. We'll go to Mr. Beebe first.

You have five minutes.

John Beebe (Director, Democratic Engagement Exchange): Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee.

My name is John Beebe, and I am the founder of the Democratic Engagement Exchange at Toronto Metropolitan University. We are a non-partisan organization with a clear mission to build a vibrant and healthy democracy in Canada.

Today, I want to offer a simple idea: It is time to build a public health system for Canada's democracy. We can have the best vaccines, the leading research and the most sophisticated tools to fight disinformation, but without trusted frontline staff to deliver them, we cannot stop the foreign interference threatening our sovereignty or address the algorithmic polarization undermining our social cohesion.

The good news is that we are building on the basis of strength. As a proud new Canadian who cut his political teeth in the United States, I am grateful for what we get right. Voting is easy; elections aren't swamped by dark money, and we don't gerrymander. All of these things are critical elements of a healthy democracy that we must continue to protect.

However, democracy depends on more than procedures. It depends on people. Around the world, we see healthy democracies eroding, and Canada is not immune from this.

Voting is the lifeblood of any democracy, yet participation in provincial and municipal elections has reached historic lows. It was as low as 16% for youth in the most recent Nova Scotia election.

At the same time, our social fabric is fraying. We are experiencing an epidemic of loneliness and social isolation, particularly among young people. A recent YMCA study found that nearly 70% of young Canadians now report a lack of belonging in their communities. We are no longer looking at a mid-life crisis in Canada. We are looking at a youth crisis, whereby those under 30 are the loneliest and least happy members of our society. This matters, because when people feel disconnected from one another, they become vulnerable to the polarization and manipulation that authoritarian actors exploit. These actors don't need to destroy our institutions; they need only weaken the trust holding us together. Yes, we can blame anti-social media platforms, but the regulation of the platforms, while important, is not enough. We must offer young people, new Canadians and all community members an alternative.

This is where civil society acts as our democratic immune system. The exchange partners with thousands of community organizations, which are the trusted messengers and the glue of our communities. We provide them with free training and tools like our vote pop-up, which demystifies the voting process for first-time voters. We've trained thousands of librarians, settlement workers and student leaders to facilitate conversations and teach people how to vote. They do this off the side of their desk because they are passionate, but we can no longer rely on the goodwill of these unsung heroes. Right now, our democratic front line is underfunded and overstretched.

When we support this work, it creates a virtuous cycle. In every province and territory, we hear the same thing. People crave safe spaces to belong and be heard. When they find their community, they engage. When they engage, they vote, and their confidence in our institutions goes up.

At a moment when toxic online discourse is rampant, and students, friends and neighbours are avoiding conversations on the issues they care about because they're too political, creating these opportunities is essential. I'd like to share one story that illustrates this experience.

I was invited to join a workshop run by frontline staff we had recently trained. Noor ran a cook and learn program for new Canadians, who were mostly older women from South Asia. As part of the workshop, they had an opportunity to learn about the three levels of government, discuss issues they care about and make a representation of their ideal democracy out of playdough. At the end of the workshop, I asked the participants if they enjoyed it and found it valuable—after all, they were there to learn about cooking and have a chance to socialize, not talk about Canada's democracy. They had one simple answer: Yes, because this was a safe space to talk about the issues that matter to them and engage in our democracy, which was something they desperately wanted to do.

These conversations strengthen the health of our communities and our democracy, and this is why I am here to express our strong support for the Canadian democracy fund, with a $20-million annual investment. This model would be at arm's length and non-partisan, similar to how we fund the arts, sciences or Elections Canada itself.

● (1150)

This investment is modest compared with the costs of treating the disease of democratic collapse after it has already taken hold, and its impact will be significant. It will help unlock the potential of community organizations and local leaders in communities across Canada, and it will provide a foundation for deeper commitment from private philanthropy. This critical investment in our communities is what we need at this moment. Ultimately, the strength of our democracy isn't measured by who wins. It's measured by who participates.

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

I'll now turn to Mr. Rahyab.

Maiwand Rahyab (Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Resilient Societies): Chair Bittle and honourable members of the committee, thank you for the invitation to contribute to this important study.

In my experience, democracies do not decline overnight, and civic space rarely closes all at once. It weakens gradually when trust declines, participation narrows and citizens begin to feel their voice no longer matters. I have seen this process up close. Before seeking protection in Canada three years ago, I worked for many years alongside civil society organizations in Afghanistan and in other fragile contexts in which civic space was repressed. These experiences taught me something fundamental: Societies remain resilient when citizens stay engaged, organized and hopeful.

My name is Maiwand Rahyab. I am the founder and CEO of Resilient Societies, a Canadian organization dedicated to protecting civic space in Canada and globally.

Canada remains one of the world's strongest democracies, with a vibrant civil society. According to the CIVICUS Monitor, Canada is among the very small group of countries with open civic space. However, we should not take our democracy and our freedoms for granted. Building civic resilience now is the best way to protect it for the future.

Civic resilience is not built by governments alone. It is built by societies. Resilient civic spaces depend on citizens who participate, volunteer, organize, create, debate and hold institutions accountable. They depend on a strong civic ecosystem. This ecosystem includes community organizations, journalists, educators, artists, universities, philanthropies, volunteers and responsible businesses. When these actors are active and connected, civic resilience grows. When civic life weakens, societies become more vulnerable to polarization, disinformation, declining trust and attempts to silence dissent.

Canada, like many other democracies, faces real pressures. Trust in institutions is under strain. Polarization is increasing. Digital disinformation is reshaping civic discourse. Activists, journalists and diaspora communities face transnational repression and social marginalization. Strengthening civic resilience, therefore, requires harnessing the agency and energy of society itself while ensuring that people can participate freely and meaningfully.

I would like to offer three recommendations for the committee's consideration.

First, Canada should develop a national civic resilience strategy to strengthen civic participation and rebuild social trust. Backed by strong political will and financial resources, such a strategy should centre the agency of the people and bring together national and provincial governments, civil society, academic institutions, cultural leaders and the private sector to support the institutions and networks sustaining civic life.

Second, Canada should build on the inaugural Ottawa Civic Space Summit, which takes place next month in Ottawa. For 2027, Canadian civil society organizations are planning to launch an annual Canada civic action week to celebrate and strengthen civic engagement across the country. Such an initiative will mobilize communities, schools, universities, artists, volunteers, civil society organizations and businesses to engage citizens in civic dialogue, community service and democratic participation. Parliament should encourage and recognize such initiatives at the municipal, provincial and national levels.

Third, Canada should strengthen its role as a civic refuge. Canada is home to one of the world's largest communities of exiled journalists, human rights defenders and pro-democracy leaders, who have been forced to flee as civic space closes globally. While many have found safety here, they often remain vulnerable to transnational repression and face barriers that prevent them from contributing and participating in civic engagement in Canada. By fostering an enabling environment in which civic actors can contribute with safety, voice and agency, Canada can strengthen its own democratic life while demonstrating global leadership in defending human rights and civic space.

● (1155)

Civic resilience ultimately depends on people and participation. It grows when citizens believe their voices matter and when societies invest in institutions and networks that enable participation.

Canada has an opportunity to strengthen civic resilience by empowering its citizens, supporting a vibrant civic ecosystem and standing alongside those defending civic space in Canada and around the world.

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

I turn now to Mr. MacLeod for five minutes, please.

Peter MacLeod (Principal, MASS LBP): Thank you.

I am very pleased to speak to the committee on a topic so vital that I published a book about it last month. The book is called *Democracy's Second Act: Why Politics Needs the Public*. Most everything I want to say this afternoon is captured in the title.

First, liberal democracies are struggling not only because they're under immense pressure from foreign adversaries but also because our democracies have stopped evolving. They are leaving too many people feeling excluded and angry, like passive spectators rather than active and indispensable participants in our local and national life.

We should be proud defenders of everything we've achieved: responsible government, universal suffrage, an independent judiciary, fair and free elections and the peaceful transfer of power. Democracy's first act has delivered peace, security and voice to millions in this country and beyond, but it's not the end of our story or of our democratic evolution.

This brings me to the second half of the title, “Why Politics Needs the Public”. This should seem self-evident, and I know members of this committee are here because they believe passionately in public service. However, we must concede that the relationship between politics and the public is not as strong or as healthy as it might be.

We know this because of the long-term trend in declining voter turnout, the hollowing out of riding associations and your political parties and, of course, declining trust and confidence in government and public institutions. These trends aren't unique to Canada, but this makes them no less dangerous.

At some point over the last 50 to 60 years, governments everywhere have come to treat their publics more as risks to manage than as society's most critical resource. However, people are smart: They know when they're being managed, talked down to or kept at a distance. We are preoccupied by measuring whether people trust government; I would challenge the committee to flip the question and consider whether governments really trust people.

All of this matters because civic resilience requires what the great American educator and thinker John Dewey called democratic fitness. Democratic fitness is the sibling of civic literacy, the idea that we should all know how a bill becomes law or how governments are formed. However, more than knowledge, which is surely needed, democratic fitness is about moral courage, agency, voice and the experience of personal and collective efficacy.

We can build this fitness, like any muscle, only with exercise, and I would argue that our democratic fitness and our civic resilience decline when there are fewer opportunities to work together and exercise the skills of citizenship: disagreeing agreeably, accepting trade-offs in the pursuit of larger aims and thinking long-term as stewards of the public interest.

Democracy's second act is fundamentally about building our civic resilience by asking more of people than simply their dollars and their votes. If our democracy is struggling, it's because it is encumbered by the tyranny of low expectations and the corrosive belief that people are too ignorant, apathetic and self-interested to do more.

Where do we go from here? If liberal democracies are to thrive, we need a sea change in our understanding of modern publics and the role of parties and government. The purpose of democratic institutions must be more than sustaining the edifice of democracy; it must also include building vibrant democratic publics.

My co-author and I argue that healthy democratic publics are three things: informed, engaged and productive. Fortunately, when we look around the world, including here at home, we can see the contours of democracy's second act coming into view.

This looks like Norway's independent media trusts, which help ensure that citizens have access to a range of quality news sources and opinions, from the local to the national.

It looks like statistical agencies such as the National Science Foundation, which traditionally has measured what people know, not only what they like or dislike, and taken this as a mandate for public education and communication.

● (1200)

It looks like the citizens' assemblies of Ireland, which have been used to change their constitution not once but three times in the past decade, inspired in part by Canada's own early experiments in deliberative democracy.

In parts of Belgium, randomly selected members of the public can sit on committees just like this one. Rather than finding it awkward or distasteful, parliamentarians there see it as a benefit, bringing new voices and perspectives to the table. As one Belgian MP put it, you always behave better when you have guests in the house.

It looks like Sweden, which, like many Nordic countries—

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. MacLeod, but I will have to cut you off. We're over time. Hopefully, you can put more of your recommendations within the answers you give to questions from members.

Just as a warning, members, I will be a bit more strict on time than I typically am.

On that note, we'll turn to Mr. Van Popta from the Conservatives.

You have six minutes, please.

● (1205)

Tako Van Popta (Langley Township—Fraser Heights, CPC): Thank you.

I'd like to thank all the witnesses for their testimony and for their patience with us as we dealt with some political issues in the House of Commons today.

Mr. Beebe, I'll start with you. As you gave your testimony, I noted your observation that political engagement, particularly among younger people, is lower and probably going in the wrong direction. I find it ironic that the more social media we have, the less social our society seems to become. This is not really a question; it's just a comment, but it is the basis of my next question.

A number of you noted that voter turnout has been going down. There was a record high of almost 80% in 1958 with John Diefenbaker's landslide victory. These days it's typically less than 60%, sometimes even less than 50% provincially. It's definitely heading in the wrong direction. When I knock on doors during campaigns, I often ask people if they follow politics. They often go, “I'm sorry. I don't, really.” This is their choice. We want an engaged public, but they have a choice about how engaged they want to be. I wonder if you could comment on that.

I have some quotes from your website. You state, “The promise of democracy is that everyone has a voice in shaping the future they want for themselves, their families, and their communities.” You go on to say, “People who are least likely to participate are rarely disengaged by choice. They are excluded by design.” In the last provincial election, 40% of British Columbians decided not to vote. Did they not vote by choice or by design?

John Beebe: I completely agree with you on the social media piece. This is why I'm trying to get everybody to call it “anti-social media”, because it really hasn't proved to be social media as a bonding piece.

The question of how people are participating and why people are participating is critical to the work you're considering and the work we're doing. We've seen that when people feel a sense of belonging in a community, they do engage. They do vote. They do participate. This is the key to the health of our communities. It's why so much of the work we're pushing for and supporting is really creating those safe spaces in our communities for people to come back together—in person.

Tako Van Popta: I agree with that and I respect that. You gave the example of new Canadians in a cooking class. It's a nice example, but 40% of British Columbians chose not to vote. These aren't all new immigrants who don't know the system.

John Beebe: Exactly. I think what you've experienced at the door is too often that people are feeling as though politics is now a space that feels toxic. How do we help undo this in a way that invites people into the conversation? That's the key issue we're looking at. I think it's by working with our trusted local organizations, which help to rebuild those civic spaces and bring people in.

I think, for those of us who were lucky enough to grow up in our communities with family and friends who talked politics, that's great. We're very likely to be involved. For those folks who didn't, we have to find ways to engage them.

Tako Van Popta: Good.

I also want to talk about another democratic institution: our court system. There seems to be a lack of confidence there. I thank the analysts for the nice report they put together, which shows that only 48% of Canadians trust our criminal justice system.

This is reflected in an article I read in the National Post on March 6, just a couple of days ago. They quote a Macdonald-Laurier Institute study: “Rising crime, mounting delays and inconsistent enforcement have created a widening gap between expectations and performance”. Perhaps you could comment on that—on the importance of an engaged and resilient society's having a justice system that people can have confidence in.

John Beebe: It's a super interesting piece. It's not something we necessarily come up against in our work, with people raising that concern, but you're exactly right. How do we build confidence in our communities and institutions, such as our courts? It's a virtuous cycle that we're trying to establish.

One of the key ways is getting people who are more knowledgeable and engaged to have those conversations with other people in their community in order to learn about people's experiences. However, I agree with you. It's a big challenge we need to address.

Tako Van Popta: Do I still have a minute?

● (1210)

The Chair: Yes, it's about a minute.

Tako Van Popta: I want to talk about an example of people being very engaged. You might disagree with them, but they were certainly engaged.

This was the so-called “freedom convoy” a couple of years back. These were independent citizens coming in and expressing their views to the government. The government disagreed with them and shut them down. You know all about the Emergencies Act. It has just come through the Federal Court of Appeal. The court disagreed with the government and said that these people have the right to express themselves.

Your comment addresses the heavy-handedness of a government shutting down people who want to be engaged.

John Beebe: I am not a legal expert and don't pretend to have an understanding of the different arguments about whether it was the right place to be.

I will say that one interesting thing about this community was people coming together to express their views with a sense of community, which they clearly had. It had a sense of belonging and a sense of people sharing their views—whatever one's views are on the particular subject. It was about people coming together around things they cared about. This, ultimately, is how democracy is supposed to work.

We want to encourage people to come together around things they care about and create those spaces, but in such a way that they can talk about things with each other.

The Chair: I'll have to interject there. We're over time.

We'll turn to Madame Brière for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Élisabeth Brière (Sherbrooke, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank the three witnesses for joining us. Their testimonies were really quite insightful.

I would also like to thank my colleague for moving the motion for this committee study.

The witnesses' work reminds us that we have concrete ways to strengthen citizen participation and to rebuild the bonds of social trust, despite the decline in democratic vitality. I would like you to give us, the government, some concrete examples of how we can strengthen citizen participation. A number of studies show that trust among citizens is just as important as trust in the government. How can we strengthen this horizontal trust in increasingly diverse societies?

I think that all three of you can answer my question, but that Mr. Beebe could respond first.

[*English*]

John Beebe: Thank you.

The core issue is trust among community members. The opportunity to do this is based on our civic institutions, which have been eroding in our communities. This is why it's critical to reinvest in those opportunities and create space for people to have those conversations. We have to make it acceptable for spaces like libraries, YMCAs and community institutions to host those pieces.

Honestly, it doesn't come easily, because people are uncomfortable having those conversations. We can do it in ways that might sound out of place in this community—ways that are fun and build communities on shared values and the things that bring us together. We can start from a place of shared values—the things we all care about, such as our families, our neighbourhoods and our friends. If we can start from those places, we can also have the more challenging conversations about the places in which we disagree.

It's something that all of you do in your work. It's about ways of being intentional about this and encouraging our civic institutions to take up the mantle and take it on.

● (1215)

Hon. Élisabeth Brière: Thank you.

Mr. Rahyab, would you like to add something?

Maiwand Rahyab: Sure. I have a couple of points.

First, emphasize the idea of shared values, and focus on that.

Second, as Canadians, as communities, we need to come up with our story of Canada and our shared narrative of what it means to be Canadian. What priorities, stories and narratives become our collective vision as Canadians for the future of the country?

Once those are shared among different communities, it will help bring a sense of unity, trust and cohesion among community members.

Hon. Élisabeth Brière: Mr. MacLeod.

Peter MacLeod: Thank you.

I would make two very brief points. First, we need to be very clear, when we talk about civic resilience, what it is we're talking about. Second, we need to have much more comprehensive measures of this thing. I agree that horizontal trust is absolutely vital.

Canada does many of the right things. We just don't do any of them at the scale necessary to make an impact. Certainly, when we think about young people, one of the best ways in a country as vast and diverse as ours is to find programs that allow young people to mix and move around the country to experience different ways of living, different ways of connecting. The government at various times, from Encounters with Canada to Katimavik and beyond, has invested in these programs. Sadly, we're not in a moment in which they have enjoyed continued investment.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Élisabeth Brière: In the Hogue commission report, definitions of “civic resilience” were laid out on paper. I would like to know your thoughts on these definitions.

Canada is also responsible for principle 3 of the Paris Call, which concerns civic resilience. As a country and as a co-lead for this principle, Canada is doing many things. Do you think that this will lead to any concrete results or recommendations?

[*English*]

Peter MacLeod: The first thing I'd want to say is that many of these definitions and much of this work puts, perhaps, undue emphasis on trust. I actually think trust is a bit of a red herring and that, underneath, if we peel back what is a driver of trust, we often encounter concerns about capability. People don't regard government as capable. They don't regard its institutions and agencies as capable, and equally, government institutions don't feel that Canadians are capable.

We need to measure capability and weave this into some of our definitions of civic resilience. However, there are other measures as well—social capital, cohesion, legitimacy of institutions, volunteerism, voter turnout and all the rest.

Again, this is a question of scale more than innovation. It costs in this country, I believe, somewhere in the order of $500 million or $600 million to run a federal election. We are not putting a fraction of this investment into the space between elections to sustain an engaged and vibrant democratic culture.

The Chair: At this point, I have to intervene. We will move on to Madame Normandin.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Normandin, you have the floor for six minutes.

Christine Normandin (Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank the witnesses for joining us. I want to ask a broad question and hear what you all have to say.

The committee has already devoted a great deal of attention to misinformation and transnational repression. You seem to be talking about a different aspect, which concerns engagement and public interest. I would like to hear your comments on the connection between these two factors.

In terms of general engagement, fewer and fewer people are volunteering for community organizations. People are living in a society that seems increasingly individualized. Even if we work on this aspect, it doesn't need to turn into electoral participation. In contrast, when it comes to mistrust or misinformation, a person can be highly misinformed but remain deeply involved in politics.

Which of the two aspects do you think is the most important to work on if we want to improve civic resilience?

● (1220)

[*English*]

John Beebe: The connections among foreign interference, disinformation and the health of our communities are very clear. The evidence around this is very clear. When people feel lonely and they do not have friends, family and people whom they feel connected with, they're much more vulnerable to foreign interference and manipulation.

It's common sense. The number of people reporting more loose friends, not necessarily close friends, is down dramatically over the last 10 years. COVID accelerated this. Those are the ones with whom we have informal conversations and connections. We hear different views, because maybe they're not in our bubble of particular political ideas about the world. When we lose those, we naturally lose the things that help us build our immune system against foreign interference. It makes us question some of this disinformation and makes us question some of the things we're seeing.

As Peter was suggesting before, we need to reinvest in this and understand that our investments in our community are related to the health of our democracy.

Maiwand Rahyab: To add to that, transnational repression, foreign interference and disinformation are directly impacting civic engagement and the health of Canadian civic space and democratic institutions. Many people who are the direct targets of transnational repression operations are forced to leave their countries because of their civic, human rights and democratic activities.

They are natural activists, civil society leaders and democracy actors. They can contribute significantly when they come here, not only to the countries they came from but to the health of the Canadian ecosystem and Canadian democracy. They can also transfer their experiences here. They are assets and important contributors to our civic ecosystem.

Attacking them, through transnational oppression and disinformation, weakens our civic space ecosystem. It is going to directly discourage participation. It's going to make people more frustrated, isolated and marginalized.

Countering these operations and allowing these people to become more engaged, involved and included in the Canadian civic space not only helps and protects them but also helps to enrich our own civic and democratic systems in Canada.

Peter MacLeod: I'll make three quick points.

First, Canada survived the 2008 financial crisis because we had superior financial regulations. Today, we do not sufficiently regulate our digital information space. It has become compromised. Without an independent digital regulator, the government cannot sufficiently protect Canadians.

Second, the nature of volunteerism has changed. It doesn't look like people are belonging to the local rotary club and attending a meeting every Wednesday afternoon. When the government activated the groups of five program 10 years ago with the encouragement of the Lifeline Syria Fund, 132,000 Canadians sprang into action to give 37,000 Syrian families a new start on life here.

Those were Canadians who were raising money, getting people good jobs and getting them into housing. A decade later, the Syrian Canadians who were sponsored by long-time Canadians have integrated more successfully into our society. The nature of volunteerism has changed. It's intense, episodic and high-impact. We have to tap into the problem-solving capacity of Canadians.

Lastly, political parties—I'm sorry—are culpable too. It's because too much engagement has been replaced by top-down management and communication. It makes people cynical.

The Chair: Next, we have Mr. Calkins for five minutes, please.

Blaine Calkins (Ponoka—Didsbury, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

I want to start off with you, Mr. Beebe. In your opening remarks, you talked about the under 30 crowd being the least engaged.

When I was a young man, the notion that I would never own a home was.... We never even talked about these things. Fast-forward to now, and my kids are in their twenties and well educated. They have the same common problems as do many young people across Canada. I live in a part of the country in which inflation and home costs are not even remotely as severe as they have been in some of our larger urban centres in eastern Canada and along the west coast.

Given this fact, it all boils down to a sense of hope. Right now, I don't think there's a strong sense of hope, because of some of the decisions that have been made.

Is this a factor in any of your discussions, thoughts or studies? The question's for everybody, but I'll start with you, Mr. Beebe.

● (1225)

John Beebe: I am not an expert on the elements of what drives hope, but I certainly hear the exact same thing. My kids are in the same boat. They're feeling despondent about the rise in housing prices and—

Blaine Calkins: How do you deal with social cohesion—

John Beebe: Right—

Blaine Calkins: —when your population is despondent?

John Beebe: It's the same way we always respond in times of crisis or times of challenge. It's to find and create opportunities for people to come together, because in those moments, people are looking even more for their sense of community and more for people to bond with. When you're feeling challenged, you're looking for hope. People would much rather be in a place of hope.

I think you're right. These realities are crushing for our young people today, but I think that when they're in this situation, they want to find other people to connect with, and we have to build this and provide people a chance to come together and talk about it. Even talking about it helps them feel more connected, and there's more of a sense that they're not in this by themselves.

Maiwand Rahyab: On the sense of hope, democracies' institutions—including governments, civil society and businesses—all need to deliver. That's important. It's one piece that can contribute to creating this sense of hope, but also, there are different sources for hope.

One is, of course, as you know, the economy, and governments delivering and democracies delivering, but it's also about agency. When people feel that they have agency, that they are able to shape the conversation, the politics and policies of the institutions of democracy, it gives them hope. It also comes from community organizations and civil society groups working hard to make a better situation for all Canadians.

Hope is critical for protecting our democracy, but there is not one source of hope: There are multiple sources, and they all need to work collectively to bring hope.

Blaine Calkins: When you're talking about agency—I didn't get a chance to go to Mr. MacLeod yet, but maybe he can chime in on this—one in four jobs in Canada right now is a government job. We've never had more government than we have right now. We've never had larger federal budgets and provincial budgets than we have right now.

How does this help people with their sense of agency? It seems to me that when you expect the government to do more for you, it doesn't deliver the same result.

Mr. Beebe, you came here asking for more money from the taxpayers in order to create a better outcome for people. We've never spent more; we've never had more government workers, and we've never had worse outcomes for the generation we're talking about.

If you're going to talk about agency, that's giving people control over their lives and control of the decisions they make and having positive outcomes. How do you see more government doing what more government hasn't been able to do for the last 10 years?

The Chair: You have about 30 seconds.

John Beebe: I would quickly say that I don't see this being about more government. I see it being about investments in our community organizations that matter to us, that work in our communities and have the closest connection. However, I certainly understand your concerns about how we can make sure people have a sense of agency. Exploring this is key to any solution.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We'll now go to Mr. Wilkinson for five minutes, please.

Hon. Jonathan Wilkinson (North Vancouver—Capilano, Lib.): I'm going to be a bit provocative, maybe. I would like each of the witnesses to respond.

Thank you for coming.

There are a number of trends in society making—in my mind, anyway—civic resilience more challenging. Certainly, social media is one of those. We are all increasingly living in silos.

It's also true that we are a more urbanized society. I grew up in Saskatchewan, and there are many communities there where the sense of community is very strong. However, I live in Vancouver, and I would tell you most folks don't even know who their neighbours are. It's an increasingly atomized society. Couple this with the fact that, for better or for worse, churchgoing attendance has declined. This was one of the fundamental sources of community; people got together and actually had conversations.

The macro level is quite challenging.

I would also say that with respect to trying to encourage engagement, every one of the MPs in this room tries to do various kinds of things to encourage grassroots participation, whether it's through town halls or a range of things. I'd be shocked if it's different for any of the other MPs. The same faces come to those engagements every time. It's a tiny fraction of the citizens who live in each of our ridings.

With mechanisms like a citizens' assembly—I think somebody mentioned that another country had taken lessons from us—our experience with a citizens' assembly in British Columbia was around electoral reform, and it didn't drive higher voter turnout. It didn't succeed.

What I would be really interested in hearing about from you guys is not the high-level conversation but what specific things you would recommend that we do to try to turn some of these things around. How can they be scalable? I heard one of you mention Katimavik. It's a great program, but it touches a tiny number of people.

What specific things would you recommend, and how do you ensure that they can be done at scale?

● (1230)

John Beebe: I can respond.

You've nailed the challenge. One specific thing that we do is not trying to host events and invite people to them. We try to figure out ways to join tables that already exist. This is why we're partnering with community organizations. It's why we're doing programs like cook and learn, rec leagues and programs in other places where people are coming together already. That's one.

One very specific thing, when you look at Elections Canada and other election management bodies, is that they're increasingly hiring staff called community relations officers ahead of an election. Their job is to reach out to trusted community organizations and make sure that they have accurate information about where, when and ways to vote. It's not to encourage people, but to give people information by going where they already have programming going on.

You're exactly right. We have the same experience. When we invite people to come out and talk about democracy, we get our friends and allies. We love them, but they're not the new people building new communities.

I would encourage you to try the same thing. I'm sure you do. Join people where they are. Sit down with those people who are at the table and listen to what they have to say about the issues at the top of their minds. This will be a groundbreaking experience.

We start by asking people the question, “What matters to you?” Many times, people say, “No one's ever asked me that.”

Maiwand Rahyab: One example for us, which we are launching next year, is the Canada civic action week. We are trying to make democracy and civic engagement more accessible and more understandable for the public by organizing music and cultural events, book launches, conferences and volunteering events in which communities themselves drive civic activities in their communities in a one-week period throughout the country.

It creates a narrative for how important civic engagement and democracy are. It also creates a sense of belonging throughout the whole of the country during one week through what they do, not through what we ask them to do. It's how they integrate civic engagement and democracy conversation: art, music, volunteering, community engagement and university lectures. All of this can contribute to creating a common, shared sense of engagement among Canadians.

● (1235)

The Chair: Thank you so much. I have to cut it off there.

As a reminder to members, I believe Mr. MacLeod has to leave us at 12:45, if you're looking to direct your questions to him.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Normandin, you have the floor for three minutes.

Christine Normandin: Thank you.

I do many classroom visits. I start by asking students how much they like politics, on a scale of one to 10. Usually, the answer is zero or one.

I then get them debating by asking them whether we should regulate abortion, ban guns and give more money to health care or education. I also ask them what they think about the environment. I have them debate for an hour. Afterwards, I tell them that they have engaged in politics.

Is the issue that people aren't interested in politics, or that they don't make enough of a connection between politics with a capital P and political institutions?

[*English*]

John Beebe: I'm happy to jump in on that. I'm a former high school teacher. I taught high school for 13 years, and I love working with young people.

We have the exact same experience. When you ask them if they are interested in politics, it's zero to one. Are they interested in power? It's 10. They understand power. They don't necessarily connect what you do to power. This is why we talk about agency and power and voting as a form of power. I ask people what other forms of power they have, and young people especially don't have many other forms of power. They like the idea of voting as a form of power. It works much better as a form of power when you do it collectively. It's not just an individual act. I would think that framing is part of it.

We also talk about democracy. Young people have a very mixed relationship with democracy, but when questioned about it, they are some of the most hopeful people about the potential of democracy. When we look at it this way, we can tap into their desire for agency and their desire to have a voice. They get very excited and motivated.

Right now, I'm working with a group of people from the Forum for Young Canadians, who are here this week. I help lead the program. It's totally inspiring to spend time with these young people from all across Canada. It makes me very hopeful about the future of Canada. They are people who understand what power means and what agency means for them.

[*Translation*]

Christine Normandin: Does anyone want to chime in?

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. MacLeod, if you have any comments, you have 30 seconds.

Peter MacLeod: I would simply observe that I think we teach many of the wrong lessons about democracy in our high schools. Even the structure of student government teaches people, from a very young age, that they can opt out and leave it to other kids, who often have various sorts of privileges and advantages and are recognized as young leaders, to gallop ahead. It establishes a norm in which most people are relatively passive spectators of this thing called politics.

We have better models. Recently, the Senate convened Canada's first climate youth citizens' assembly, building off the B.C. model Mr. Wilkinson mentioned.

Let's recall that 58% of Canadians voted for electoral reform in B.C. I can't recall a government that's ever been elected with 58%.

When we invite people to do real work and serve in a capacity that lets them grapple with real problems, Canadians, time and again, spring into action, young and old. There have been 1,500 assemblies globally. It's one of Canada's proudest democratic exports.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We'll turn to Mr. Kram for five minutes, please.

Michael Kram (Regina—Wascana, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Beebe, I would like to congratulate you on becoming a Canadian citizen.

Maybe I'll start with you, Mr. Beebe. I was wondering if you could comment on the importance of quality local journalism when it comes to civic resilience versus websites that peddle conspiracy theories and disinformation.

John Beebe: We would all agree that it's critical. This has been one of the core pieces eroding the health of our democracies.

We see this particularly during municipal elections. In municipal elections, especially if you don't happen to be in one of the major cities with a major paper covering it, it can be very challenging to find accurate information about the candidates and issues that are being discovered and discussed in those meetings. We hear that this is the major reason people don't participate. They don't feel as though they can make a well-informed choice, especially new Canadians and young people who don't already have a clear political ideology that they can line up with and look to.

It's critical to invest in the health of our local democracy, local journalism.

● (1240)

Michael Kram: Everybody I know is on Facebook these days. It always struck me as more than a little counterproductive that if you have, say, a municipal election campaign, individuals cannot share links to mainstream media articles on their Facebook pages, but anybody who wants to can spread disinformation and conspiracy theories on Facebook.

Mr. Beebe, I was wondering if you could share your comments on that.

John Beebe: It's part of the challenge that the platforms are posing for us. I completely agree. We run into this all the time, and we don't have the perfect answer. It's the hardest question we get. People say, “Okay, I get it. I want to vote. I understand. Who should I vote for?” Of course, we do not tell people who to vote for, but we want to direct them to good information. We say, listen to the news, attend town hall meetings, go to debates. Those are high lifts for people who are leading busy lives.

Michael Kram: I'll turn to you, Mr. Rahyab.

Could you share your thoughts on the ease with which individuals can share disinformation on social media when they can't share links to their local news publication on Facebook?

Maiwand Rahyab: Unfortunately, this is the challenge we have right now, as it's so easy to share misinformation or disinformation among Canadians. One way we are involved in this is in promoting information integrity through the ecosystem, but empowering communities through media literacy and other available tools to ensure that they have a say and that they have agency in understanding which information to believe and which information not to trust. This is the key thing. Sometimes it's hard, and we need to advocate and see how these platforms can become better. In the meantime, on the other side, we can focus on how our communities can become more resilient so that they are not victims of disinformation. Building capacity within communities so that they can decide for themselves how they're going to consume disinformation is going to play a key role in minimizing its impacts.

Michael Kram: Mr. Chair, we still have Mr. McLeod with us. Okay.

The Chair: He can stay until one o'clock now.

Michael Kram: Very good.

Mr. MacLeod, it's the same question for you. Could you share your thoughts on the lost opportunity to share links to mainstream media articles on Facebook versus sharing links to conspiracy theories and disinformation on Facebook?

Peter MacLeod: It's an absolute scandal. Unfortunately, it shows Canada's vulnerability in the face of big tech. If you were to ask Canadians if they want to share news on Facebook, they'd say yes. However, Facebook—Meta—has decided to deny Canadians this opportunity in retaliation for government policy. It shows the current danger of trying to act and regulate in defence of Canadians in this space.

Michael Kram: Chair, how am I doing for time?

The Chair: You have 15 seconds left.

Michael Kram: I'll hand it back to you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you so much. I appreciate that.

Madame Kayabaga, you have five minutes, please.

Hon. Arielle Kayabaga (London West, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

I would like to allow Mr. MacLeod to finish his thoughts on the answer he was giving. I'm interested to hear more about this danger with regulations from the government.

Peter MacLeod: I think every parliamentarian is aware that the government has worked to introduce online harms legislation. There is speculation that this will be challenged in the ongoing trade negotiations that are under way as we attempt to renew our free trade relationship with Mexico and the United States. It's why we see the greatest success with larger political entities like the European Union, which has introduced a variety of statutes. The EU is being challenged by big tech, and Canada can expect to be challenged as well. It doesn't mean that we can't do hard things and that we shouldn't try.

In fact, it is much like another era—the 1960s and 1970s, with the great era of cultural nationalism—when we established the CRTC and many other means to ensure that Canadian voices could be heard by each other, unimpeded by American broadcasters. We need to find our resolve on this question so that Canadians can speak to each other unimpeded again.

● (1245)

Hon. Arielle Kayabaga: I agree with you. I was trying to understand where your train of thought was headed, because this is what Canadians want us to do. They want us to protect Canadians online and to stand up to big tech and allow Canadians to be paid for what they produce. I agree that this plays into the very complicated negotiations.

I'll follow up on a conversation around engaging young people. I had the privilege of being shadowed by three young people from different universities today. I think the engagement is there.

Could you talk about other innovative ways to engage Canadians, beyond a citizens' assembly or policy engagement? Do you have any ideas on other ways we could be innovative in getting younger and other Canadians engaged and give them the power structure you talked about?

John Beebe: Peter, I'll turn it over to you. You start, and then I have some ideas.

Peter MacLeod: Briefly, there's no shortage of experts in this field, and there is no shortage of very innovative programs that exist and deserve to be scaled.

I'm going to point to one that may be sensitive for the committee, and this is the importance of something that, sadly, has become necessary given global affairs: the creation of a civil defence corps for Canada. There are lots of ways for young people to contribute to the defence of the country by learning emergency skills or by having better first aid skills. We're at a point when we need to organize our society, much as the Scandinavians have done, and give Canadians of all ages the opportunity to feel as though they can be part of a response, whether it is a natural disaster or whether it is, unfortunately, some kind of territorial challenge.

Hon. Arielle Kayabaga: Mr. Beebe.

John Beebe: Regarding young folks in university, we know the importance and value of Elections Canada's on-campus voting program, but we haven't seen our post-secondary institutions—the colleges and universities—step up to ensure that young people know about these opportunities and have an opportunity to become well informed. It's not just in your poli-sci class. It's across the university.

How do we engage people in these conversations and demystify the voting process? I blame my country of origin, but a lot of people in Canada think voting is really hard. When they go to vote, they realize it's easy. If you've never voted before, it's natural to think that you have to jump through all these hoops and do all these things. Well, you don't. We're very lucky, and part of engaging people is just demystifying the voting process.

It's also about encouraging them and creating safe spaces for people to have these conversations. This is not easy, and we've all felt the pressure on campuses. I work on campus. How do we make sure that we're creating ways for people to have what can sometimes be difficult conversations? It doesn't mean we can't have them, though.

Then there are simple, practical things we can do on campuses to encourage and raise awareness. We did this at TMU during the 2019 election, and we saw participation in the on-campus voting turnout go up 55%.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'd like to thank our witnesses, especially for waiting with us through the votes.

The study will continue.

This committee will move to an in camera meeting, so for those not authorized to be here.... I'd like to thank and dismiss everyone in the gallery and our witnesses.

We will suspend to go in camera.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]