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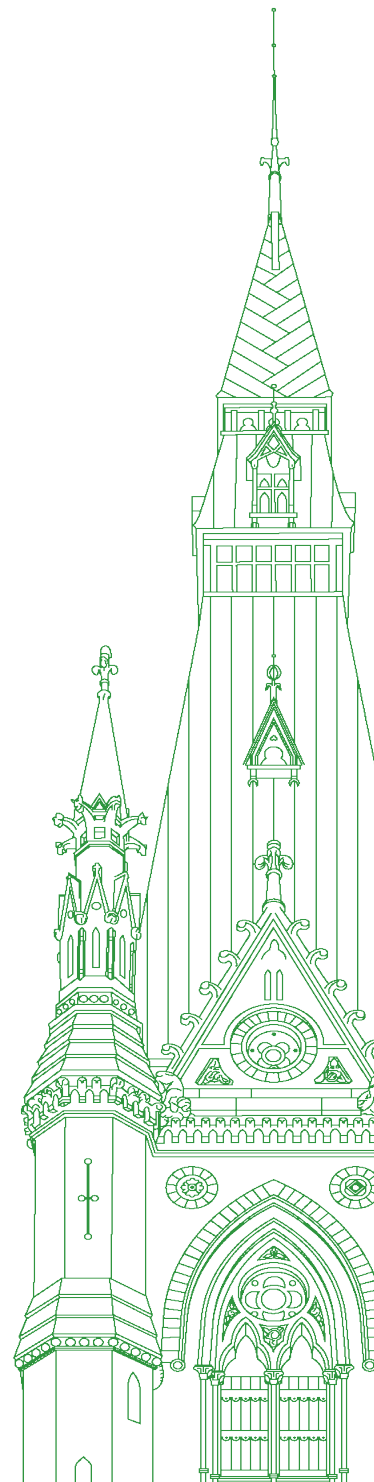
Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

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Chair: Chris Bittle



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• (1105)

[English]

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

Welcome to meeting number 28 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3), the committee is meeting on its study on the current state of civic resilience in Canada. Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format pursuant to the Standing Orders. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

I would ask all in-person participants to consult the card in front of them that contains a short video about the health and safety of all participants, especially our interpreters.

All comments should be addressed through the chair. For members in the room, if you wish to speak, put up your hand and, for members on Zoom, please use the “raise hand” feature.

I'd like to welcome our first panel of witnesses. As individuals, we have Aengus Bridgman, assistant professor, McGill University, and Taylor Gunn, fellow, national centre for critical infrastructure protection security and resilience, Carleton University. Online from QuietWire, we have Chris Blask.

We'll start with Taylor Gunn for five minutes, please.

Taylor Gunn (Fellow, National Centre for Critical Infrastructure Protection, Security and Resilience, Carleton University, As an Individual): Thanks so much for having me back. I was here about 4,500 days ago, 12 years, when there was a bill that was put forward that would have had the unintended consequence of disempowering Elections Canada from participating in civic education activities for elementary and secondary school students.

I had a really positive experience at the committee. You were clear-headed. You shared similar concerns with me and others, and an amendment was made, so thank you. Because of that, I trust this institution, and I admire your work. I wonder whether, on rainy days here at PROC, members would like something good to put in their pockets. I wanted to give you something tangible that at least came out of that work that you did with us and others.

I want to let you know that, after that change, Elections Canada was able to support what you might know as the student vote parallel election program a year later. This relates to all the witness testimony that's taken place so far on your topic. There were 7,600 schools that registered, and 920,000 Canadians under the voting

age cast a student vote ballot. In 2019, just under 10,000 schools registered, and 1.2 million students cast a student vote ballot. In 2021, there were 7,600 schools, with 810,000 students who cast a student vote ballot in the third week of September, which was about the worst time to do anything in schools.

[Translation]

Claude DeBellefeuille (Beauharnois—Salaberry—Soulanges—Huntingdon, BQ): Excuse me, Mr. Chair.

The interpreter tells me that she hasn't received the text and the witness is reading it so quickly that she can't keep up.

Can the witness provide the interpreter with the text?

[English]

The Chair: We didn't receive prepared remarks in advance. I've just asked the witness if he could just be a little slower. We appreciate that for our interpreters.

Thank you.

Taylor Gunn: That's no problem. Could I be slow and also, maybe, add back the time from the pause?

Are we good? Okay. I'm sorry about that. I will try my best to slow it down. It's not my greatest skill.

In last year's federal election, 7,100 schools and one million students cast a student vote ballot. As I said, on a rainy day, maybe you'll want to recognize that you caused four million voting experiences in kids under the voting age through the work of this committee, so thank you.

You sure picked a doozy with this standing order. I will cut it up a little. I'll start with a quick comment on what I think the state of civic resilience is in Canada right now.

I think we're very resilient—so far. I've looked into civil resilience over the last few years. It's led me to speak to the most amazing people in this country and around the world. There's a very special breed of person with whom I've had the privilege of speaking: past and current members of our armed forces.

I shared a meal with someone last night. His name is Dave. He was a major in the Canadian Army. He quit at the time of the Ukraine invasion, and he went and fought on the front lines. He knows what I've been up to. He said something when we left this really cute little pub on Elgin Street. These are his exact words: "Resilience is the only thing you can't build during a war. Once the war starts, you can figure everything else out. If you don't have the will, you don't have anything." I know we're not talking about a war today, and that's okay, but you could put a little blank space about that quote. "Resilience is the only thing you can't build during" and then a blank space.

The second part of your standing order is about what to do to build resilience. That's my interpretation. I think what you're really looking at is attachment. That's what you want to do. You want to focus on attachment to each other, to Canada and to our values and ideals as a country.

One point I'll leave you with today is getting to the how. I love the how. I've focused on the how of civic engagement and education for 20 years. It's what I do. Let's look at how you get people to know each other and get attached to Canada. There's an incredible opportunity. It seems to be a very different moment regarding some of the things our armed forces are exploring. It's about the growth of our primary reserve and the potential for a strategic reserve. I don't know whether Mr. Wilkinson.... There was a question related to one of the testimonies earlier on in this committee that talked about scale. It talked about Katimavik, which may have 10,000 kids a year, and other things. That's great. I'm used to hundreds of thousands and millions. We have an opportunity to encourage our armed forces to be entrepreneurial in how they look at the development of this supplementary and strategic reserve.

I'll leave you with that. There are a number of other things I can comment on related to your previous witnesses.

Again, I appreciate the work you do.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We'll now turn to Mr. Bridgman for five minutes.

Aengus Bridgman (Assistant Professor, McGill University, and Director, Media Ecosystem Observatory, As an Individual): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, committee, for the invitation. I also am being welcomed back. I was here in November for the foreign interference study. At that time, I talked about resilience and about information integrity, so I'm happy there's now a dedicated study looking specifically at that. I'm also happy to share my thoughts and research and understanding with the committee.

I direct the Media Ecosystem Observatory, Canada's largest entity that monitors the information space and the way information emerges, is digested and comes to shape the attitudes and behaviours of Canadians. For many years now, I and others in the information integrity space have been sounding the alarm. Most recently, this was sounded by Commissioner Hogue during the commission.

I want to talk a bit today about three things that I think folks have a sense of but I think really deserve attention in this study.

First, at this moment in Canada, we are operating in an information environment that is comparatively unregulated relative to many of our peer countries. We are operating in a situation where the platforms are not providing data access or base levels of accountability and visibility into what's going on. I have numerous examples I can speak to, moments where parliamentarians like you have asked platforms to provide even just a basic standard, a basic decent level of standard, of transparency around an information operation and around inauthentic activity, and have been met with silence.

Generally, both social and AI platforms are at a moment where they have been able to capture large parts of the market. They have been able to be very effective and serve the interests of Canadian democracy in some ways but also completely disregard others. While there have been several fits and starts in terms of legislative approaches and governance approaches, I really think we're at a moment where, when we look at other countries, we look at other jurisdictions and we look particularly at our European partners, we are lagging far behind. The time to act is far past. That absolutely needs to happen.

The second thing I want to talk about is the way in which AI will be restructuring the information environment. There is considerable change already occurring. About a month ago, we released a study looking at the way in which AI agents are ingesting and repackaging Canadian journalism. Increasingly, that is the way Canadians will be getting and receiving information about their communities and about what's going on in the world around them. There is some responsible, interesting and innovative behaviour in that space, but they are doing so in a way that is in their interest and not necessarily in the democratic interest. We're certainly keeping a very close eye and monitoring that. In that study in particular, I want to highlight that we identified some very clear exploitative behaviours, particularly vis-à-vis the French-language community in Canada and the underserving and under-referencing of French-language journalism.

The third thing I want to say is that we are in a moment when there will be massive change and a massive acceleration of change. I think we're all tired of change. We're all tired of how fast the information environment has been shifting over the last decade or two. Buckle up, because it's going to keep going. Very likely we're moving from a point where maybe many of your experiences with AI are through a chatbot type of interface. That's certainly the way many Canadians are now using it. We are very quickly moving into an agentic space, where individuals are tasking AI agents with seeking information and providing them with information. They are displaying very high levels of trust.

This is an opportunity. This is an exciting moment. We should think about how that can support our democracy, how that can support civic resilience, and how that can support information integrity, but there are also some dangers. This is also a fraught space. It will be yet another radical restructuring of our society and yet another radical restructuring of our information environment at a time when we are still playing catch-up.

I have two clear recommendations.

First, I think there has been a sense for a while in Canada that the information environment cannot be regulated and cannot be governed, for a variety of reasons. We need to disabuse ourselves of this notion. There is a lot of low-hanging fruit around data transparency, attribution, researcher access and basic levels of accountability. There's also some medium-hanging fruit if we talk about online harms. This is possible. This is urgent. This absolutely needs to happen.

• (1110)

The second is around civic resilience infrastructure, particularly in the information environment but also thinking a little more broadly. The major program in the space of the digital citizen initiative is sunseting. There are other programs that are sunseting at the moment, coming out of Heritage and other spaces. This is an opportunity to think about what we want to invest. I was heartened to see there's this \$31.5-million investment in improved capability to protect our information environment from foreign adversaries, but the civic resilience side is lagging behind, and that absolutely needs to be a priority over the next year.

The last thing I'll say, if the chair will permit it, is that we have two very important moments. The Quebec election is coming up. The Alberta referendum is likely to occur at the end of the year. These are critical moments for our democracy. Information integrity is absolutely critical to those being successful democratic exercises.

• (1115)

The Chair: Thank you so much.

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

Chris Blask (Chief Executive Officer, QuietWire): Thank you, Chair and members of the committee, for the invitation.

My name is Chris Blask. I'm co-founder and CEO of QuietWire, a Canadian AI infrastructure company. My work lives at the intersection of cybersecurity, institutional trust, community memory and practical AI deployment.

I want to start with a simple claim. Civic resilience is not mainly a messaging problem. It is an infrastructure problem. When people stop trusting institutions and trusting what they hear, when they no longer know where local truth lives and where institutions feel distant, and when communities lose the ability to interpret events together, that's when resilience starts to fail. When that happens, no amount of centralized messaging fixes it. You cannot "communication strategy" your way out of a trust deficit.

Resilience starts closer to the ground than that. It starts in communities that still know themselves: communities that can still remember what happened, still recognize who they trust, still connect

present events with shared meaning and still act through human relationships. That may sound abstract, but in practice it is very concrete. A resilient community needs trusted people, shared memory, credible local institutions and tools that help people make sense of events without taking agency away from them. This is where I think Canada should focus.

At QuietWire, that is a direction we're building towards: local practical AI systems that help communities, institutions and businesses preserve continuity, strengthen memory and remain legible to themselves over time. That's not as a replacement for people and not as a centralized platform that hoovers up data, but as infrastructure that supports human judgment, stewardship and local trust. That is not the only answer to this problem, but I do believe that it is a useful Canadian answer.

A lot of the public conversation around civic resilience drifts very quickly towards disinformation, moderation, platform policy and centralized response. Those things matter, but they are downstream. If people feel like they're only being spoken to and managed, corrected or nudged, that does not build resilience. It usually does quite the opposite. People become more resilient when they are better connected to one another, when they can see themselves reflected in their institutions, and when they have real ownership over the systems that shape local understanding. That is where AI becomes useful as a tool for continuity, recall, interpretation and service at the local level.

Used properly, AI can help communities preserve knowledge, access memory, support education, strengthen institutional continuity and help a place remain legible to itself over time. Importantly, this does not have to mean only the largest institution with the largest budgets. Canada can support approaches that are accessible to ordinary municipalities, libraries, indigenous communities, schools and small and medium-sized organizations as well, and that matters.

It's a different thing from using AI to manufacture consensus or push narratives from the top down. I think that distinction is one of the most important ones that this committee can make. A healthy approach to civic resilience is not centralized narrative management. It is distributed, human-anchored, community-owned capability. If I were to leave you with three practical recommendations, it would be these.

First, treat civic resilience as infrastructure—not just as a communications concern, but as something that deserves real support, experimentation and long-term institutional backing.

Second, invest in community memory and trust systems. Municipalities, libraries, indigenous communities, schools and local civic bodies are all places that need tools that help preserve knowledge, maintain continuity and support local meaning-making.

Third, support human stewards, not just technology. Every system that actually works still depends on trusted people on the ground. If Canada wants resilience, it should be backing the people who hold local trust: educators, librarians, archivists, municipal leaders, operators and community custodians.

My central point is this. Canada will not become more civically resilient by becoming more centralized, more abstract or more managerial. It will become more resilient by becoming more local, more legible, more trusted and more connected from the community up.

Thank you very much for your time.

The Chair: Thank you so much. We'll now go to questions from members.

We'll start with Mr. Van Popta for six minutes, please.

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

Thank you to all the witnesses for coming here today and sharing their wisdom and knowledge with us as we undertake this study on the state of civic resilience in Canada today.

Mr. Gunn, maybe I'll start with you.

You talked about voter engagement and the work that your organization has been doing in encouraging young people to get involved. I think that work has borne some fruit. I understand that in the last election, in 2025, voter participation among younger people went up.

However, overall, our voter turnout is not that great. There was a record turnout of 80% back in 1958, in the John Diefenbaker landslide. That's sort of the benchmark, and it's been sliding since then. It sort of bumps up and down a bit. Provincially, sometimes it's very low, and in by-elections, it's particularly low. Perhaps you could comment on voter turnout and how that ties into a sense of civic resilience.

• (1120)

Taylor Gunn: Sure. Just to clarify, I haven't been with Civix for four years, but I was just kind of reflecting on my past time here at the committee. I still admire the work of that organization.

Also, Mr. Van Popta, I just want to congratulate you, because, of all of the committee members, you were in third place in the last federal election for the number of ballots cast in your electoral district by the kids, with just under 5,000.

A voice: Get out the vote.

Taylor Gunn: That's right. Good for you. Twenty-one schools in your electoral district participated.

When I was much younger, I thought that voter turnout was the best measure of the health of a democracy. I still think it's a clue, but I don't think it's the best measure. I think we have a different,

generational interpretation of a sense of civic duty into electoral participation. That doesn't make me happy or comfortable with the decline in voter turnout. You're right that we've seen some hope in the recent federal election and in some of the other past recent federal elections, with youth voter turnout. Thank goodness Elections Canada actually monitors and studies that.

I think I'm not entirely uncomfortable with the change. I think we just need to acknowledge it. I still also don't think we should give up on a sense of civic duty. I also don't think we should believe that clicktivism, whatever that means, is a replacement for electoral participation. I think that it's a fundamental act of citizenship, and we should always treat it as such. We need continued actions, which would be great, with more investments in civic education.

Chris was a fantastic witness. I don't know Chris personally, other than from a couple of LinkedIn messages, but his concept of community and of bottom-up rather than top-down in how you look at some of these issues around civic resilience is something I firmly believe in. I think we need to keep working at it. It's not something to give up on. It's not going to be fixed overnight. We all have a role to play—even you in how you are on committee, how you are in the House and how you are at home—in people's trust in institutions.

Tako Van Popta: Mr. Bridgman, I'll just bring it over to you.

You talked about where Canada is in regulating platforms, and I think that you're being critical of Canada being a laggard there. However, we do have Bill C-18, which became law in the last Parliament. Again, we're talking about civic resilience and civic engagement, so is Bill C-18 a net benefit or a net detraction from that, in your opinion?

Aengus Bridgman: The link that is very explicitly drawn is the quality of Canadian journalism and the output of Canadian journalism in civic resilience. It has been a priority of the government that these two things be linked. Higher quality of production of information locally will ensure or help civic resilience. I think that concept, that idea, is fundamentally sound. What we want is to get high-quality, easily available information to every citizen to help them make informed decisions. That's where we should start from.

Now, on the question of whether or not Bill C-18 has been successful, there have been two major effects. One is \$100 million a year from Google to support Canadian journalism. That means there are more journalists writing stories and more availability. Maybe that's good, but there's been this enormous harm that has been done, which is that news is now not widely available on Facebook and Instagram. I think that decision by Meta to remove news was not written in stone. There is the chain here. There's Bill C-18, and then there's the Meta decision.

I think the Meta decision largely relies on a loophole. The loophole here is that they have interpreted very directly that news outlets cannot post and individuals cannot post news links. They have said that because those two things are not happening, they are not a news distributor. They are a news distributor, though. If you ask Canadians today where they get their news—you can ask them, we have published results on this—they will say they get their news from Facebook and Instagram. That's where they go to get their news.

We have an impossible situation here. We are saying that they are not subject to this law. They are not paying into this fund, because they are not news distributors. At the same time, depending on the platform, 40% to 50% of Canadians are saying they get their news on that platform. It's an inherent contradiction and one that I am deeply concerned about. It speaks to all sorts of challenges here, but I think that absolutely needs to continue to be considered.

The other piece here about Bill C-18 that is really an ongoing question is its applicability to AI platforms. In the AI news audit that I mentioned, if you go to any AI chatbot today and ask about a recent Canadian news event, it will provide you—and our study documents this in what I would say is painful detail—with a proximate substitute to the Canadian journalists' content, and it will do so by fetching the journalists' content, packaging it and providing it to you as its own product.

● (1125)

The Chair: Thank you so much. I'm sorry, but we're over time.

We'll go to Mrs. Vandenbeld, please, for six minutes.

Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Thank you very much. I want to thank all three of the witnesses for some very good ideas.

I want to start with you, Professor Gunn, because of course, through your work with Civix, you do things like connect young people to their elected representatives, helping to demystify the process. I really like the word you used when you talked about attachment. I wanted to follow up on that, because I think this is one of our challenges. I've often said people have stopped listening to each other. They're getting that feedback loop in their social media—the polarization.

I wonder if you can talk about the need to have forums where people of differing views could talk to each other, hear each other and have discussions. I'm thinking of things they have in the U.S., like Search for Common Ground or Millions of Conversations, where they have dinner parties with people of differing views. One thing that I do every Friday is have an open Zoom coffee hour with constituents. Anybody can join. They set the topics, and people hear each other.

Can you tell us a bit about what we can do as a government to support that kind of conversation and attachment?

Taylor Gunn: I'll try. It's a tricky one.

We also need to remember that we have some things that disattach us from each other. I'd say screens it's in general. That's been documented for a long time. When I started working in schools in 2002-03, I remember how offensive it was to consider something

like a corporate logo on an in-school poster. I remember that, and I took it seriously, because schools are sacred places. Just a few years later, every kid in the school board was getting a Gmail address. I wondered if there was a bit of hypocrisy in saying you couldn't have a corporate logo, but everybody could have a Gmail address.

I'm sorry to say it, but I think we were also delusional about the benefits of technology in schools continuing to bind kids to screens as a form of learning. There are some people I can recommend who would speak about how that hasn't worked for students. We have things that work against us all the time.

If you bring people together in person, you don't find polarization. Part of it is that you lose your social capital if you say some of the things in person that you would say online, and you're also not anonymous. For a long time, everyone was thinking we should meet young people where they are, presuming that they were on Instagram. I don't think that was ever a good idea. We should always have been doing things in person. I know it's more expensive, but I think we might now be waking up to the idea that maybe great things are just more expensive.

There's also a role to play.... This isn't me being mean or inconsiderate, but how you all treat each other publicly does some role modelling for people in terms of how we talk to each other. The worse you speak to each other, the more okay it is for people not to speak kindly to each other. We have a really bad example of that close to us, but not in our country. Educators tell people that kids will role model what they see from the highest voices in the land. It's just something to factor into this type of thing.

None of it, Ms. Vandenbeld, is easy. It's a work in progress. The more we're off these devices, the more socially cohesive we are naturally.

● (1130)

Anita Vandenbeld: Mr. Blask, you said some interesting things. You said that the concern about disinformation is downstream. Building on this idea of the human connection, reinforcing those connections, memories, institutions, I wonder if you could talk about the same thing.

Could you also speak about the productive and constructive ways of engagement? Through social media, there can also be ways of engagement that can create more polarization and distrust in institutions. Could you talk about that in the context of your work?

Chris Blask: I've spent most of the last 35 years focusing on cyber-resilience, cybersecurity and so forth. That's taken me down all the paths globally, in nation states, organizations and all kinds of conflict spaces.

In the last seven years, I've been focusing on supply chain security. I've been chairing the U.S. Department of Homeland Security supply chain information-sharing working groups, talking with a global cohort on how we can get trust across supply chains in the world we're in and not just with current events. It's getting fractally more complicated.

What we see in social media or what we call social media is similar to what we see in other infrastructure. There's a level of immaturity that does not yet hold the reality of the relationships that we express in business and in this context, in civil communities and so forth.

My view and our view is that all these issues need to be solved locally, and we finally have the tech and so forth to do that. We ended up with centralized control with Google and all these big things, not because that's the way the Internet was intended to be built but because that's what worked at the time. I think we're fortunate that a number of technical evolutions are coming together at about the time we really need to take it away from the cloud and put it in the local community.

The Chair: I'm going to have to interrupt you there. Thank you so much.

We're going to turn to Madame DeBellefeuille for six minutes.

To our witnesses, if you don't speak French, you can put in your earphones.

Mr. Blask, make sure that you're on the French translation service.

[Translation]

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor for six minutes.

Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

This is the francophone part of the meeting. I suggest you practise your French.

Mr. Chair, I would like to thank the interpreters, who are here in person.

I can attest to the fact that I'm getting excellent interpretation. I thank them very much. I know it's not always easy when you don't have the text in front of you. I sincerely thank them. I can do that because I see them. I see their smiles and they see my expression. They will be able to interpret my remarks correctly.

Mr. Gunn, I agree with you that the environment our young people find themselves in lacks humanity. In addition, we don't instill critical thinking skills in our children to help them become good citizens. We raise children who believe everything they read. We know very well that their sources of information are limited to social media. However, at present, social media, by the way it is built, always suggests what we want to hear. It doesn't develop critical thinking and nuance in our children.

We see that even in adults today. As a member of Parliament, I get a lot of emails from people who tell me that they have read something, so it must be true. Critical thinking is disappearing, as is societal acceptance of nuance. That leads people to think that anyone who doesn't agree with them is against them.

It's hard today to have a healthy debate and formulate arguments for or against something. I find that social media is a cancer on our society, quite frankly, because it doesn't train humans in a way that develops their critical thinking skills.

I think mock election programs in schools were one tool. However, I think we need to go further in educating our children to help them develop a way to be good citizens while being very aware of the societal issues we face and the environment in which we live.

I agree with you 100%. Cities, provinces and the federal government must make an effort to fully understand that there are risks to limiting our children's ability to look at others with kindness. Being for or against means judging rather than accepting nuance. That, to me, is very concerning.

I agree with you, Mr. Bridgman, that there are things we can do at the federal level and that we're lagging behind when it comes to social media. It's not right, for example, for social media companies to decide to remove our local weeklies from their newsfeeds. Our local weeklies help us stay informed about what is happening locally, in our municipalities and in our communities.

That connection to our community has been severed by the fact that Meta, for example, refuses to share news. We tried to do something. I really admired Ms. Freeland for taking on Meta and telling it that it had to pay a levy so that we could better support and inform our communities. Now, the new government has decided to renege on that commitment to get Meta to pay its share.

What more could be done? I think Europe is much more forward thinking than we are in framing the power that the web giants have.

What can the state do, within its limits?

● (1135)

Aengus Bridgman: That's a great question.

There is certainly a problem with Meta in particular. Meta is clearly a player that is doing real damage right now, especially to local news. It's hard for the big chains in Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal, but it's much harder for small towns.

I come from Manitoba, where a number of small towns have a real problem. In my opinion, there are plenty of things we can do. First, there is already a law that could be enforced. I'm not a lawyer, but I see the situation. The big platforms are already distributing news. They're making a lot of money from promotion here in Canada, but Canada is timid. Right now, people are afraid to take on the big American companies in a number of regions. I understand the broader political context, but I'm wondering if timidity has helped us in the last couple of years.

Has timidity been helpful to us?

Has Canada managed to deal with platforms the way it wants to by being timid?

I think it's really useful to know how to act with the major artificial intelligence platforms. Changes are happening quickly. Now, there are major players, such as Google and Meta, but there are also OpenAI, Anthropic, Perplexity AI and Cohere.

If we don't apply restrictions, if we don't exercise our governance, all these players are going to do exactly the same things.

[English]

The Chair: You have five seconds.

[Translation]

Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you.

I hope we can continue this discussion in the next round of questions.

[English]

The Chair: We will now turn to Mr. Jackson for five minutes.

Grant Jackson (Brandon—Souris, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Welcome to the witnesses again. Thank you for being here and for sharing your views and expertise with us. We sincerely appreciate it.

I'll just build a bit on what Madame DeBellefeuille was talking about. With respect to you, Mr. Bridgman, you came with two recommendations.

One of them is that you believe these big social media companies—this social media environment—can be regulated.

Then, in responding to a question from Mr. Van Popta, we outlined.... Bill C-18 happened. There was a reaction from Meta. It didn't go very favourably, because now we have this vacuum. Maybe you didn't use the word "vacuum", but that's basically what it's become. They didn't play ball at all with the government's attempt, yet you recommend that they participate if there were regulation brought in, in some type or form.

What evidence could you present to this committee that big corporations like Meta...? The Canadian market is very small relative to their presence globally. What evidence do you have that they would, in fact, participate in any regulation the Government of Canada might bring in?

• (1140)

Aengus Bridgman: This is always the question with any large corporation. "If we try to regulate, will they co-operate?"

We have evidence that Google did co-operate in that instance. Meta chose not to. I've talked about the loophole. I've talked about the timidity with which we approached this and our acceptance of their framing of the issue around the link tax and other things. Canada, globally, is a small player. Likely, in the Meta case, what was going on there—and what continues to go on—is that it wasn't about the Canadian market or the Canadian dollar. It was about the global context. It was about the extent to which they were afraid this was going to happen in California, New York and around the world. They were trying to draw a line in the sand. Nevertheless, Facebook usage is enormously high in Canada. There are ads. They make enormous amounts of money in the Canadian context and have a responsibility.

I do not think it is okay for us to say, "They're big, therefore we can't regulate them." How has that served us in terms of the social platforms? Do we look at society today vis-à-vis 20 years ago and say that we are clearly more democratically enabled, more resilient and more capable now? I don't think we are. There are networks. There is the ability of citizens to talk to one another. There are enormous advantages to that, but I think we can do better.

Grant Jackson: Thank you.

I've heard from different people who feel they are more connected than ever now and freer to have these discussions, as opposed to before Meta, when there was a phone call, mail in the traditional sense, email or those types of conversations.

I'm not advocating that we shouldn't try because they're big. I'm just curious about whether you have examples of other countries that regulated it, and where Meta did not take a decision like the one they took with Bill C-18 but actually went along with what the government was trying to impose.

Aengus Bridgman: Australia is the obvious example. There have been a variety of bargaining codes, where there has been a requirement to bargain with news outlets. That's a model around the world, and it was attempted in the Canadian context as well.

Often, when I come and do these appearances and talk, I come across as techno-pessimistic. There is not going....

I agree that local Facebook groups and community groups are great. I'm in my local town's. They allow connection. Why can't we have both? Why can't we have the news on Meta and the ability to have these connections? There is a way to do that.

I think the fear of when this occurred, when Meta pulled out, and the geopolitical context have changed, and this should be revisited.

Grant Jackson: Your second recommendation was about digital resilience infrastructure. One of your colleagues on the panel mentioned libraries and this type of thing, but I wonder if you have specific examples of what digital resilience infrastructure would look like that you would recommend.

Aengus Bridgman: There was the digital citizen initiative, and there were a variety of programs that often were on a short-term horizon. There were a lot of great programs.

The reporting's there. There's been a really vibrant experimental space. Looking at those programs really seriously and the ones that worked is a really great place to start.

The Chair: Thank so much.

Mr. Wilkinson, you have five minutes.

Hon. Jonathan Wilkinson (North Vancouver—Capilano, Lib.): I would also like to thank the witnesses for their participation.

Maybe I can start with Mr. Gunn. It's a three-part question.

You've obviously worked a lot on civic education through experiential learning, with the rep day program to engage with members of Parliament and the student vote program to bring voting closer to students. At a basic level, can you explain why this kind of positive engagement in democracy is important?

Can you also talk a bit—whether it's your direct experience or observations of other things—about what has typically been most important?

I mentioned the issue of scale in a previous meeting, and student voting is a good example of being able to scale. Outside of the school environment, do you have ideas about how you can scale—how you can do public engagement effectively at scale?

• (1145)

Taylor Gunn: Your first question, I think, was about why the student vote, rep day and other types of programs are important. Where else do you see stuff like that happening in a young person's life outside of a school? I don't. You may. Some families have great positive reinforcement of democratic participation or service.

I'm going to try to go slowly. I apologize.

Schools remain a sacred space, and educators remain highly committed, dedicated Canadians who want to create citizens before they create employees. There isn't anywhere else for that, so that, to me, is why this is important.

You asked what has been most important. Is that kind of like asking what I have seen that's most effective? Yes, okay.

There's a way of looking at this. You may be looking at new things to do. There has been talk about a democracy fund and things like this. I think what you want to do, before anything else, is identify your assets. What do you have that you can use and strengthen before you worry about creating something new? That would be the first thing.

Again, I'm out of the group, so it doesn't benefit me in any way. If you were worried about something like media literacy or civic education, you could look at a group like Civix, which has 60,000 committed teachers who can turn on a dime in a snap federal election to get a million kids to do something. That's what I'm talking about when you're looking at your assets.

Maybe I'll take that to a scale outside of schools. You probably all know this. Maybe there's a bit of an age difference in the room, and maybe there isn't—I'm 48—but a lot of our civic infrastructure in the past was built by community groups. These community groups were the Lions clubs, the Rotary clubs and other types of things that really don't exist in the same way they did 10 or 20 years ago.

You can go to different academics who will tell you it has been influenced by this...our entertainment, our technology. I wonder if there's a way in which it could be time for a resurgence in that type of public activity, shared activity, face-to-face activity with each other. It could be done in a number of different ways.

I'm privy to some research that isn't out yet, but it involved 2,500 middle school and high school students across the country. It asked them, "If there were a national service program that was meant to help you meet other people and learn some skills—maybe there's a little bit of an honorarium or something like this—would you be interested?"

Twenty-five per cent of the kids said, right off the top, that they'd be interested, and 45% said that they would be interested but that it might be better for somebody else. All they saw was a paragraph, right? What could we do that involves people and gives them constructive outlets where they can learn skills?

That's why I was bringing up these ideas about this infrastructure in terms of what our armed forces are about to try to do. Maybe they could turn more outward facing and be less insular.

What are the other existing assets that we can use for public engagement? I don't know about you, but my kids are learning about their city and getting to know kids outside of their classroom simply because of the sports that they're involved in. There shouldn't be any impediment whatsoever to having families and people playing together. I know this involves the provinces and the municipalities—and some of the municipalities do this so well—but kids should be playing together, and it's not just soccer. My younger guy doesn't want to play soccer, but he could do other things, so we need to look at how we really grow that.

There's another thing, and this goes maybe a bit beyond that, but the best asset we could use to create public engagement is our geography. If you want to know Canada, you just have to get out of wherever you live and get to know this country. I thought the train pass was a great thing, but the flights are ridiculous. The problem is that most people can't take a train for four days. You can't have a 10-day trip across Canada to spend a day in Halifax.

• (1150)

The Chair: I'm going to have to interrupt you. I apologize for that.

It was very interesting, and we will have time to continue.

We'll now go to Madame DeBellefeuille for two and a half minutes, please.

[Translation]

Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We're going to continue our discussion on the digital giants, Mr. Bridgman.

One of the first decisions of the Carney government was to drop the digital services tax on web giants. We would have thought that the money raised could have better supported our local media, our community media and our community television stations that connect communities and deliver local news. Our local media can also be at odds with what is conveyed on social media.

In your opinion, is this a failure? The Carney government revoked the act thinking it would appease the U.S. government, but that didn't happen.

Currently, do you think we should rethink this tax measure to redistribute the money to our local media and strengthen local and regional news?

Aengus Bridgman: We absolutely need to strengthen local news. Taxation is one method of doing so.

I also think we need to think about where people are starting to spend their time. A lot of studies have been done showing that Canadians are increasingly turning to influencers to get their information. We have a tendency to say that we don't like it, because influencers are not regulated and they do what they want. I've spoken to a lot of influencers and creators who take responsibility but are a bit overwhelmed by it all. It's a very tough environment. I myself am a full-time researcher who works to better understand what's going on, and I find it hard.

In my opinion, we absolutely have to invest in the production of local news. How we do that, though, is very important. We have to think about how to do it well and properly understand the information ecosystem. We also have to think about who will share local information and how we can equip them.

Claude DeBellefeuille: That's great.

I have a few seconds left to thank you for continuing to spread the good news. We need you, because I don't think we're headed in the right direction. I think we will pay for our timidity later on by the kind of citizens we are developing. I hope your alarms are heard, gentlemen.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

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

Tamara Kronis (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, CPC): Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses for their very insightful comments, but I also really want to compliment the clerk on the way these witnesses were put together and the way they compliment one another, because this has been a pleasure to listen to.

Mr. Blask made the point that people feel better connected when they can see themselves reflected in their institutions. Professor Bridgman talked about how AI is restructuring a relatively unregulated information environment. He also talked about the high level of trust that people put in AI. One of you talked about the prevailing "I get my news here" perspective. AI fetches the content, packages it and presents it as fact. I think that was also said by Professor Bridgman.

What I'd like to do is ask you, Mr. Gunn, what happens when someone builds their own AI model using only sources they already agree with.

Taylor Gunn: We may all have the answer to that. Aengus would be the technical expert on something like this, but you'd be talking to yourself.

Tamara Kronis: In that context, there's been a lot of focus on the messenger so far, in this session. There's been a lot of focus on AI, and on Meta and the other social media platforms. I think this lets us, as citizens, off the hook in a lot of ways.

If an AI system is trained to prioritize what a user already believes, how does a person challenge bad ideas or correct the errors they might be learning in that process?

Taylor Gunn: I'm going to note our own personal responsibility as citizens, because I think it's really important and shouldn't be abandoned or excused. That's not going to land well with your average 17-year-old, but I'm going to say it because I believe in that.

It's very difficult with technology and how it's been designed to work with us. I have a small theory. I could be totally wrong, and Aengus or Mr. Blask would know this better, but I bet people wouldn't use social media so much or post so much if there wasn't a "like" button. I see this on LinkedIn. I don't want to be on LinkedIn. I've used it for a reasonable amount of interesting information, but I know people are doing this for the likes. If they took out that small dopamine hit, I wonder if... I don't know whether any of you have experimented with your dopamine levels, but this stuff really is a low-level dopamine addiction. It might be half a cigarette, but it is. Trust me.

• (1155)

Tamara Kronis: What happens, then, when people start to trust those devices you're holding up? What happens when people start to trust those personalized AI systems and those influencers Professor Bridgman was a bit down on more than they trust the sources—the independent experts and journalists? What happens to our civic resilience under those circumstances?

Taylor Gunn: It lessens dramatically. I think we're facing that already. What you might then ask is, well, what else would you do? I'm about to—

Tamara Kronis: The question I want to ask there is this: Who should be held accountable for that?

Taylor Gunn: Probably the people who built the systems, split between our own responsibility. Is that a fair way to put it? The only thing is that they're going to fight against that, so maybe we shouldn't wait for the day they fix it themselves. One of the first things we might look at is how much young people, or people of all ages, simply even know Canadian news brands and understand what goes into journalism. I think that's very low. That's the first problem.

You should maybe go on this, Aengus, because you know it better than I do. Aengus is right that in the replacement of even the recognition of a brand within a summary of a news article, you're stealing from journalism. The computer is spitting out a summary at you. It's wrong. I don't know how anyone pays for this. It reinforces the idea that you can get simple, fast information that may not even be accurate from a news system. It's not social media anymore. It's our LLMs.

Do you want to detail this, Aengus, since you're more knowledgeable?

Tamara Kronis: Please go ahead.

Aengus Bridgman: Just very quickly, the current consumer-facing behaviour of AI systems for news replacement is in general a much higher-quality product than what you would typically encounter in your average social media feed.

Tamara Kronis: That having been said, do most users actually understand how their custom AI has been trained? To what extent are they actually placing blind trust in something that they can't really evaluate?

Aengus Bridgman: Almost no one has.

The Chair: I will have to cut you off there.

We'll turn to Madame Brière for five minutes, please.

[Translation]

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

Thank you to the three witnesses for being with us today.

Your testimony is frankly very interesting. I agree with my colleague that you complement one another very well.

Mr. Gunn, in your opening remarks, you talked about the importance of developing attachment and creating connections. Mr. Blask also talked about that in his. He said that civic resilience was a structural problem in our communities. He talked about the impor-

tance of developing human relationships and strengthening memory.

Two weeks ago, in my riding of Sherbrooke, there was the Pain partagé campaign. Groups like the Boy Scouts and the cadets were all there, going from house to house giving bread to people. There were stalls where you could buy bread. They were the ones standing there handing it out.

I saw the beauty and kindness of these young people, who are trained and disciplined, who want to help and who want to pass on all the wonderful values they learn in these youth groups.

Do you think that building on that would be a good way to broaden citizen engagement? There are different ways to be committed to our democratic institutions.

[English]

Taylor Gunn: I'd hate to be the person who would disagree with that. That would be awful.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Taylor Gunn: Who is that person? Who is that guy? Yes. That's exactly the thing. There is already.... Well, I'll say it like this. What's really interesting to me is that all of the military investments right now are talking about dual use. They're going to build a hospital for a base in the north, but that hospital is going to serve the community. We already have this potential for a dual-use social infrastructure, which is groups like that, which benefit the participants but also benefit our civic resilience. I think it's a matter of some of these. They can self-identify and volunteer, and the others can be externally identified, but we want to bolster that in any way we possibly can.

I think what we may have seen, though, is a decrease in participation in a lot of those traditions. You named the Scouts. The Scouts and the Girl Guides don't have the same numbers they had in the past. I'm pretty sure of this. I think we just need to change our culture. "Maybe just change our culture." That's a fun thing to say. How can we make it more habitual and dedicated, so that those are the priorities of participation for our kids forever on this, in any way?

This hasn't worked. Let's go back to what was working. There's nothing wrong with that. I'm not saying to go back and all be farmers, as awesome as that would be. We're not all going to do that.

How do we go back and participate in this existing social infrastructure? We'll have a better life because of it. I'm going to give you a quick example, because it changed my life.

During the virus time, I used to worry about millions of kids, and then I started worrying about dozens of people in my neighbourhood. We took over a volunteer ice rink. I didn't even skate. I just liked the idea of building something. I started worrying about dozens of people, and now we have a group of about 60 volunteers. We've done this new thing where we get together around a fire for a celebratory meal, and we cook.

People say they haven't done that before in their own communities. It's kind of sad, but it's also hopeful, because this is what we need to do. I think we lost that. It's just a matter of all of us putting in our own.... It's risky. It's risky to make new friends. It's risky to get into your community, but I think we all need to take that risk and build it back ourselves.

• (1200)

[Translation]

Hon. Élisabeth Brière: Hear, hear. Thank you for sharing that wonderful example with us.

What can we do to attract young people to these groups?

What can we do to also get adults to interest their children in taking part in this kind of initiative?

[English]

The Chair: We'll have a very quick answer, please.

Taylor Gunn: Okay.

A part of those survey results that isn't out yet is that kids want more face-to-face interaction. They want it.

If you look at things in Ontario, for example—and there are some consistencies about this across the country—service is a part of the school curriculum, but what types of opportunities are available to enable them to participate in service? Sure, you learn something licking envelopes and putting it in the thing for an NGO, if that opportunity even exists, but what could be out there that is much more substantial and constructive, and that maybe in the longer term kids could get involved in? I think that's actually what we're missing.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We will now suspend for a few minutes for the next panel.

• (1200)

(Pause)

• (1210)

The Chair: Welcome back. I'd like to thank the clerk for herding the cats, which is always a challenge in the House of Commons. We'll proceed with our second panel.

We have, from the Agri-Food Analytics Lab, Sylvain Charlebois, director and professor at—this name is always a challenge for me—Dalhousie University; from the Euphrosine Foundation, Niamh Leonard, executive director; and from the Justice Centre for Constitutional Freedoms, John Carpay, president and founder.

We'll go to Dr. Charlebois for five minutes, please.

I will be pretty strict on the five minutes.

Sylvain Charlebois (Director and Professor, Dalhousie University, Agri-Food Analytics Lab): Mr. Chair and honourable members, thank you for the invitation to appear before you today to discuss the current state of civic resilience in Canada, an issue that is both timely and fundamental to the health of our democracy.

I appear before you as a researcher specializing in food systems, supply chains and consumer behaviour. While my work focuses on agri-food, the insights extend far beyond it. Food is one of the most immediate and tangible ways Canadians experience economic pressure, institutional performance and, importantly, trust.

Over the past several years, Canada has faced a series of shocks, pandemic disruptions, geopolitical instability and sustained food inflation. These events have tested not only our supply chains but also public confidence in institutions. Civic resilience at its core depends on that confidence.

Allow me to offer three examples that illustrate the challenges we are facing.

First is the role of media and open discourse. Earlier this month, my 25-year collaboration with *La Presse*, during which I wrote over 1,000 columns for free, came to an end. This followed concerns I had publicly expressed as a citizen on social media about how public funding for private sector media could potentially influence editorial decisions. What is important here is not disagreement. Debate is essential in a healthy democracy, but the reaction was surprising. No other media organization responded in the same way. This raises broader questions about how comfortable we are collectively with the challenging of prevailing narratives. Civic resilience depends on our ability to sustain open, pluralistic dialogue without disproportionate consequences.

Second is the issue of industrial carbon pricing and its indirect effects on Canadians. While the consumer carbon charge has been removed, the industrial carbon price continues to rise, now reaching \$110 per tonne. In the agri-food sector, these costs do not disappear: They are embedded across supply chains, from processing to transportation to distribution. Many businesses are adjusting quietly, often through surcharges or contract changes, yet very few media outlets are examining these dynamics closely. We have. This gap matters. When citizens sense that real economic pressures are not being fully acknowledged or explained, it can erode trust in both institutions and the information ecosystem meant to inform them.

Third is the Loblaw boycott and countertariffs by Ottawa. I can go on and on with many examples.

Taken together, these examples point to a common thread: Civic resilience is about not only how institutions perform but also how they are perceived, understood and trusted.

From my perspective, strengthening civic resilience in Canada requires action in three key areas.

First is transparency. Canadians need clearer, more accessible information, whether about public policy, pricing mechanisms or institutional decision-making.

Second is accountability. Institutions must not only act fairly but also be seen to act fairly. Perception is critical, and trust is difficult to rebuild once lost.

Third is engagement. Canadians must feel that their voices matter and that open dialogue is encouraged. Civic resilience depends on participation, not just compliance.

In closing, civic resilience is not a fixed condition. It is dynamic and must be actively maintained. If Canadians begin to lose confidence in the institutions that shape their daily lives—whether governments, markets or media—then resilience weakens, but with transparency, accountability and open dialogue, it can be strengthened.

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.

• (1215)

The Chair: Thank you so much.

[Translation]

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

[English]

Niamh Leonard (Executive Director, Euphrosine Foundation): Good afternoon, Mr. Chair and members of the committee.

My name is Niamh Leonard. I am the executive director of the Euphrosine Foundation, which supports charities that are protecting and expanding the democratic spaces where people participate and hold power to account.

Before I dive in, I want to acknowledge that many of you have spent decades doing the work I'm about to speak about, meeting people in community centres and diners who carry big dreams but feel that the political system is broken. You know better than most what it takes to show someone that our system can still hold their hopes.

My own path into this work started when I was 19 and stopping my peers on sidewalks, asking them to pledge to vote. I was not there to sell them on a party. I was there because I believed—I still do—that people deserve the information, the confidence and the space to decide for themselves. That conviction has carried me from the non-profit sector to law and to philanthropy, always with the belief that the greatest service we can do for others is to support their agency.

I am here to make one central argument: Canada should create a Canadian democracy fund to disburse \$20 million a year through an

arm's-length granting mechanism to support on-ramps into the democratic system. This proposal was developed collectively and is now endorsed by more than 130 leaders across the country.

I will make four points in support of it. First, the need is urgent. Second, the fund would support our defence commitments. Third, our allies are moving ahead with similar initiatives. Fourth, the fund is feasible.

First, what's the problem?

Democracy is in retreat worldwide. It's no secret that just 26% of the world's population now lives in a democracy. Here at home, only 40% of Canadians believe that the political system allows them to have a say, let alone a meaningful one. Shockingly, one in four feels that our institutions need to be torn down.

The distance between people and their institutions is the space that hostile actors and extremist movements are rushing to exploit. Now is the time to strengthen our democratic immune system.

Second, this work would support our defence commitments.

Canada recently spent \$63 billion on defence, meeting its 2% NATO target. It now plans to raise that commitment to 5% of GDP. However, defence spending alone is insufficient. The NATO Parliamentary Assembly has adopted a resolution urging allied states to allocate a portion of the 1.5% in defence and security-related investments to strengthening democratic resilience through a whole-of-society approach, partnering with civil society to strengthen information systems, promote digital and media literacy, and build civic engagement. The strongest safeguard of our democracy is not tanks and bombs; it is people who believe that their country is theirs to shape.

Third, our allies are moving ahead.

The European Union, fighting an authoritarian regime at its doorstep, understands the importance of investing in democratic resilience. Last year, it launched the EU democracy shield, which is a unified strategy to safeguard the information space, strengthen elections and independent media, and boost citizen engagement.

This strategy is backed by a proposed nine-billion-euro commitment to this work, which is a doubling of the EU's previous investments in this area.

Fourth, the fund is feasible.

The Canadian democracy fund would provide \$20 million annually through an arm's-length granting mechanism. It would support non-partisan organizations working with people directly on the ground, like many the committee has already heard from. These are organizations that run electoral and media literacy programs, design and implement citizens' assemblies, make government proceedings accessible to the public, and counter hate, discrimination and polarization. These organizations are effective, non-partisan and under-resourced. A Canadian democracy fund would allow them to scale.

The philanthropic sector is already mobilizing. In January, more than 20 Canadian foundations convened for the inaugural meeting of Democracy Funders Canada, which is a new network committed to strengthening the pillars of our democracy.

To conclude, Canada invests billions to defend against threats at our borders, but the deeper threat is Canadians no longer believing that their democratic institutions are worth engaging with, let alone protecting. It is time to invest here at home in bringing people to our institutions and our institutions to people.

Politics should not be something that is done to us by people far away. It is how we negotiate our shared life across geographies, ideologies, religions and languages. It belongs to us all. We will know we have succeeded when people from Cochrane to Iqaluit to Rimouski to Gander feel that they are co-designers of our democracy and not mere tenants within it.

Thank you. I welcome your questions.

• (1220)

The Chair: Thank you.

It was four minutes and 15 seconds. That was exceptional.

Mr. Carpay, you have five minutes, please.

[Translation]

John Carpay (President and Founder, Justice Centre for Constitutional Freedoms): Thank you.

[English]

Good afternoon.

[Translation]

I am delighted for the opportunity to appear before you to discuss social trust and civic engagement.

As a graduate of Laval University 37 years ago, I am also delighted to be able to speak in French today. Unfortunately, that doesn't happen often in Alberta.

[English]

Today I will touch on three topics. The first is the rule of law and equality before the law. The second is how equity, diversity and inclusion, or EDI, undermines social trust, and the third is how the federal government can increase civic engagement.

Social trust is the trust Canadians have towards fellow citizens who are not family members or friends. It depends very heavily on the rule of law.

[Translation]

The Roman goddess Justitia wore a blindfold so she couldn't see the skin colour or other characteristics of the people who appeared before her. The principle behind the blindfold was "equal rights for all, special privileges for none".

Social trust cannot be strengthened when the law applies differently depending on race or other personal characteristics. We were all created in the image of God. Every person has intrinsic value as a human being.

[English]

The preamble of the charter states, "Whereas Canada is founded upon principles that recognize the supremacy of God and the rule of law". The statement is followed by a colon, not a period. This means that the contents of the charter flow from the supremacy of God and the rule of law.

[Translation]

To enhance social trust, we need to emphasize what unites us rather than what divides us. The rule of law is undermined, if not completely destroyed, when citizens are led to believe that their legal rights depend on personal characteristics such as sexual orientation and so on.

[English]

Equity, diversity and inclusion ideology emphasizes division rather than our common humanity. It necessarily leads to conflict and competition. It promotes the idea that we must belong to a victim class or an oppressor class. The emphasis is not on our common humanity. In the EDI ideology, the ultimate triumph comes when the victim group vanquishes, defeats and crushes the oppressor group. This is not an ideology that goes by.... There's a beautiful slogan you may have seen on bumper stickers that says, "Be the change that you want to see in the world." The EDI ideology is focused on group rights.

An example of this, quite recently, is the Musqueam agreement, which became public in March. It was signed in secret. It jeopardizes the property rights of over two million people in the greater Vancouver area. It recognizes aboriginal title, which is about not just the right to hunt and fish but also actual ownership of the land. When you take away people's property, threaten to do so or create a scenario where that could happen, it is not the way to get social trust or reconciliation. Everyone in Canada is a settler or the descendant of a settler. I have to ask the question: With section 35 of the Constitution and the royal proclamation, why do we create different legal rights for 95% of the people whose ancestors came from Europe, Asia and Africa in the last 500 years and 5% of the population whose ancestors came here more than 500 years ago?

To increase social confidence, the federal government can take steps to abolish EDI initiatives and race-based laws and policies. For example, abolish the Indian Act, repeal the agreement signed in secret in February with the Musqueam, and view all Canadians as first-class citizens under the principle of equal rights for all and special privileges for none.

I see that I have 20 seconds left. I'll say, briefly, that the government should also respect section 92 of the Constitution Act on division of powers. If the government itself is not respecting the Constitution, it breeds a cynicism that is contrary to civic engagement.

• (1225)

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

It's three for three to the witnesses for being at or under five minutes. The chair appreciates that.

We'll turn to Mr. Jackson for six minutes.

As a reminder, I cannot be my usual lax self on the timing, so I will be fairly strict on the time, since we're running a little late.

Grant Jackson: Thank you, Chair. I'll do my best to recognize that.

I want to thank the witnesses for being here today. It's a pleasure to hear from you all.

My questions are mostly for Professor Charlebois.

I have to begin by thanking you for coming to ag days in January. That was in my constituency. For those of you who don't know, that's the largest indoor farm show in western Canada. It's hosted annually in January in the wheat city. I've heard nothing but positive feedback from producers and those who attended just to hear you speak. I sincerely appreciate your coming out to western Manitoba for that. Thank you for your comments about Canadian agriculture, food production and food security within the resiliency context of our nation.

I want to thank you also for your opening comments and for being clear about the industrial carbon tax. I wonder if you would repeat your view on the relationship between the industrial carbon tax and the price of fuel. If you believe there is some relationship, why doesn't the media report those factual inaccuracies with regard to the government's position on the industrial carbon tax and food prices?

Sylvain Charlebois: As an academic, it's been very frustrating talking to the media and trying to convey to the public the academic work we've been doing on the industrial carbon tax—peer-reviewed, published work.

Our focus is on the industrial part of the industry and how the policy impacts the competitiveness of the ag sector, knowing that margins are incredibly thin. It's been our concern since day one.

The focus in the media, with the public, has always been on retail. We all know that in retail, prices can be impacted by hundreds of factors. When an economist says that the carbon tax doesn't impact retail prices, from our standpoint it's impossible. You can't say that scientifically. However, you can assess how the policy is im-

pacting farmers, processors and their competitiveness over time, which could obviously impact food security.

Grant Jackson: For many of the witnesses who have presented as part of this study, their main concern about civic resilience has been about misinformation and disinformation on social media and how getting mainstream media back on Meta platforms specifically should solve some of the misinformation and disinformation, just by getting reputable journalism back on Meta platforms. The mainstream media is refusing to report on their existing platforms about peer-reviewed evidence that you and your colleagues have done, so how would putting those news articles back on Meta improve civic resilience, if they're not reporting those facts through the streams they have available to them now?

Sylvain Charlebois: It's worse than that. They call us, and when we give them our findings, they edit it. They edit parts that they think the public will understand.

Grant Jackson: You had peer-reviewed research that reputable, mainstream media journalists have then edited to change...not the facts necessarily, but the results.

Sylvain Charlebois: They pivoted the discussion around retail and the consumer. My guess is that they just tried to make sure that the information was easily understandable by the masses.

Grant Jackson: I'll switch gears. What are the biggest barriers to increasing food production domestically within Canada?

Sylvain Charlebois: It's access to private capital. We saw the RBC report yesterday, which is devastating. When you talk to farmers and entrepreneurs, you can see that.

Of course, the CFIB yesterday came out with a report saying that we're losing more companies than we are gaining new companies. That's a four-year trend. It's happening in agriculture as well. There are fewer entrepreneurs getting into food, and that's a really big concern.

• (1230)

Grant Jackson: What's the biggest policy recommendation that you could share with this committee, and vicariously with the government, about how we could change that investor environment to improve and increase the amount of investment in domestic food production?

Sylvain Charlebois: I could share with the committee a report that we wrote with MNP. We're in a five-year collaborative contract with them. We publish a report every year on the exact point you're talking about. It's 120 pages. I can certainly share that report, and you probably would be able to get some answers. It's in French and English.

Grant Jackson: Yes, it would be wonderful if you could share that with us in both official languages.

This is my final question. Is there an impact of food insecurity on the resiliency of Canadians? Whether it's information resiliency or that type of thing, I just wonder if you could speak to the impacts of food insecurity.

Sylvain Charlebois: We're slowly seeing the emergence of a K-shaped economy. You have the poor and the rich, and the middle class is slowly being eroded. In fact, I just wrote an op-ed this week about that, using data from Statistics Canada showing that the middle, the 60% part, which is the middle class, is earning less compared to the top 20%, and the lower 20% is earning much less than 10 years ago. Without a stronger middle class, it's hard to innovate. It's hard to get entrepreneurs to be more interested in investing in agriculture in general.

Grant Jackson: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now go to Mr. Louis for six minutes, please.

Tim Louis (Kitchener—Conestoga, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses. I appreciate your being here today for the study that we're doing on civic resilience.

We had a panel previously, and that was focused quite a bit on the next generation and how we can build civic resiliency.

I know that, Ms. Leonard, you listened to it. Sometimes, when you're hearing a panel, you have ideas and wish you could comment, so I want to give you a chance to comment on anything that you might have heard in the last panel's discussion, something you might want to add to that.

Niamh Leonard: Yes, I think that not only do young people have a big stake in the future, but it's also an age where we have habit formation. I think, in terms of civic engagement and education, young people are, of course, a priority population. We know, for example, around "get out the vote" that, if young people vote or not in the first two elections in which they're eligible, that will determine whether or not they vote across their life. I think youth engagement is key. I think targeting young people is important for those two reasons.

Tim Louis: In your opening statement, the quote I wrote down was that you referred to civic resilience as "the distance between people and institutions". At the end of our studies, we usually have to come up with a title, and I think I'm going to be pushing for that one right there. I do appreciate that.

Also in your opening statement, you strongly suggested public funding. The democracy fund has been brought up a number of times. It sounds like it's an arm's-length ranking and granting process. What governance model would be best to ensure that it remains non-partisan, that it remains transparent and that it remains

insulated from any kind of political influence while still being accountable?

Niamh Leonard: The government has done this before in other contexts. I think, for example, of arts funding and other areas.

We've made two recommendations. One is the creation of the fund, and the second is a process through which to determine the governance, because I don't think we should have the answer.

I think that there are two pieces. One is defining well what the fund is going to be supporting exactly, if we're talking about civic education and how we define what that means to make sure that it's done in a non-partisan fashion.

The second, to your point, is the question of the governance. You can think in a more straightforward way about, for example, a board, and think about the composition of the board, but you can also think more generally and, for example, have participatory determination of funding, for example, so that the decision-making within the fund embodies the principles that it's trying to reach as well. I leave the details to a further consultation, but I think there's a spectrum of options, and I think that question of non-partisanship is absolutely key.

The reason we are asking for an independent and arm's-length funding mechanism is that I think there's a real risk that the idea of democracy and of civic engagement becomes politicized if it is perceived to be so. The organizations that are doing this kind of work for them are a key part. On the governance, I think we need to make sure to have broad consultation and get feedback on the framing of it to make sure that it reflects...and so that people with different ideologies are comfortable with it.

• (1235)

Tim Louis: Yes, it sounds like you do support that it can be done in a non-partisan, transparent way.

Success leaves clues, and you talked about the EU and how they're investing in democratic resilience more than we are right here. Maybe we can learn from that. You referred to it as the democracy shield. Can you give some testimony to some best practices that you see in other countries, whether it be EU or elsewhere, that you think can be applicable here in Canada, something we can use and learn from?

Niamh Leonard: Yes. I can say a little more about the democracy shield. The democracy shield is the general pro-democracy strategy that the European Union is currently putting in place. It encompasses a few different things. For example, there are the Digital Markets Act, the Digital Services Act and questions of policy and legislative reform.

It involves the creation of an EU centre for democratic resilience—I believe that is the name—and then there's the AgoraEU funding. Within that funding, there are three streams: media, culture and civic engagement. That is deployed to different countries across the EU. That represents about eight or nine billion euros, I think.

What we're recommending, if you compare it just to the civic engagement portion, is about a quarter—on a per GDP adjusted basis—of what the EU is currently investing in that area.

Tim Louis: Thank you. That's helpful.

In last minute I have, on your website you had different pillars of what you wanted to expand on. One was fostering diverse participation.

We've heard a bit about diversity already, but I wanted to focus on under-represented communities. You've said how you want to expand free, informed and meaningful participation in public life. We want to make sure that in Canada everyone has the same chances. In the time we have left, how would you expand on that pillar?

Niamh Leonard: Yes, absolutely. I mean, these are big questions, the questions of how we reach equality. Is it a question of form or is it a question of substance? I'm of the view that we have the law, and the law should be impartial, but the law lands in a society in which we have inequities.

For example, we can think of the Luamba case, which just went to the Supreme Court, around an officially neutral law of being able to stop cars without suspicion, and the impact that has disproportionately on certain populations. To me, the key part is making sure that any approach is determined by data and not by partisanship. For example—

The Chair: I'll have to cut you off there. I do apologize.

We'll go to Madame Normandin.

[Translation]

You have the floor for six minutes.

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

I'd like to thank all the witnesses for being with us. We are very grateful to them.

I'll start with you, Ms. Leonard.

Unfortunately, Mr. Louis stole some of my questions, but I do have another one.

During my time at the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, the then-president of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Gerald Connolly, was a strong advocate for setting up a centre for democratic resilience within NATO headquarters. You may have heard of that.

Do you think it would be appropriate to have this kind of initiative not only in all countries, but also locally?

Is there a risk of redundancy or would it instead lead to complementary initiatives?

You talked about distance between people and institutions as well as closeness to the ground. If there were also local initiatives, would there be more overlap or would there be better complementarity?

Niamh Leonard: I think it's essential that we work with our allies on these issues. Some countries had to deal with situations long before we did. They have been learning over the past few decades.

I don't think we need to reinvent the wheel here. These bodies can be used to share best practices and lessons learned. That would speed up our development.

Historically, Canada has been able to take our democracy a little more for granted. Not only do we need spaces for dialogue internationally, but we also need them at the national level, between the provinces, to ensure that learning, such as what Quebec learned about citizen participation, can be passed on to the other provinces and vice versa.

• (1240)

Christine Normandin: I would still like to come back to the issue of non-partisanship.

As you mentioned, getting funding becomes counterproductive if the system seems partisan from the outside.

You talked about what is being done outside Canada, but I would like you to tell us more specifically about funding. You've put forward some ideas. For example, boards of directors or governance bodies could be set up that would enable decision-makers to determine which organizations would receive funding.

Do you have any examples of what is being done elsewhere in the world in terms of how to proceed with funding decisions?

Niamh Leonard: I don't really have any examples of what's being done elsewhere in the world.

At AgoraEU, for example, I don't know exactly how the funds are distributed and what the criteria are. In fact, it's still being set up, and I'm not sure they have the answer there either.

I think we have to look at the form of the technique. For example, in journalism, there is a code of ethics for what constitutes journalism. That kind of thing could also be applied to civic engagement.

When it comes to specific populations, I think it has to be rooted in data on under-representation and the demographics of certain populations. Elections Canada already does this for young people, newcomers and people with disabilities, for example.

In my opinion, when there are more targeted strategies, we really have to ensure that they are for populations that are under-represented in relation to their demographic weight.

Christine Normandin: I want to come back to the issue of funding. Money is always the crux of any organization.

I'll draw a parallel. In Quebec right now, the community movement known as "Le communautaire à boutte!" is talking about funding that is often non-recurring and unpredictable, which undermines some initiatives.

Would you prefer a permanent funding model, for example by operating on a mission basis, for organizations that work on democratic resilience? Would you rather adopt a project-based funding model?

I'm thinking about a way to eliminate the partisan aspect of funding. If you have a budget forecast that covers a five-year plan, it could overlap election periods. There may be less of a perception that it is partisan funding.

Would that be something to consider?

Niamh Leonard: I think mission-based funding for organizations is critical. If everybody had mission-based funding, I think there would be a 20% increase in organizational capacity across the country.

That's what we do. We prefer mission-based funding, but we also have project-based funding for collaborative issues.

I think those details could be determined through consultation. I think resources also have to be allocated for networks and collaborative initiatives among organizations to ensure that the learning you talked about earlier can be applied.

Thank you.

Christine Normandin: This is once again for you, Ms. Leonard. In the next round, I'll move on to other witnesses.

Could you tell me about the degree of collaboration among the various organizations that are working on democratic resilience?

That would be a way of preventing overlap in some cases. For example, one organization might receive funding, but not the other one, even though both do excellent work.

Should making funding well distributed among organizations be more of a priority?

Niamh Leonard: Yes, absolutely.

I am a source of funding. Our organization receives applications from people from a wide range of ecosystems. I'm really impressed with the degree of collaboration among organizations.

You heard that in the evidence given. Such conversations happen on a regular basis. I think it really comes from a sense of urgency and the fact that no one organization can deal with this on its own. It also means recognizing that collaboration is the only way to have a broader impact than we can have on our own.

The Chair: Thank you.

[English]

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

Tamara Kronis: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Professor Charlebois, your research specializes in food systems and supply chains. I come from Nanaimo—Ladysmith on Vancouver Island, where it is often said that we have about three days of food supply at any given time. Food costs in my community are dramatically higher than in many other parts of the country. I could talk to you for days, but I'm going to start with an overarching question around cost. Can you explain a bit about how multiple distribution nodes, supply chain challenges and industrial carbon pricing contribute to the high prices that we experience on Vancouver Island and the worries that we have around food security and sovereignty?

● (1245)

[Translation]

Hon. Élisabeth Brière: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

How does this question relate to the subject being studied today?

[English]

Tamara Kronis: I will get there.

The Chair: We'll get there, but can we get there pretty quickly? It's a pretty tenuous connection between this witness and civic resilience—

Tamara Kronis: Well, let me—

The Chair: In this committee, one person speaks and one person listens. Please wait for me to finish. I will go back to you very quickly.

Get to that fairly quickly. I've granted a lot of latitude with respect to this witness and this witness's opening remarks. Please get there quickly.

Tamara Kronis: Can I start again with a different question?

The Chair: Sure. Go ahead.

Tamara Kronis: Professor Charlebois, can you talk a bit about the connection between food security and civic resilience?

Sylvain Charlebois: It's about understanding why food prices are going up, and it's about understanding food systems. Right now, if we want informed citizens, we want to make sure that they know the whole picture.

When we work on Canada's food price report every year, with 30 different scholars from all across the country, we look at 47 to 50 different factors. We look at climate change, costs of salaries, distribution, energy, geopolitics.... There are so many different factors affecting food prices. I think it's not fair for consumers to pinpoint one factor—for example, grocers exaggerating...and things like that—and that seems to be the overwhelmingly, I would say, convenient argument out there that is being conveyed.

Tamara Kronis: In the context of the trust that Canadians need to have in pricing and in government regulation of grocery stores and the cost of food, can you talk a bit about how supply chain issues and things like industrial carbon pricing contribute to the high cost of food in communities like mine?

Sylvain Charlebois: Well, I kind of answered that question earlier. I would say that it is a factor, but it wouldn't be the overwhelming factor. Essentially, it's really about how to measure the entire spectrum. Right now, I would say that most of the analyses given that we see in the media actually apply a linear analysis on the impact of the policy. What we do is look at the periphery, the whole thing, including fertilizers and the energy used to process everything, and that's when you see that it's really a matter of scope. I think that's what's missing out there to allow Canadians to appreciate what's going on.

Of course, grocers certainly deserve their fair share of the blame. We just heard from the CBC about the scaling issue with meat. That can actually increase the price of food by either voluntary error or error. Certainly, there are a lot of factors that can contribute, but it's important to give the big picture, the whole picture, so that Canadians can appreciate exactly what's going on.

Tamara Kronis: When there's a disconnect between people's understanding of how prices are calculated and the information being provided by institutions, what happens to people's trust in those institutions?

Sylvain Charlebois: It's a matter of consumer trust. Last year, we were arguing quite a bit that countertariffs implemented by Ottawa were impacting many food prices at grocery stores. It required the U.S. ambassador to Canada to finally say to Canadians in August that we were in breach of CUSMA with food. That's when Prime Minister Carney decided to finally eliminate all countertariffs in September. It took months for us to say to Canadians that countertariffs are a problem and countertariffs are making food more expensive at the grocery store.

Tamara Kronis: In the context of that information gap, what's happening? What's the trend that you're seeing in your research around Canadians' trust in our institutions?

The Chair: Give a very quick answer.

Sylvain Charlebois: Science is about nuance. The more complicated it is to convey the big picture, the bigger the temptation is to simplify the message as much as possible, which undermines trust.

The Chair: Thank you so much. I'll have to intervene there.

Now we go to Madam Vandenbeld for five minutes, please.

Anita Vandenbeld: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll just return to the subject of the current study and direct a question to Ms. Leonard.

Following on from Ms. Normandin's questions, I'm very interested in the difference between funding that would go to civic resilience and, say, regular funding that goes to different organizations around the country. You've mentioned that the NATO Parliamentary Assembly is actually looking at democracy as fundamental to our security and to the foundation of our country.

Could you talk a bit about how this kind of fund...? We're talking about small organizations for which a little bit of money would go a long way. Could you talk about why that is something that needs public funding and the fact that it is fundamental to our existence as a democratic country?

• (1250)

Niamh Leonard: There are a few parts to the question.

On the question of public funding, I think if we decide that it's important, then it needs to be funded. There are only so many options in terms of how this kind of work can be funded, and government is part of the answer. I don't think it should be the complete answer, and that's also why I mentioned in my opening remarks that philanthropy is mobilizing in response to events around the world and seeing that this is important. I don't think government would be alone at the table, either on co-funding different organizations or maybe in a closer collaboration.

Ultimately, if we decide this is important and it needs to be independent, having multiple sources of funding is part of the answer.

To your question around what it would fund exactly, I heard the end of the previous panel discussing issues of social cohesion, and that is so important to Madame Normandin's point about community organizations being over-stretched. All of that is crucial, but I would distinguish general work around civil society from work that is about strengthening the connection between people and institutions. That exists on a spectrum from education around voting to the fact that you can come sit at committees and to misinformation, disinformation and media literacy.

There are all of those questions, from education to get out the vote efforts and community mobilizing and having spaces where people can discuss complex issues, such as, for example, citizens' assemblies. I know you heard from Mr. MacLeod and the Centre for Media, Technology and Democracy, who, as you've also heard, for example, have been doing these citizens' assemblies with young people around AI.

These opportunities for people to understand the complexity of policy are also important so that people have trust that policy decisions are made weighing factors appropriately.

Anita Vandenbeld: Thank you.

In the few minutes remaining, could you talk about the difference between constructive and productive engagement and the kind of inflammatory polarization that might happen when people are getting information from sources that they're not engaging that way?

Niamh Leonard: Democracy fundamentally is about whether or not people are heard. We work with a consultant, Steve Joneslee, who said it very well, and I've never heard someone talk about democracy so succinctly. He said that democracy ultimately is whether we get what we want, and if we don't, do we understand why, and do we think it's fair?

Having the feeling of being heard is so important to being able to accept outcomes when outcomes may not go in your favour. We all know here—you know this better than most—that we can't serve the interests of everyone 100% of the time. We wish, but that's not possible.

However, having procedural fairness is important. I'm a big advocate for the fact that we need to reach across divides to have spaces where people can discuss complexity, and to come to realize, as I think Mr. MacLeod mentioned in his testimony, that when we bring people together over time, people realize they have a lot more in common than the things that divide them. I think time together discussing real issues is one of the ways in which we can make progress on complex policy decisions.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We will now go to Madame Normandin for two and a half minutes, please.

[Translation]

Christine Normandin: Thank you very much.

I would now like to turn to you, Mr. Carpay. This is an opportunity for you to speak in French, if you wish.

You talked about equity, diversity and inclusion standards. In your opinion, that is more divisive than inclusive, and you say that justice must be blind in the application of its rules.

I'd like to hear your opinion on the main theories that support this, particularly the theory of humanism as opposed to multiculturalism. This is indeed a topical issue in Canada. It is said that humanism focuses more on common values, whereas multiculturalism amplifies the differences among the various groups that must coexist.

Is your vision closer to humanism or to multiculturalism, strictly speaking?

• (1255)

John Carpay: Thank you very much for the question.

I don't see them as opposites. I think multiculturalism can work well, as long as there is a foundation. It's like a mosaic that needs glue to hold the little pieces of glass together. Multiculturalism can work well if people think the law is fair, because the law applies equally to everyone. You would not tell someone that their ancestors came here much later than someone else's ancestors. If there are legal distinctions, people will feel that there is a lack of justice. It will undermine solidarity.

For example, the agreements with the Musqueam in Vancouver are not bringing people together. There are people who bought a house, and now it's not clear whether they can keep the house that they've paid a lot of money for. There's a minority of people who can potentially, probably, benefit from that. It is dividing people. It doesn't help with reconciliation.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We'll go to Mr. Van Popta for five minutes, please.

Tako Van Popta: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all of the witnesses.

Mr. Carpay, I have a question for you.

I'm looking at a briefing note that we have from the Library of Parliament, prepared by our very capable analysts, which I thank them for. In it, they cite some Statistics Canada information about the degree of confidence that Canadians have in several of our important democratic institutions, one of them being our criminal justice system. Apparently only 48.2% of Canadians have confidence in our criminal justice system, which seems pretty startling to me.

I don't know if you have a comment about that. I know you're legally trained. You talked about the rule of law, equality and race-based policies. You have race-based sentencing, and we have, not to be partisan, what we call catch-and-release bail rules. Now we also have sentencing based on a person's immigration status.

We're talking about civic resilience, keeping in mind that's the purpose of my question.

John Carpay: There's been a lot of media coverage in recent months of some very high-profile cases. I'm not going to describe them or elaborate on them, but these are cases in which the judge has expressly written into his judgment that a person would have received a much harsher sentence or deserves a harsher sentence, but we had this special report—I'm sorry, I forget the name of it—so this person gets a lighter sentence because he's Black or because he's aboriginal.

That, I think, rubs the vast majority of Canadians the wrong way and creates, again, conflict and division between people, because there's this sense of unfairness and favouritism.

We have to remember as well that long before the Gladue decision of the Supreme Court of Canada, which was in respect of special sentencing considerations for aboriginals, judges have always had discretion to take note of the accused person and if they had a horrible childhood, abusive alcoholic parents or a horrible youth and didn't have opportunities or guidance, etc.

The judge already had and still has the jurisdiction to take that into account. In my view, it was a mistake, though well intentioned. Everybody has good intentions. I don't question that, but to say we need special sentencing considerations for aboriginals is not necessary; it's divisive. That special consideration was already in place long before Gladue or the current policies.

• (1300)

Tako Van Popta: Thank you for that.

I want to tie this back to the study of the day, which is civic resilience. I think it is a disturbing stat that more than half of Canadians don't have confidence in this important democratic institution.

What does that do to our sense of community and our sense of civic resilience? I know these policies are well intentioned, but maybe they don't work out the way they were intended.

John Carpay: Your question has expressed my point. I don't question that the EDI initiatives are intended to help people who are disadvantaged, who have a harder time in life and who have conditions beyond their control that make it harder to get ahead, etc.

I completely understand that EDI initiatives are well intentioned. I also think they are counterproductive, because they make it harder to have unity, say, between men and women, between gay and straight people and between dark-skinned and light-skinned people. That common humanity.... If you're always emphasizing that you belong to a victims group or you're in an oppressor group, that is so counterproductive to getting along and respecting each other.

Again, these initiatives have good intentions, but I think they're destructive and toxic, and they undermine social trust between people.

Tako Van Popta: I have 50 seconds for Professor Charlebois.

I read that editorial—it was in Canadian Grocer, I think—very recently. You say a healthy food economy depends on a strong middle class. I find it somewhat ironic that after 10 years of the government that wanted to enhance the middle class, which even had a ministry of middle-class prosperity, you talked about the Canadian economy and how things are going in the wrong direction.

Could you comment on what a prosperous middle class, or a lack thereof, does to the sense of civic resilience in our country?

Sylvain Charlebois: It affects us all, because the top 20% is still buying beef at plus 15% and lamb at plus 8%. They'll buy caviar, crab and lobster, pushing prices higher and penalizing the people who actually are trying to make ends meet. They're dealing with the same inflation.

The Chair: We'll have to move on to Madame Brière.

You have five minutes.

[Translation]

Hon. Élisabeth Brière: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First of all, thank you all for your testimony.

Ms. Leonard, you mentioned a \$20 million Canadian fund that could be set up.

Which sector do you think would need the most support?

What weaknesses could that funding address?

Niamh Leonard: Thank you for your question.

In my opinion, the scope of the funding has yet to be determined. We could include a lot of things.

In terms of the current funding from the federal government, which includes the digital citizen initiative, the local journalism initiative and other initiatives, the missing pillar involves civic engagement.

We have to ensure that people are closer to institutions, and that institutions are closer to the people. We have to be able to inform people about how institutions work. We need to make sure that people show up to vote and that their voices are heard.

In my opinion, the real weakness is in the organizations that make that connection. We must nonetheless continue to strengthen other important things, including issues related to journalism.

Hon. Élisabeth Brière: Thank you very much.

Mr. Charlebois, you often question the credibility of the media. You say that it is compromised by public funding, even though that represents a small portion of their funding.

What would you say about your credibility as a university professor if you're entirely publicly funded?

Sylvain Charlebois: I don't have a problem with publicly funded media. I have to correct you. The newspaper La Presse, which terminated my work with it, made \$9 million, and it received more than \$15 million in grants. It also benefited from tax credits. That is not insignificant.

As an academic and researcher, I sense there has been some influence. I've been working with the media for 25 years, and I've noticed a difference in the past three or four years.

I have no problem with public funding. I'm a big supporter of Radio-Canada/CBC. For privately owned media, however, we know very well that this is a partisan issue now. We can see that.

• (1305)

Hon. Élisabeth Brière: Thank you.

I'll give the rest of my time to the committee chair.

[English]

The Chair: I would like to use my discretion as chair to ask a few questions.

I'll start with you, Professor Charlebois.

It sounds like your argument with respect to media is that if you had 300 experts on one side saying one thing and one expert on the other side saying the other thing, it should be reported the same way as two sides of the same coin.

Are you trying to tell us that is the reason you're being excluded from the media?

Sylvain Charlebois: I'm not being excluded at all.

The Chair: I see you a lot. That's why I'm surprised you're here saying that you can't get into one newspaper but you're in every other newspaper across the country.

Are you telling us that La Presse should not have the freedom to include or not include who it would like?

Sylvain Charlebois: They absolutely should. It's just the reason they used to dismiss me was troubling to me. That's why—

The Chair: Okay.

I suppose it would be troubling to all of us if we were dismissed.

Mr. Charlebois, I looked through your university website just to confirm you are well studied in food and food security and whatnot. Compared to the other academics who have been here, would it be fair to say you have not done research in civic resilience?

Sylvain Charlebois: It's fair. I'm not an expert in civic resilience. Absolutely.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Grant Jackson: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair. I'm just curious. We've had a number of witnesses over many days of study on this. I'm not sure I've seen the chair question the expertise of any other witness.

I'm just wondering why that's happening.

The Chair: That sounds like debate. It's not a point of order.

Mr. Carpay, with respect to your comments on inclusion and diversity, and I can understand where you're coming from, is that why you compared the pride flag to the swastika?

John Carpay: Well, you need to get your facts straight on that, with respect. I made a point, and I'll make it again today, that any flag and any symbol can be used to attack rights and freedoms. You can violate human rights under the Canadian flag, the American flag, the Israeli flag, etc.

The Chair: Is that a yes?

John Carpay: I was misquoted by media. I don't think it's a fair point you're making, with respect.

The Chair: Fair enough.

It's surprising to me that even in your questioning, the Conservatives talked about law and order. That's a big thing they talk about. Is it correct that you were disbarred from two law societies for having the Chief Justice of Manitoba tailed and surveilled? Is that true, Mr. Carpay?

John Carpay: No, it's not true. I resigned from the Law Society of Alberta in 2023. I've not been disbarred in Manitoba. I've never been a member there. After I resigned from the Law Society of Alberta, after disciplinary proceedings were fully concluded in Manitoba, the Alberta law society decided to commence a brand new prosecution. That is the status of where things are at.

I'm not sure what this has to do with civic resilience, with respect.

The Chair: You're the one who brought up the rule of law. Does the rule of law include having judges tailed?

John Carpay: The rule of law includes judicial independence, period.

The Chair: Thank you. Excellent.

Thank you so much.

This committee stands adjourned.

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