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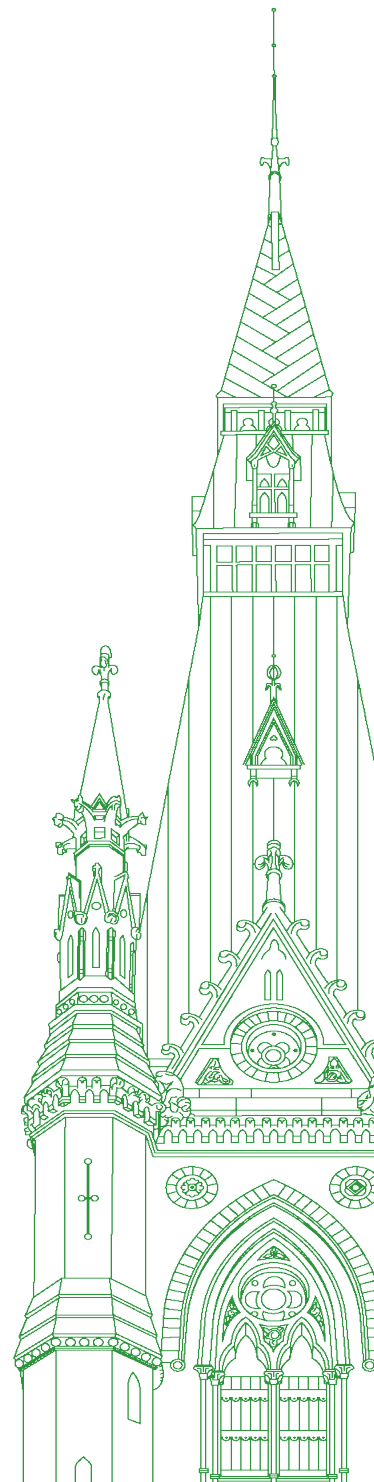
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Tuesday, October 6, 2026

Chair: Ben Carr



Standing Committee on Industry and Technology

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• (1105)

[Translation]

The Chair (Ben Carr (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.)): Good morning and welcome.

I hope you had a good week in your ridings.

[English]

We are continuing this morning with our study of the private member's bill, Bill C-268.

[Translation]

I can confirm that the audiovisual checks were completed.

[English]

Colleagues, I have spoken with members representing all parties. We're going to reduce the number of rounds of questioning today. We're going to provide our colleagues from the CRTC, whom I'll introduce in a moment, with a five-minute introductory statement, and that will be followed by a six-minute round for each party. That will complete our testimony for today, at which point we will enter into clause-by-clause consideration, and then there's some other committee business that we will go in camera for regarding consideration of our reports.

[Translation]

First, however, we will hear from the officials from the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, or CRTC, who are with us today.

[English]

We have with us Mr. Sheehan Carter, director general, strategic policy, consumer, analytics and strategy; Ms. Rachelle Frenette, general counsel and executive director, legal services; and Ms. Leila Wright, vice-president, telecommunications.

[Translation]

As I understand it, Mr. Carter will start, followed by Ms. Wright.

[English]

You will have up to five minutes between the two of you, at which point we will enter into our rounds of questioning.

With that, Mr. Carter, I'll turn the floor over to you, sir.

Sheehan Carter (Director General, Strategic Policy, Consumer, Analytics and Strategy, Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission): Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to appear before your committee.

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge that we are gathered on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

I'm joined today by my colleagues Leila Wright, vice-president of telecommunications, and Rachelle Frenette, our general counsel.

[Translation]

As you know, the CRTC is an independent, quasi-judicial tribunal that regulates the Canadian communications sector in the public interest. We hold public consultations on telecommunications and broadcasting matters, and make decisions based on the public record.

We are pleased to assist your study of Bill C-268. As the bill recognizes, the CRTC and Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, or ISED, play a role in helping ensure that Canadians have access to high-quality cellphone services.

The CRTC's role under the bill is to collect accurate data from service providers about their networks, including where services are available, and share this information with ISED.

[English]

Like committee members, we've heard from Canadians about dead zones and dropped calls in places where maps say they should have full service, such as Pincher Creek, Alberta; Chelsea, Nova Scotia; and even territorial capitals, such as Whitehorse.

When Canadians have difficulty accessing reliable Internet and cellphone services, it can be a real threat to their livelihoods and even their lives, so we understand the importance of these services, and we're listening to what Canadians are telling us.

Earlier this year, we launched a public consultation to improve how cellphone coverage data is collected and reported, and last week we acted. The CRTC is introducing new requirements for cellphone service providers to give more detailed and accurate coverage information. Canadians will be able to compare networks and provide feedback when their real-world experience does not match the information on ISED's national broadband map. With better information, service providers and governments will also be able to decide where improvements are needed.

Now I would like to hand things off to Leila to discuss our work helping Canadians get access to high-quality Internet and cellphone services.

Leila Wright (Vice-President, Telecommunications, Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission): Thank you, Sheehan.

Good morning.

We watched your last meeting and heard stories that underlined how crucial it is that all Canadians have connectivity no matter where they are.

We all have these stories that stick with us. As a parent, the one that sticks with me is that of Angelina Arrowmaker. Angelina had to move more than 200 kilometres to Yellowknife at the start of grade 11, because her community lacked reliable connectivity for virtual education.

These are the stories that we are hoping to make a thing of the past. Connecting all Canadians provides vital services, opens doors and creates opportunities.

[Translation]

A key question at your last meeting was how to get coverage to underserved areas. Let me briefly explain how the CRTC is doing its part.

First, since 2019, the CRTC has helped allocate funding for reliable Internet and cellphone services. It is improving service in more than 320 communities and along more than 650 kilometres of major roads, often in remote areas.

Second, our wireless competition policy creates strong incentives for providers to improve coverage. Competitors are now offering cellphone service in nearly 100 new communities across seven provinces.

Third, when networks are built, we want them to be strong and resilient. We have an ongoing public proceeding to develop policies that will help build high-quality networks.

• (1110)

[English]

The good news is that there is broad alignment among Canadians, governments and industry that everyone should be able to connect to reliable and high-quality Internet and cellphone services. At the CRTC, we are doing our part to advance connectivity for Canadians.

Thank you again for inviting us, and we look forward to your questions.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Carter and Ms. Wright.

We will now begin the first round. As I mentioned initially, each party will have six minutes.

Mr. Ntumba, you may go ahead. You have six minutes.

Bienvenu-Olivier Ntumba (Mont-Saint-Bruno—L'Acadie, Lib.): Good morning, Ms. Wright. How are you?

Leila Wright: I'm fine. Thank you.

Bienvenu-Olivier Ntumba: As a Canadian who takes the train from Quebec City to Ottawa, I'd like to ask you something. When the train travels through certain areas, I sometimes lose connectivity, and I could be in the middle of a meeting on my cellphone or tablet. I imagine you get asked this a lot, but I'd like to hear your answer. Is that a common occurrence for someone like me who regularly takes the train to Ottawa?

Every time I take it, I have to hold my meetings before or after my trip. Seeing as I'm comfortably seated for two hours, I wish I could work and get things done in the comfort of the train, but I can't.

What do you say to that?

Leila Wright: Thank you for your question.

Connectivity is a huge issue in Canada. We're taking many steps to address the problem.

[English]

Generally, there are two types of areas in Canada. There are areas where there is a business case to build networks, and there are areas where that business case doesn't exist, either because the areas are rural or remote or because of population density issues. We're trying to manage both of those situations in different ways.

In areas where there is a business case, we have put in place a policy that allows competitors to use the large carriers' networks to provide services to Canadians and then to build out in those areas. In areas where there is no business case, we have a fund that we use to help carriers build out. This fund is a small part of a very large initiative across all levels of government to help build out those areas.

[Translation]

Bienvenu-Olivier Ntumba: Thank you for your answer.

Canadians, as a whole, aren't always familiar with what the CRTC does.

I'm sharing my time with my colleague Ms. O'Rourke, so this will be my last question.

I was in Nunavut recently with colleagues for our rural caucus, and we saw that, outside certain areas, there is little connectivity in northern Canada. Of course, I was talking about the Ottawa area, Montreal and Quebec City, which are major urban centres, but rural areas don't even have a voice.

What do you say to people in those communities today, so they know that they can count on you and that their connectivity will improve?

Rachelle Frenette (General Counsel and Executive Director, Legal Services, Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission): I'll go first, and then my colleague Ms. Wright can comment.

Certainly, access to telecommunications services in the Far North is an issue the CRTC is very concerned about. We have different regulatory policies specific to the north. Ms. Wright referred to those areas where a business case doesn't necessarily exist to build networks. We have tools such as funds and specific regulations for telecom companies that serve those areas. That helps to ensure basic service, so we can then establish regulatory frameworks to improve service in those areas. We want to make sure that those populations have access to service comparable to that enjoyed by Canadians in southern Canada.

• (1115)

[English]

Dominique O'Rourke (Guelph, Lib.): Thank you very much.

I met this morning with the Association of Equipment Manufacturers. Its members make agricultural equipment, mining trucks, construction trucks, etc. A lot of that equipment will be wired, connected to the Internet, using AI. A lot of that equipment is going to be used in rural and remote areas, particularly in light of major projects, our focus on electrification, etc.

We heard a lot of examples at our last committee meeting about individual safety. We're hearing about individuals being able to study. However, I thought it was helpful to point out that the equipment on which so many of us rely for construction, food security, etc., is also vulnerable in terms of access to the spectrum.

Should the geographic coverage be reported separately from the population coverage? Should other considerations take place beyond the business case? There is a chicken-and-egg situation happening here. We need to build in the Ring of Fire; we need to be building in rural and remote areas. How does that change the urgency of this question?

Sheehan Carter: We are absolutely collecting information in both of those areas: areas where people live right now, as well as outside of those areas, primarily along.... We think in terms of road segments or portions of roads where you have or will have access to service.

From our point of view, it's absolutely essential that Canadians have full access to cellphone mobile services wherever they work and wherever they live. The first step in that is, by necessity, having good information about exactly where those services are right now, so that we can continue to put on pressure to make sure those gaps are filled in the future.

[Translation]

Dominique O'Rourke: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. O'Rourke.

Go ahead, Mr. Groleau.

Jason Groleau (Beauce, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

I will split my time with Mr. Gill.

[Translation]

Welcome to our witnesses, Ms. Wright, Mr. Carter and Ms. Frenette.

The CRTC is telling us that 99.4% of Canadians have access to reliable network connectivity. Figures are well and good, but that's not the reality on the ground. Cellphone service in Beauce, my riding, is horrible. I'll be polite: there is zero coverage. It just doesn't work. Half of the 40 municipalities in the riding have broken connectivity. It's even worse between towns, where half the roads have no connectivity at all. When I go fishing 100 miles north of Fermont, I use an American product and I have access to excellent, reliable network connectivity.

It's 2026, so why hasn't the problem been fixed yet? Who is responsible?

Please tell me: What are you going to do to fix the problem?

Leila Wright: It's a major initiative, and a lot of people are working on the issue to make things better.

[English]

Currently, there are gaps. The way it works, unfortunately, is that the closer we get to 100%, the harder it becomes to get to 100%. The last 10% is harder than the first 90%.

There are a lot of different initiatives taking place. At the federal level, the CRTC has the broadband fund, which is used to help build out connectivity across the country where there are gaps. ISED also had a universal broadband fund, which has upwards of \$3 billion associated with it. There are also initiatives at all levels of government working on this, because they know how important it is to get connectivity to all Canadians.

• (1120)

[Translation]

Jason Groleau: I saw the news release you put out on Friday, October 2. You're taking action to obtain clearer information on cellphone coverage. That's good news. It's a funny coincidence, I'll call it, since the information came out right before your appearance before the committee.

Why did it take so long to get things moving?

Sheehan Carter: As I said, the first step is measurements. What has to do with the measurements is done. That's precisely the case here.

[English]

Our objective right now is to ensure that there is consistency in that measurement, there is clarity, and this information is conveyed to Canadians so that Canadians can make choices about their own services and be assured that they can receive services in certain areas.

Jason Groleau: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Gill is next.

Harb Gill (Windsor West, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Folks, your news release of October 2 says that “Canadians will...be able to report locations where coverage maps do not reflect their experience”. It says that the feedback “will help improve the accuracy of information over time”. That, to some extent, is passing the buck to the customer or the victim who is not getting the service, in my opinion. People's lives are busy, and we are asking them to come and report to us. They're frustrated to begin with. Why are we asking them to do the CRTC's job?

Let's take a real example. A Canadian reports a dead zone. The CRTC investigates and confirms that, yes, the coverage map says there's service, but there isn't. Who is responsible for fixing that problem, what is the deadline for fixing it, and what happens to the carrier when they don't fix it?

Here's what I'm asking. You have the data now, but who is responsible for fixing the confirmed gap, and what are the consequences that the CRTC is going to impose on or recommend to that carrier?

Sheehan Carter: Our role here in the first instance is to collect the data and use it to determine where there are difficulties or problems. Quite frankly, when we see those problems or difficulties, the next step is going to be to work directly with the carriers themselves and to try to understand what the source of the problem is. Is it a problem of validation? Is it a problem of measurement?

Beyond this, we'll continue to work with the carriers to ensure they are looking at those gaps and taking the steps necessary to make sure Canadians have services in these areas.

Harb Gill: Again, the point is, who is going to impose consequences on these people? Have you done that with any carrier so far? Have you revoked their licence or taken away their spectrum?

Leila Wright: We're not able to do that as the CRTC, because we don't oversee spectrum. However, this committee, in its last meeting, spoke a lot about incentives and how we can create incentives. That's the area where the CRTC is focused. It's how we can create incentives for carriers to build, both where there is a business case and where there isn't a business case.

Harb Gill: Would you recommend any negative incentives to ISED, which does control? Would you be able to recommend that to them by saying, “This carrier is not doing what it's supposed to do”?

This is what Canadians are facing. There have to be some consequences. I agree about the positive incentive, for sure, but there should be negative incentives as well.

Leila Wright: Our role in this is to create those positive incentives. That's what we're doing through the initiatives we have within our organization.

Harb Gill: Nobody is responsible for the negative incentives, then?

Leila Wright: There's a lot of work being done across the country to try to fix this problem and ensure that all Canadians are connected.

Harb Gill: Again, it comes down to accountability and responsibility. What we are seeking here from you is transparency, and clearly I don't think we're getting it, sadly.

Those are my questions, sir.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gill.

Did you want to respond, Ms. Wright, or leave it there?

Sheehan Carter: We absolutely will be holding the service providers to account for the information they're providing about where they provide service, and we'll be very diligent in that task to ensure that Canadians have all the information they need about the services they're offered.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gill.

[Translation]

Mr. Ste-Marie, you may go ahead. You have six minutes.

Gabriel Ste-Marie (Joliette—Manawan, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning to our witnesses. My thanks to all three of you for being here.

Yesterday, Stéphanie Paquette, the CRTC commissioner who represents the Quebec region, met with the greater Joliette chamber of commerce. She talked about the CRTC, and I think everyone who attended really appreciated it.

In terms of Bill C-268 and the measures relating to the CRTC, have you assessed the financial impact? Where do you stand on that?

Are you able to do everything my colleague Ms. Dandurand's bill requires you to do within the prescribed time frames?

• (1125)

Sheehan Carter: Sorry, I'm a bit—

Rachelle Frenette: I can start.

In terms of what we're being asked to do under the bill, I would say that, with the mandate we were given by Parliament through the Telecommunications Act, with the power to collect data, we are already working towards the objectives set out in the bill. For that reason, I think we have a good lead in terms of when it comes to what we are being asked to do under the bill.

Gabriel Ste-Marie: All right. Thank you.

The bill also requires that a review be completed every five years. Shortly, we will be debating the possibility of doing that review every two years.

How do you see the five-year and two-year time frames? Are you able to meet those deadlines?

Would a two-year review time frame be more appropriate given the changing reality and technological landscape?

Rachelle Frenette: The CRTC reviews its regulatory policies and procedures on a regular basis, so as far as the need to review how we collect data is concerned, it's part of our everyday work.

Gabriel Ste-Marie: With respect to the funds you administer to support infrastructure in areas where there isn't a business case, would you consider doing what was done for Internet coverage? I mean letting Quebec City administer the funding, or does that fall under the Department of Industry? As we saw, things moved quite fast and the approach was successful.

Leila Wright: We have a \$150-million fund we use to help companies build networks.

[English]

We're not able to transfer that money. That money comes from industry. Industry contributes to the fund, and then that fund is used to help build networks.

[Translation]

Gabriel Ste-Marie: I'd like to ask you about licensing.

With the conditions of licence, is it possible to provide good coverage in regions? What do you think?

We can't revisit old licences, but what can you say about that?

Leila Wright: Are you asking about what we're doing in the Far North?

Gabriel Ste-Marie: Yes, that could be relevant.

Leila Wright: We've done a great deal of analysis in the Far North. A few years ago, we undertook to find out how we could improve the situation in the Far North and make it a bit fairer.

[English]

We found that there were opportunities to increase competition that will result in lower prices in the far north.

We're also very focused on the far north with our broadband fund. We had one call for applications that was very much focused on how we can help build networks within the far north. That is oftentimes where we are seeing the lack of connectivity.

[Translation]

Gabriel Ste-Marie: Companies send you coverage information. How often do you notice that the information you're getting doesn't reflect the facts on the ground?

The different companies don't apply the same standards. Is that lack of standardization significant?

Sheehan Carter: That's precisely the substance of the decision that was announced on Friday. It's about standardizing the data collection. Normally, under our process, we collect the data every January, but data are constantly updated throughout the year.

• (1130)

Gabriel Ste-Marie: I have one last question for you. Again, thank you for being here.

According to a CRTC document, 99.5% of the Canadian population has access to mobile services, while your research also indicates that many Canadians continue to experience significant coverage gaps.

How do you reconcile those two things?

Sheehan Carter: Those are the current data, and they come from the industry itself. The point of the decision announced Friday is to change the data collection system, to increase data quality and accuracy in that context.

Rachelle Frenette: I can elaborate on what Mr. Carter said.

There's a difference between network access and network reliability. The reason we made the decision that was published last week was to make sure that the service reporting of telecommunications companies gives us evidence on those two components, access and reliability.

Gabriel Ste-Marie: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ste-Marie.

[English]

Colleagues, I will briefly suspend to allow us to prepare for clause-by-clause.

I'd like to thank our witnesses for being here today.

Because we have some members who are probably going through clause-by-clause for the first time, I will introduce the process. Just as a reminder, clause-by-clause is not done in camera. It's a public process that plays out here. We'll come back after suspension and enter into that conversation.

Thank you.

- (1130) _____ (Pause) _____
- (1140)

The Chair: Colleagues, we are going to get under way here.

I want to explain a couple of things in terms of clause-by-clause. First of all, we have a few new faces. We have Michelle and Andrew, who are here from the legal services in House administration. Their job is to help shepherd us through the process.

We have Andre Arbour, who is here from ISED, and Mr. Kellison will be joining us shortly. They're here to answer questions that you may have on the specifics of the bill, whereas Andrew and Michelle will be here on the legalities of it.

I know we have a few members who have not gone through this process before, so feel free to ask questions if you're unsure of how things should proceed. Essentially, clause-by-clause, as the name suggests, is the specific examination of each clause or section of the bill before us. It is our responsibility, at the committee stage of a piece of legislation, to review it; to either amend or not amend it, based on the majority view of the committee; and then to provide the bill back, in whatever form it takes, to the House. It will then go through its final stages of reporting and third reading.

As I said, because it's our first time, in particular, and it's a relatively short bill, feel free to ask questions. We really want to make sure that the environment is one where members feel comfortable with what we're doing.

The very first thing that we have to go through is as follows. Pursuant to Standing Order 75(1), consideration of clause 1, the short title, and of the preamble is postponed. We'll get back to them.

(On clause 2)

The Chair: The chair calls clause 2.

• (1145)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Ste-Marie, go ahead.

Gabriel Ste-Marie: Thank you. Sorry to bother you.

I'll be voting in favour of the clause, but since we have the industry officials here and given that we just heard from the CRTC representatives, I'd like the industry officials to clarify something, first. This should be the only time I ask such a question.

The CRTC officials told us the commission has a fund to improve cellular connectivity. The department has one too, and Quebec has a program.

In order to transfer the CRTC funding, as was done in the case of Internet connectivity, could the department just ask, or would a legislative change be necessary?

This will be the only time I ask a question like this. If the witnesses don't know the answer, they can get back to us in writing.

Andre Arbour (Director General, Telecommunications Policy Branch, Department of Industry): I'd like to thank the member for the question.

This bill doesn't affect the CRTC fund. What's more, ISED's universal broadband fund provides some flexibility.

There is no direct effect. There are benefits tied to the accuracy of the available data.

Gabriel Ste-Marie: Sorry, but I'm going to stop you there. Thank you, and I fully understand what you're saying.

Can you get back to us with a written answer on the CRTC-administered fund? Would a legislative change be necessary to transfer the funding to another program that wasn't administered by the CRTC?

My question has to do with what the CRTC officials told us.

Andre Arbour: Thank you for clarifying.

If funding were transferred between the CRTC and another federal organization, it would have a huge impact, quite frankly, since the CRTC is an independent tribunal. The Financial Administration Act would also come into play in the case of a department like ISED. Yes, it would be quite a big deal.

Gabriel Ste-Marie: That's very clear. Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ste-Marie.

[*English*]

Colleagues, just to clarify as well, in looking at the bill, you may see, for example, "2" and then, in parentheses, "1", and then "2" after, with "1" being the subclause. When we are adopting a clause, we are adopting everything within that clause. In other words, we don't do "2" and parentheses "1" and "2" independent of one another. When we're adopting, they're being adopted together.

Does that make sense?

Shall clause 2 carry?

(Clause 2 agreed to)

The Chair: Shall clause 3 carry?

(Clause 3 agreed to)

(On clause 4)

The Chair: On clause 4, Mr. Groleau, would you like to move your amendment, sir?

• (1150)

[*Translation*]

Jason Groleau: Yes, I assume my fellow members received the amendments.

Given the breakneck speed of technological change and the CRTC's failure to serve our regions, Beauce and all other rural areas in Canada, even though we've been fighting for years for a network, I don't think it's unreasonable to require that a review be undertaken every two years.

I am therefore asking my fellow members to support this amendment.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Groleau.

[*English*]

Colleagues, for clarification purposes, the amendment has been moved, much like during any other motion. It is now up for debate. Once debate has subsided, we will call the question as to whether we want to adopt the motion.

[*Translation*]

Go ahead, Mr. Ste-Marie.

Gabriel Ste-Marie: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I just asked the CRTC officials what they thought of such an amendment, whereby the review would have to be carried out every two years instead of every five years. They said they had an ongoing process, so they would have no problem with a review every two years instead of every five. For that reason, I will support the amendment.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Bardeesy, you may go ahead.

Karim Bardeesy (Taiaiko'n—Parkdale—High Park, Lib.): Thank you.

I thank my fellow members for their comments, and I understand the spirit behind them.

In the bill, I think the most important thing is to trigger the process, something that hasn't been undertaken in nearly two decades. The bill forces the department to develop the spectrum policy and report on it. We feel it is very important to trigger the process.

I appreciate the point about technological change, but I worry that the requirement to undertake a review every two years would be too onerous for the department, staff and companies. A review every five years provides time to create the maps. It also gives companies time to respond to the creation of the maps and policy. Making them respond every two years would likely disrupt, not speed up, the progress we need.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

Seeing no further speakers, I will call the question on whether the CPC-1 amendment should carry. Because we are in clause-by-clause on a piece of legislation, colleagues, we're going to be more formal in the recording of the vote than we might otherwise be.

Madam Clerk, I'll ask you to take the vote please.

(Amendment negatived: nays 6; yeas 5 [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: Colleagues, the amendment has been defeated. We now move on to the adoption of clause 4, unamended. I'm going to look for support here.

(Clause 4 agreed to)

The Chair: Shall the short title carry?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Shall the preamble carry?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Shall the title carry?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Shall the bill carry?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Shall the chair report the bill to the House?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Colleagues, that concludes our clause-by-clause revision of Bill C-268. I want to thank Mr. Kellison and Mr. Arbour for hustling down here earlier than we had scheduled. The same goes to our folks from legal here.

Colleagues, I'm going to suspend, but before I do, I'm looking for consent from the committee to move us into consideration of our draft reports. We have an hour remaining in this meeting as scheduled, and we need to look at our AI report. In discussions with colleagues, I didn't hear any opposition to that, but I'm just looking for consent to move us, following the suspension, into consideration of our draft report on AI.

Seeing no opposition, I'll consider that to be the will of the committee. We're going to briefly suspend.

● (1155)

(Pause)

● (1200)

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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