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OFFICIAL REPORT
(HANSARD)

Tuesday, April 29, 2008

—
Speaker: The Honourable Peter Milliken

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Tuesday, April 29, 2008

The House met at 10 a.m.

Prayers

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

• (1005)

[*English*]

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO PETITIONS

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 36(8) I have the honour to table, in both official languages, the government's response to 12 petitions.

* * *

[*Translation*]

HUMAN PATHOGENS AND TOXINS ACT

Hon. Christian Paradis (for the Minister of Health) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-54, An Act to promote safety and security with respect to human pathogens and toxins.

(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed)

* * *

[*English*]

COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Mr. Bob Mills (Red Deer, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the fifth report of the Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development in relation to Bill C-377, an Act to ensure Canada assumes its responsibility in preventing dangerous climate change.

Second, I have the pleasure to present the sixth report of the Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development. The report provides reasons for the committee not having completed its study of Bill C-377, an Act to ensure Canada assumes its responsibility in preventing dangerous climate change.

Mr. Speaker, the committee adopted clauses 3 to 9 with amendments, postponed clause 1, the preamble and the short title pursuant to Standing Order 75(1), and stood clause 2. The committee was unable to vote on clauses 10, 11, 12, 13 and 14 due to a

prolonged debate of over 20 hours on clause 10, which led the committee to an impasse.

As members will recall, the committee presented a report on April 14, 2008, arising from the debate on the bill, regarding inherent difficulties in the rules and procedures of the House. As a result of the impasse, the committee adopted a motion to the effect that the title, the preamble, clauses 1, 2, 10, as amended, 11, 12, 13 and 14 of Bill C-377, an Act to ensure Canada assumes its responsibility in preventing dangerous climate change be deemed adopted, that the bill as amended be deemed adopted, and that the chair report the bill as amended to the House.

I wish to note that as an indicator of the impasse, the report contains in annex four supplementary opinions.

I wish to thank all members of the committee for their willingness to find a compromise, allowing the committee to proceed in its important work.

* * *

DRINKING WATER QUALITY ACT

Mr. Alex Atamanenko (British Columbia Southern Interior, NDP) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-538, An Act to bring the Food and Drug Regulations in line with the Guidelines for Canadian Drinking Water Quality.

He said: Mr. Speaker, this is an act to bring the food and drug regulations in line with the guidelines for Canadian drinking water quality. It states that bottled water must conform to the same strict standards as municipal tap water. Accordingly, bottled water should be regulated by the same guidelines as municipal water in the guidelines for Canadian drinking water quality.

(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed)

* * *

[*Translation*]

CANADA TRANSPORTATION ACT

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr (Jeanne-Le Ber, BQ) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-539, An Act to amend the Canada Transportation Act (vibration and noise).

Business of Supply

He said: Mr. Speaker, I am introducing this bill to amend the Canada Transportation Act with respect to railway noise. Last session, the House of Commons came to an agreement in committee on a text that would strengthen the Transportation Act. Unfortunately, the Senate did not agree with us and amendments were necessary in order to pass the bill before the end of the session. This bill would return the text to the form unanimously agreed upon by the committee.

(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed)

* * *

•(1010)

[English]

PETITIONS

INCOME TRUSTS

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to present another income trust broken promise petition at the request of the member for Kelowna—Lake Country. The petitioners would like to remind the Prime Minister that he promised never to tax income trusts, but he broke that promise by imposing a 31.5% punitive tax which permanently wiped out over \$25 billion of the hard-earned retirement savings of over two million Canadians, particularly seniors.

The petitioners therefore call upon the Conservative minority government, first, to admit that the decision to tax income trusts was based on flawed methodology and incorrect assumptions, as was demonstrated at the finance committee; second, to apologize to those who were unfairly harmed by this broken promise; and finally, to repeal the 31.5% tax on income trusts.

UNBORN VICTIMS OF CRIME

Mr. Ken Epp (Edmonton—Sherwood Park, CPC): Mr. Speaker, a year ago, Aysun Sesen of Toronto was murdered and her unborn child also lost its life. That family was deeply hurt because the police could lay no charges in the death of the unborn child. The petitions that I am presenting today reflect that. These are mostly from Toronto, from her area, and they are from people who are asking Parliament to please enact legislation that would provide for a second offence when a pregnant woman is murdered and her child also dies or is injured.

* * *

QUESTIONS ON THE ORDER PAPER

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I ask that all questions be allowed to stand.

The Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

GOVERNMENT BUSINESS

[Translation]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—ELECTIONS CANADA

Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, BQ) moved:

That the House express its full and complete confidence in Elections Canada and the Commissioner of Canada Elections.

He said: Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise on behalf of my party, the Bloc Québécois, to participate in the discussion about this very important motion.

This motion is grounded first and foremost in democracy. Although this may seem quite ironic, the purpose of this motion is for the House of Commons to spend today reiterating its confidence in an independent, impartial organization whose neutrality is above reproach. That may indeed seem ironic.

Why will we be talking about a motion that asks the House to express its full confidence in Elections Canada and the elections commissioner? Because the party currently leading a minority government, the Conservative Party, has given us reason to believe that it does not have faith in Elections Canada.

We know that free and fair elections are the basis for any democracy. In some countries, the people do not have opportunities to choose their elected officials democratically. Here in Quebec and Canada, we do have that opportunity. Regardless of the party elected or the member or candidate in whom the people place their trust, that person is elected democratically. Nobody in this House was elected by citizens who went to the polls at gunpoint. We are legitimate.

All the same, the democratic process that takes place during our elections has to be overseen by an organization. We cannot let the government or the party in power, regardless of who they are, decide how things are going to happen. We are responsible for keeping a close eye on the electoral process.

We know that the right to vote is not enough on its own. We need rules in order to hold free, democratic elections. For example—and this is with reference to the case currently before the courts—we need rules that govern contributions to political parties and that make it possible to prevent the electoral process from becoming hijacked by the money game. That means that parties have to play by rules enforced by an independent organization.

Here is another example that is more directly linked to the motion today. The rules that set limits on election spending are intended to make sure that the candidate with the best chances of being elected is the one who is most in tune with the wishes of the public, not the one who spends the most money to flood the country with partisan advertisements. In the Bloc Québécois, we feel that, in a democratic society, elections must not be bought.

Business of Supply

I went onto the Elections Canada website, which lists the organization's values: a knowledgeable and professional workforce, transparency, responsiveness to the needs of Canadians involved in the electoral process, cohesiveness and consistency in administering the Canada Elections Act, earning the public's trust, and finally, stewardship and accountability in how the democratic process is managed.

• (1015)

The position of Chief Electoral Officer was created in 1920. Marc Mayrand, the current Chief Electoral Officer, is the sixth person to hold the position. I sit on the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, of which I am vice-chair, and, when Mr. Mayrand was appointed, even the Conservatives recognized his skills and professionalism. Now that Elections Canada, as an impartial referee, makes a decision that does not suit the Conservatives, all of a sudden, they start to discredit the individual and the institution.

Elections Canada has shown us time and time again that the concern for transparency is clear in everything they do. If the Conservatives had acted in a transparent way and had cooperated with Elections Canada in what is now called the "in and out affair", when the Conservatives shuffled money back and forth during the January 2006 election campaign, the police raid that we witnessed some ten days ago would not have been necessary.

Is it customary, is it normal that Elections Canada had to get a warrant from a neutral judge and use the services of a neutral police force like the RCMP? Is it normal for a police force to have to search the headquarters of a political party, the Conservative Party in this case? Does this happen all the time, or is this an exceptional case? This shows that Elections Canada was completely fed up with the Conservatives' unwillingness to cooperate regarding this scheme, which supposedly allowed the Conservatives to exceed the \$18 million national spending limit by transferring \$1.2 million in advertising expenses to local ridings.

The Prime Minister tells us that everything was legitimate, that everything was done according to the rules. If everything was done properly, why did the Conservatives refuse to cooperate with Elections Canada? Why did they not sit down with them and explain what they did and how they applied the rules? No, they preferred to use a strategy that was against the law, with the result that it is being challenged by Elections Canada, thus explaining the police raid.

The Conservatives made some grand promises of transparency. I am sure we all remember the 2006 election. People really doubted Liberal management and attacked their credibility. People took a hard look at the sponsorship scandal and said the Liberals ran their campaign with dirty money. The Conservatives, however, were going to be squeaky clean, irreproachable and transparent. I am sure everyone remembers the Conservative ads during the election campaign in 2006, not all that long ago. They said these ads were paid for with clean money. But would Elections Canada be challenging this if everything had been done legitimately?

• (1020)

A lot of Conservatives, including, yesterday, the Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board and the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, have defended themselves by saying that all the parties do it. So I would like you

to explain for me, Mr. Speaker, why there are only 67 election reports by candidates, some of whom were elected as members and some of whom have apparently been appointed as ministers. Why are 67 Conservative election reports being challenged by Elections Canada?

I would point out that the election expense reports filed by the Liberals, the Bloc and the NDP after the 2006 elections have resulted in refunds. We got our refunds. That is too handy a defence. Saying that everybody does it so we do it too is just blowing smoke. I am sorry, but there is a dispute with Elections Canada, an independent, neutral and transparent body that oversees the democratic process and deserves to have our confidence. I am persuaded that in the vote tonight all parties will reiterate their confidence in Elections Canada.

Quebeckers and Canadians do not want to have an electoral system here like we can see in other countries. By their attitude, the Conservatives flaunt the election laws that are not to their liking. When Elections Canada's decision does not suit the government, they attack Elections Canada. They complain about inappropriate treatment. I am sorry, but it is nothing of the kind.

Another thing we find on the Elections Canada site relates to cohesiveness and consistency in administering the Canada Elections Act. If we want elections to be conducted as a democratic process, it is important that all candidates and all parties, without exception, have equal opportunities. There can be no elasticity: the fact that someone does not like the sovereignists in the Bloc wanting to break up Canada and establish their own country does not mean they can be treated differently. No! Behaving like the Conservatives are asking would mean having an asymmetrical democracy. The rules of the game have to be clear and they have to be the same for everyone.

The Conservatives can feign indignance about this all they like, but the public's confidence has been seriously undermined. Speaking ill of an impartial body like Elections Canada is not how to do things in a democracy and makes the public skeptical about politicians, but particularly about the attitude of this Conservative Party. It is too handy to claim unfair treatment. The sole purpose of that attitude, intentionally criticizing and attacking credibility, is to conceal fraudulent activities.

I could tell you about the seven months of repeated filibusters we had at the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. The Conservative candidates went on and on about genuinely examining this issue. Well before the Elections Canada prosecution and the police raid, the Liberal whip had introduced a motion at the Committee on Procedure to bring this whole in-and-out scheme by the Conservative Party in the last campaign into the open. The Committee on Procedure has been paralyzed since September 10 and has really been unable to do its work.

• (1025)

Obviously, the Conservatives are trying to sweep the dust under the rug. Understandably, they are uncomfortable with what they did. Not only did the Conservatives knowingly set up a fraudulent scheme to claim rebates to which they were not entitled, but now, instead of apologizing, they attack the credibility of Elections Canada for blatantly partisan purposes.

Business of Supply

Yesterday, during question period, the Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board told us: “Conservative candidates spent Conservative money on Conservative advertising”. He forgot to say that inflating the election spending limit for local candidates shortchanged citizens because the Conservatives received a 60% rebate when their expenses return was approved.

As a defence they say that Conservative advertising was paid for with Conservative money. We say that it was used to inflate the spending limit, hence the notion of dirty money in this case, because taxpayers, who are fed up with paying taxes, were shortchanged by 60% with these artificially inflated expenses.

In conclusion, I want the Conservatives to know that we have seen where they are going with this scheme. Instead of cooperating with Elections Canada, they have opted for confrontation. This stance forced Elections Canada to use an extraordinary remedy to have access to incriminating documents, which explains the police raid at the headquarters of the Conservative Party of Canada.

The Bloc Québécois reiterates its full and complete confidence in Elections Canada as an impartial, independent and transparent referee necessary to ensure democratic elections.

• (1030)

[English]

Mr. Ken Epp (Edmonton—Sherwood Park, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have a question for the hon. member. Many questions come to mind but I will focus on one question. Does he believe that Elections Canada or the courts in our land are infallible? Can they make no mistakes at all?

I refer to the fact that in our court system pretty well everything the court rules on can be challenged on appeal all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada. We know there have been a number of instances where Elections Canada made a ruling that was, subsequently in court, shown to be incorrect and it had to backtrack because it is not infallible, as none of us are.

Does the member think there should be removed from our legislation the ability to challenge in a court the rulings of Elections Canada as with many other committees and boards in the country?

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Guimond: Mr. Speaker, I listened to my colleague's question directly in English, not because our interpreters are not competent, but because I have noticed that my knowledge of the other language has improved. Clearly, my colleague cannot make the same claim.

He is asking me whether an organization is infallible. We must accept the basic premise that our society is subject to the rule of law. The organization interpreted a rule of law in the same way for everyone. But his party does not accept Elections Canada's interpretation. That has nothing to do with whether or not the organization is infallible. We are asking the Conservatives to cooperate with Elections Canada when the time comes. Perhaps they will manage to convince Elections Canada and it will eventually recognize that its interpretation was incorrect.

I could use the mirroring technique and turn the question back to my colleague. Is the Conservative Party infallible? Is the

Conservatives' interpretation the only correct one? Absolutely not. That is why a neutral, independent, non-partisan organization conducts the election in 308 ridings across Canada. That is what it means to recognize the rule of law.

Mr. Marcel Proulx (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask my Bloc Québécois colleague a question.

The Conservative Party is trying to find out whether Elections Canada may have made a mistake. I believe my colleague gave a good answer to the question.

If the Conservative Party is really sincere about its question, why are the Conservatives forced to use altered or even forged information in making accusations against the three opposition parties in this House?

Yesterday, I listened to the Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board. In committee, the Conservatives repeatedly levelled the same accusations against us, saying that all the parties—the three opposition parties and they themselves—committed the same sin. However, we know full well that the Bloc Québécois, the NDP and the Liberal Party of Canada did not use this method during the most recent election.

What does my colleague think? If Elections Canada made a mistake, why does he think the Conservative government has to use altered information to make its case?

• (1035)

Mr. Michel Guimond: Mr. Speaker, it boils down to the weakness of the Conservatives' arguments. That is the typical reaction of someone who has no good arguments, someone who is not on solid ground. My training as a lawyer and my experience in court have taught me that. When the lawyers opposite me knew they did not have a case, they found ways of fiddling with the truth by attempting to interpret the rules of law to suit his case. Fortunately, the situation was remedied when the judges handed down their verdicts.

This is the approach used by those who have a guilty conscience. Instead, the Conservatives should face reality and admit that they used the in and out scheme to the tune of \$1.2 million in the 2006 election campaign and exceeded the \$18 million spending limit.

We have a series of e-mails in which the ad-buying agency, on the verge of exceeding the \$18 million limit, wondered what to do. At that point, the Conservatives dreamed up the strategy of invoicing the ridings for \$1.2 million for local advertising when, in fact, the content was the same as that in national advertising and there was nothing local about it.

Hon. Christian Paradis (Secretary of State (Agriculture), CPC): Mr. Speaker, my colleague spoke of the rules of law—I know he is a lawyer by training. He knows very well that there are legal proceedings underway, there are concurrent proceedings before the courts. The courts are involved; the judges will have to decide. However, some people seem to enjoy finding the Conservative Party guilty even though the matter is before the courts.

Business of Supply

In these proceedings, the Conservative Party has co-operated with Elections Canada and yet they showed up with a search warrant. Even more surprising—and this is what I would like my colleague to comment on—what about the fact that a Liberal Party cameraman was on the scene even before the RCMP?

We can talk about the rules of law or fine principles, but there is a practical matter that is very surprising, if not frightening. I would like his views on this.

Mr. Michel Guimond: Mr. Speaker, I am unable to answer as to the presence of one or any cameraman. My question to the member who referred earlier to cooperation between the Conservative Party and Elections Canada is: Why was a search necessary then?

If I volunteer to show him my bank book and show him my Caisse populaire passbook, that is cooperation on my part, and he is welcome to come and see it in all good faith. But if he has to seek a search warrant from the RCMP to check my bank account, is that cooperation? That does not make sense. It is complete nonsense.

I would have liked the parliamentary secretary to tell this house whether or not he is among the 67 under investigation by Elections Canada. Did he get a refund?

[English]

Mr. Ken Epp: Mr. Speaker, the member opposite engaged in considerable outrage but what would he say if we told him the truth, which is that no request by Elections Canada was denied by our party? Everything it asked for it received. It was quite inexplicable for Elections Canada to show up with the RCMP. There was no reason for that. How would he respond?

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Guimond: Mr. Speaker, if there was free access and cooperation, why did the RCMP have to conduct a search? That is because there was no cooperation. This is an attempt at putting up a smokescreen, but it is not working. We are not buying it—

•(1040)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): The hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the President of Treasury Board has the floor.

[English]

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today's dispute arose from the fact that Conservative candidates spent Conservative funds on Conservative advertising. This process was helped along by a series of transfers to and from the national party and its local candidates.

All parties do precisely the same thing to help finance local campaigns but Elections Canada decided that it would single out just one party. Therefore, our party took Elections Canada to court. We put all the documents on the table and planned to have a fair hearing before the courts.

However, one day, before it was set to face questioning over its conduct, Elections Canada decided to interrupt that court proceeding by barging into Conservative headquarters with Liberal Party cameras in tow.

Let us then break down the accusation that Elections Canada is making. We will break it down into four questions.

[Translation]

First, is it legal for the national Conservative Party to transfer funds to local ridings? Yes, it is perfectly legal. We will see examples later of millions of dollars that the other parties transferred from the national party to local candidates.

Second, is it legal for local candidates to run advertising with national content? It is not only legal but a right guaranteed by the Charter, which allows local candidates to say what they want in their advertising. In my entire political life, I have never seen a local campaign that did not mention national issues.

Third, is it legal for local candidates to purchase advertising from the national party? Yes, it happens all the time, especially in the Bloc. I will quote examples of millions of dollars being spent by local candidates to purchase products from the national party.

Fourth, is it legal for local candidates to pay for advertising that ran outside their own constituencies? Yes, it is not only legal, it is unavoidable.

[English]

I would like to elaborate on these four points of the debate. Is it legal for a national party to transfer funds to local ridings?

[Translation]

I want to start by giving an example. The Bloc Québécois transferred some \$732,000 to its local candidates in the 2006 elections and about \$1.5 million in the 2004 elections. If they think that is illegal, they should apologize now to the voters of Quebec and Canada for having broken the law.

[English]

The Liberal Party itself, according to Andrew Coyne, a very prominent Canadian author, has reported that the Liberal Party transfers in the neighbourhood of \$1.5 million from its national campaign to its local campaign. These millions of dollars in transfers, which happen regularly in campaigns, are designed to help local candidates finance their operations. Oftentimes those local candidates do not have the money to do so and parties are therefore permitted to step in and help.

That brings me to the second question: Is it legal for local candidates to run advertising with national content? It is not just legal; it is standard practice. Let us review the candidate handbook of Elections Canada. It reads:

Election advertising means the transmission to the public by any means during an election period of an advertising message that promotes or opposes a candidate, including one that takes a position on an issue with which a registered party or candidate is associated.

These are the rules that candidates must follow in buying advertising. They indicate that a candidate can support or oppose a national party in those ads.

Members do not have to accept my interpretation. I will now quote the then chief electoral officer, Jean-Pierre Kingsley. In his report on the 1997 election he stated that, "It is perfectly permissible for local campaigns to expense advertising with national content".

Business of Supply

He was writing in the section of the report dealing with rules related to the blackout. There used to be at a time in Canadian elections a blackout on national advertising in the last 48 hours before the polls closed. That meant that on the Sunday before and the Monday of an election national parties were not allowed to run advertising.

However, there were no such constraints on local campaigns. In other words, local ads were allowed in the last 48 hours of an election; national ads were not.

Naturally, this raised the question of what constituted a national ad and what constituted a local ad. Would it be the content of the ad that determined which level claimed the expense or reported the ad? If there was national content, would it necessarily be considered a national advertisement? If the content was discussing local issues, would it then necessarily be considered a local advertisement? According to Mr. Kingsley, no. It was the tag line on the ad that determined whether it would be counted nationally or locally. Let me quote from the 1997 report:

The content of the advertisements accepted was subject only to the freedom of expression guaranteed by the charter. As a result, a number of individual candidates purchased time on the day before and on the actual day of the election. Since the time purchased was often used to run national advertisements with local tag lines, this rendered the prohibition somewhat ineffectual. In other words, because these national advertisements had local tag lines [wrote Kingsley] they became local and were no longer subject to the national limits on advertising.

Mr. Kingsley did not like the fact that national ads could be rendered local with the addition of a mere local tag line. He did not like the way the rules were written. However, it does not matter what he wanted the rules to be. What matters is what the rules were.

I understand that Mr. Kingsley and Elections Canada might recently, in the last several months, have changed their mind, changed their interpretation. I tell them, and all Canadians, that it is not their role to change the rules after the game has been played. I understand they have now amended, retroactively, the candidate handbook in order to forbid the practice that our party engaged in. However, they did that after the election was over and they, therefore, cannot apply those new rules retroactively.

The third question is: Is it legal for local candidates to purchase advertising from the national party? Yes.

According to Andrew Coyne, the local Liberal campaigns purchased \$1.3 million in goods and services from the party in the last election without provoking Election Canada's wrath. Second, local candidates purchase advertising and other products from national campaigns all the time.

• (1045)

[*Translation*]

There is another example from the Bloc. It billed its local candidates \$820,000 for the 2006 elections and \$936,000 in goods and services for the 2004 elections.

[*English*]

The Bloc is very familiar with this practice as well. In fact, the Bloc transfers large numbers of dollars from the central campaign to local candidates and then those local candidates transfer back large numbers of dollars to purchase products and services from the

national campaign. This benefits the Bloc because it allows those local candidates to claim refunds on moneys that were originally in the hands of the central party. But, it is allowed.

The local campaign of the NDP member for Vancouver East in the 2006 election also participated in an in and out operation. In this case, the third party media invoices were made out to the national party rather than the official agents of the local candidates. A group of Vancouver area candidates for the NDP came together, bought advertising, but it was all organized by the central party. None of these local campaigns had any contact with the advertiser. They did not even get a direct invoice from the advertiser. They simply purchased the ads from the national party, but claimed it as a local expense entitling them to the refunds that Elections Canada provides to local candidates.

There is an invoice from the national office of the NDP to the official agent for the member for Vancouver East for her campaign that reads "Election period radio advertising paid by the federal party" in the amount of \$2,612. This invoice was paid to the national office by the local campaign by a cheque dated March 31, 2006. That same day the local campaign received a transfer of funds from the NDP national office for \$2,600, virtually the same amount as the invoice. What happened was that the national party bought a national advertisement for 11 candidates in the Vancouver area. The national party coordinated all of the ad buy. The national party paid for the advertisement, received the invoice in its name from the advertising companies, and then billed the local campaigns.

In the case of the member for Vancouver East, not only did the national party bill her campaign but it actually sent her a cheque so that she could pay for that bill. The money came from the national party, went to her local riding association, followed by an invoice from the national party for almost exactly the same amount of dollars. The money went into her account, out of her account, and paid for an advertisement that she did not organize, that she was not involved in securing. But interestingly enough, this in and out operation did not raise any curiosity at Elections Canada.

All of this information is well documented and the in and out nature of this specific transaction is set out in an email to the campaign from the NDP national office which states in part, "The good news is that the federal party will transfer \$2,600 to the federal riding association as we agreed to pay for the ads". So the national party, in writing, says it will pay for the ads, it will transfer the money into the local account to pay for these ads, and the local campaign gets to claim them as an expense and achieve a refund. Local campaigns purchase products including advertising from national campaigns all the time. It is a regular occurrence.

Business of Supply

The fourth question: Is it legal for local candidates to pay for advertising that also ran outside of their constituencies? Yes, it is not only legal. It is unavoidable. I represent southwest Ottawa in the House of Commons and I have purchased radio advertisements in the lead-up to elections here in this city. It is impossible for me to purchase broadcast advertising exclusively in my constituency. Ottawa stations run deep into western Quebec and in the opposite direction almost to Kingston.

In other words, when I buy a radio advertisement in my constituency, it probably gets broadcast into about 15 constituencies around the area. It is not possible to block the radio signal and ensure that it only runs in my own personal constituency. However, I am still allowed as a candidate to claim it as a local expense even though it had a broad reach to listeners in other ridings.

• (1050)

[*Translation*]

Let me summarize the situation. Elections Canada implies that the Conservative Party transferred party funds to the local ridings, the local ridings purchased advertising from the national party, this advertising had a national content, and in some cases, advertising ran outside the ridings in which it was bought. My question is: where is the offence?

I am going to repeat the questions. First, is it legal for the national Conservative Party to transfer funds to the local ridings? Yes. It is not only legal, it is standard practice.

Second, is it legal for local candidates to run advertising with national content? It is not only legal, it is a right guaranteed by the Charter, which allows local candidates to say what they want in their advertising, as Mr. Kingsley said.

Third, is it legal for local candidates to buy advertising from the national party? Yes. It happens all the time. I just provided numerous examples of local candidates for the Bloc Québécois purchasing hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of goods, services and other things from their national party.

Fourth, is it legal for local candidates to pay for advertising that ran outside their own constituencies? It is not only legal, it is unavoidable, as I just described using my own riding as an example. My advertising has to run outside the boundaries of the riding I represent.

• (1055)

[*English*]

We could go on and discuss examples of where other parties have engaged in exactly the same practices. I will refer to the member for Beauséjour who, in addition to being a fine, hard-working member of Parliament, followed the same practices that we did in the last federal election when he bought common advertisements with other members of the New Brunswick Liberal team. Let me cite an example.

The member of Parliament for Beauséjour and the other New Brunswick Liberals joined in a regional media buy in the 2006 election organized by the national party. The copy of the cheque provided by Elections Canada from local official agents, the local financial officers in the campaigns, for the member for Moncton—

Riverview—Dieppe, who also participated in the buy, is made out not to the newspaper in which the ad ran, but it is made out instead to the Liberal Party of Canada. In other words, the Liberal Party did the purchasing of this advertisement. The Liberal Party of Canada purchased the ad.

The contents of the ad, which I have seen by the way, are entirely national in scope, with the exception of a small, local tag line. Here is where it gets very interesting. While the member for Beauséjour is mentioned in the tag line as having paid for the ad, the advertisement says that he and his campaign paid for it, despite that fact, there is no apparent listing of any payments for these ads from the election return that that member of Parliament and his campaign submitted to Elections Canada. I do not know if he went on to correct that mistake later on, but there is an ad that ran in the last election in New Brunswick which says that he paid for it. It was not paid by him, at least not originally, and it was not counted in his election return as having been covered by his campaign.

I do not know if that means there was a transfer from the national party to help pay for the advertisement. We know that transfers happen very regularly in the Liberal Party. There was over \$1 million in transfers during that campaign. I am not sure if those expenses are hidden somewhere else, but what is very clear is that a national party organized a nationally focused advertisement in the New Brunswick area, that there were numerous members of Parliament who participated, that the invoice from the advertising company went to the Liberal Party and not to the local campaigns, and that the local campaigns then purchased the ad from the national party. These are all the same characteristics of the alleged breach for which Elections Canada carried out its visit to our office.

I have a whole book full of examples, and there are many more outside of this book, of where parties and members of this House have engaged in transfers, have bought products from their national parties, have run national content in locally expensed advertisements, have done all of the exact same things that Elections Canada accuses the Conservative Party of Canada of doing.

It is for that reason that our party is confident in its case. That is why we have taken Elections Canada to court. We want it to uphold the rules as it has in the past interpreted them so that we can get on with the job of continuing to provide good, solid, honest government for the Canadian people.

• (1100)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marcel Proulx (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have two questions for my colleague.

First, since he keeps talking about regional advertising and seems to approve that approach, I would like him to explain to me how come the Conservative candidate in the riding of Hull—Aylmer, in Western Quebec, was involved in advertising in Quebec City in the last election.

Business of Supply

Second, I will again use as an example the riding of Hull—Aylmer, where the candidate received almost \$50,000 from the Conservative Party and included that amount in his list of expenses. Since about 60% of these expenses are reimbursed by Elections Canada, it means that about \$30,000 of this \$50,000 would have been reimbursed by Elections Canada using taxpayers' money.

I would like to know if, according to the Conservative Party's practices, this \$30,000 now belongs to the Hull—Aylmer Conservative riding association or if the riding association or the candidate in the last election had to return the money to the Conservative Party of Canada.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his question.

First, the member asked me how a candidate in Hull—Aylmer could have bought advertising seen in Quebec City. I am not aware of this particular case because I did not follow that campaign. However, I can certainly tell him, as I said earlier, that it is nearly impossible now to buy ads that are seen only in the region where they are bought. In Quebec, many television programs are broadcast throughout “la belle province”. If the candidate bought an ad in Hull, it is very possible that all Quebecers may have had the pleasure of seeing it.

Second, he talked about the reimbursement of expenses. I think he said that that particular candidate was reimbursed by Elections Canada. If Elections Canada did decide to reimburse the Conservative candidate in Hull—Aylmer, it certainly was an excellent decision and I would congratulate Elections Canada for following its own rules for once.

Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would expect a minimum of intellectual honesty from the Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board. I would also like to settle the matter once and for all. When he quotes the report published after the 36th general election by the former Chief Electoral Officer, Jean-Pierre Kingsley, he should quote the whole paragraph and not only the sentence that suits him. That would make a big difference. By quoting only parts of sentences one can give a false impression.

I want to come back to the issue for one last time to have it on the record. The Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board must quote the whole Kingsley report. Since he probably does not know, I will inform him that Mr. Kingsley was commenting on the *Somerville v. Canada (Attorney General)* case from 1996, which had been heard in the Alberta Court of Appeal. By the way, *Somerville* was suing the Attorney General in the name of the National Citizens Coalition, a group that the present Prime Minister knows very well because he took Elections Canada in court.

That case he quotes was overturned by the Supreme Court in 1997, in the *Libman v. Quebec (Attorney General)* case. So, let us get our facts straight.

I would like the Conservatives to stop playing the victim and saying that all parties did it, in order to justify their own actions. We have all had our election expenses reimbursed after producing our election reports, but not the Conservatives.

●(1105)

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Speaker, that is why we are suing Elections Canada. All parties do the same thing, but Elections Canada chose to target only one.

I have here some very interesting documents. Canadian taxpayers should know that the Bloc finances its local campaigns almost entirely with funds from the national party.

An hon. member: Come on.

An hon. member: That is not true.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Let me state the facts. The Bloc Québécois transferred \$732,000 to local candidates during the 2006 election.

An hon. member: Where?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: And the local candidates paid their national party \$820,000.

Regarding this amount of \$732,000 that the Bloc Québécois transferred to its candidates for local spending, I wonder if local candidates were reimbursed by Elections Canada? Can the hon. member tell the House if Canadian taxpayers had to reimburse the money transferred to local candidates?

[English]

Ms. Alexa McDonough (Halifax, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have a very brief comment and then a question.

What Canadians find so distressing about the fact that we are debating this issue is that despite all of the supposed changes as a result of the Liberal sponsorship scandal, there are still very questionable practices by political parties that are under the microscope here. There are very serious issues we should be dealing with, but we are not and that is what is so distressing. Certainly what is distressing to me and my colleagues is that we are not dealing with climate change, as we should. We are not dealing with health care issues, as we should. We are not dealing with job losses and the growing prosperity gap.

I understand the parliamentary secretary to be taking the position, which he has now stated at least twice, that it is not illegal to transfer money from the central campaign to the local campaign, as after all, all the parties do it. I think that is true, and I do not think that is at issue here. But it is my understanding that is not what the Conservative Party is alleged to have done and why that party is under investigation by Elections Canada.

It is my understanding there are strong suspicions that the Conservative Party has devised a scheme to get around the spending limits and it may indeed have broken the rules with respect to local officials being required to authorize local ad buys before there is any basis for reimbursement.

Does the member not see a distinction between the issue of transferring money and doing it within the rules and the possibility of having devised a scheme that exceeds the spending limit and breaks the law that requires that local campaigns have to approve of such expenditures for them to be legal and authorized?

Business of Supply

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Speaker, the former NDP campaign director, Robin Sears, indicated that what the Conservative Party is doing is exactly the same thing as what all the other parties do.

The member talked about schemes. I want to refer to an NDP candidate in Saanich—Gulf Islands. The documentation that the Saanich—Gulf Islands NDP filed with Elections Canada includes a letter from the NDP national office to the local NDP association on March 31, 2006 entitled “Transfer from the Federal NDP to assist with election advertising”. It states, “Enclosed please find a transfer cheque from the Federal NDP.... The Federal NDP has invoiced the Official Agent requesting reimbursement for this local advertising so that it will be included in the Candidate’s Electoral Campaign Return”.

In other words, the money was transferred to the local NDP campaign with the express understanding that it would be transferred right back to pay for centrally purchased advertising and the local NDP candidate in Saanich—Gulf Islands was able to claim a reimbursement from Elections Canada.

Can the member stand in her place and explain how that is any different from what Elections Canada accuses the Conservative Party of doing?

• (1110)

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with a very distinguished member of the House, the member for Dartmouth—Cole Harbour.

[*Translation*]

First, I would like to thank my colleague, the member for Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, for putting forward the motion before us today in this House. I have worked closely with the Bloc’s chief whip, because he was a member of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs with me. As he said in his speech, the Conservative Party has been filibustering that committee for several months now.

I know how important this issue is to the member for Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord and the Liberal Party. We would therefore thank the Bloc for using its opposition day to bring a matter before this House today that is this important and fundamental to Canadian democracy. This will also be an opportunity for members to express their full confidence, tonight, not only in Elections Canada—the Chief Electoral Officer, Mr. Mayrand, who was appointed to that position by this government—but also in the conduct of the Commissioner of Canada Elections, Mr. Corbett. As you know, the position he holds is very different from the Chief Electoral Officer, but the work he does is absolutely essential to Canadian democracy, because he is responsible for enforcing the Elections Act and investigating to determine whether there are reasons to believe that an offence has been committed. In fact, that is exactly what he is currently doing in respect of the Conservative Party.

You will not be surprised to learn that the Liberals intend to support the Bloc motion tonight, because we want to reiterate our full confidence in this independent institution, one that truly enjoys an international reputation for honesty and effectiveness in applying the Elections Act transparently and fairly.

The Liberals are concerned about this situation, now known as the “in and out scandal”, the scheme to funnel money in and out of the Conservative Party to local associations. We have been concerned since August, when we first had public knowledge that an investigation was taking place. After that investigation started, the Conservative Party decided to apply for judicial review in the Federal Court. As I said earlier, we are concerned because the Conservative Party, the party in government, has refused to allow the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, a very important committee of this House, to investigate this matter.

As the Bloc’s chief whip said, with the support of the NDP and the Bloc, we decided to put forward a motion at committee in September. That motion, which was moved by my colleague from Kitchener Centre, would have made it possible for the committee and Canadians to hear witnesses, including witnesses from Elections Canada. We could have understood why the people in charge at Elections Canada had decided to investigate, had decided to take a close look at a situation as problematic as this in and out scheme. We could also have heard the Conservative candidates who got in touch with us to tell us they were uneasy about what had happened, they did not support a decision made by Conservative Party headquarters. At that point, those candidates asked to be able to come and give a public account, under oath, of how they saw the facts and how they interpreted what had gone on.

Unfortunately, as my colleague said before me, the government decided to paralyze the committee, to prevent it from hearing those witnesses. They engaged in filibusters, which were frankly embarrassing at some points. The Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons talked about all sorts of situations that had absolutely nothing to do with the motion before the committee. There was a bizarre situation: the chair of the committee would suddenly adjourn the committing meeting and leave.

• (1115)

He did not even allow the committee to get to the bottom of the systematic obstruction and thus demonstrated how panicked the government actually was at the idea of an attempt to bring a situation as problematic as this into the open.

[*English*]

In a progressive, modern democracy like Canada, Elections Canada, or the independent agency that supervises the electoral process, has an absolutely fundamental role to play. If we are going to have a democracy where the votes of Canadians are counted in an appropriate, fair and equal way, then surely a set of rules governing that process, including limits on spending during an electoral period, are fundamental to ensuring that the process is fair and that there is a level playing field in a period of time as important as a writ period during an election.

From our perspective, Elections Canada has done an appropriate job in every general election in Canada in ensuring that the process is fair and transparent and respects the rights of all candidates and all parties equally. This is something that the current Prime Minister has never believed in.

Business of Supply

When the Prime Minister was head of the National Citizens Coalition he even brought to the Supreme Court of Canada a case challenging the rights of third parties to advertise in an unlimited way during an electoral period. In other words, certain voices during a campaign period could be heard because they had the funds to make their voices heard and they could, in fact, seek to override or silence other voices, like those of candidates who fill out the forms and follow the process to put themselves on a ballot to represent their citizens like all of us who have had the privilege of being elected to this House have the responsibility to do.

If we start from a premise that spending limits really have no place in an electoral process, then one should not be surprised when one ends up as the leader of a national party in a tightly fought election that one's party seeks to find every way to get around spending limit legislation and maximize whatever loopholes or spending patterns it can in order to ensure that at the end of the day if it takes \$1,300,000 more than they would be allowed from national advertising limits to win in certain races around the country, then a scheme is designed that Elections Canada believes may not have complied with the law.

Let us look at what the precise allegations are.

Elections Canada has essentially identified two problems. One relates to a national spending limit of \$18 million that every national party is subject to in an election. Elections Canada has reason to believe that the Conservative Party may have exceeded this national spending limit in terms of advertising nationally during an election period by over \$1 million. The issue is whether the party respected the national spending cap. Obviously, Elections Canada, in its investigation, has serious concerns that it may have gone over the national limit and by a large amount of money.

The second issue is the one of refunds. Canadians should understand that in a local campaign, when an election return is filed, eligible local campaign expenses are subject to a 60% refund from Elections Canada if a certain percentage of the vote is obtained in that constituency. That is taxpayer money.

The Conservatives claimed almost \$1 million of taxpayer money that Elections Canada says that they are not entitled to. They have offered a series of very weak defences. They say that all parties do this. As was pointed out earlier this morning, that simply is not true. Elections Canada is investigating one party, has found that one party has systematically evaded the spending limits and claimed refunds to which it was not entitled, and that is why the Conservative Party is currently under investigation.

The Conservatives also confuse their own judicial review application with the quasi criminal investigation conducted by the Commissioner of Elections. The Commissioner of Elections is not even a party to their civil action for judicial review and yet somehow they pretend that the investigation is related.

We think this is a serious matter. We think the government has a responsibility to answer questions in this House, which it has not done. We intend to support the motion tonight.

• (1120)

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, although I do not agree

with the hon. member's comments, he is respectful in his presentation, as I will be in mine.

I want to ask him about the group ad buy, in which he was a member in the 2006 election, where he joined other New Brunswick Liberals in purchasing a centrally organized and centrally transacted advertisement that was set up by the national party. A copy of the cheque provided by Elections Canada from the local official agent for the member for Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe, who also participated in this particular media buy, was made out, not to the newspaper involved, but to the Liberal Party of Canada. All of the content, by the way, was national, except for the local tag lines, and on that tag line appeared his name. His campaign indicated to readers that his campaign had helped pay for the advertisement. However, his returns did not indicate a payment for that advertisement.

I wonder if he can tell us if he was later forced to correct his return to Elections Canada and acknowledge that he was paying into this regional advertisement purchase.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Mr. Speaker, I am happy to explain the difference between what the Conservative Party did in terms of having the national party incur the cost for its ads and trying to pass it off on local campaigns, and what the Liberal Party did in the situation in New Brunswick.

In a province like New Brunswick, there are two newspapers that are distributed throughout the province that cover every riding in the province, a francophone and an anglophone daily newspaper. Two or three weeks before the end of the election, in a conference call with the 10 New Brunswick Liberal candidates, the New Brunswick campaign co-chairs asked if we were interested in participating in a regional media buy on the Saturday before the election.

The parliamentary secretary talks about the Liberal Party of Canada. He forgot the bracket after that which says "New Brunswick", because it was organized by the New Brunswick campaign in Fredericton. He also forgets that is precisely the kind of activity that Elections Canada accepts as being legitimate advertising. We did not have in and out transfers. We had a decision of local campaigns to pay for an ad themselves. It was not imposed upon us and the ad was run in the province in which we were candidates.

In the Conservative example, New Brunswick candidates appeared on ads that were running in Nova Scotia. A lot of people from my riding may go to the casino in Halifax but we would not have thought it was an appropriate expense to run ads in a Halifax publication.

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, under the Canada Elections Act, once a campaign is over, if there is any surplus remaining in the candidate's campaign that, as a separate legal entity, under the law it must be either transferred to one of the party riding associations, to the party or, in lieu of all of that, back to the Chief Electoral Officer.

Business of Supply

However, the existence of a surplus at the end of the campaign does not create an additional rebate. This is an example where we need to look at the difference between cash flow and expense and where it lies. In this case, it would appear that the so-called in and out scheme is a matter in which the differentiation between flow of funds has been mixed up. It is apples and oranges, as the member has explained.

I wonder if the member would care to comment on the issue of cash versus expense and its impact on rebates payable by the taxpayers of Canada?

• (1125)

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Mr. Speaker, as my colleague has pointed out, the Conservatives, in a rather weak attempt to deflect responsibility for this serious situation and put up smokescreens, have used the idea of a transfer at the end of an election.

A colleague of mine from Quebec, at the end of the election, transferred back to her riding association the surplus of money that was left in the official agent's account. That is a legal, appropriate and contemplated in the legislation transfer of money to dispose of a surplus when a campaign account is closed down.

When we close down a campaign account, it is because we have been audited by Elections Canada and have received direction to dispose of the surplus. That is precisely what is missing in the 67 Conservative candidates that were caught in this scheme.

Elections Canada, in its audit, uncovered these in and out transfers and decided that the decision as to advertising was taken in Ottawa.

There was a bizarre situation and an exchange of emails where the national campaign director said that they needed to allocate money to a certain riding in Quebec but that they did not yet have a candidate there, so they would need a name by the end of the day. That does not sound to me like a local campaign that decided to participate in a scheme like that.

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have the opportunity to talk to this motion. I congratulate the member from the Bloc who brought it forward.

What is occurring here is very troubling. It is particularly troubling that we have to take a day in Parliament to discuss this, but in fact I think it is worth the time that it is going to be accorded.

An institution such as Elections Canada has a reputation that is unimpeachable. The question I find myself asking is this: how did we get here? As parliamentarians, how did we get to the point where nothing is sacrosanct, where impugning the reputation of individuals and institutions is now a normal part of daily discourse, particularly for this government? I think a lot of MPs come here thinking they will do a good job and work hard for their constituents, and then they get caught up in stuff like this coming from the Conservative Party and, by extension, the government. It is very unfortunate.

My colleague, the member for Beauséjour, who has been on this issue for a long time, outlined what we are talking about. Very simply, this is a case of the Conservative Party trying to do two things, in my view.

The first is to get around the spending limit of I think \$18.2 million in a national campaign and to do so by taking money, of

which the Conservatives have a lot, and flowing it through constituency associations, in most cases constituency associations that are not going to spend the amount of money they are allowed to. They probably are not competitive in a lot of those constituency associations. They take the money, they pool it to pay for national ads and they send the money back, but the hook is that they are then told they qualify for a rebate. In other words, the taxpayers subsidize this form of creative election financing. It is wrong.

In my riding, the Conservative candidate in the last election was one of the 67 or so candidates who were implicated in this scandal. I do not think he is a bad guy. Robert Campbell had never run before. He is an ex-RCMP officer. I do not agree with him on a lot of things, but I do not doubt that he is an honest and decent person. I do not think it is his fault.

I do not think it is necessarily the fault of the people who were involved in this in neighbouring ridings: Halifax West, which the Conservatives will never take from the member for Halifax West, and Halifax, where the Conservatives are not competitive. These are the ridings in Nova Scotia where they used this ploy.

I do not blame Mr. Campbell, who is a decent person, but I do blame the national Conservative Party of Canada, because it came up with this plan and foisted it upon a lot of unsuspecting candidates across Canada. We know that. We can go back to something that Tom Flanagan, the Prime Minister's guru, suggested in his book:

Even though there is a cap on national campaign spending, it is easy and legal to exceed it by transferring expenditures to local campaigns that are not able to spend up to their own legal limits.

So we have a national Conservative Party with a lot of money and some local associations that do not have money. We tell them that if they are part of this they will get a rebate, so why would they not do it? Even some of the Conservative candidates came out and said after the fact that they did not really know exactly what was going on.

There was Mr. Hudson, a Newfoundland campaign official for the Conservatives, who said, "I have realized that this is a transfer in and back out, same day". That is what he knew about it.

As for other Conservative candidates, there is Mr. McDonald, the official agent for a Conservative candidate in Winnipeg: "Mr. McDonald was not aware of and could not recall receiving any invoice or invoices, from either Retail Media or the Conservative Fund Canada". He did remember "a wash in and out of our account".

For another candidate in Toronto, in Trinity-Spadina, the agent suggested, "There was no discussion pertaining to the advertising or its benefit". He "was simply instructed to post the funds as an advertising expense, and he did so".

It is pretty clear that what we have is the national Conservative Party of Canada, this institution that now forms the backbone of the Government of Canada, putting this system in place across Canada. It got caught, frankly. I commend my colleague from Beauséjour, who raised this probably close to a year ago when it first came out.

Business of Supply

The government laughed it off and asked him what he was talking about. Then we had the fact that Elections Canada said it was pretty serious, and it investigated. What does the government do? It goes after Elections Canada.

If there is a particularly disturbing trend about the Conservative government, it is that it has an enemies list. It does not like people who disagree with it, including members of its own party who do not fall completely into line, such as my colleague from Cumberland—Colchester—Musquodoboit Valley and my colleague from Halton, who were gone.

Also on that list are programs and organizations that do work the government does not like. The court challenges and status of women programs get penalized, as do non-partisan organizations that do not toe the government line and the Wheat Board, our ethics officer, the Nuclear Safety Commission, and now Elections Canada. As well, journalists who do not print what the government likes do not make the A-list for press conferences.

• (1130)

In short, anybody or anything in the way has to go. MPs who disagree are booted. Public servants who do their jobs are fired. Journalists disliked by the Conservatives are shunned. Rules they do not like, such as the Minister of Finance in regard to tendering, are ignored. Parliamentary committees they do not like are shut down.

That is an appalling way to run a country. It is not the way that the people of Canada want to see this country run. When one maligns an organization like Elections Canada, which does the very important work that it does, it is very concerning. It does important work not just for candidates or at election time but throughout the year in making sure we have a system that works for all Canadians. This should be of concern to all of us.

The integrity of elections is the cornerstone of democracy. We can see it around the world right now and in the last year or so in Zimbabwe, and in Kenya, a country that I had a chance to visit a year ago and which was racked by violence, the immediate precipitator being electoral fraud, similar to Zimbabwe.

As Canadians, we look at that and say it is wrong. In fact, Canadians are well known as people who go all over the world to help fledgling democracies conduct elections, elections that have integrity and in which people can believe when they see the results. We do a strong job as Canadians in making sure that the systems we believe in and the systems others want to have for their own countries are allowed to flourish in free and fair elections.

We do not need that here in Canada because we have Elections Canada. There are things that Elections Canada put into law and has suggested as the rules for Canadians to follow in election campaigns. Any one of us may say that we disagree with this or that, but we know that the integrity of Elections Canada is unassailable.

It is our job as politicians, as members of Parliament, as incumbents, and as challengers in the next election, and we respect our challengers, to follow those laws, to make sure that the elections in which Canadians vote do not carry with them any question about integrity. It is assumed and understood that it is always in place.

The government has gone against that. The government has maligned Elections Canada. I believe it has gone around the rules that we have all accepted as the rules for running elections in Canada. The government should be ashamed of that. I support the motion from the Bloc Québécois. I encourage all members of the House to do the same.

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I think the member has raised another dimension of this. Again, it adds another brush stroke to the painting that is being created of the Conservative government and its kind of meanspirited approach to dealing with almost anything, which is to crush dissension.

The motion itself is basically a vote of confidence in Elections Canada and the Chief Electoral Officer. Significantly, the government spoke about all of the errors and problems it has had with Elections Canada but did not express an opinion on whether it is going to support the motion. However, I suspect that it will.

With regard to the debate that seems to have been coming around it, it has to do with what appears to be a scheme. It is pursuant to reviews by Elections Canada of the returns of all candidates from all political parties in the last election. The Conservative Party is the only party that was found by Elections Canada to have allegedly violated the rules of the country with regard to electoral democracy and fairness.

Would the member care to comment on the attitude of the government and the way it is approaching this as opposed to saying that it might have made a mistake? Why does it sue Elections Canada? Is there not a forthright, more acceptable or more appropriate fashion in which to deal with, as it alleges, a dispute with Elections Canada?

• (1135)

Mr. Michael Savage: Mr. Speaker, there certainly is a better way, a more sensible way, a way such that I think Canadians would have said that maybe there is more here than meets the eye. But we did not see that from the government in the way it approached the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission. We did not see it from the government in the way it approached the Wheat Board or the ethics officer or untold other non-partisan, non-political organizations and individuals.

This is simple in its design. There is all this money nationally and a party wants to funnel it to the local associations so they can pool their money to pay for the national ads, to get around the spending limits and also to bulk up the rebates. I think of the old expression “to have your cake and eat it too”. This is a case of the government having its cake, eating it too, getting somebody else to pay for it, and then suing the person who sold them the cake, all in one big package. It is unconscionable.

It is wrong. It is simple in its execution but it is devious in its principle. If the government would take a more reasonable, sensible and Canadian approach to dealing with organizations with which it has issues, Canadians would be a lot more likely to say that maybe they could give the government the benefit of the doubt. That doubt is long gone.

Business of Supply

Mr. Maurice Vellacott (Saskatoon—Wanuskewin, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have some questions for the member opposite with respect to his speech. I will be quoting Robin Sears, the former NDP campaign director. He makes a few comments with reference to the NDP and also with respect to the Liberals. He said:

Various New Democrats' filings reveal that in their more centralist structure, more money flows up than down, but they too mix national and local spending freely....

Many Liberals and New Democrats are horrified by all of this. They know that it could be their turn next.

I think it is important as we look at the matter before us today to be aware that all the parties were involved in similar types of transactions. I think it is quite safe to say that in regard to numerous constituencies across the country, mine included. I have in four elections run national advertisements with the little tag at the bottom. It is not really the right of Elections Canada to decide if I am to use hot air balloons or ads on the back of men's bathroom stalls at the university. That is my choice and it is in terms of the funding of it as well, or if the national party deems to give me money in that respect. I would suggest to the member that this is something that other parties have been involved in. He would want to respond to that.

Mr. Michael Savage: Mr. Speaker, I have some respect for Mr. Sears, Mr. Mulroney's spokesperson, whom my colleague mentions. I think he is right on a lot of issues, but he is not specifically addressing the in and out system. A lot of us do different things that are entirely legal within the purview of Elections Canada. What is being done here is not legal. It has been pointed out by Elections Canada as being specifically not in keeping with the Canada Elections Act. Other things have not been. There are many things that we all do and we make sure they are done with the support of Elections Canada. What the Conservatives did violates the election law and it is wrong.

Mr. Bill Siksay (Burnaby—Douglas, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have this opportunity to participate in the discussion on the Bloc motion, which expresses confidence in Elections Canada and the Commissioner of Canada Elections. It is important that we have an opportunity to debate this, given the current political context in Canada and some of the allegations and concerns raised by the Conservative Party about Elections Canada. We have to state very clearly our support for this important institution.

I want to share my time, Mr. Speaker, with the member for Timmins—James Bay.

Elections Canada is our independent non-partisan agency that manages elections in Canada. As such, it has to be prepared at all times to conduct a federal general election, byelection or referendum and also to administer the political financing provisions of the Canada Elections Act to monitor compliance and enforce electoral legislation. It is also mandated to conduct voter education and information programs and to provide support to the independent boundaries commissions in charge of adjusting boundaries of federal elections following each 10 year census. It also has a mandate to look at voting methods and to test electronic voting processes for future use during elections.

It is a very important mandate and one that all of us appreciate as fundamental to our democracy in Canada. Elections Canada's mission is very basic and stated clearly, "Ensuring that Canadians can exercise their democratic rights to vote and be a candidate". It is

simply and succinctly stated. Any of us who have anything to do with the democratic process in Canada realize how fundamental and important that is to Canada and all Canadians.

Elections Canada hopes it will do this by expressing a number of important values in its day to day activities and decision making. It lists those values to be: a knowledgeable and professional workforce; transparency in everything it does; responsiveness to the needs of Canadians involved in the electoral process; cohesiveness and consistency in administering the Canada Elections Act; continuously earning and maintaining the public's trust; and stewardship and accountability in how it manages its resources. Many of those things are being questioned by the Conservatives. The consistency in administering the Canada Elections Act is being questioned by the Conservatives, as they try to shift responsibility for what they did in the past federal election. They are trying to chip away at Elections Canada's long-standing record of being consistent in how it administers the Canada Elections Act.

The Commissioner of Canada Elections has a particular responsibility. The commissioner is an independent officer whose duty is to ensure that the Canada Elections Act and the Referendum Act are complied with and enforced. The commissioner is actually appointed by the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada. That is another very important officer related to the electoral process in Canada. I am glad the Bloc motion also asks us to express our confidence in the commissioner. I will be pleased to vote in support of the motion both to express confidence in Elections Canada and in the commissioner.

It is sad that we have reached this point where a political party in the House of Commons has felt the need to table this kind of motion. Hopefully all parliamentarians will stand in their places and vote confidence in Elections Canada.

It is sad that the Conservative Party has tried to chip away at the reputation of Elections Canada because of its problems in following Canada's election law. The reality is we have one political party under investigation for its practices during the past campaign, and only one. The Conservatives need to take responsibility for their actions in the last Parliament and do everything they can to see that the issue is solved.

• (1140)

Frankly, I do not have confidence that they have done this, given the fact it was necessary for Elections Canada and the RCMP to conduct a raid on the Conservative Party headquarters. To me this indicates there was not full cooperation in resolving the questions related to the election return of the Conservative Party.

It is sad that many Canadians see again another political scandal, this time involving the Conservative Party, a party that came to power promising to be clean and transparent and to operate a good government in contrast with the mess the Liberal Party had created with the sponsorship scandal. I think many Canadians are very disappointed and have had enough of this kind of political scandal. I think they hope to see another direction taken.

Business of Supply

It is also sad when this kind of scandal detracts from the important issues of the day. It would be great if we could talk about the rising gas prices that affect so many people in so many different ways, or health care and the need for doctors and nurses, or the housing and homelessness crisis, which affects so many Canadians. It is so crucial in our country, yet we do not spend the kind of time or have the same kind of accountability as we do around this political scandal. This is all very unfortunate. I, too, have had enough, like many Canadians.

If one were to ask me if I have confidence in Elections Canada, I most certainly do. Part of that is due to my own experience over many years as both an election organizer and as a candidate. It is partly due to the folks locally who worked for Elections Canada in Burnaby—Douglas over the years, people like James Pavich and Ann Crittenden.

Neither of them currently work for Elections Canada so I feel I can easily sing their praises in this forum and in this debate. In fact, James passed away a few years ago. He was the returning officer in Burnaby—Douglas and Ann was a member of his team, I think his second-in-command. They ran the electoral process in Burnaby—Douglas and did so in an amazing fashion. They were well-organized. They knew the provisions of the Canada Elections Act. They had good relationship with all the political parties and the campaigns in Burnaby—Douglas over many years. There were never questions about the fairness of the elections there. Where there were problems, they were quickly sorted out. Where they had questions of us, we provided the information and found the solutions to those issues.

James Pavich and Ann Crittenden are excellent examples of the kind of people who work for Elections Canada at the local level, in fact who work for Elections Canada, period. They have a great sense of commitment to the democratic process. They want to see an independent and non-partisan approach to our electoral process and they know how to get down and get the details of running a fair election. They know how to get it done and done fairly. They are very important to this process.

Without people like that, our democracy would be sadly lacking. We owe it to all the people who, at the local level, participate with Elections Canada. We know that setting up a one-day operation, in a sense, of the size and scale of our election machine is a very difficult job. To organize the workers for that one day of work, to train them and to see that they are all in place on election day and for the advance polls is a very significant challenge in our ridings, as diverse as they are, covering diverse geographic areas and covering the very different kinds of neighbourhoods we have in the urban areas of Canada as well.

I thank the people who work locally for Elections Canada and who follow in the fine tradition of people like James Pavich and Ann Crittenden.

Elections Canada has an excellent reputation around the world, as well, whether it is organizing elections in democratic development in Afghanistan, or working on the bill of electoral rights for people with disabilities, or participating with other electoral organizations around the world in conferences, in capacity building, or the ACE Electoral Knowledge Network Program of which Elections Canada is part, or

the work that it has done in Iraq to develop the democratic development and the electoral process there.

● (1145)

Elections Canada is recognized around the world for its important commitment, knowledge and expertise. Hopefully later today the House will have an opportunity to stand and vote strong confidence in Elections Canada for all the important work it does both here and around the world.

Ms. Libby Davies (Vancouver East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I endorse the comments that have been made by the member for Burnaby—Douglas about Elections Canada.

I want to raise one issue. Earlier in the House the parliamentary secretary singled out my riding of East Vancouver as though it and other ridings were involved in the same kind of scam and scheme that the Conservative Party tried to pull off. This deserves an answer and a correction of the information, which has been erroneously put out by the Conservatives.

The fact is the Conservative Party was trying to get around the ceiling it had for its national ad buy and it used ridings like East Vancouver, which it had no hope of winning. In some cases it slipped in tens of thousands of dollars in what were supposedly local ads, but were truly national ads. The Conservatives did this by using a very low local ceiling.

In the case of the NDP, its national party bought an ad buy for local candidates, and we participated in that. The riding of the member for Burnaby—Douglas also participated. Because it was organized by the national campaign and was an ad buy, we all paid our share of it. Because it was a local ad, it went under the local ceiling. It was something completely—

An hon. member: It had to be authorized by the official agent too.

● (1150)

Ms. Libby Davies: It was authorized by the official agent. It is very curious and ironic that the Conservatives are now trying to completely confuse the issue by making out that this is something everybody is doing. Having a shared ad and people paying a portion of what their local share is for a local ad under the ceiling is going by the rules. This is why it was done that way.

The Conservatives have been trying to get around their national ceiling. In fact, the NDP, nationally, was way below its ceiling for ads. In fact, it would never even contemplate such a scheme. Ironically, East Vancouver was very close to its ceiling because it had a low voter list. Not many people were on it. Therefore, it had a low election spending limit. It was suggested that somehow the NDP was putting something under its ceiling because it was trying to help the national party. Why would we do it in Vancouver East? It was so close to its ceiling?

This needs to be cleared up. Could the member comment on it? I know his campaign participated in the same local ad that we all did and—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): The hon. member for Burnaby—Douglas.

Business of Supply

Mr. Bill Siksay: Mr. Speaker, the member for Vancouver East raises a very important point. One of the features of our electoral system has been tight restrictions on how much money is spent and how it is spent in election campaigns. Canadians have been justly proud of that kind of electoral practice.

We often look south of the border to the United States and see the billions of dollars that are spent on electoral campaigns. We are thankful we do not have the same kind of situation. We have chosen to limit how much money can be spent during an election campaign. Elections are not for the buying in Canada and there are legitimate expenses related to an electoral campaign, but there have to be limits placed on how much can be spent. Canadians want that to be observed. They do not want to see political parties scheming to find ways around that. It is sad when political parties spend more time scheming to avoid election rules rather than trying to conform to them and practise them appropriately.

I have confidence in the practices in my riding and in the official agent, who is a very experienced person when it comes to following the guidelines of elections both federally and provincially. She has done this for many years. She has a very high ethical standard and she would certainly raise questions if at any time a proposal did seem not to fit with the appropriate understanding of the electoral law in Canada. She would do her utmost to get the proper advice before any expenditure was made.

Lila Wing in Burnaby—Douglas has spent many years trying to understand our electoral law, the obligations of a riding and a campaign and to meet those obligations during an election and the reporting afterward. That kind of standard is important to follow in this kind of process.

[Translation]

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am very proud to be here this morning as the member representing the great region of Timmins—James Bay, and as the NDP critic for democratic reform.

We support the Bloc Québécois' motion. Indeed, the Parliament of Canada must express its confidence in Elections Canada, which is an institution that plays a critical role in Canada's democratic life.

• (1155)

[English]

It is a pretty disturbing situation that this motion even has to come forward. We have seen a disturbing trend over the last number of years where the institution of Parliament and the institution of voting has become more and more ridiculed across this country.

I certainly know, in my riding and anywhere I travel in Canada, of the lack of confidence that people have in politicians and the lack of trustworthiness of politicians. Politician jokes are everywhere. They used to be funny, but there is an element that is not funny anymore, because I think what they are expressing is the average citizen's disgust with the fact that Parliament is being turned into something of a circus and that the real decision making is happening in the backrooms, in the boardrooms and in the war rooms of the political parties.

When we talk about the role of Elections Canada in this country, it is to ensure, number one, that we have a fair and open democratic process and that everyone plays by the rules. There is probably not a single member of Parliament in this House who has not been questioned at least once, twice or three times by Elections Canada because they are very thorough.

When we are running elections in 308-odd ridings across this country, most often with volunteers, mistakes are made. There are many hard-working and honest politicians in this House who do their best with their elections committees to ensure that they play by the rules. Elections Canada will double-check, triple-check, and it will come back to us to make sure that we did follow the rules because following the rules is essential to ensure that we actually have a fair and democratic process, so that elections are not simply bought and people do not simply make up the rules on the fly.

When I first ran for office, my campaign manager gave me one piece of advice. He said, "If you are not sure, do not do it". That is the ethical standard that we as politicians must apply to how we operate our offices, how we operate in dealing with our power as members of Parliament, and how we have to operate our election campaigns. If we are not sure, we should not do it. If it is a grey area, we should leave it alone.

Unfortunately, we have seen, both from the Liberals and from the Conservatives, a general tradition of looking at the rules as though they were corporate tax lawyers looking for loopholes, looking for how to get around the rules, and then coming back and trying to explain it to the Canadian people as though it were a perfectly normal and natural thing that happened.

What has happened in this case with the in and out scandal is not perfectly normal and it is not perfectly natural. The Conservative Party is trying to deflect attention by blaming Elections Canada and referring to the RCMP raid as a publicity stunt. Our nation's police force went and got an injunction because it believed something serious had occurred, a serious breach of public trust. We have heard the Conservatives trying to claim that this is somehow a fight for freedom of expression. They have twisted all the facts to get the attention away, to tell the people back home not to look at the essential issue of what is happening here.

What is happening here is that we had a party that had reached its spending limits and it was trying to find a way to get around those spending limits.

The reason we have election rules in this country is so that parties cannot buy elections. In particular when we have an election that is very close, we have to ensure that people or parties are not able to circumvent the rules to buy the election.

What happened was we had an elaborate scheme that was set up at the party headquarters to find ways to get around this national ceiling, to be able to buy \$1.2 million more in national advertising at a time when a party felt that those ads might actually win it the election, so it had to find places to funnel that money.

Business of Supply

If we look at the list of ridings where money was funnelled to, it really becomes clear that this begins to look very similar to a money laundering scheme, that the money is moved into ridings on the condition that it will be moved right back out and sent back to headquarters, yet it will appear as clean money because it is being charged technically to the riding, even though the riding has no benefit of it.

I am looking at ridings where money was funnelled into, and I notice a number of ridings in northern Ontario where the Conservatives' chances of getting elected are as dismal today as they were in 2006.

● (1200)

My own riding of Timmins—James Bay is the size of Great Britain and only \$25,000 was spent on the entire campaign there. Of that, 40% or \$10,000 of a \$25,000 ceiling was used by the party to buy ads on a national level.

I remember that campaign well. Our Conservative opponents worked very hard to try and get their message out, and yet I do not remember seeing pamphlets in any great number. We did not see any signs for Stephen Harper, and I am speaking of him strictly in the capacity as a candidate not in the capacity as Prime Minister—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): Order. Unfortunately, the hon. member cannot do that. If the member wants to refer to the person whose name was on the signs he can use the riding or the title.

Mr. Charlie Angus: We did not see any of that, Mr. Speaker, and yet the good, hard-working volunteers were struggling. Money was put into the riding but then quickly pulled out. Forty per cent of that riding's budget was used to buy ads elsewhere.

Any average Canadian is going to look at that and wonder what is going on. They are going to ask how a claim can be made that this is a perfectly normal practice? It is not a perfectly normal practice. A perfectly normal practice is when a federal party looks at a riding and considers buying some ads because it feels it might have a chance of winning that riding. Those ads are clearly marked for use in a local campaign. Whether the money is transferred to the local party or whether it is held by the national party is very clear.

What we are dealing with here is something different. We are dealing basically with what amounts to laundering money by sending it to ridings then pulling it back and paying for national advertising. That is the background.

The real issue here is the response when the government party was caught. It tried to hit up taxpayers for rebates that Elections Canada said it was not entitled to receive.

The Conservatives could have looked at this as though they were corporate lawyers and said that because it was a grey area they thought they found a loophole and could get away with it. A Mack truck could be driven through that loophole. The Conservatives were caught. They could have said they learned their lesson.

That was not their response, however. They responded by attacking Elections Canada with a series of insinuations as though Elections Canada was somehow a partisan wing of the Liberal Party, that somehow it was involved in a nefarious attack.

This has really become an open-ended attack on an institution of parliamentary democracy in this country. If the Conservatives are telling citizens at home that they cannot trust the election process in Canada, it is very much a scorched earth policy. That desperate party is trying to mislead the Canadian public about how it circumvented the very clear rules. The Conservatives knew they were circumventing the rules.

Now we are in a situation where the Conservatives have turned their attack on an institution that ensures the validity of elections in Canada. This institution is used internationally. It has set a standard.

The Conservatives have now hunkered down in their war room. A few of their spin doctors are basically trying to run the country. Anyone who asks questions will immediately be attacked. They have launched one lawsuit after another if anyone questions them. Those members have turned the government House committee into a total zoo. I sit on that committee and I find the actions of Conservative members absolutely embarrassing. They have been elected to this place and they are expected to show up and do a job for the people of Canada, and yet they are standing on their heads in an attempt to interfere with that job.

We have seen attempts to stop any investigation time after time. When Elections Canada finally had to bring in the RCMP, the attack was turned on that institution.

We simply cannot have that. We need confidence in our public institutions. We need confidence in parties playing by the rules, whether they like to or not. We as a Parliament are duty bound to declare our recognition of the work Elections Canada does. We are duty bound to say that these partisan attacks simply have to stop.

● (1205)

Mr. Laurie Hawn (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I was listening in the lobby and just got the tail end of my colleague's comments. We all share concerns about fair elections, fair process and equality. The evidence is clear and has not been refuted by Elections Canada that the Conservative Party never refused to provide it with that information.

I wonder if my colleague has taken the time, as I suspect he has, to look at the Elections Act in its great thickness. There are hundreds of contradictions within the act itself, but when we look at the manuals that go with the act that are sent out to returning officers and so on, there are hundreds more contradictions from one to the other.

I am wondering if he has ever tried to get guidance from Elections Canada because we have. It always comes back, "Sorry, we are not here to provide guidance. Get a lawyer and he will give you an opinion". When that happens, a couple of years later it comes back, "Sorry, we now disagree with the opinion you got", and now we are wrong and we are somehow to be punished.

Does the member think that in a case where nothing had been refused Elections Canada, that it is reasonable or fair for them to ask the RCMP, and this was not an RCMP raid, it was an Elections Canada exercise with a standing agreement with the RCMP, to take that drastic action when nothing had been refused, that if it had asked for it, it would have received it?

Business of Supply

Mr. Charlie Angus: Mr. Speaker, I am not really sure whether my hon. colleague from the Conservative Party really recognizes the gravity of the situation.

We are dealing with accusations that the Conservative Party sat down to find a way to circumvent the spending limits. If this party were as open and transparent as it is now claiming to be, post-RCMP raids, we would not have had the monkey show here in Parliament that went on for months. The Conservatives were threatening members of Parliament who asked questions. They were shutting down the committees or they were basically running out the back door rather than address the simple question.

The Conservatives are expecting us to believe that they were forthcoming when they went immediately on the attack against Elections Canada, trying to basically trash reputations of independent representatives in this country.

The question was brought to the attention of the RCMP and a judge issued a warrant. There were certainly serious issues about why the Conservative Party members were emailing their local ridings, who were desperate for any kind of money and being told, "If we are going to send you money, we want to ensure that money is coming back the next day. We want access to your bank account so we can get the money back as quickly as we can".

There are serious questions and I do not know if the member is actually recognizing how much of an impact this has had on public trust. That is why we, as politicians, in representing the hard-working honest politicians in the House in the various parties, have to restore public confidence.

We are not just here on some kind of elaborate shell game. We are not here as a money laundering scheme. We are here to ensure that elections are done in a fair and open manner, and if the Conservative Party had been open from the beginning, it probably would not have been in this trouble in the first place.

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, during elections it is often the practice of parties to run their national ads on some position or statement and say, "This ad is brought to you by your candidate" or "Your candidate in Mississauga South is Mr. John Doe".

That alone is part of national campaign spending and it is not subject to rebate. However, if the money is given to a riding, to a candidate, and the candidate buys that same ad, it is subject to getting a rebate of 60%. It is quite a big difference, but the same outcome.

It appears that simply the mode in which the transaction took place makes all the difference in the world. In the Income Tax Act we have a general anti-avoidance provision. Basically, if it is not specifically covered, if it is clear that it is to get around the rules, it can be dealt with. I wonder if the member would care to comment. It appears that it is not what was done, but how it was done, and the fact that it creates a new liability on behalf of the taxpayers of Canada.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Mr. Speaker, what we need to keep focused on here is that the Conservative Party had reached its national spending limit and it was trying to find a way to exceed that spending limit. It was looking at campaigns where it had very little

chance of winning but had high ceilings. What is really going to be pertinent to this discussion at the end of the day is to find out where that money was spent. If the money that was put into northern Ontario ridings where we saw almost no advertising, if they had to pay for ads in other regions, then clearly the Conservative case is going to be nailed shut in terms of how far it went over the line.

Again, we have to get back to the simple question of public trust. As I said at the beginning of my speech, when I first ran for election, my campaign manager told me that if I was not sure, then do not do it. The Conservative Party was really sure what it was doing. It was looking for a way to get \$1.2 million in national advertising that it was not entitled to and once caught, rather than own up, the Conservatives were defiant and belligerent and they were still trying to ding the taxpayer for almost \$700,000 in rebates to which they were not entitled.

Average Canadians play by the rules, but why is it that people in the Conservative Party of Canada think those rules are there to be broken and twisted around and at the end of the day they should also be entitled to money they are not entitled to?

● (1210)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Paquette (Joliette, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to participate in this debate. First, I want to congratulate the hon. member for Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord on the motion that he tabled in this House and which I had the pleasure of supporting.

I repeat, for the benefit of all those who are watching this debate, that the motion reads as follows:

That the House express its full and complete confidence in Elections Canada and the Commissioner of Canada Elections.

I am convinced that people who are listening to us today wonder why the Bloc Québécois was compelled to table a motion that states the obvious. Normally, no one—and I am referring to all parliamentarians and the whole population—should question in any way our confidence in Elections Canada, which is the watchdog of our democracy in Quebec and in Canada, and in the Commissioner of Canada Elections, who is responsible for conducting the investigations that the Chief Electoral Officer deems necessary.

I must say, for the benefit of those who are watching us, that, regrettably, we reached a point where we had to table this motion in order to determine that, indeed, all parliamentarians in this House still consider Elections Canada to be a reliable, independent and credible organization.

Over the past few weeks—in fact since Elections Canada has been investigating certain practices of the Conservative Party relating to its use of election funds and its election spending claims—the defence used by the Prime Minister and the Conservative government has sought to undermine Elections Canada's credibility.

Business of Supply

The Conservatives would have us believe that Elections Canada, the Chief Electoral Officer and the Commissioner of Canada Elections are ganging up on them for a motive that has never been explained to us, out of vengeance or for partisan considerations. Of course, that is absolutely false. The Conservatives' stubborn attitude toward Elections Canada, which alleges that they violated the Canada Elections Act, makes it necessary to set the record straight and to ask this House, today, to unanimously restate its confidence in this extremely important actor in the democratic process.

It is somewhat ridiculous that the Conservative Party, now accused of a number of practices that are in violation of the law, should play the victim and try to depict the agency responsible for enforcing the Canada Elections Act as the one who is trying to intimidate the Conservative Party and the government that it forms.

Again yesterday, the Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board said in this House that the behaviour of Elections Canada was very strange, and suggested the agency was using a double standard. They implied not only that Elections Canada would apply special rules for the Conservative Party but also that the other parties in this House, the three opposition parties, used the same kind of tactics in the last election, which is false.

I remind the Conservative Party, the Conservative government and the Prime Minister that it is only Conservative candidates who are currently under investigation by Elections Canada. I also remind the Conservative Party, the Conservative government and the Prime Minister that only the offices of the Conservative Party were searched by the RCMP at the request of the Commissioner of Canada Elections.

They should not try to take us for idiots by confusing the issue. It is very clear that this attempt by the Conservatives, the Prime Minister and the Conservative government to confuse the issue by throwing the burden of proof back on to Elections Canada does not fool anyone. Unfortunately, all of that has forced us to introduce this motion today.

What the Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board very clearly insinuated—as did other government representatives, including even the Prime Minister—is that Elections Canada, which is an independent agency, had a political agenda and applied different criteria. They insinuated that this office had not only lost its independent character but also its status as an agency that must apply fair and equitable criteria for all the parties.

● (1215)

Yet it is precisely because Elections Canada wants to ensure that the criteria for enforcing the Act are fair and equitable that there is currently an investigation into the practices of the Conservative Party.

It is important to remember that Elections Canada is an independent, non-partisan agency that reports to Parliament and is responsible for organizing elections and administering the political financing provisions of the Canada Elections Act. It is also the agency that has the important mandate of monitoring political parties' compliance with electoral legislation and enforcing that legislation. The current investigation into the practices of the

Conservative Party is entirely within the mandate of Elections Canada.

If there were searches in the offices of the Conservative Party, it is because the Commissioner of Canada Elections considered that the Conservative Party had not disclosed all the information required, or perhaps was preparing to destroy information or falsify documents. It is completely within the rules of the game to ensure that everyone respects the law and the established rules, especially when the democratic process is involved.

Also, under the Canada Elections Act, the Chief Electoral Officer is appointed by resolution of the House of Commons. That is what section 13 states. Once in office, the incumbent reports directly to Parliament, not to the government, let alone to the Conservative Party, thereby acting at arm's length from the government and the political parties. As I indicated, that provision of the Canada Elections Act ensure that kind of independence.

As hon. members know, the age limit for chief electoral officers is 65, and the officer holds office until retirement or resignation. He or she may only be removed for cause by the Governor General on address of both the House of Commons and the Senate. It is clear from the process that the intention is to preserve this independence.

Now, we have a governing party which, with a series of totally unfounded insinuations, is trying to undermine that independence. For partisan purposes, it is suggesting that the head of Elections Canada and the Commissioner of Canada Elections are somehow determined to go after the Conservative Party.

To ensure independence, the Chief Electoral Officer has to perform the duties of the office on a full-time basis and may not hold any other office or engage in any other employment. What is more worrisome about what has been going on for the past several weeks is that the Prime Minister and the Conservative Party are trying to undermine the credibility of Elections Canada, casting aspersions on its independence and its non-partisan nature. I should remind those listening, however, that the current Chief Electoral Officer was appointed on February 9, 2007, and that the Prime Minister himself made the recommendation. His appointment was later confirmed by Parliament. It is pretty incredible therefore that, from the moment that he started to perform his duties and act in accordance with Elections Canada's mandate, Chief Electoral Officer Mayrand, in whom the Prime Minister had full confidence, suddenly no longer possessed all the qualifications that had led the Prime Minister to appoint him.

There is nothing new about this though. Over the last two years—because we have already endured two long years of this minority Conservative government—we have come to know the Prime Minister pretty well. We have learned that he considers the government his private domain. In a number of issues, we have seen his wish or his desire—because it is not just a wish in his case and more a firm resolve—to exercise total control over all possible aspects of the federal government and attempt in various ways to minimize the counterbalances that our democratic system provides, beginning with the media, the courts, all democratic institutions in Canada and Quebec, and the fact we live under the rule of law.

Business of Supply

The Prime Minister's desire to control everything and minimize the counterbalances could be seen in his relations with the press. We all remember how surprised the journalists were on Parliament Hill to see the Prime Minister trying not only to avoid them but also to ensure that his ministers and MPs were unable to express the views of the government, their department or their voters to the written and electronic press here in Ottawa.

● (1220)

The Prime Minister also wanted to control the process for selecting judges so that they would interpret the laws in the way in which he wanted. This was all very clear. In addition, his first appointment to the Supreme Court of Canada was criticized by many people in Quebec and Canada because the judge was a unilingual anglophone. This would probably be a problem, both for lawyers and the people who appeal to the Supreme Court.

The Prime Minister wanted to interfere, therefore, in the judge selection process. He also tries to control information, as I said, by refusing to meet the members of the parliamentary press gallery and doing everything in his power to ensure it is very difficult to get information under the Access to Information Act and, if it finally does reach the people who inquired, it is only in extremely censored form.

There was a good example this morning in the *Globe and Mail*, according to which the Department of National Defence has produced a little guide—or more thick than little, in all senses of the word—telling military personnel how to make sure that access to information requests are either refused, circumvented or censored. This is all very obvious, therefore, and it is despite the recommendations in the Manley report, which said that the government should be more transparent, in particular, about the Afghanistan mission.

What we have instead is a document telling military personnel—despite themselves, I am sure—how to ensure that information is as difficult as possible to get when it has to be produced at all despite the desires of the Prime Minister and his government.

We also see a Prime Minister who wants to control the parliamentary process by telling the chairs of the committees to sabotage their work. This can be seen currently at the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights, the Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development and the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

We are concerned about that, and the same attitude was displayed about other issues. Take for example the Chalk River reactor. The head of the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission gave her advice, but it was not in line with what the Prime Minister and the government wanted. I do not deny that, at the time, we agreed with the government's proposal to resume production of isotopes for medical uses, but the head of the commission did her job. Parliamentarians could have made a different decision. But her firing by the Minister of Natural Resources was nothing but vengeance.

So, the Conservative government, the Conservative Prime Minister, and the Conservative Party of Canada are launching a systematic attack against Elections Canada. This is part of an overall

strategy. It is extremely important for our democracy that opposition parties shed some light on this for the public.

Let us deal now directly with this matter of the contributions that were allegedly transferred between different levels of the party during the 2005-06 election. Since the election was held in 2006, let us call it the 2006 election. Right from the outset, the Prime Minister and all the Conservatives that were involved in this matter claimed that they had followed the law. But we have already seen that in a couple of instances, the Conservative Party "neglected" to report a number of contributions that were not legal under the electoral rules.

As I recall, in December 2006 they forgot to report the receipt of hundreds of thousands of dollars to the Chief Election Officer. What was involved were the registration fees of the Conservative delegates at the Conservative party convention in May 2005. That is when they started to claim—and the Prime Minister was the first to do so—that there was no problem. Six months later, the Conservative Party had to admit that it had not reported to the Chief Election Officer the receipt of hundreds of thousands of dollars. All in all, the additional amount that had to be reported was \$536,915 in unreported contributions, and other revenues of \$913,710.

● (1225)

These revenues, which amounted to about \$1.45 million, were not declared. As we have all seen, there was nothing novel about the Prime Minister's initial reaction, which was to say that nothing illegal was done regardless of Elections Canada's allegations.

Other members have already pointed this out, but I too must say that the evidence is mounting. Even within the Conservative Party's electoral apparatus, there were serious doubts about the legality of transfers from the national party to certain ridings and back to national headquarters to pay for national advertising. As a result, 60% of the money was reimbursed, which is what happens when candidates in ridings claim reimbursements for elections expenses, as you know.

We have seen at least two emails about this. The first was from a Conservative Party advertising official who expressed serious doubts about the legality of the strategy, of the scheme. The second, which we saw recently, was another email sent to the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, the Prime Minister's political lieutenant for Quebec. In the email, certain details about implementing the strategy and related problems were discussed. For example, some riding associations wanted to participate in transferring money from national party headquarters to the ridings, money that would then be used to pay for the Conservative Party's national advertising, but there was no Conservative candidate. That made things a little tricky. A candidate had to be found quickly in order to carry out the strategy.

We found out today that right here in the Outaouais, two former candidates had received transfers even though there was little chance they would be elected, as they themselves said. For example, Gilles Poirier, who is the head of the accounting department at the Université du Québec en Outaouais and was the Conservative Party candidate in Hull—Aylmer, said that during the 2006 election:

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The person in the Montreal office who was responsible for candidates in the Outaouais called me to announce the good news that the party would be investing money in my campaign—

Three days after the money was deposited in the Hull-Aylmer Conservative riding association account, he learned that the money had to be returned to the Conservative Party and he was told that the party would take care of the advertising. He always thought it was a matter of regional advertising. This is what he said, “I, as a candidate, was lead to believe the money was for regional advertising.”

We know that most of the money transferred by the Outaouais ridings to the national Conservative Party was used to pay for regional ads in the Quebec City area. I do not see how that could have helped Mr. Poirier—although I do not know him personally—who seems to be as surprised as Elections Canada that these transfers were used for national ads during the election campaign.

As I was saying earlier, I do not want to dwell on the investigation that is now in the hands of Elections Canada. Again, I hope that all parliamentarians, all the members of this House, will vote in favour of this motion in order to move on to something else, namely finding out exactly what happened in the Conservative Party during the 2006 election.

We see that the ethic position the Prime Minister was advocating during the election campaign was all for show. Until proven otherwise, the Conservative Party is doing everything in its power to keep the truth under wraps. The truth will come out one day, probably quite quickly, and every day more pieces of the puzzle are falling into place.

If I may, I want to close by saying that this is the same attitude that exists toward the nation of Quebec: the government says it recognizes the nation of Quebec, but in fact, it is not putting its money where its mouth is. This same attitude exists toward the mission in Afghanistan: the government is not being transparent. This same attitude exists toward the environment. This same attitude exists toward the death penalty. This same attitude exists toward abortion. It is the same attitude everywhere. This government is trying to hide its real agenda. Fortunately, the government's true colours are revealed in its way of doing things. Voters, in Quebec in any case, will remember this come election time.

• (1230)

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have a couple of questions for my colleague. First of all, I thank him for his speech. This a matter of law and ethics. My questions will be very clear and simple. I will talk about the 2005-06 election, which was focused on ethics and scandals.

The current situation affects Conservative members in particular. This comes after years of Liberal scandals and harsh words directed at the Liberal government. After the Gomery inquiry and everything that happened with Mr. Chrétien, it is hard to believe that the Conservatives are now using the same ethics regarding law, money and public trust that the Liberals were using back then. It is the same with environmental issues. The government says one thing and does another.

I believe it is also a matter of law. How can the government say it abides by the legislation without respecting its spirit? The spirit of

the current Elections Act is to make sure that everybody is treated fairly and equitably. However, at the same time, the Conservative Party believes that it is acceptable to spend more than one million dollars over the legal limit. What does the member think about the ethical value of the Conservatives' actions and their respect of the spirit of the legislation?

Mr. Pierre Paquette: Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for his question. I think it is very insightful.

It is even more paradoxical that these schemes are clearly intended to exceed the election spending limits provided for in the legislation. We are talking about over \$1 million dollars, an amount which is quite significant in an election campaign. For instance, some regions where the Conservatives could foresee some gains must have received a good share of this windfall at the end of the campaign. It is quite a paradox to realize that this took place when the Conservative Party and the Prime Minister were campaigning on transparency and accountability and some toughening of ethics rules that had been—and this has to be recognized—quite undermined by the previous Liberal government.

If people want to clean things up, they have to be irreproachable. In that sense, not only have they violated the intent of the law, but they also violated the law itself. Even if they had violated only the spirit of the law, that was already a misstep because, during the election campaign they wanted Canadians and Quebecers to believe that, finally, with the Conservatives in power in Ottawa, there would be real ethics, responsibility and transparency. However, it was false pretence and, in that sense, Canadians were misled in this general election. The acts that are presently being investigated by Elections Canada are the best proof of that.

[English]

Mr. Laurie Hawn (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my colleagues talked about the letter of the law. It is pretty difficult to decipher the letter of the law when we read the Elections Act or any of the guidance that comes out from there.

He talked about the convention fees. Again, we were following the letter of the law. Elections Canada decided, after the fact, to change that, which resulted in the taxpayers paying for our convention. We did not want them to do that. The Liberals apparently wanted them to pay for their convention which they subsequently did.

I have a question for the member. Why is it not okay for Conservative Party candidates to challenge decisions and rulings by Elections Canada but it is okay for others to do that? Given the lack of clear guidance in the Elections Act and the manuals, it was okay for the hon. member for Toronto Centre to challenge Elections Canada on a funding ruling and he won. Why is there a double standard? Why is it okay for others to challenge Elections Canada and not this party?

• (1235)

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paquette: Mr. Speaker, there is a very big difference between individual and isolated cases and the one we are dealing with here.

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Yes, a candidate for a party can, for example, forget to include the official agent authorization at the end of a brochure or flyer. There are isolated cases.

Here it is a matter of some 60 cases in which the scheme we are now aware of appears to have been used. Even people who worked on the Conservative campaign had concerns right at the time of the election.

If one, two, even five Conservative Party candidates had been investigated by Elections Canada, or had had a dispute with Elections Canada, the hon. member's question would make some sense. But now it is a matter of 60 or so candidates all being investigated for precisely the same thing. There are emails to prove that the entire Conservative Party machinery was aware of the scheme, and that even some employees of some Conservative Party ad agencies had doubts about the legality of what was being done. For example, a woman working for Retail Media had concerns as early as December 6, 2005, about what she saw happening daily.

The case we are dealing with here is not at all the same. This is a scam, rather like the one that came out in the sponsorship scandal. It is not the same, because it looks very much like something that was cooked up in order to get around the Canada Elections Act. In a democracy, this is an extremely serious matter, particularly coming from a party that won the election that followed these irregular expenses.

[English]

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in this week's *Hill Times* is a list of the 67 Conservative candidates who participated in this in and out scheme. I do not know the answer but I note that not one of the candidates who participated in the scheme comes from the province of Alberta, though there are participants from all the other nine provinces. It is kind of an interesting observation. I am not exactly sure why but maybe there is a reason.

The fundamental of this is that something has happened that has created a difference. An advertisement could have been purchased directly by the national campaign of any party and that would not qualify for any additional money because parties already get their annual allotments and are subject to a limit of \$18.3 million for national advertising.

By virtue of the fact that the Conservatives transferred cash in and out, which amounted to \$1,375,000, that created the big rebate difference. The rebates for those candidates were increased by \$770,000.

The bottom line is that there are two issues. The first is that there was \$1.3 million of overspending in the limit on the national campaign advertising, which is a fairness issue, a democracy issue.

The second has to do with the rebates and the fact that Canadians had to pay an additional \$770,000 just because the Conservatives used a particular scheme to get around the rules of the Elections Act.

Since the government has explained, according to it, that there is nothing here that is illegal and that everybody does it, why is it that the government has been filibustering the procedure and House affairs committee and refusing to allow it to get these facts on the table? What is it hiding?

• (1240)

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paquette: Mr. Speaker, that is a very relevant question. If the government, the Conservative Party and the Prime Minister have nothing to hide, why did the RCMP need to search their offices so that the Commissioner of Canada Elections could carry out his inquiry? If they have nothing to hide, why would they prevent the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights from examining and getting to the bottom of this issue?

The government's attitude leads us to believe that we do not know the whole truth. As I was saying, the pieces of the puzzle will fall into place, and the credibility of the Prime Minister and the Conservative Party, which has already taken quite a hit after only two years in power, could disappear entirely. If they are sincere, which I seriously doubt, they should tell the truth, give all the information to Elections Canada and demonstrate transparency. Then we would be able to see what this is all about.

Until proven otherwise, Elections Canada alleges that there were irregularities. I certainly have more trust in Elections Canada than in the Prime Minister of Canada.

[English]

Mr. Rob Anders (Calgary West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to provide all hon. members with a clear, open and, most important, complete account of the facts surrounding the Elections Canada affair.

I say complete for a reason, for if we view the Elections Canada affair through the lens of that agency versus the Conservative Party alone, then we are taking a much too narrow view of the facts. What I want to lay out on the public record today is that the other parties in the House availed themselves of the exact same methods identified in this dispute and yet Elections Canada chose to scrutinize only Conservative Party candidates in this regard.

I am sure the irony cannot be lost on the members of the House, even as they piously call for truth in answers, that certain opposition members spent their week away from the House presenting Canadians with a storyline that was not in concert with the truth.

There are a lot of questions to be answered for sure but what the opposition parties, like Elections Canada, cannot get away from is that they will be the ones who will be expected to come clean with many of the answers, the most important of which is why they condemn practices that they themselves use.

Before I get into the meat of this issue, I would like to briefly talk about something known as national content as it relates to political advertising.

Here in the House of Commons we are in the business of governance. We are elected by the people of Canada and working for the people of Canada. That is what we do and, whether one is a part of the government or a member of the opposition, it should be the goal of all members in the House.

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We all have slightly different approaches as to how this work for the people should be carried out. Some of us believe that Canadians want a government that puts faith in individual families and small businesses. Some in the House instead believe the only good answers can come from the government itself. Some parties in the House are old school centralists, some parties in the House were elected on a separatist platform and some in the House were elected on the sentiment that the centralist versus the separatist debate was accomplishing nothing for Quebec or anyone else. Therefore, we have offered Canadians a different say.

In short, we have a diversity of political opinion in the House, one that reflects the diversity of opinion that makes our country great.

All of us here were elected by our constituents. Some of us are more seasoned, while others have only been elected for less than a month. Regardless of length of service, though, surely all of us remember going door to door in our ridings, and for some us the doors were a little further apart than others, and speaking to our potential constituents about what we were going to do to help the people of our ridings and just as important, about what the party we represented was going to do for Canada.

In short, while local candidates campaign on local issues, they also, to a large degree, rely on national issues of the party they represent. Balancing local, regional and national issues is a healthy part of our democracy. We are all responsible to our constituents but we are also all part of a national team: one party, one leader, one national message. That is the way it works.

That is the way it is supposed to work. Local candidates are going to talk about national issues, which is why they are federal candidates, which is how Canadians know who we are, what we stand for and what we are going to do for them. That is what is known as national content. Whether it is buttons, T-shirts, banners, flyers, pamphlets, TV commercials or radio ads, local federal candidates will work closely with the national campaign on their local campaigns. Every party does this and every party is right to do this.

The fundamental inviolable rule, however, is that local campaigns take full responsibility for local expenses, while the national campaign takes full responsibility for national expenses. On this count, the Conservative Party and our local campaigns are in full compliance with the Canada Elections Act. To say otherwise is false and a gross distortion of the facts.

That is why in May 2007 the Conservative Party took Elections Canada to court. The court case specifically related to Elections Canada's refusal to recognize the expenses claimed by some Conservative candidates for the 2006 election because of some new and novel definition of what it called national content. Elections Canada apparently wanted to send a message that this kind of collaboration was wrong.

• (1245)

This is very thin ice for Elections Canada. It is moving away from serving as an impartial arbiter of the rules toward a highly interventionist approach that actually passes judgment on the content of different campaigns. That has never been the role of the agency and it should concern us all.

Let us look at another way that the national campaign helps local candidates. I am talking about the transfer of money to support local campaigns in order to carry out election related activities. Again, every party does this and every party is right to do this. However, curiously, in this case, it was only the Conservative Party that was singled out by Elections Canada. We were singled out for following, not only the long established rules of elections practice, but also the widely used practice of other major political parties.

I will share some examples with members of this House. Let us take, for example, part of the NDP campaign in British Columbia in 2006 election. According to documentation obtained through Elections Canada, NDP candidates for Saanich—Gulf Islands, Nanaimo—Cowichan, and Victoria all participated in a cooperative media buy with the national party organizers. These NDP cooperative media buys bore a striking resemblance to the matter that is behind the motion we debate today.

We should consider that they involve a number of local campaigns banding together to purchase advertising for their area. The NDP headquarters organized the buy. The invoices were processed by the NDP headquarters. No transactions occurred directly between the local campaigns and the media outlets. The cost of the media buys were allocated entirely to the local campaigns and the content of the advertising was based on the national content of the NDP campaign.

A similar occurrence transpired with NDP candidates, several of whom have gone on to become MPs sitting in this House in the greater Vancouver area. We should consider that there were no less than 12 NDP candidates in that region who participated in a local media buy where, again, Elections Canada did not question the validity of their transactions. I do not know whether our friends in the NDP have been visited by Elections Canada with the CBC and Liberal Party cameramen in tow, but given the events of the past week one would wonder why that is not the case.

When the Conservative Party took Elections Canada to court, examples of Liberal Party election practices were also provided. The Liberal Party also made liberal use of regional media buys. Who do we see named among the Liberals who partook in these regional media buys, surprise, surprise? We see none other than the name of the member for Beauséjour. Oddly, he chose not to focus on this during his press conference last week.

Again, according to Elections Canada documentation the member for Beauséjour participated in a local media buy that apparently was arranged by the national party and contained, with the exception of the local candidate's name, entirely national content.

As with the previous NDP examples, this media buy again involved combined local campaigns banding together to buy regional media advertising, arrangements that were made by national party organizers, invoicing processed at the national level and no prior contact between the local campaigns and the media outlets.

However, in the instance of the campaigns of the member for Beauséjour, Elections Canada documentation contained a Liberal Party memo that notes the local campaign was to pay for the advertising. However, as there is no listing of this purchase within the documentation of the member's Elections Canada return, we are left to guess how those ads were paid for and by whom.

I wonder if the hon. member might clarify to this House whether he has had Elections Canada officials, CBC crew members, RCMP officers and other parties' cameramen knock on the doors of his party's office over this practice. Although the member's finances appear to be non-compliant, again, these New Brunswick regional media buys did not appear to merit questions by Elections Canada.

There is a rather vicious irony to this. The member who is being most vocal about the purported abhorrence of this practice has engaged in it himself and with what appears to be less than compliant methods.

Questions have also been raised about the practice of transferring funds from the national party to local campaigns to assist them with electoral related activities.

• (1250)

First, let us put aside the fact that it is perfectly reasonable for local campaigns to be supported by their national headquarters. As I mentioned earlier, we are all working toward a common goal and despite a lot of noise from our friends opposite to suggest otherwise, they not only think but they also act the same way. According to Elections Canada documentation obtained by Conservative Party lawyers, it is very clear that the Liberal, NDP and Bloc all engage in the same practice as the Conservative Party.

For example, the 2006 election documentation shows many examples of Liberal Party headquarters transferring substantial funds but also invoicing similarly substantial funds as well. Documentation shows that the Liberal Party made \$1.7 million in transfers to local candidates in the 2006 election, while invoicing them \$1.3 million as well.

The NDP made \$884,000 in transfers to NDP local candidates, while invoicing them a total of \$545,000 for goods and services provided to them in the election.

The Bloc made \$732,000 in monetary transfers to its local candidates in the 2006 election, while invoicing its local candidates \$820,000 for goods and services rendered.

It is quite clear that all parties in this House engage, most vigorously I would add, in the practice of transferring money back and forth between headquarters and local ridings during elections.

Additionally, in Elections Canada documentation, it is clear that there are numerous examples where transfers from party headquarters to Liberal, NDP and Bloc candidates exactly or closely matched amounts that candidates were invoiced by the national party.

The member for Don Valley West was invoiced \$5,000 by the Liberal Party on June 16, 2004. The Liberal Party also deposited a cheque for \$5,000 to the candidate on July 9. On June 28 the candidate paid the Liberal Party invoice with a cheque of \$5,000.

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Then the candidate cashed the Liberal Party cheque on July 15. That is the same amount. That is Liberal campaign spending in and out.

The member for Vancouver East was invoiced \$7,003.64 by the NDP on January 13, 2006. On January 31, 2006, a cheque from the NDP to the candidate for \$7,003.64 was deposited. On February 1, 2006 a cheque from the candidate to the NDP that pays the invoice for \$7,003.64 was written and cashed on March 1. That is the very same amount. That is NDP campaign spending in and out.

Clearly this is a common practice. Should the courts ever rule that a different interpretation of the law is in order, then all parties will have to change their practices. The courts will make that decision, not the Conservative Party, not the Liberal Party, not the Bloc nor the NDP, and not Elections Canada.

All of these examples I have brought up today are clearly laid out in the affidavit submitted by the Conservative Party to the courts over our legal challenge to Elections Canada. We have been very clear. Not only do we feel that we have followed the rules which are laid out by Elections Canada, but it is also clear that we have adhered to a standard no different from any other party's in this House.

As my hon. colleague stated earlier, all of us here have the honour to be elected to this House by the people of Canada and although we have different ideas about the best way to run the country, one hopes that at the end of the day we all have the same goal, which is to run it well. Each of us sitting here worked hard to win this honour. There was a lot of pounding the pavement, long hours and dedication.

Conservative candidates played by the rules, the same rules followed predominantly by candidates from all parties. Our local candidates talked about local issues and they talked about national issues. We supported our local candidates in their efforts to win office, the same way that the other parties in this House supported their local candidates in an effort to win office.

Those are the facts. Everything else is political posturing.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you, Mr. Speaker, and the hon. members opposite for giving us the opportunity to set the record straight.

• (1255)

Mr. Marcel Proulx (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to make sure that the hon. member understands my questions, so I will ask them in English. I have two questions for my hon. colleague.

The first question is with respect to the money that was transferred. I gave the example a little while ago to his colleague, the Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board, but I think the member chose not to answer my question.

The Conservative candidate in my riding of Hull—Aylmer received roughly \$50,000 from the Conservative Party. The money went in and out. When he submitted his election report, and should that \$50,000 be accepted, he would get roughly 60% back, or \$30,000. Is that \$30,000 transferred to the local association, or does the candidate have to return it to the central party?

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I was listening to the hon. member for Calgary West and I heard him say that this was perfectly legal, totally legal, nothing but legal. I am looking at his 2006 financial report, the campaign return. He was allowed \$87,014.95 in election expenses and he only submitted a claim of \$47,434.67. Roughly there is room for another \$40,000. If this was so legal, why is it that he did not accept from the central Conservative Party that it transfer and remove \$40,000 so that he would have been within his limit of \$87,000 and he would have made 60% of the extra \$40,000? Why is it that he did not get that extra money from his party?

Mr. Rob Anders: Mr. Speaker, I want to point out once again what I consider to be the hypocrisy in this, because the other parties engage in exactly the same practice and it is a long-standing practice.

In my particular riding we are very fortunate that it is a wealthy riding and we have been around as a long-established Conservative Party. I do not believe the seat has been represented by a Liberal, NDP or Bloc member ever in the history of this country going all the way back to R.B. Bennett. As a result, my constituency does not feel as though it has to transfer money during the midst of a campaign. We can run a campaign on less than \$50,000, and God bless the constituents of Calgary West, they will elect a Conservative, and they probably would elect a Conservative for less money.

That being said, any money that is transferred or that we give away can be done before the election campaign. It does not need to be done during the midst of the campaign like it is for other parties and other candidates and other circumstances. My riding of Calgary West does have more than \$50,000 to spend on a campaign, but we are confident that people will re-elect a Conservative in my riding, so these transactions take place before the election occurs, not during the writ.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, just to underscore what my hon. colleague from Calgary West was saying in response to the member for Hull—Aylmer, the Conservative Party has transferred money into ridings or regions in which we needed to get additional political support. Clearly, Calgary West is not an area where we really need to pump up our support, since Conservative members have been elected there for many, many years. That is why, if we take a look at all of the areas in which money was transferred, it was to areas and regions in which we had an opportunity to elect more Conservative members. That is why we absolutely, within the rules, did the same thing as the other parties and transferred money into those areas.

It has been stated by the former commissioner of Elections Canada, Jean-Pierre Kingsley, that the determining factor between what constitutes a national ad and a local ad is the tag line. I can verify that quite clearly because in a previous life I ran a provincial party and I was also involved in revamping the provincial electoral laws. When we did a revision of the Saskatchewan election laws, we mirrored almost identically the laws that controlled federal election practices.

When it came to determination of local versus provincial ads, we had the same situation. As a matter of fact, before any election, I always got written clearance from the provincial electoral officer as to if we group bought and put a number of ads together, provincial in

scope, purchased by local candidates, as long as they had their tag lines on the bottom, would that constitute a local ad and would that be eligible for local reimbursements. The answer that always came back was “yes”. That was identical to the provisions contained in the federal Elections Act.

I simply ask my hon. colleague from Calgary West, is it his interpretation, as it is mine, that if all candidates who participated in giving out a national advertising message had local tag lines on the bottom of their ads, that would comply with federal election laws and would be considered a local ad?

• (1300)

Mr. Rob Anders: Mr. Speaker, it makes perfect sense that if there is a local tag line, it is a local ad, and I am going to get into why.

When designing a TV ad, the question can be raised as to where it was edited. The question can be raised as to where the concepts or the storyboards were done and who did them, et cetera. We could split, slice and dice that so many different ways.

Ultimately what Elections Canada has previously decided is that the tag line is the determiner, and that is indeed what has been accepted as the going practice. I think that is the way we have to look at it, because I know there are federal parties in this place that have had their campaign ads even done outside this country, foreign-made campaign ads, your own party included, Mr. Speaker, and because they have local tags, they are considered local ads.

Opposition members can try to split hairs on this matter, but if there is a local tag line to the ad, it is considered a local ad, and I leave it at that.

Mr. Marcel Proulx (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, speaking of tag lines and local campaigns, would the hon. member explain to me how it could be that the Conservative candidate in the riding of Hull—Aylmer, right across the river from here in western Quebec, would have been advertising on local television in Quebec City?

Mr. Rob Anders: Mr. Speaker, just to give an example within the Liberal Party, since I think it is wise to shed light on that side of the House as well—

• (1305)

Mr. Marcel Proulx: Just answer the question.

Mr. Rob Anders: Mr. Speaker, I am answering the question and to that point, I know there is money from the federal Liberal Party, probably from members who are criticizing me today even, that goes to support Liberal candidates in southern Alberta, because God bless southern Alberta, but people there would not elect a Liberal I do not know when. As a result, the federal Liberal Party is so desperate to get candidates in southern Alberta and so desperate to help them out that it sends money and resources to Liberal campaigns in southern Alberta.

All parties in this place take areas of strength and fundraising capability to support areas where they are weaker. The Liberal Party has been weak in Alberta for a very, very long time and will continue to be so. It takes money from places like Quebec or Ontario to try to subsidize campaigns in southern Alberta.

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The same is true with regard to the Conservative Party helping out candidates in places that are not as fortunate as in southern Alberta. [Translation]

Mr. Paul Crête (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the member for Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel.

I have been a member of this House for 15 years and I really never thought that I would have to speak to a motion such as this. But today, it is absolutely necessary to do so.

The text of the motion reads:

That the House express its full and complete confidence in Elections Canada and the Commissioner of Canada Elections.

Why have we reached the point where it is necessary for the Bloc Québécois to table this motion? It is because of the Conservatives' behaviour during the election, which I will discuss later in my remarks. The behaviour of the Conservatives, in accusing Elections Canada of taking partisan positions, was completely unacceptable.

As for the Elections Canada appointment process, the chief executive officer and chief commissioner of Elections Canada is chosen with the support of the House of Commons. In our democratic system, it is very important that institutions like this are not exposed to comments such as we have heard from the Conservatives—and even from the Prime Minister in the past—comments that question an institution that is fundamental to our system of democracy, an institution that is in place to oversee the organization of elections and to apply the Elections Act. In the case at hand, this institution noticed that a number of Conservative candidates used an unacceptable procedure of claiming reimbursement for their expenses.

It also noticed—and this is why additional evidence was needed and why the police raided the Conservative offices—that it seems to have been an organized procedure. This is all going to be checked and confirmed. The raid produced a number of results. We will see how all these questions are answered. I am inclined to say that, if the Conservative Party is not satisfied with the Elections Canada decision, it can challenge it in court, as it has done. We will see for sure who is right.

But it is totally unacceptable for the Conservative Party, which forms the Government of Canada, to impugn the integrity of an institution like Elections Canada and the Commissioner of Canada Elections. I think that the Conservative government has to take responsibility for what it has done and is continuing to do today. When we look at the facts, the Conservative position does not hold up for long.

Because the Conservative Party had reached the spending limit for the 2006 election, party officials allegedly transferred party funds and invoices to candidates in order to get around the spending limits. This initial move by the Conservatives is unacceptable. In return, the Conservative candidates who agreed to play a part in this scheme became eligible for a rebate from Elections Canada. The party funds were spent on national advertising and should have been included in national expenses. In the end, a rebate equivalent to 60% of this amount was requested for each of the ridings concerned. Elections Canada has refused to issue these rebates, because clearly this would

have consequences for the most recent election, since the rules of the game were changed. It would also affect future elections, because if these rebates were granted, they would provide a significant amount of money to plan the next election campaign.

Elections Canada determined that this behaviour was unacceptable, and legal recourse was available to the Conservative Party, which took advantage of that recourse. However, the Conservative Party does not have to impugn the integrity of an organization like Elections Canada. In doing so, it has crossed a line that should not be crossed in a democracy such as ours. The Conservatives' behaviour is strangely reminiscent of stories we read in the papers about countries or states that do not have the democratic foundation or history we have. It is very surprising that the Conservatives are taking this tack. Moreover, the Prime Minister has confirmed this in statements he has made. This is the sort of situation in which we find ourselves.

Despite what happened with regard to registration fees and despite the documents that have been made public to date, the Conservatives are still saying everything was done legally. They are even claiming that Elections Canada is taking revenge on the Conservative Party for its lawsuit against Elections Canada for refusing to refund dozens of candidates' election expenses. This defence does not hold up when we look at the facts.

● (1310)

For example, during the 2005-06 election campaign, high ranking Conservative Party officials, including the Conservative Fund Canada president, developed a national advertising campaign scheme paid for by local candidates when they realized that the party was about to exceed its authorized spending limit. That is what is revealed in the emails that are currently being analyzed. A total of 67 Conservative candidates, some of whom are now ministers, were involved in this circular scheme, the in and out scheme, which Elections Canada has deemed illegal.

I also got the surprise of my life when I read in an article in *Le Devoir* that the Conservative Party wanted to carry out this plan in my riding and that it desperately sought a candidate to do so. That is what the email says: anywhere there was a candidate, it might be difficult to get people to accept it, but at least there would be someone to attribute the expense to.

The emails state that in ridings such as Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, there was still no candidate and that one absolutely had to be found in order to carry out the plan. This is what explains the selection of an individual no one had ever seen in my riding, who did not campaign for a single day and whom everyone described as a phantom candidate. That person did not necessarily participate in the plan, especially since it was in the final days of the campaign. In any case, my riding had been targeted as one place to carry out this plan.

Thus, money was spent in my riding to pay for national advertising, while the Conservative Party knew very well that the candidate there had practically no chance of winning. However, by moving some money around in that way, they were trying to influence the results elsewhere.

Business of Supply

This kind of behaviour is truly unacceptable. The result at the end of the day should be quite clear. I think the legal process that is now underway will show us.

Again, it is very unfortunate that the Conservative Party has questioned the integrity of Elections Canada. Thanks to the changes to the appointment process for returning officers, the mechanisms that have been developed and the strength of democracy in Quebec and Canada, we are often asked to monitor elections in other countries. Our history is an effective guarantee that things have run properly at home. Now there is a major blemish on our record. The party in power in Canada is questioning the integrity of the agency in charge of running elections, Elections Canada, and of the elections commissioner.

We on this side are slowing gleaning information from what the Conservative candidates have reported. Elections Canada noticed some anomalies in the Retail Media invoices that were sent to them. The CEO of that media placement company in Toronto, Marilyn Dixon, thinks the bills were changed or simply created by someone other than an employee of her company. This type of behaviour is quite serious. We absolutely must get to the bottom of this.

Let us not forget that we are just coming out of rather troubling times when it comes to backroom deals, the sponsorship scandal and the totally illegal use of money here to try to influence the perception of Quebecers toward their national future. This was demonstrated and an inquiry was held to look into the matter.

Now we have a new government that claimed to be above that type of behaviour. Perhaps that is why the Conservatives have such an aggressive reaction toward Elections Canada. It is indeed unacceptable to be caught red handed after claiming they would never, ever, behave in such a way. Ultimately we will see how this all plays out.

I will close by saying that much more transparency is needed. The Conservatives have to promise not to resort to such practices during the next election, regardless the result of the current investigation. For now, this is sending a message to Canadians that the party in power is not prepared to respect the rules and decisions of the agency in charge of running elections. That is very unhealthy for democracy.

What is healthy is the power to debate it in this House. I hope that our motion will receive a great deal of support from all members of this House.

• (1315)

Mr. Mario Laframboise (Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise on behalf of the Bloc Québécois to address this motion brought forward by our party. It is worth reading it again:

That the House express its full and complete confidence in Elections Canada and the Commissioner of Canada Elections.

That is very important. Indeed, what has been going on over the past few weeks—namely the charge being made by the Conservative Party against Elections Canada and the Commissioner of Canada Elections—is of great concern for our democracy, this for all sorts of reasons. There are, of course, historical reasons. Canada did not have to fight to protect its democracy. Over the past 50 or 100 years, those countries that had to take up arms to defend their democracy are well

aware of the importance of having an organization that monitors elections and that enjoys the full and complete support of all citizens, and particularly of all the political parties participating in these elections.

In recent weeks, a political party in Canada has decided to challenge the only non-partisan agency responsible for ensuring that democracy is respected in this country. That is a choice that these people made. Personally, I believe this was a deliberate choice. It is always the about power at all costs. The Conservative Party, which saw the possibility of getting a majority looming on the horizon, decided to go all out to achieve its goal, and was even prepared to violate the Elections Act.

We are now well aware of the importance of advertising campaigns. One only has to look at what is going on in the United States. The result is often a reflection of the money invested in those advertising campaigns. The Conservative Party deliberately chose to spend more, because it had the money to do so. I realize that it may have been frustrated. It had a lot of money to spend, but there was an election spending limit. It tried to do everything it could to get a majority. Despite their efforts, the Conservatives form a minority government in this House, and it is a good thing that voters made that choice, and particularly that Quebecers were very vigilant in choosing those who were going to represent them here. Once again, they put their confidence in the Bloc Québécois, which is the only party in this House that can rise day in and day out to protect their interests, without having to manipulate all the laws in an attempt to come to power. That is the reality.

Like you and I, the population must put up with the explanations given by the Conservative Party to try to justify itself and those explanations change everyday. When we look at the sequence of events, we realize that the seizure of documents by the Commissioner of Canada Elections is extremely important because it is bringing this scheme into public view. We saw the emails sent by the organizers. We saw how they operated. I do not want to go through everything that was done, email after email, but we now know that the Conservative organization knew that its spending would exceed the limit and that it was desperate to win a majority at all costs.

I insist on that expression, “a majority at all costs”. In the end, that pits them against the only organization that does not do politics and is there to ensure the proper conduct of elections and respect for all laws, as in a good democracy. We should be giving a good example, as Quebec always has done. Indeed, it was under René Lévesque's direction that the first act to really limit election expenses and regulate political party financing was adopted. It was later used as a model by the Liberal government of Jean Chrétien. Quebec was a pioneer and that explains why you see here, in this Chamber, elected representatives from Quebec who have the utmost respect for institutions like Elections Canada, Élections Québec and the Commissioner of Canada Elections.

Business of Supply

•(1320)

The tragic part in this is that the Conservatives decided to undertake civil action against Elections Canada, knowing very well that the impact of this would be to postpone the matter. It is a well known fact that civil actions drag on. With a good law firm, it is possible to delay the proceedings. One can practically decide when the hearing will take place. Quite simply, the Conservatives wanted to gain time until the next election. The election is still weeks or months away, but we all know it has to be held by 2009 at the latest.

Again, it will be possible to delay the proceedings until after the next election. The Conservatives hope to have a majority government then, but it will not happen because they do not respect the institutions Canadians chose to put in place. No member in this House can claim to be the great defender of Elections Canada. We can defend Elections Canada today, but we should do it on behalf of Canadian citizens, because they are the ones who give us the opportunity to sit in this House. This privilege is loaned, and not given to us. Obviously, it is the electorate that decides when it will take it back. The Liberals learnt that the hard way in the last election, and it is likely the Conservatives will undergo the same experience the next time around.

If the Conservatives are thrown out of office, it will be precisely because they did not respect a key institution like Elections Canada. That is why I am so proud today to stand in this House to represent the Quebeckers who elected me in my riding of Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel, and I feel the same pride for all my colleagues who were elected in other areas of Quebec. The Bloc Québécois is standing for and expresses its full and complete confidence in Elections Canada and the Commissioner of Canada Elections. This shows the great spirit of democracy of all Quebeckers.

Achieving sovereignty takes time, but we will achieve it while respecting democracy. We have witnessed, in various inquiries that have taken place into both the sponsorship scandal and Option Canada, the federal way of trying to control democracy and of not being afraid to spend any amount at all, irrespective of the rules. In Quebec, there was disrespect of the legislation on elections and referendums at the time of the last referendum in 1995.

Once again, this is the most difficult part when there are Quebec members in the political party in question. These are true federalists. They do not hesitate to use the funding they need, even if this means going so far as to violate the electoral process. This is a great threat to democracy, and will make our battle one of the most significant in the world, because when Quebec achieves sovereignty, it will have done so while fully respecting democracy, but the same will not be said of our federalist adversaries.

If the Conservatives had even one moment of clear thinking—I am speaking to the Quebec Conservatives, the members elected by the people of Quebec—they would waste no time in voting in favour of the motion by the Bloc Québécois, which reiterates full and complete confidence in Elections Canada and the Commissioner of Canada Elections, because this is the only institution that is not politically involved and has the responsibility of ensuring that democracy is respected. The most important attribute of any self-respecting country seeking international recognition is to ensure that

democracy is respected within its borders, and this the Conservatives are not doing at present.

•(1325)

Mr. Marcel Proulx (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask my honourable colleague from the Bloc Québécois a question. Though he is not a member of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, he has sat on the committee on occasion.

I would like to know what he thinks of the fact that one of the Conservative government members, during what we might call a filibuster, spent time talking to us about his dog. It was when we were discussing how money came in and out and when we at the committee were trying to hold an investigation so that we could question witnesses. During the filibuster, the Conservative member in question talked to us about his dog, and I would like to know what my colleague, seasoned parliamentarian that he is, thinks of that attitude.

Mr. Mario Laframboise: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for Hull—Aylmer for his question.

First of all, I have never seen that member's dog. However, his behaviour is typical of the Conservative Party. And I stand by that. This scheme was used by the Conservatives and the evidence of this is being uncovered by the RCMP. We saw that when documents were seized, and now emails are being made public. The Conservatives knew from the start that they had enough money to win a media campaign. The only problem was that there was a spending limit they could not exceed. When they felt that a majority government was within their grasp, they were willing to do anything to achieve their goal, including finding ways to get around our elections laws.

When a government that had everything planned quickly decides to launch a civil suit against Elections Canada because it wants to buy time, it means that it will stop at nothing. And when a committee of the House of Commons wants to look at the issue, the Conservatives resort to a filibuster. They will do that as often as they want because their only goal is to buy time until the next election campaign so they do not have to be subjected to the kind of repressive measures that could result from this.

The fate of those members who may have knowingly broken the law is very important, because no one should ignore the law. And when a member of Parliament who signed up as a candidate does not comply with the law, the penalty is the loss of his or her status as member of Parliament. That is the tragedy: 67 candidates should not have ignored the law and, today, they will try hard to win their case, because if found guilty, they would no longer be allowed to sit in this House.

This is the battle that the Conservative Party is waging, but it is a serious blow to democracy. When a party with a lot of money is willing to exceed the spending limits, circumvent the law and then go to court and spend all the money necessary to buy time, it certainly puts a black mark on democracy.

Business of Supply

[English]

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Newton—North Delta, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I will be splitting my time with the hon. member for Vancouver Quadra.

I rise today in shock and disgust over the way the government is attacking Elections Canada, one of the most respected electoral organizations in the world. Elections Canada has become an international leader in conducting fair, open and accountable elections. Whether it is the creation of the national register of electors or its successful introduction of computers into the administration of an election, our elections serve as a model for countries around the world.

Our honoured international reputation began to take shape in the 1980s when our assistant chief electoral officer was invited to observe elections in several Central American countries. By the 1990s, the trend had exploded as Elections Canada was flooded with requests not only to serve as international monitors but also to conduct assessments for fairness and to advise foreign governments. Over the decade, Elections Canada hosted more than 125 foreign delegations and participated in an amazing 300 missions abroad.

If one reads the official mandate of Elections Canada, it states that the organization is an independent body set up by Parliament. This is a fundamental point to note in light of accusations that the Prime Minister and his officials have been making about Elections Canada since the RCMP raided their party headquarters.

The Conservatives have called the raid “a PR stunt and a tactic of intimidation”. The government House leader has said that Elections Canada had no justification or right to begin such an inquiry, which is a comment that questions its very legitimacy. Other government ministers have accused the Chief Electoral Officer of abusing his powers by launching the investigation as a bargaining chip over a civil lawsuit.

The member for Nepean—Carleton has spoken about Elections Canada, inviting the Liberal Party to watch the raid. Internal documents revealed that the Conservative Party had even ordered its MPs and former candidates to deny knowledge of this issue.

The most ludicrous Conservative attack has been the claim that this raid was the result of a 10-year-old vendetta against the Prime Minister for his criticism of Elections Canada when he was with the National Citizens Coalition. This is absolutely ridiculous, as both the Chief Electoral Officer and the Elections Commissioner were appointed during the Conservatives' time in office. This government has stooped to these tactics to take the focus away from their own actions in the 2006 election.

Under the in and out scheme, the Conservative Party shifted money from its national office into 67 local ridings and immediately demanded the money back, allowing the party to disregard election spending limits and to unfairly spend an extra \$1 million on national advertising.

• (1330)

What I find so surprising is how the party leadership completely ignored those local campaigns and candidates, which had a problem with the plot. For example, two ridings initially declined to

participate, citing questions about the legality of the actions. How did the Conservatives respond? As always, they expected complete and utter control.

Mike Donison, the Conservative Party president, during the election campaign wrote in an email to Conservative officials, “Why should they be allowed to just outright refuse?” A better question would be: Why should they not be allowed to refuse? Other local officials knew it was wrong and did the right thing.

Barbro Soderberg, the official agent for Toronto candidate Steven Halicki, said she fought back against party officials, stating, “As a bookkeeper, I know that sometimes you have to use creative accounting between two small companies...but I found this move was being a little too creative”.

Andrew Kumpf, an executive with Retail Media, the company that designed the ads, emailed his concerns to the Conservative Party, writing, “While our thinking is that this option would be legal, we are not certain of this beyond all reasonable doubt”.

Douglas Lowry, the official agent for candidate Sam Goldstein in Trinity—Spadina in Toronto, told Elections Canada investigators that “There was no discussion pertaining to the advertising or its benefit to the Goldstein campaign”. There are many others.

As we can see from these statements, many people told the party that the in and out scheme would break rules and the laws of our country. The simple and sad fact of the matter is the Conservative Party chose not to listen.

The RCMP raids at Conservative headquarters would have never happened if the party fully cooperated with investigators. Instead, the Tories first refused to work with a parliamentary committee trying to investigate the scheme and then they declined to provide documents to Elections Canada.

This controversy is about a government that believes it is above the law and beyond reproach. It also demonstrates how arrogant the Prime Minister has become. He is no longer prepared to listen to his own candidates or local party supporters.

I want to conclude with the words of the Prime Minister during the last campaign. “I pledge to you”, he said, “to introduce the most sweeping reforms in Ottawa's history, to create a future environment where governments will have to be accountable”.

My question for the government is: What happened?

Business of Supply

• (1335)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I listened carefully to the remarks of my hon. colleague from the Liberal Party and I would like to hear him on something that happened in December 2006, when the Conservative Party admitted having omitted to disclose to the Chief Electoral Officer hundreds of thousands of dollars that it had received. We will recall that these were fees charged to Conservative delegates to attend the party's convention in May 2005. The party having been forced to consider registration fees as contributions, the report stated that the Conservative Party then discovered that three delegates, including the Prime Minister himself, had exceeded the \$5,400 yearly limit for contributions to the party and, as a result, the party was forced to return \$456 to the Prime Minister and two other delegates.

Granted, these may seem like insignificant amounts, but something more significant is hidden behind them. The Conservatives who, at first, claimed that they had followed the law were eventually forced to backpedal, hence the similarity with this in and out scheme with respect to election expenses.

Will the member recognize that the Conservative Party would have been expected to act in this instance as it did when it admitted that illegal contributions were received in connection with the party's 2005 convention?

[*English*]

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Mr. Speaker, I cannot agree more with the member. He already has covered it very well. In fact it is the culture of entitlement of the Conservative Party and that is clearly demonstrated.

When we look at the example my hon. colleague gave, the Conservative Party even on that issue always said that it followed the law as interpreted. In 2006, when Elections Canada questioned the party on the procedure to not book its 2005 convention fees as political donations, both the Prime Minister and Michael Donison, who was then the executive director of the party, claimed they had followed the law. Months later they quietly amended their 2005 filing with Elections Canada to include these fees.

What does that tell us? It clearly demonstrates that the Conservative Party is telling Canadians that it has followed all the laws, all the regulations. Similarly it had the same myth a few years back. In fact, it had to backpedal at that time. Now the Conservatives are trying to hide these irregularities in 67 ridings. They would not have formed the government if they had followed the law and had spent the money allowed for the advertising campaign.

I appreciate the input from the hon. member of the Bloc.

• (1340)

Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, 67 ridings is roughly 20% of the ridings in the country. It is a pretty significant number. Has the hon. member, within either his riding or in ridings immediately next to him, any knowledge as to whether any of the candidates who ran against him or ran against other colleagues in his approximate area participated in this scheme?

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Mr. Speaker, in fact, the candidates who ran against me in the ridings surrounding me spent their money to the fullest. At this point in time, I do not have that information, but we never know. With the investigation going on, who knows what could come out in the next few months. What the government wants to do is sweep everything under the rug so it can go to an election before the investigation is complete.

Ms. Joyce Murray (Vancouver Quadra, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to stand and speak in support of the Bloc opposition motion:

That the House express its full and complete confidence in Elections Canada and the Commissioner of Canada Elections.

Noting that six of the British Columbia Conservative MPs participated in this in and out scheme, I wanted to share time with my colleague and speak in support of the motion.

The Conservative Party appears to have devised a systematic scheme to cheat the Elections Canada rules with respect to financing campaigns. Elections Canada caught the Conservative Party red-handed with this and is investigating.

The key that I want to bring to this debate is the lack of accountability by the Conservative Party and government, which I believe is at the heart of its response to the issue of having perhaps been caught cheating.

There appears to not only be a systematic scheme to get around Elections Canada laws, but this ties into what appears to be a systematic scheme to undermine democracy in Canada. One of my colleagues, the member for Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, spoke earlier about a number of officers of Parliament who were fired or forced to resign by the Conservative government when they criticized or did not support the Prime Minister or the Conservative Party in some way or another. That is a very long and now growing list.

I want to point out that the president of the Law Commission of Canada was fired in September 2006. A scientist with the Geological Survey of Canada, Andrew Okulitch, was fired in September 2006 for objecting to an order that he praise Canada's new government in supposedly non-partisan correspondence. Allan Amey, the president of the Canada Emission Reduction Incentives Agency was fired and his agency dismantled. Jack Anawak, the ambassador of Circumpolar Affairs, an important area and issue in Canada, was fired and his position eliminated in September 2006. The ambassador for the Environment was fired in 2006, and I wonder to what she was objecting.

We have a systematic pattern of the Conservative government not wanting people in positions of neutral responsibility and respect to comment on the its activities.

Business of Supply

The ethics commissioner, Bernard Shapiro, resigned after several run-ins with the Prime Minister over the appointment of the trade minister. Jean-Pierre Kingsley, the Chief Electoral Officer, “resigned” in December 2006 after forcing the Conservatives to admit they violated election financing laws. It looks like forced out to many people. John Reid, the Information Commissioner, was forced out in September 2006 after criticizing the Prime Minister. The chairman of the Immigration and Refugee Board “resigned” in March 2007 because of government's attempt to politicize the Immigration Review Board.

The list goes on. The ombudsman for the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Forces was forced out, only two years into a five year appointment, after months of not seeing eye to eye with the government.

We could then go to the muzzling of a respected Environment Canada scientist, Mark Tushingham, who was prohibited by the government in April 2006 from promoting his book on global warming, probably because the government had cut most of the Liberal programs to deal with the challenge of global warming and reduce greenhouse gases.

I am pointing to a systematic scheme to undermine democracy by treating commissioners and other officers of the House and other respected non-partisan members of the fabric and network of democracy in Canada of undermining them and their ability to scrutinize the government and to comment on the activities and actions of the government and the Prime Minister.

• (1345)

The decision to take the Chief Electoral Officer to court when that office discovered a possible systematic scheme of cheating the taxpayers of Canada through this in and out scandal is just one in that lineup of the undermining of our democracy here in Canada. It is certainly not something with which Canadians can be comfortable.

I am looking forward to having Elections Canada shed light on what actually happened and begin to stop this systematic scheme of suppressing, firing and forcing to resign, and specious lawsuits against anyone who has the courage to speak up about the activities of the Prime Minister and the Conservative government.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I listened carefully to the hon. member's remarks and I would like her opinion on the following.

We know that the Conservatives were particularly keen on attacking the Liberal Party of Canada on the sponsorship scandal. The hon. member was not a member of Parliament at the time, but the Conservative Party was strutting around and patting itself on the back for being as pure as the driven snow, and particularly for having a Prime Minister who was the Mr. Clean of transparency.

But when something happens that the Prime Minister does not like, or the Conservative Party does not like, there they are attacking the credibility of others. They do not just attack the credibility of other opposition parties, feeling as they do that they alone have a monopoly on the truth, they tell us that Elections Canada is an imperfect institution. They proclaim themselves to be the champions of transparency, and, whenever they have an opportunity, they tell us

how wonderful they are for having implemented C-2, the Accountability Act.

I would like to hear the hon. member's opinion on why Justice Gomery, two years after having submitted his report, is complaining about the Conservatives' delay in putting his findings into effect.

• (1350)

[*English*]

Ms. Joyce Murray: Mr. Speaker, the member points out the absolute difference between the Conservative Party approach and the Liberals' approach to problems when they were in government.

The government's approach is to obfuscate and attack and, in doing so, to try to fend off legitimate concerns about its activities that are undermining the integrity of government. The previous Liberal government, when the sponsorship issue was brought to the attention of the then prime minister, Paul Martin, immediately took steps to cancel the program, bring in the RCMP, call for an inquiry, and in every way be open and accountable and make sure that those who were responsible for breaking the law were identified and charged.

We have seen that happen. That is leadership. That is the responsible thing to do. Leaders who deny, obfuscate and attack are being irresponsible and are not transparent. The comment made by Justice Gomery that his recommendations are not being fulfilled is absolutely correct. It is just further to that pattern of the lack of transparency and accountability on the part of the Conservative government.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member for Vancouver Quadra is new, but I would remind her that the former prime minister is still the hon. member for LaSalle—Émard and should not be referred to in the way she referred to him until perhaps after the next election. The hon. member for Saskatoon—Wanuskewin.

Mr. Maurice Vellacott (Saskatoon—Wanuskewin, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have a question for the member, who made a statement in her speech to the effect that the former chief electoral officer, Jean-Pierre Kingsley, was fired. I know she is new around this place, although she has been involved in politics elsewhere in the country for a long time. I will read from the *Globe and Mail* of February 2008, which stated that Jean-Pierre Kingsley “denied yesterday that his sudden resignation was sparked by political pressure from the Conservative government”.

I want to give the member an opportunity to withdraw what she just said. She is an hon. member and that would be the honourable thing to do. He went on to say, in referring to the allegation she just made:

There's no basis to that at all. I couldn't understand when that came out at all. There were linkages that were being drawn that escaped me entirely.

Mr. Kingsley revealed that he was leaving his job to take a new post heading a major Washington-based organization, IFES, that helps to organize and monitor elections around the world.

I will give the hon. member an opportunity to be honourable by withdrawing her statement, because clearly from the words of Jean-Pierre Kingsley himself he was not fired by this Conservative government but made a choice to move on to other opportunities.

Statements by Members

Ms. Joyce Murray: Mr. Speaker, I believe my words were that the former chief electoral officer was forced out, resigned under pressure, and if I said “fired”, I will correct that and replace it with the words “forced out”.

[*Translation*]

Ms. France Bonsant (Compton—Stanstead, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I wish to inform you that I will be sharing my time with my colleague, the member for Drummond.

I am pleased to join the debate today to reaffirm the full and complete confidence of the Bloc Québécois and, I hope, of this entire House, in the work of Elections Canada.

We know very well that our democratic system is recognized around the world for its transparency, its fairness and its integrity. This is why teams created by Elections Canada are often invited to supervise voting in other countries, the Ukraine and Haiti being two recent examples.

If Elections Canada’s expertise has become a touchstone internationally it is mainly because voting in Canada is conducted within a very strict legal framework that allows the different parties to compete on an equal basis during an election campaign. Generally speaking, everyone respects the legal framework, which allows us to hold elections that are fair and democratic.

Obviously, it happens that some candidates make mistakes, through error or ignorance of the law. That is why we have Elections Canada; to monitor the parties and candidates, to ensure that no one abuses or infringes the law.

To ensure democratic elections, the people at Elections Canada have to feel that they have the trust of Parliament, of the candidates and the voters. If that trust is broken, the quality of our democratic life is affected.

For several weeks now, the Conservatives, in particular the member for Nepean—Carleton, have implied that Elections Canada is prejudiced against their party. As long as he was fantasizing, the member might also have said that Elections Canada is a nest of Liberals and horrible separatists. Why not go all the way?

Such remarks constitute an attack on the quality of democratic life. They create the impression that the agency has lost its independence. Allow me, Mr. Speaker, to record my disagreement in that respect.

What is happening right now is a beautiful example of the principle, “If you do not like the message, shoot the messenger.” In fact, since the election in the winter of 2005-06, the Conservatives have run out of ways to justify the things they did. The Conservative Party tried to get around the rules. They thought they were above the law and now they are clumsily trying to justify their actions. But there is no doubt in my mind about what happened.

The Commissioner of Canada Elections was doing his job when he refused to reimburse the expenses of 67 Conservative Party candidates, since the expenses were in violation of the Elections Act. Elections Canada maintains that the Conservative Party developed a system to surpass the authorized spending limits for a political party by having some candidates pay for national advertising.

Of the 67 candidates who allegedly helped their party surpass the authorized limit, several are from my region. In my riding of Compton—Stanstead, one of my opponents was caught up in this shady affair.

An hon. member: Say it outside the House.

Ms. France Bonsant: I would be happy to.

My Conservative opponent, Gary Caldwell, said this week that he had trusted party leaders when he agreed to have money deposited in the local organization’s account. Mr. Caldwell told the newspaper *La Tribune* that the money was supposed to be spent on local advertising, but that did not happen. He had the wisdom to return the money when he was informed by Elections Canada that this was illegal, and I can say that outside the House.

In Richmond—Arthabaska, former candidate Jean Landry claimed that he spent \$55,000 on his campaign and that Elections Canada refused to reimburse \$26,000 for a local advertisement that went national.

• (1355)

Mr. Caldwell and Mr. Landry are not the only ones who have come out about what happened in their party, but some do not dare say anything. Some of the candidates who participated in this shady scheme are sitting here today in this House, including the member for Mégantic—L’Érable and members from the Quebec City area. I was amused to learn on the weekend—

• (1400)

The Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. member for Compton—Stanstead but we must proceed to statements by members. The hon. member will have five minutes to finish her speech after question period.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

[*English*]

MEMBER FOR RED DEER

Mr. Bob Mills (Red Deer, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as you know, I have decided not to run in the next election and my replacement, Earl Dreeshen, has been chosen to run for the Conservative Party.

I want to take this opportunity to thank all the constituents of my riding of Red Deer who have, at each election, given me an increased mandate for each of five elections. At close to 80% of the vote, I guess I was afraid to try it one more time.

For the past 15 years, my constituents have treated Nicole and me with unbelievable courtesy and respect and have thanked us profusely for our service. These thanks are what kept both of us going over the years.

I will always remember my first question when I stood as foreign affairs critic for the Reform Party and how André Ouellet was so kind to me.

Statements by Members

I will remember the stained glass windows and the feeling of honour in representing my constituents in this place. [English]

I will remember the Monday to Thursday speech on Kyoto when I tried to tell the Liberal government and Canadians how hard it would be to hit the targets by 2012 and how we needed to start now.

I will remember the scrums, news conferences and interviews with people like Don Newman, Mike Duffy and Julie Van Dusen. Honestly, they treated me fairly. Not many politicians can say that.

I want to thank my staff in Ottawa and in Red Deer, especially Louise, who has been with my for 15 years. I also want to thank my constituents, Albertans and Canadians.

* * *

GRANT PARK HIGH SCHOOL

Hon. Anita Neville (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, on Wednesday, April 2, the students of Grant Park High School in Winnipeg participated in the world's biggest lesson. I was privileged to attend as a witness.

Along with potentially millions of students around the world, 400 young people at Grant Park attempted to set a Guinness record for participating in the world's largest lesson. In the same half hour, these students learned about the necessary components of quality education for children around the world, the need for trained teachers, for adequate resources, enough textbooks and access to schools where they live.

They learned that one in four women world-wide cannot read or write. They also learned that if a girl in Africa completes primary school, her income has the potential of doubling. She also can reduce by half the chances of catching HIV or AIDS. And, they learned much more about the responsibilities of being citizens of the world.

Coupled with the lessons of the classroom, two students, Austin MacKay and Kyle Geronimo, produced a rap video to reinforce the importance of accessible quality education for students world-wide.

We have to give congratulations to Grant Park for a lesson well learned.

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[Translation]

GABRIELLE SAVARD

Mr. Paul Crête (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, BQ): Mr. Speaker, Ms. Gabrielle Savard passed away last fall at the age of 95. She was the very first woman to serve as committee clerk in the House of Commons.

In June 1961, she set a precedent in the House of Commons by becoming the first woman to serve as a committee clerk. Originally from Rivière-du-Loup, Ms. Savard was well versed in parliamentary procedure and fluently bilingual. Ms. Savard was a well-rounded individual and a staunch supporter of women and the French language throughout her career. Her courage and perseverance propelled her to the top of the senior civil service in Ottawa.

Ms. Gabrielle Savard was a pioneer who proved that women can be highly competent in areas formerly reserved for men.

NATIONAL VOLUNTEER WEEK

Mr. Tony Martin (Sault Ste. Marie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, this is National Volunteer Week, a chance to pay tribute to a precious resource in our communities.

Much of what we take for granted is delivered to us by volunteers. They serve on boards and service clubs, help out in schools, churches, health care, arts and culture, and minor sports. The list is endless. Volunteers fundraise, feed and comfort.

Just today, five Canadian Red Cross volunteers from the Sault Ste. Marie and District branch left for Thunder Bay to work in shelters set up for evacuees from Fort Albany.

This weekend, Johnson township will pay tribute to coaches and other volunteers helping in an outstanding recreation program.

This Friday, I will attend a Volunteer Sault Ste. Marie and United Way dinner honouring 337 volunteers, outstanding representatives of many more who give of their time and talents.

Volunteers are the heart and soul of Sault Ste. Marie and Algoma and I want to thank them.

* * *

● (1405)

CHINA

Mr. Deepak Obhrai (Calgary East, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the government has always supported dialogue between China and representatives of the Dalai Lama. We have always encouraged a peaceful resolution of differences; one that protects the rights of the Tibetans.

The recent unrest in Tibet has demonstrated the urgent need for a resolution. This government consistently pressed for dialogue between the Chinese government and the representatives of the Dalai Lama during this crisis.

This government welcomes China's recent decision to meet representatives of the Dalai Lama. We are pleased that it has acknowledged that it is time for dialogue.

As always, Canada is ready to support a meaningful, substantial dialogue. An early, peaceful resolution is in the interests of all.

PUBLIC TRANSIT

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Newton—North Delta, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the government of British Columbia has announced an ambitious plan to double public transit ridership by 2020.

It calls for investments in four rapid transit rail lines, nine new rapid bus lines and upgraded clean buses. In my riding, the old inter-urban rail corridor has been protected for the future.

The transit plan will reduce congestion, decrease greenhouse gases and lower energy use.

The province has committed \$5 billion to the plan and is calling for the federal government to commit only \$3 billion.

I, along with my constituents, Cory Hollick and Divia Madoo, who are here in Ottawa today, urge the federal government to get behind British Columbia so that it can become a world leader in public transit.

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CLEAN ENERGY INITIATIVES

Mr. Ted Menzies (Macleod, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is with great pleasure that I inform members about the clean energy initiatives in my riding of Macleod.

Macleod is among the most forward-thinking ridings in the country when it comes to using renewable energy. Hundreds of wind turbines produce almost 2 million megawatt hours of electricity, enough to power than 100,000 homes each year.

The Waterton hydroelectric plant produces a further 14,000 megawatt hours of electricity every year.

In addition, Okotoks boasts North America's first solar powered community.

By using renewable energies, such as hydroelectricity, wind energy and solar power, my riding is lowering its energy costs and is helping to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in Alberta and across the country.

I would like to congratulate my constituents for embracing these environmental initiatives and I applaud the Conservative government for encouraging the use of clean energy.

* * *

[Translation]

JESSICA BOSSÉ-CHARLAND

Mr. André Bellavance (Richmond—Arthabaska, BQ): Mr. Speaker, it is my pleasure today to introduce Jessica Bossé-Charland, from Warwick, the winner of the second “MP for a day” competition for students of the Cégep de Victoriaville.

In a course entitled “Espace québécois et méthodologie”, participants had to discuss Quebec's territorial and political claims both inside and outside Canada. Jessica's analysis was the best. This non-partisan competition seeks to foster interest in politics and helps to raise awareness among young people about the realities of life as a parliamentarian, to showcase the work politicians do and politics in general, always, of course, with a critical eye.

Statements by Members

I would like to thank Mr. Jean-François Léonard, a political science and geography professor at the Cégep de Victoriaville, with whom I set up the competition. My thanks also go to the Société Saint-Jean-Baptiste du Centre-du-Québec and La Capitale Centre-du-Québec for their contributions to the \$500 scholarship awarded to Jessica, who is a young woman with a promising future.

* * *

[English]

BIOFUELS

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): Mr. Speaker, 200 years ago, people opposed to technological progress were known as Luddites.

Today's Luddites are called the NDP.

In 2004, the NDP claimed it wanted to support “family farms by expanding incentives for ethanol as a transitional fuel”.

In 2006, its party platform even called for Canadian ethanol to make up 10% of vehicle fuel by 2010.

Bill C-33 would create a mandate to kickstart a biofuel economy but what are the NDP members doing? They are voting against what they campaigned on two years ago.

The head of the UN environment program stated, “We have enough food on this planet to feed everyone”.

Canadians see biofuels as an important part of a diversified economy. The Saskatchewan and Manitoba provincial NDP leaders support biofuels, while the federal NDP opposes them.

The NDP has turned its back on farmers and on its own provincial leaders. The NDP refuses to support value added for farm families, stands against progress and cannot even be consistent from one year to the next.

It is no wonder Saskatchewan has turned its back on the NDP.

* * *

● (1410)

NATIONAL VOLUNTEER WEEK

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, this is National Volunteer Week and I would like to recognize and thank all Canadians who take their time to get involved in their communities as volunteers. The theme of this year's volunteer week is “From Compassion to Action”.

The 12 million volunteers in Canada are motivated by their strong desire to help others and to improve their country. Many of the programs and events that we take for granted, like community health care, recreation and sport, arts and cultural events, and yes, even political campaigns, would not be able to function without volunteers.

Statements by Members

During this volunteer week I encourage all Canadians to thank the people who make a difference in their communities and to consider getting involved as a volunteer. There are over 160,000 charities in Canada who could benefit from their compassion and their action.

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[*Translation*]

BLOC QUÉBÉCOIS

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lotbinière—Chutes-de-la-Chaudière, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today I would like to unmask the puppet show featuring the Bloc members so that the stage manager will put an end to his hypocrisy immediately.

The truth is that the players are not happy with how the Bloc leader is treating them, but he can no longer stop them from talking about how badly they are being treated.

Some have said that the Bloc leader bosses his troops around like a drill sergeant, and others have talked about an unhealthy environment where verbal violence reigns and lack of respect is an everyday reality. Some members of the Bloc have even been denied the right to ask questions for five years.

Given what we know about this little shop of horrors, it is clear that the Bloc has a double-standard approach to politics. Before trying to teach others a lesson, the Bloc leader should take a look behind him.

* * *

[*English*]

IMMIGRATION

Ms. Olivia Chow (Trinity—Spadina, NDP): Mr. Speaker, there is a global food crisis. Rice, wheat, gasoline and oil are too expensive for ordinary families, leaving many worried about their future.

Canada used to be a land of hope for those fleeing hunger, oppression and poverty.

In 1847 the Irish potato famine was at its worst. People starved and over a million died, and Canada opened its doors. Toronto welcomed over 40,000 Irish in those years. Many were sick and starving, but they helped build a great city, a great country, as did other waves of immigrants, over the years from every part of the globe, seeking a better life.

Under the proposed new immigration rules, the Irish would not have been welcomed in Canada. Nor would others fleeing famine and despair. The Conservatives would have branded them as losers, not winners.

Today we face the impact of climate change and a severe food crisis. We need to open our doors, not close them. We must not give the minister the key to lock families out. Let us open Canada—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Davenport.

* * *

ISRAEL

Mr. Mario Silva (Davenport, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, May 8 marks Israel's 60th anniversary of independence. Like Canada, Israel is a

nation born of many people and backgrounds. It is bilingual and plays a pre-eminent role in international development.

Despite an ongoing onslaught by Israel's neighbours, Israel not only survived but flourished.

I am proud of Canada's record and of the record of the Liberal Party when it comes to supporting Israel.

Today, as it has in the past, Israel faces a number of threats, from despots and terrorists who aim for its destruction to boycotts that claim to support peace, but instead only encourage further mistrust and misunderstanding.

Israel and Israelis should know that Canadians stand by them through the tough times and during the celebrations.

I ask all members to join me in wishing Israel a happy 60th birthday and hope that the coming years bring the peace that Israelis have prayed for since Israel's birth.

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[*Translation*]

QUEBEC MINING WEEK

Mr. Marc Lemay (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to use Quebec Mining Week as an opportunity to acknowledge the expertise that this industry has developed in my riding. Pardon the pun, but the miners are a gold mine for Abitibi—Témiscamingue and their expertise has acquired world renown.

Traditionally, the regional mining industry has been characterized by underground mining of precious and base metal deposits. Today, the Abitibi—Témiscamingue region has become a leader in technological development in exploration, mining and mine tailings management.

On behalf of my Bloc Québécois colleagues, I am pleased to commend those who are making mining a booming industry.

* * *

● (1415)

[*English*]

THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr. David McGuinty (Ottawa South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, 10 years ago today Canada officially signed the Kyoto protocol, the only international agreement that brings the world together to fight the greatest environmental threat of our generation. It is more than a simple agreement. It is an international effort to save our planet.

[*Translation*]

Unfortunately, here in Canada, we have been going backward for the past two years, two years that we have lost. The climate change crisis is getting worse every year. We must act even more quickly.

The Liberal Party believes what scientists are saying and recognizes that global warming is a reality.

*Oral Questions**[English]*

We are committed to the Kyoto protocol and the international negotiations that are currently taking place to set mandatory limits on emissions for its second phase.

The Liberal Party calls upon the Conservative government to admit that its plan will simply not work, that no one supports it, no one believes it, and to get busy making up for lost and wasted time because that is what Canadians want, that is what Canadians deserve, and that is what the planet needs.

* * *

THE ECONOMY

Mr. Rick Norlock (Northumberland—Quinte West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, more and more Canadians are realizing that the Liberals are just too risky on the economy. While Canadians face increasing gas prices, the Liberal leader is promoting his plan for the economy, a new and massive increase in gasoline taxes.

This new tax, in addition to other Liberal promises, would mean that under a Liberal government the GST could increase to 12%, whereas our government reduced the GST from 7% to 6% to 5%. Only the party opposite would view giving Canadians their hard-earned money back as a bad thing. The Liberals' reckless spending promises would plunge Canada at least \$62.5 billion deeper into debt.

Today taxes are at their lowest level in 50 years, unemployment is at the lowest level in 33 years, and Canada's debt burden is at the lowest level since the 1970s. The Liberal leader and his party would risk all of this success.

Under the leadership of this Prime Minister and Finance Minister, we are balancing the budget, reducing debt and lowering taxes for all Canadians.

ORAL QUESTIONS*[English]***ELECTIONS CANADA**

Mr. Michael Ignatieff (Etobicoke—Lakeshore, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, RCMP officers raided the Conservative Party headquarters. They did not raid our headquarters and they did not raid anybody else's headquarters. They raided one party alone. Why? Because only the Conservative Party broke the spending limits, only the Conservative Party refused to cooperate with Elections Canada.

I ask the Prime Minister this question. Did he authorize this scheme to defraud the Canadian taxpayer, and if he did not, who did?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Conservative Party has followed all the laws. In fact, the Conservative Party has used practices, as has been demonstrated in this House, that have been used for years, allowed by Elections Canada, and used by every single party.

In fact, it is very interesting, some Liberals went to court recently against Elections Canada. They forced Elections Canada to allow the

transfer of hundreds of thousands of dollars to their leadership candidates, of which the deputy leader was a beneficiary.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order. The hon. member for Etobicoke—Lakeshore has the floor.

Mr. Michael Ignatieff (Etobicoke—Lakeshore, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, they did not raid my headquarters nor the headquarters of the member for Toronto Centre.

[Translation]

The election spending limits are in place for a good reason: to create a level playing field for all the parties and make sure elections are fair.

Why does the Prime Minister think he can ignore the rules? Why does he think the Conservative Party can spend a million dollars more than any other party? Does he think he is above the law?

• (1420)

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): On the contrary, Mr. Speaker, we have obeyed the same laws as the other parties and followed the same practices and the same Elections Canada interpretations for a long time. The Liberals are being just a tad hypocritical, because as I said, some Liberals went to court against Elections Canada to receive hundreds of thousands of dollars for their party. That suit benefited the deputy leader of the Liberal Party.

Mr. Michael Ignatieff (Etobicoke—Lakeshore, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, there were no raids on my headquarters, but there were raids on their headquarters.

[English]

When Elections Canada raided Conservative Party headquarters, it did so because 16 out of 18 Conservative Party operatives refused to answer any questions. That is why the raid was necessary in the first place.

Can the Prime Minister explain why his party has obstructed Elections Canada at every turn? Can he explain why his government and his party have so little confidence—

The Speaker: The right hon. Prime Minister.

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Well, Mr. Speaker, if what the hon. member is saying is that it is strange that Elections Canada had one practice for the Conservative Party and one for other parties, we agree.

That is not correct. In fact, the Conservative Party of Canada has never refused any documentation to Elections Canada. In fact, by our own lawsuit we are required to provide that documentation and we believe as a consequence, that raid broke Elections Canada's own rules.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, caught and cornered, the Conservatives are misleading the House to divert attention from the fact that it is the only party that participated in this electoral laundromat.

Oral Questions

The parliamentary secretary attempted to distort a 1997 ruling on blackouts as somehow relevant to this scam. Elections Canada has never told any party to change the content of their ads. It is about fraud, not free speech.

Can the parliamentary secretary confirm his reference yesterday to the Somerville exception had nothing to do with spending limits and nothing to do with expenses?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it had everything to do with both. So does the collective ad buy that the member participated in.

The member for Beauséjour and a group of New Brunswick Liberals joined in a regional media buy in the 2006 election organized by the national party and then paid for by the national party. In fact, the invoice was never even given to the local candidates. It was given to the national party and local candidates then paid to the party.

Interestingly, while it was seen as a local expense in the ad, he did not book it in his election expenses. Can he explain why not?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the government insists on making up facts to mount a defence that does not hold water. The Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board has forgotten that the Federal Court refused to accept the examples he gave concerning other political parties because the Federal Court felt that those examples had nothing to do with the situation in which the Conservative Party now finds itself.

Why is the government making up facts to try to whitewash an untenable situation?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I find it interesting that my hon. colleague did not deny the facts, as I presented them. In fact, there is more. If he has the opportunity to rise again, I think he should admit that in the past three months, he had to modify the documents he sent to Elections Canada and admit that he himself participated in this collective advertising. Why did he change his position?

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, we would have appreciated a reply from the Prime Minister to our questions yesterday, but he preferred to attend a photo shoot. I hope he will give us some answers today.

Ms. Dixon, of Retail Media, an advertising agency the Conservative Party dealt with, has stated that advertising invoices attributed to her company are forged or were falsified.

Is the Prime Minister denying Ms. Dixon's allegations and can he state, from his seat, that these invoices were not forged or falsified?

• (1425)

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that is completely false. The only difference between the party's invoices and those of the advertising agency is the addition of the GST. Once again, it is interesting to note the Bloc Québécois' hypocrisy. During the 2006 elections, the Bloc transferred more than \$700,000 to local candidates and invoiced them for more than \$800,000.

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, everything was done by the book. Elections Canada and—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order, please. We have to be able to hear the hon. member's question.

Mr. Gilles Duceppe: Mr. Speaker, in the kingdom of hypocrisy, the prime minister is king.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Gilles Duceppe: And that of censorship also.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order, please. The hon. member has the floor and we must be able to hear the question.

Mr. Gilles Duceppe: Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister just told us that Ms. Dixon's statements are false and that she is lying. I would like him to say that outside the House.

Will he sue Ms. Dixon for libel, as he did the Leader of the Opposition? If he is not a hypocrite, he will.

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is not necessary to deny it because that is not what she said. The leader of the Bloc should be truthful.

The Bloc definitely transferred funds to its riding associations and candidates. Federal grants are the only source of funds for the Bloc Québécois. But in 2004, the Bloc transferred \$1.5 million to its local candidates and invoiced its candidates over \$900,000.

Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would remind the Prime Minister that only Conservative candidates are being investigated by Elections Canada and only the Conservative Party has been the object of an RCMP search.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Michel Guimond: During the January 2006 general election, the Quebec lieutenant of the Conservative Party was the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities. Was that minister aware of the scheme of his party, the Conservative Party, to spend more than the allowable limit, contrary to the law, as Elections Canada alleges?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in the kingdom of transfers, the leader of the Bloc is truly king. Let me give an example.

The Bloc received a local reimbursement from Elections Canada for a national expenditure. In May of 2004, the Bloc submitted invoices for some \$17,000 to the candidate, and now member, for Québec. A few weeks later, that member sent a cheque to the Bloc in payment of those same invoices. Then the Bloc reimbursed precisely that same amount to the member for Québec. This was an in and out transfer by the Bloc Québécois.

Oral Questions

•(1430)

Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, we understand why the political lieutenant, the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities is not rising. This is confirmation that he was perfectly aware of the scheme being used by the Conservatives. As proof, I refer to an email dated December 19, 2005 explaining the details of this scheme to him.

Is this not additional proof that the scheme was explicitly intended to get around the rules by using Conservative rules and by filing phony invoices in order to claim electoral fund reimbursement from Elections Canada out of the public purse?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in May of 2004, the Bloc Québécois invoiced the candidate, now member, for Abitibi—Témiscamingue for approximately \$30,000. A few months later, the Bloc wrote the member a cheque for approximately \$30,000. And then, guess what, 10 days after that, the member wrote a cheque to the Bloc Québécois for \$30,000.

By so doing, they got back more of the taxpayers' money from Elections Canada. That was in and out Bloc Québécois style.

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GLOBAL ECONOMY

Hon. Jack Layton (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today's families are concerned about the state of the economy. Their jobs are in danger, and they keep having to pay higher and higher prices at the pump. Rising gas prices drive food prices higher, and that is an increase people are currently feeling across America, Asia and Africa, where millions are suffering. The UN has called for very broad public mobilization.

When will the Prime Minister act to curb this rise in energy prices and fight this worldwide crisis?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, rising food prices are a very significant concern all over the world. Canada is among the leading international donors for the UN program in that area.

I know that the minister is currently looking at the various options and I am confident that the government will be announcing the next steps shortly.

[English]

Hon. Jack Layton (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the World Bank says that food prices have gone up by 83% in three years alone, and we are seeing a steady rise in costs here for both fuel and staple foods. Meanwhile, Petro-Canada is racking up a billion dollars more in profit and the best the government can come up with is to cut its taxes.

Meanwhile, gas prices are going up and food prices are going up. The fact is that we cannot trust the government to respond to this crisis. Is the Prime Minister simply going to respond to this crisis the way he has to the loss of jobs, with denial, delay and half measures, or are we going to see real action by Canada on real problems right here at home and around the world?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is obviously absolutely correct to observe that the price of oil and gas is rising, but the best the NDP and all the opposition parties can come up with is to have higher gas taxes.

That is obviously not the right policy. That is why we have reduced the GST and why we are reducing taxes for Canadian households.

* * *

*[Translation]***AUTOMOTIVE INDUSTRY**

Hon. John McCallum (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, yesterday, General Motors announced that it was cutting 900 jobs at its Oshawa plant.

When the Minister of Finance was a provincial politician, he said that we needed a national automotive strategy. That is pretty clear, but now, all he does is blame Ontario. What hypocrisy. How can he face his electors who have just been laid off?

[English]

Hon. Jim Prentice (Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, there is not a single person in this House who is pleased when a Canadian loses a job. That is the situation at GM. Our immediate concern is for the workers who have lost their employment and ensuring that they are properly treated and have other job opportunities.

I can advise the House that I have spoken to the senior executives at General Motors. They advised that the situation at GM relates to changing product preferences. Some 90% of the vehicles produced at this plant are exported to the United States. American consumers are simply not buying pickup trucks and large SUVs in the same quantities.

We will continue to work with the industry and it will be a Canadian success.

•(1435)

Hon. John McCallum (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): So the finance minister has nothing for laid-off workers in his riding, Mr. Speaker, and he cannot even bother to stand up, but when it comes to an illegal contract for his Conservative friend, now under investigation by the ethics commissioner, he gives like Oprah.

As for an uneconomic railway through his riding or money for an agency connected to his wife, what is a few million taxpayers' dollars among friends? Why all this pork for friends and relatives, but nothing at all for laid-off workers?

Hon. Jim Flaherty (Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank members opposite for supporting our budgets, the budgets in which we provided \$1 billion in direct tax relief for the auto sector and a 2% reduction in the GST.

Oral Questions

I can tell members that Canadian auto sales are strong this year, in January, February and March, but they are not in the United States. That is a concern with respect to the production of pickup trucks and exporting them to the United States, as the Minister of Industry has already mentioned. I am sure even the member for Markham—Unionville could follow that.

* * *

ONTARIO ECONOMY

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, just listen to the litany of problems facing Ontario today: in Oshawa, 900 jobs were lost, and in Ottawa, 1,100 jobs—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order. I think the litany is going to come from the member for York West. We do not need to hear it on both sides at the same time.

The hon. member for York West has the floor at the moment. A bit of order, please.

Hon. Judy Sgro: Mr. Speaker, jobs are being lost. At Stream in Belleville, 144 people just received layoff notices, and there are more layoffs in Kapuskasing and North Bay, all of this in only the last week.

Why is the do-nothing finance minister more concerned with finding jobs for his Conservative buddy Hugh MacPhie than he is with saving the jobs of Ontarians?

Hon. Jim Prentice (Minister of Industry, CPC): Frankly, Mr. Speaker, the Liberal rhetoric does not match their record if one looks at the auto industry in particular. In the time in which the Liberal Party was in office, there were plant closures. At the General Motors plant at Sainte-Thérèse, over 1,000 jobs were lost. At the Chrysler Corporation plant in Windsor, over 1,200 jobs were lost. At the Ford plant, the Ontario truck plant in Oakville, over 1,400 jobs were lost.

The former Liberal government never addressed the issues of competitiveness. We are doing that. Whether it is infrastructure, fuel harmonization or safety standards, all of these issues are being dealt with.

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, that was not much of an answer for the workers who were just laid off.

The current Minister of Finance ran huge deficits and pretended to have balanced budgets while closing hospitals, schools and firing water inspectors. With a \$13 billion federal surplus, the minister still cut funding for child care, women's equality, literacy services, the court challenges program and more.

Now that he has pushed the federal government to the edge of a deliberate deficit and has promised to cut more, what is next? Who will be the next victims?

Hon. Jim Flaherty (Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member opposite is wrong in her facts. When I was the minister of finance in Ontario, the budget was balanced, as even the premier admitted, but what was not balanced was the 1990s, when health care, education and social services in the provinces were reduced.

Why? Because of the Liberal government in Ottawa trying to balance the budget on the backs of the weakest people in our society,

on the backs of our hospitals, our nurses, our teachers and our social workers in the province of Ontario and other provinces.

* * *

[*Translation*]

BROADCASTING INDUSTRY

Mrs. Maria Mourani (Ahuntsic, BQ): Mr. Speaker, we now know that Remstar intends to eliminate its news service. However, TQS has a general interest television broadcasting licence, which requires the network to broadcast the news. We also know that Remstar wants to have the licence changed so that it can be exempt from this requirement.

Does the Minister of Canadian Heritage, Status of Women and Official Languages realize that removing news programming from a general interest television broadcaster is a major change?

• (1440)

Hon. Josée Verner (Minister of Canadian Heritage, Status of Women and Official Languages, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would simply like to repeat what I have been saying since last week. Remstar will have to submit its licence to the CRTC. The CRTC will hold hearings and all stakeholders will have an opportunity to express their views.

Mrs. Maria Mourani (Ahuntsic, BQ): Mr. Speaker, this is such an important issue that Quebec's National Assembly has unanimously requested that the federal government take immediate action on this file. The Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, who told the House that the CRTQ issue had been wrapped up, had received a letter dated April 9 from the Government of Quebec calling for negotiations for a broadcasting and telecommunications agreement.

Instead of telling us how sad she is, which is what she has been doing lately, will the Minister of Canadian Heritage, Status of Women and Official Languages accept her responsibilities and tell us if she received the letter and if she will conduct such negotiations with Quebec?

Hon. Josée Verner (Minister of Canadian Heritage, Status of Women and Official Languages, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would just like to clarify that the letter in question arrived by courier early in the evening of April 24.

That being said, the member is asking the minister to intervene in the CRTC process. Allow me to refresh her memory, because the Bloc leader forgot to do so when he authorized the question. In 1994, when a former Liberal minister, Michel Dupuy, tried to intervene with the CRTC, Lucien Bouchard rose and said this: "A minister who fails to respect the autonomy of a judicial or quasi-judicial body must relinquish his post." That is what the member—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert.

*Oral Questions***BILL 101 AND THE CANADA LABOUR CODE**

Mrs. Carole Lavallée (Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert, BQ): Mr. Speaker, yesterday, the Minister of Labour was talking nonsense about the objectives of Bill C-482. Here is how he interpreted those objectives: “—wants the federal government to interfere in a provincial jurisdiction by applying Bill 101 across Canada.” Yet all the Bloc is asking for is an amendment to the Canada Labour Code, which comes under federal jurisdiction, so that Bill 101 applies to all workers in Quebec.

Has the minister at least read this bill, yes or no?

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn (Minister of Labour and Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, once again, we see the impotence of the Bloc Québécois, which sees all sorts of problems where there are none.

I have some new statistics from the Office québécois de la langue française. The Bloc ignored these figures, which are for 2006-07. Of the 3,789 complaints received between April 2006 and March 2007, only one—I repeat, one—comes under federal jurisdiction. I am talking about one complaint in 3,789.

Mrs. Carole Lavallée (Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert, BQ): Mr. Speaker, this stands to reason, because Bill 101 does not apply to federally regulated companies. The minister does not understand. The people who work in federally regulated companies understand that they are not subject to Bill 101, so they file very few complaints. Since 2000, fewer than 150 complaints have been filed, but they have all been rejected, precisely because these companies are not subject to Bill 101.

Now that I have explained that to him and he understands, will the minister—

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Labour.

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn (Minister of Labour and Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am going to quote the statistics again. The Office québécois de la langue française receives language-related complaints, which it categorizes. Some of those complaints pertain to the federal charter. Of the 3,789 complaints the Office québécois de la langue française received about the use of French, only one concerns the federal charter.

* * *

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez (Honoré-Mercier, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, not a single day goes by without hearing of a plant closing and the loss of hundreds of jobs.

What is the Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec doing in the meantime? He is renovating the airport in his riding to accommodate his flying limousine, but he is doing nothing for the airport in Trois-Rivières and nothing for Saint-Hubert.

What did he do for Crocs and AGC in Quebec City? Nothing. What did he do for Golden Brand in Montreal? Nothing. What did he do for Beaulieu Canada in Wickham? Nothing. What will he do

for all these unemployed people? Will he move them to his own riding?

• (1445)

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn (Minister of Labour and Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, to promote economic development in Quebec, we have an annual budget of roughly \$200 million. With that money, we have to focus on the regions in greatest difficulty. We have started implementing our strategic plan for 2008-11 in order to support the regions in greatest difficulty. Soon we will have the opportunity to implement the second phase of this strategic development plan to support the regions.

I do not know how many times the hon. member has been to the Gaspésie, the North Shore or anywhere else. He does not know that the regions are more than just Montreal.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez (Honoré-Mercier, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have been there often enough to know that the minister is doing absolutely nothing.

While the minister is sipping cocktails and eating canapés on his private jet, the Bank of Canada and financial analysts are quite clear: the economic slowdown will be more significant than previously thought. The survival of our exporters and manufacturers in the regions is at stake.

What does the minister plan to do to help them get through this? Lower taxes, reduce spending, abandon the workers? It is not a Marshall plan he proposed, it is a marshmallow plan.

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn (Minister of Labour and Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, allow me to specify that the \$217 million we have invested in the Government of Quebec will be used to support the manufacturing sector. That is what that money will be used for to help the regions in difficulty. There will be investment tax credits in the regions. Some \$90 million of our money will be used to fund 100% of the cost of these measures in Quebec.

The second thing we are doing to help investment in the companies is implementing a new 5% investment tax credit that will also help secondary and tertiary processing companies in Quebec's manufacturing and forestry sector.

* * *

[English]

ONTARIO ECONOMY

Mr. Omar Alghabra (Mississauga—Erindale, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Ontarians remember the failed policies of Mike Harris and that finance minister. Their policies gave Ontario a \$5.6 billion hidden deficit, hospital closures, thousands of nurses fired, the Walkerton catastrophe, the Hydro mess, the heartless attacks on the homeless and Ipperwash. They even bungled meat inspections.

Canadians deserve effective policies. Why is the minister determined to recycle policies that we know have failed in the past?

Oral Questions

Hon. Jim Flaherty (Minister of Finance, CPC): I know, Mr. Speaker, Mike Harris was responsible for most of the snowstorms that fell each winter in Toronto and around the province of Ontario. I know he was responsible when the weather forecasts were inaccurate.

Let me point out for the member opposite that in 1995 we inherited a rather dismal fiscal situation from the now Liberal member for Toronto Centre. I also point out that we achieved balanced budgets, including the time when I was the minister of finance in Ontario.

Mr. Omar Alhabra (Mississauga—Erindale, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, that answer proves my point. The minister is delusional.

The minister ignores the manufacturing job crisis with his “laissez-faire, I don't care” attitude. Instead, he cares about phantom trains in his riding. He cares about rigging an application process to favour a group in his riding with which his wife is involved. He cares about giving his friends untendered contracts.

Canadians want to know: Why is the minister not working for them?

Hon. Jim Flaherty (Minister of Finance, CPC): Apparently, Mr. Speaker, we on this side of the House favour lower taxes for business. We proposed these in the economic statement on October 30. We encouraged the government of the province of Ontario to please provide a similar stimulus to the economy of the province to help out that manufacturing sector.

I know the members opposite agree with me because they supported our efforts, they backed our efforts and those tax reductions in Ontario are now law.

* * *

SPORT

Mr. Mike Lake (Edmonton—Mill Woods—Beaumont, CPC): Mr. Speaker, participation in sports is part of a healthy lifestyle and contributes to a healthy society. Sport is also a very important contributor to Canada's image worldwide.

Canadian athletes have demonstrated time and time again their ability to bring home the gold. Hosting sporting events builds significant legacies for the Canadian sport system and brings substantial economic, cultural and social benefits to our cities.

Could the Secretary of State for Sport please update the House on how the government plans to raise Canada's profile with regard to sport on the international stage?

● (1450)

Hon. Helena Guergis (Secretary of State (Foreign Affairs and International Trade) (Sport), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague from Edmonton—Mill Woods—Beaumont for his support for the sport community. I am delighted to be announcing a new federal sport policy, with \$14.7 million annually. This is up from the mere \$1 million provided by the previous Liberal government.

We are looking to the future. We are replacing the old program with a new approach that is a coordinated approach for the provinces and territories. Hosting international sporting events provides much

valuable training and competition experience to our athletes and it contributes to our goal of becoming a leading sport nation.

* * *

MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today is Black Tuesday for families who work in Canada's beleaguered manufacturing sector. Today Campbell's has announced it is closing its doors, leaving a third of the town of Listowel out of work. In Oshawa GM has announced it is shedding another shift, 970 jobs. For every job loss there, seven spinoff jobs will disappear.

Under the government's watch, Canada has lost 55,000 manufacturing jobs since the beginning of 2008, 5,000 in the last three weeks alone. How can the government continue to ignore the manufacturing jobs crisis when so many families are suffering?

Hon. Jim Prentice (Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my hon. friend is ignoring some of the great success that we are having in the Canadian economy, whether we are speaking about the aerospace industry and some of the strength that we have across Canada.

The government will continue to build on a sound fiscal record. We will continue to work with industry right across the country. As the Minister of Finance has indicated, the stimulus package that was introduced was well ahead of the economic downturn in the United States. We will continue to adjust to that.

Our country has a bright future based on our industrial strength. The member should be more optimistic.

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the economic strategy of the government is to pick winners and losers. Just today, as more layoffs are announced and communities are in a state of shock, Petro-Canada, while it is gouging Canadians at the pump, announced it filed a \$1 billion profit in the first quarter alone.

Does the finance minister have the guts to go and visit the workers at GM and the workers at Campbell's and explain why he has billions of dollars for tax cuts to the petroleum industry and nothing for the manufacturing sectors in Canada?

Hon. Jim Prentice (Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I can assure the member that I was at this GM facility a number of months ago. I met the workers who work there.

We continue to work both with GM and with other industry leaders in the manufacturing sector and in the auto sector. We are addressing the issues of competitiveness that will make this industry successful.

To be sure, there are infrastructure issues that were left by the former government. To be sure, there are other issues of competitiveness and harmonization of standards with our American neighbours. We are dealing with all those issues. As this downturn begins to turn, the industry will be well positioned to succeed.

Oral Questions

[Translation]

AFGHANISTAN

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have a very simple question for the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Tomorrow, the UN representative in Afghanistan is coming to Ottawa to speak with the minister. The Manley report insisted on a change in Canada's policy with regard to aid, diplomacy and our government's political strategy.

Can the minister tell us exactly what he will say tomorrow on these very important government matters?

Hon. Maxime Bernier (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the hon. member for his question since Afghanistan is an important issue to our government and to Canadians. What is more, Canadians have to be informed of our actions in Afghanistan.

Tomorrow I will have a meeting. My colleague, the Minister of National Defence also has a meeting with the United Nations special envoy. We will discuss the situation in Afghanistan and I can assure this House that we will soon report back daily, as stipulated in the motion, on our activities in Afghanistan.

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I heard something about a schedule, but I did not hear an answer. We know full well that the U.S. troops are arriving in southern Afghanistan right now and that all the international studies clearly show that a military solution—exclusively military—will not achieve stability in Afghanistan.

I will repeat the question. Can the minister tell us today what Canada's strategy is for aid, diplomacy and political change in Afghanistan?

• (1455)

Hon. Maxime Bernier (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the strategy is quite simple. I went to Bucharest with the Prime Minister and my colleague the Minister of National Defence and while we were there we adopted an entire military and political plan for a strategy to provide the Afghans with the development and economic assistance they need. We want to build a viable, reliable and safe state for the Afghans.

That is what we are doing with the help of the opposition. I want to thank the Liberal Party for voting with us in favour of the motion.

* * *

[English]

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Ms. Bonnie Brown (Oakville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, a decade ago a Liberal government proudly led the process to ban landmines.

Next month in Dublin the global community will be taking the next step, moving to ban cluster bombs. However, the government is not even sending the foreign affairs minister, only junior note takers, and it is failing to provide funds for the projects.

Is the government simply pandering to its Republican soulmates in Washington, who are boycotting the Dublin talks?

[Translation]

Hon. Maxime Bernier (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the diplomats working in my department are very competent. Furthermore, everyone knows that one of Canada's aims is to reduce the devastating human impact of certain types of cluster bombs. We will continue to pursue that objective at the next international meeting, as at past meetings.

[English]

Ms. Bonnie Brown (Oakville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we know the Prime Minister is on record attacking the Liberal achievement of a decade ago when he said that the Liberal government pushed forward with the treaty to ban landmines without giving due consideration to the United States' concerns.

Why is this government again taking orders from Washington, or is it simply afraid the foreign affairs minister will put his foot in his mouth again?

[Translation]

Hon. Maxime Bernier (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my hon. colleague knows full well that we have signed the Wellington declaration and that we are working with the international community to ensure effective control over these kinds of munitions. We are taking action on this side of the House and we are proud of the work being done by our diplomats. I can say that we are, at this time, destroying all the cluster bombs we may have here at home.

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DEPARTMENT OF NATIONAL DEFENCE

Mr. Claude Bachand (Saint-Jean, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the *Globe and Mail* is reporting today that the Department of National Defence has produced a guide instructing the military how to justify censoring records. This is the complete opposite of what the Minister of Foreign Affairs just said.

The guide talks about blanking things out and withholding all the information from the public. The Conservative government has become a haven for censorship. It is muzzling the military, senior government officials and ministers. It is completely unacceptable.

How can the minister explain—

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of National Defence.

Hon. Peter MacKay (Minister of National Defence and Minister of the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this is obviously not true. Determining whether any information released could compromise a mission is an operational decision. This decision is made by specialists and soldiers, and not by politicians. We fully understand our obligations and responsibilities under the Access to Information Act, and we abide by them.

*Oral Questions***HEALTH**

Ms. Christiane Gagnon (Québec, BQ): Mr. Speaker, we have another example of Conservative censorship. They threw away a million dollars when they stopped distribution of an informative and educational tool on the subject of drugs, a book ordered by the Minister of Health, its original preface signed by Mr. Couillard, Quebec Minister of Health.

Will the Minister of Health admit that this case of censorship was dictated by the Conservatives' straitjacket of right wing ideology and that there is no other justification for such a decision?

Hon. Tony Clement (Minister of Health and Minister for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I said in the House last week, that was not a good campaign. It was the doing of the former Liberal government, and an example of their bad policies for tackling drug use and improving the situation. We have a new policy for fighting drug use and we are proud to be truly dealing with this problem.

* * *

● (1500)

[English]

INTERNATIONAL AID

Hon. Maria Minna (Beaches—East York, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Conservative government has left Canada with no fiscal room to manoeuvre. It promised to keep a \$3 billion contingency fund intact but it has failed.

The Conservative mismanagement of our economy has left us with no funds to help while the world is facing a food crisis. With food riots already occurring in developing countries, what will the government do to ensure that Canada is able to answer the call from the world's 800 million hungry people?

Hon. Bev Oda (Minister of International Cooperation, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we know that all Canadians take very seriously the impact the price of food is having on the poorest and hungriest in the world.

Our government promised to double international assistance and we will do that. Our government promised to double assistance to Africa and we will do that. We will do what we say, not like the previous Liberal government that signed the international food convention and then shortchanged the hungry across the world by over 200,000 tonnes.

* * *

CHILD CARE

Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Liberals promised Canadians that they would create a national child care plan, but did nothing. The current lack of child care spaces is a legacy of the Liberal record of failure.

Thankfully our government has taken concrete action to fund and support the creation of new and real child care spaces. Could the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development update the House on how many child care spaces have been created by our government, specifically in my home province of Manitoba?

Hon. Monte Solberg (Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my friend, the member of Parliament for Selkirk—Interlake, is an outstanding MP, but beyond that, he and his wife, Kelly, are also outstanding parents to three beautiful daughters. He is someone who knows something about parenting. Unlike the Liberals who believe that parents do not know anything, we believe in parents. We offer the universal child care benefit which the Liberals would take away, but beyond that, we support the provinces. Yesterday the province of Manitoba announced 6,500 new child care spaces, bringing the number to over 60,000 spaces announced that we introduced—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Timmins—James Bay.

* * *

ELECTIONS CANADA

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, everyone knows that nothing moves in the Conservative Party without the Prime Minister's personal approval.

In 1997 it was illegal to set up an ad scheme to circumvent election spending limits and it is illegal today. When did the Prime Minister give his approval to set up this scheme to circumvent the election spending limits? Was it his idea to bilk the taxpayers for \$700,000 in rebates to which the Conservative Party was not entitled? How does it feel to have to trot out the same old scandal ridden excuses that he so vehemently despised while he was in opposition?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will read an email from the central campaign of the NDP to the NDP candidate for Saanich—Gulf Islands, Jennifer Burgis. It says:

Subject: Radio co-op proposal

Dear Lower Island Managers:

If each campaign can commit to providing us with \$2,000, for a total of \$6,000, we [the national party??] could match it for a total buy of \$12,000. The ads would be tagged equally—i.e., would refer to each candidate—and would mean a \$4,000 expense under each ceiling...

That meant they all got to claim it locally. That is the NDP in and out scheme.

* * *

THE ENVIRONMENT

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis (Winnipeg North, NDP): Mr. Speaker, there are four types of harmful blue-green algae and at least two parasite species found in Devils Lake that are not found in Lake Winnipeg and yet the tap is on again at Devils Lake outlet, this time in violation of a court order.

I want to know if the government is prepared to join with Manitoba's application to find the North Dakota State Water Commission in contempt for ignoring the North Dakota supreme court ruling that restricted the operation of the Devils Lake outlet. Will the government file notice at the North Dakota supreme court—

Points of Order

● (1505)

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of the Environment.

Hon. John Baird (Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we understand that the government of Manitoba was not successful in the American courts earlier today. We are committed to continue to work hard on this issue. It is something that is very important. We are working constructively with the Manitoba government, with the minister of water conservation. We are concerned that the previous agreement from the Liberal government did nothing to stop this from happening in the future and we are committed to find a better way.

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PRESENCE IN GALLERY

The Speaker: I would like to draw to the attention of hon. members the presence in the gallery of Dr. Nahum Sonenberg and Dr. Samuel Weiss, Canadian winners of the 2008 Gairdner International Awards, given for outstanding discoveries or contributions to medical science.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

[*Translation*]

The Speaker: I believe the hon. member for Louis-Hébert wishes to rise on a question of privilege. Is that correct? If so, he may now rise.

* * *

POINT OF ORDER

UNPARLIAMENTARY LANGUAGE

Mr. Luc Harvey (Louis-Hébert, CPC): Mr. Speaker, during debate, the hon. member from Abitibi used very unparliamentary language when referring to one of my colleagues, and I would really like him to withdraw his comments, since there are limits, after all, to what one can say in this House.

The Speaker: I thought it was a question of privilege, but clearly it is a point of order.

Since the hon. member from Abitibi is absent at the moment, there is nothing I can do because I did not hear anything.

The hon. member for Ottawa—Vanier also gave me a notice concerning a point of order. He may now rise.

ORAL QUESTIONS

Hon. Mauril Bélanger (Ottawa—Vanier, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in response to a question put to him yesterday, the Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board quoted from a document, a sort of affidavit that the Conservatives had apparently submitted to the Federal Court and that was rejected. The rule of this House is very clear. When a minister or parliamentary secretary quotes from a document, he or she must table it.

I would like you to invite the member to table the document in this House, so we may all read its contents.

[*English*]

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will respond to this point and then present one of my own.

The document in question, I believe, was presented in this House by the House leader. If it has not been tabled, I would be happy to table it. I am going to confirm with our parliamentary staff to ascertain if that is the case. Once again, in response to the member's reasonable question, we will have it tabled if it has not already been tabled.

The Speaker: The member is rising on another point of order.

ELECTIONS CANADA INVESTIGATION GUIDELINES

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister referred in his remarks to Elections Canada's failure to follow its own rules.

I have here chapter 7 of the Elections Canada Investigators' Manual. Subsection 7.5, "Right to be protected from unreasonable search and seizure", refers readers to look at subsection 6.4 of chapter 8, which reads as follows:

It is the suspect's prerogative to refuse to produce or remit documents. In such cases, Investigators must advise the suspect that they accept the decision and record the matter accordingly in the statement report. They should also advise the suspect that the matter will be reported to the Commissioner who may consider requesting a court order...

I have been in contact with the Conservative Party lawyers, who have indicated to me that they had no such advice in the lead-up to the Elections Canada visit to the Conservative Party headquarters.

These are the rules that Elections Canada's investigators are obliged to follow before they take such a dramatic step of moving into a party's headquarters with other parties in tow with cameras. Elections Canada is obliged to follow these rules and unless it can produce evidence that it gave any sort of advice that it had been refused documents, then it has broken its own rules and then we have to ask whether or not it can interpret rules for other political parties.

Mr. Speaker, I conclude by telling you that I have here this entire document, which I will table forthwith. This is the Investigators' Manual from which I have extracted the rules that appear to have been broken by Elections Canada. If Elections Canada cannot prove that it offered advice to the Conservative Party that it was in search of these documents, if it cannot prove that it had provided advance notice that it was going to report to the commissioner, who may consider requesting a court order, if Elections Canada cannot show that it has done those things, then it is in a very critical and very serious breach of its own rules.

I conclude by saying if Elections Canada wants to interpret the rules as they relate to other political parties, it should start by following its own.

● (1510)

The Speaker: I am afraid I fail to catch the point of order in the hon. parliamentary secretary's remarks. He may have had a complaint, but it did not appear to concern the rules or practices of the House and so, I do not think there is a point of order here.

Business of Supply

Also, I can confirm that the document referred to by the hon. member for Ottawa—Vanier in his point of order has not been tabled. If the parliamentary secretary wants to check with the House leader, perhaps he could arrange for the tabling of the document at this point.

Is the hon. member for Wascana rising on another point of order?

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Wascana, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I think it is important to point out to the House that the government has, both today and yesterday, followed a very extraordinary practice of attacking Elections Canada, the Chief Electoral Officer and the Elections Commissioner on the floor of the House of Commons.

Mr. Speaker, that is a practice that I suggest to you is dangerous in this House because it brings disrespect upon the institutions of Parliament and we should be very careful about going down that road.

I have one point of specific clarification. A search warrant cannot be exercised without the authority having been given by a Superior Court judge.

The Speaker: This does sound like a debate. We are having a debate today on Elections Canada and maybe hon. members could get their remarks on the subject into the debate. There are opportunities for questions and comments at the conclusion of some speeches and, of course, hon. members are also free to participate in the debate.

Maybe there will be agreement to extend hours since there is such enthusiasm for this debate.

ORAL QUESTIONS

Hon. Maria Minna (Beaches—East York, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, during question period, the member for Selkirk—Interlake stated that the previous Liberal government had not established a national child care program. In fact, not only did—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Hon. Maria Minna: Do I get to speak?

Not only did the government establish a national child care program with an agreement with every province in this country, with \$5 million, \$1 million was already flowing, but that government cut the program and this—

The Speaker: Order, please. I think that concludes the points of order today because I am afraid that was not a point of order. It seemed more of a debate.

I would urge hon. members to perhaps check the practice relating to points of order so we do not have these speeches made under that guise. It would be helpful to the Chair.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

● (1515)

[Translation]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—ELECTIONS CANADA

The House resumed consideration of the motion.

The Speaker: Before the interruption for oral question period, the hon. member for Compton—Stanstead had the floor. She has five minutes remaining for her presentation.

The hon. member for Compton—Stanstead.

Ms. France Bonsant (Compton—Stanstead, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I will continue with equal enthusiasm my presentation on the Bloc Québécois motion.

I was amused to learn, this past weekend, that three Conservative MPs from the Quebec City area were trying to get off the hook through an open letter printed in the daily *Le Soleil*.

These three somewhat confused crooks mixed up a lot of things in trying to vindicate themselves. Among other things, they claimed that the Conservative Party is after Elections Canada and not the opposite. That is all very well, but the little Conservative accounting operation took place in 2005-06 while their party's suit dates from 2007.

They also claim that all parties use the same scheme as the Conservatives. Yet the only political party being investigated by Elections Canada is theirs. No charges have been laid against any other party.

In fact, the Conservatives are inventing all manner of arguments, each one more fallacious than the last, in their attempt to deflect attention from their turpitude.

This is why the Conservative MPs blocked the work of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs for months, when it wanted to get to the bottom of this business. Rather than cooperating and redeeming themselves, the Conservative Party decided to paralyze the committee. Because of the Conservatives' refusal to cooperate, Elections Canada was forced to get the RCMP involved.

They have only themselves to blame. If they had provided credible documents justifying their expenses, we would not have ended up with the circus we now have.

Now that emails have been seized, more is known about their strategy to redirect the costs of the national ad campaign to certain local candidates who had not yet reached their spending ceiling, not to mention the completely identical invoices bearing the letterhead of a company that denies having issued them.

The funniest thing of all in this is that, in the last election, the Conservative Party claimed to be pure as the driven snow, squeaky clean compared to the Liberals. In fact, while criticizing the Liberals for their misdeeds, they were merrily engaged in getting around the electoral rules themselves.

Business of Supply

I would remind hon. members that this is not the first time that the Prime Minister has gone after Elections Canada. In the past, he challenged the right of this federal body to impose limits on election spending and to disallow financial contributions from lobby groups during election campaigns. I have no reason to believe that he has changed his opinion. I do not share that opinion.

We in the Bloc Québécois have full and complete confidence in Elections Canada and the Commissioner of Canada Elections. We know that, whatever the tactics used by the Conservatives, they will get to the bottom of this affair.

[*English*]

Mr. Gary Goodyear (Cambridge, CPC): Mr. Speaker, while listening to my hon. colleague from the Bloc, I noticed she made the statement that her party has full confidence in Elections Canada.

I wonder if she could explain why the whip of her party was so aggressive toward Elections Canada at committee with respect to the use of bingo cards and the accuracy of the voter list. The member was very aggressive toward Elections Canada personnel. It did not seem to me that her party had that much support or faith in Elections Canada. Perhaps she could comment on that.

• (1520)

[*Translation*]

Ms. France Bonsant: Mr. Speaker, I cannot speak for my whip, because I am not him and I do not know what he is thinking. But I can say one thing. The bingo cards—

An hon. member: Oh, oh!

Ms. France Bonsant: If he would listen, I could answer and he might understand a bit better.

The bingo cards already exist at the provincial level. It is completely legal. It is done all over the place.

That is why I personally have full confidence in my whip and my leader.

By the way, we are not the ones being investigated. The Conservatives are. If I were the hon. member, I would watch what I said.

Ms. Louise Thibault (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, Ind.): Mr. Speaker, my question for the hon. member is very short and simple.

In and out scheme aside, do the member and her party think that a candidate can legitimately and legally pay for national advertising, and then obtain or request that 60% be reimbursed as election expenses?

Ms. France Bonsant: Mr. Speaker, if it is national advertising, if I appear alongside my leader, if I pay to have my name appear, if it says “paid for by the official agent”, and if all the expenses are completely legal, I am entitled to be reimbursed for 60% by Elections Canada, and I feel comfortable doing so. I do not think this breaks the law.

National advertising where I appear in the photo with my leader is important so that people can become familiar with me.

Ms. Pauline Picard (Drummond, BQ): Mr. Speaker, it is not without significance that the motion that we have brought forward deals with the trust that we, men and women from different political parties as well as the electorate we represent, must have in the institution that is the watchdog of the democratic process, Elections Canada.

What the party in power has been doing for several weeks now is nothing less than launching a concerted attack on the integrity and neutrality of Elections Canada, an independent and above all non-partisan organization whose mission is to make sure that citizens can exercise their democratic right and stand for election.

What are the values that underlie Elections Canada's actions and decisions? Transparency in everything, the public's trust, a staff that is knowledgeable and professional—the Chief Electoral Officer's office here in Ottawa has a staff of more than 330. When a general election is called, returning officers hire more than 160,000 people across the country. In each constituency, the returning officer administers the electoral process by which a member of Parliament is chosen. The values that the governing party are questioning are the cohesiveness and consistency in administering the Canada Elections Act.

Since the 2006 election, the Conservative members have essentially been accusing the current Chief Electoral Officer, Marc Mayrand, the sixth person to hold the position since it was created by the House of Commons in 1920, of showing bias. It is important to point out that, because he is appointed by the House of Commons and reports directly to Parliament, the Chief Electoral Officer is completely independent of government and political parties.

That being said, the facts that have been made public about the Conservative Party's election spending scheme are disturbing. The most recent election campaign came on the heels of the sponsorship scandal, a Liberal scandal that was strongly condemned by the parties in this House. The information brought to light by the Gomery commission about irregularities in the management of the sponsorship program landed the Liberals on the opposition benches. The Conservatives would use this sad situation to make political hay. The party went to the polls determined to be pure as the driven snow. But the allegations and revelations that have been made in recent weeks prove just the opposite.

We can be glad about one thing: thanks to the stubbornness of the Prime Minister and his party, the Chief Electoral Officer had no choice but to act. The Conservatives' refusal to cooperate led to the disclosure of over 500 pages of affidavits last week. The party's offices were raided twice by the Chief Electoral Officer, with the RCMP's help. In spite of everything, the Conservatives are sticking to their guns, even though they are unable to justify the system whereby they transferred money between the party's coffers and those of 67 candidates in order to spend more on advertising than the law allowed.

But there is worse. In addition to this botched scheme, the Commissioner of Canada Elections discovered that invoices had been forged. This was another scheme to enable Conservative candidates to obtain a refund of expenses that were not really theirs.

Business of Supply

I am talking about allegations of forgery, an offence under the Criminal Code.

When questioned by the leader of the Bloc Québécois, the government remained evasive. The question is simple, though, and I invite the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities to answer it. Can he confirm, from his seat, that no invoices were forged or falsified?

• (1525)

While the party opposite was trying to put off revealing the truth about this issue, Ronald Lamothe, assistant chief investigator with the office of the Commissioner of Canada Elections, submitted a 68-page affidavit to obtain a search warrant. Mr. Lamothe's allegations stated that Conservative Party officials produced election spending statements that they knew contained false or misleading information, which contravenes section 431(a) of the Elections Act.

As such, the Conservative Party's Quebec lieutenant must answer the question we asked. Can he confirm that there were no false invoices and that no documents were altered?

It would be interesting to hear the minister's response, particularly since Mr. Lamothe claims that Conservative Party officials produced false invoices in December 2006 on letterhead belonging to Retail Media Inc. of Toronto, the agency that was responsible for buying nationwide ad space for the Conservatives during the last election, to justify the election spending of 14 candidates—six of them from Quebec.

These allegations are very, very serious. The Conservative Party's shadowy manoeuvres make all politicians look bad. Regardless of what happens with the motion currently before us, justice will take its course, and a ruling will eventually be made. We are patient. It took a lot of time and patience to bring to light the sponsorship scandal. We will take as much time as we need to bring to light the Conservatives' schemes.

For many long weeks, Conservative members did everything they could to paralyze the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, which was trying to study the file that the Chief Electoral Officer took over. Rather than cooperate with parliamentarians and act responsibly and honourably, Conservative members did their utmost to prevent the committee from doing its job. They were determined to paralyze the committee so they could avoid answering questions. It is ironic to hear the Conservative whip complain about the fact that committee work was not moving forward when he and his fellow party members were the ones refusing to work.

There will be another election within the next 18 months. I wonder how the Conservatives, who are in so much trouble, current Conservative members, the candidates targeted by the investigation, could possibly run again. I would not be surprised to see some candidates back out, preferring not to see their name associated with such a scheme. The Liberals have been through it. The Conservatives should have learned from the Liberals' mistakes.

Beyond the current scheme, from now on, every move made by any representative of that political party will be scrutinized and analyzed. We will ask for the Chief Electoral Officer's opinion on any action that draws our attention.

Should we be concerned about certain candidates who have suddenly become very visible in our ridings? It has come to the attention of parliamentarians that Conservative candidates have set up shop in clearly identified offices. It is only natural to wonder if it is all legal. If a party can produce false invoices, which is what the Commissioner of Canada Elections is saying, and maintain that its actions were completely legal, one might easily wonder about the rest of the management practices of that political party.

In short, the Conservative ethic is nothing but smoke and mirrors. It is obvious that the Conservatives tried to circumvent election spending limits and were beat at their own game. Just like the Liberals with their sponsorship scandal, the Conservatives made up false invoices, according to the Chief Electoral Officer's affidavit. Clearly, the tables have turned.

We definitely think the Conservatives must stop undermining the authority of Elections Canada, which is why we are giving them the opportunity to show some degree of repentance, by asking them to vote with us on the Bloc Québécois motion:

That the House express its full and complete confidence in Elections Canada and the Commissioner of Canada Elections.

• (1530)

Hon. Christian Paradis (Secretary of State (Agriculture), CPC): Mr. Speaker, my colleague from Drummond talked about smoke and mirrors. That is what I would call all the insinuations we are hearing in this place. She knows very well that we are talking about Conservative money that was spent on Conservative advertising. We have reached the point where Elections Canada and the Conservative Party have a difference of opinion.

Elections Canada is an organization that must ensure neutrality between the parties. It is defending a point of view that the Conservative Party does not share. Therefore, we have taken the issue in question to court. That is how things work. We are defending our rights in court and a judge will decide.

The Bloc has been condemning certain actions since this morning. They have taken what we have been hearing and then mixed in the sponsorship scandal, which involved wrongdoing—a completely different matter—to trick and mislead the public. Then they said that some people are guilty and that they will not be able to run. They want us to assume the role of both judge and party. That is not responsible.

That is why we have courts. There are differences of opinion. There are different interpretations of the law and we acted appropriately according to our interpretation. If Elections Canada does not agree, it is our fundamental right to take it to court and that is what we are doing. The other side of this House is making insinuations and condemning us.

What does the member think about the fact that a Liberal Party cameraman was present during the RCMP search? No one is asking questions about this. It is as though it were normal. People are being condemned, but nothing is wrong. That is irresponsible.

Business of Supply

Ms. Pauline Picard: Mr. Speaker, I have a number of answers to those questions. First, if he what he really means is that the fact that the House will express its will this evening is not smoke and mirrors, then the Conservative Party has to vote in favour of the motion and the House has to express its complete and utter confidence in Elections Canada and the Commissioner of Canada Elections. The Conservatives have cast doubt on the impartiality and neutrality of Elections Canada. They have cast doubt on this institution that is the guardian of our democracy.

If they are not guilty, if they do not feel guilty and have nothing to hide then they should not be using schemes to completely block a committee that wanted to shed light on the activities of the Conservative Party. For seven months, they have used procedure to prevent the work of that committee from moving forward.

Second, since the hon. member is a lawyer, I will remind him that when there is an investigation and the RCMP wants to conduct a search somewhere because it is unable to get any cooperation from people such as the Conservative Party, it must obtain a warrant from a judge. The judge issued the warrant in full knowledge of the facts. Elections Canada and the RCMP were able to enter the Conservative Party offices to get all the receipts and documents they needed.

We have not been investigated because we have always respected the Elections Act. We have always submitted our plans to Elections Canada, before and after. We have always had our strategies approved by Elections Canada. Thus, every Bloc Québécois candidate has received reimbursement from the Chief Electoral Officer because they truly respected the rules and regulations of Elections Canada.

• (1535)

Hon. Lawrence Cannon (Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the motion we are debating today is the most recent example—and likely not the last—of the growing befuddlement of the members of the Bloc and, above all, of their leader.

Not too long ago, the leader of the Bloc Québécois was proposing a high speed train between Quebec City and New York, a train largely paid for by the federal government, of course. A couple of weeks ago, there he was in Quebec City inspecting the ruins of the Armoury and advising the government on how many sprinklers should have been installed. Yesterday, the leader of the Bloc wanted to reform the CRTC. Today, with his hand on his heart, he rushes to the defence of Elections Canada.

Tomorrow, where will we see the federalist zeal of the leader of the Bloc and his reformers? Will it be the Royal Canadian Mint, the National Library, Canada Post? Heaven alone knows!

Not too long ago, things were very simple, though not much more logical. The members of the Bloc Québécois, we were told, took their seats here in the House of Commons in order to support the PQ head office in its quest for Quebec independence. The Bloc, we were told, was going to ride off into the sunset on that great evening when the referendum was won and its members would return to their land as conquering heroes. Once upon a time long long ago, Lucien Bouchard, the leader and founding father of the Bloc Québécois, even said that Bloc members had only one single mandate to fulfill. But they are still here.

Eighteen years after they rushed into creating their party, there is no longer a referendum on the horizon, no big events on the calendar. Even the Parti Québécois, the Bloc's big brother, no longer wants to talk about a referendum, for the simple reason that Quebecers no longer want to hear about one.

It is a cruel dilemma for a sovereignist leader, even one who has been working in Ottawa since 1990, to no longer be able to talk about independence or a referendum. I know that the leader of the Bloc has enough integrity that he has pondered his role and the role of his party in Ottawa. For a few hours, he understandably wanted to move to Quebec City. Much to his surprise, the door was not very open. So he decided to stay here with us and is now a sort of patriarch in this House, having gone grey, as I did at the National Assembly, under the weight of our work.

In fact, the leader of the Bloc is so loyal to federal politics that of the 308 members sitting in this House, only 13 have been here longer than the member for Laurier—Sainte-Marie, and 20% of the venerable members elected since 1993, or one out of five, are members of the Bloc. The referendum may be a long way away, but the gold watch is not so far off.

The leader of the Bloc is a resourceful man. If he could not put an end to our federal regime, why try to reform it? Is he waiting to launch a new attack one day, with the support and approval of the PQ? That is no doubt how the leader of the Bloc became a railroad engineer, an expert in Canada-U.S. relations, a federal building inspector, a Canadian broadcasting expert and now a protector of Canadian institutions. My goodness, the leader of the Bloc has become a Reformer.

• (1540)

Our party, too, is seeking to reform our institutions. For example, we announced our intention to reform the Senate and eventually make it an elected body. Perhaps that blocks another approach for my colleague from Laurier—Sainte-Marie, but I doubt that we will be hearing an original perspective about the future of the Senate from him anytime soon.

Nobody in Canada is naive enough to believe that the Bloc can really improve Canadian federalism or help make the lives of Canadians any better. Nobody will fall for the motion it has put forward today.

Its goal—its only goal since 1990—is to embarrass the government of the day, to distract from the work of the House, and to undermine federal institutions—all federal institutions. The Bloc wants to cut Quebecers off from the institutions that have ensured their survival as a nation within Canada and that have contributed to Quebecers' economic and social development.

Of course the government has confidence in Elections Canada, a basic democratic institution. But the Bloc leader knows very well that we are questioning its recent interpretation of the legitimacy of certain electoral expenses and the extreme treatment that our party received. We have therefore decided to take this difference of interpretation before the courts.

Business of Supply

With all due respect to my colleague from Laurier—Sainte-Marie, we can hardly be blamed for believing that our legal system has more credibility than the machinations of a federal separatist party. As such, we are not criticizing Elections Canada's role, mandate or mission, but we have serious reservations about its recent actions with respect to the dispute between us about electoral spending during the last election. We want the courts to consider this issue. I will certainly not give the Bloc leader the satisfaction of hearing me say that we want to eliminate or emasculate Elections Canada.

The Bloc's latest motion gives us an opportunity to reflect not on the validity of our democratic institutions, but on the usefulness of the Bloc. I sincerely and unreservedly recognize that all members of the Bloc who have a seat in this House were democratically elected. They have the same right to express their views as any other member of any other political party.

But if the Bloc members want to pose as supervisors of our federal institutions, perhaps they might take a little advice from a Quebecker who was part of a government—Robert Bourassa—who did a very good job of defending the interests of Quebeckers in Quebec City, and who is now part of a government that has done more for Quebec in fewer than three years than their party has in 18 years.

After the most recent election, my friends opposite admitted that they could not understand why Quebec City—my home town—and the surrounding area had supported our party. I know that they also cannot understand why more and more Quebeckers are putting their trust in us and supporting our policies and the actions of our leader.

Today, I will reveal the key to this mystery. It is the key that will enable us to make gains throughout Quebec and especially in Bloc ridings. The key to the mystery is to keep your word. You have to do what you promise to do.

In less than three years, we have met all our commitments. First, we promised to clean up government and make it more transparent and more accountable. We have done that.

Second, we promised to reduce taxes. We have done that.

• (1545)

We have reduced taxes, starting with two cuts to the GST in two years. We have delivered \$60 billion in tax relief that will benefit all Canadians: families, employees, businesspeople, investors and consumers. Taxes are at their lowest level in 60 years.

Third, we promised to toughen up the justice system to keep our communities and our children safe. We have done that.

Fourth, we promised to give parents choice when it comes to child care. We have done that.

Lastly, we promised to correct the fiscal imbalance within the Canadian federation. The Liberals did not want to do it, the Bloc could not do it, but we have done it.

We have done more together in under three years than the federal Liberals did in 13 years in power and more than the Bloc Québécois could do in 113 years.

In other words, we have demonstrated that we keep our word. The Bloc Québécois has not kept its word. It promised to separate

Quebec from Canada. It promised to help the PQ win a referendum. Neither of these things has come to pass, and they will not come to pass, because Quebeckers have concerns, interests and needs other than the separatist dreams of the Bloc Québécois.

Comfortably installed in Ottawa, the Bloc Québécois members dream of reigniting the great debates of the 1970s and 1980s on Quebec independence. It is neither the place nor the time for that. Quebeckers do not live with their heads in the clouds; they know full well that the coming years, especially in terms of the economy, will require difficult decisions and action in energy matters. It will not be the time to be represented by members who shirk their responsibilities, who prefer abdication and systematic opposition to action and determination.

The Canadian economy is doing well, very well. However, no economy in the world is immune to what could happen in the United States, for example, especially since we are currently its main trading partner. We must immediately prepare for possible turbulence and that is what we are doing. In times such as these, Quebeckers cannot permit themselves to be represented by members who have no power, no means of taking action, no serious economic program and no voice at the table.

With gas prices soaring, how seriously can we take a party that claims to be able to reduce Quebec's dependence on oil by half within 10 years—without even being in power, no less? Because it has turned its back on all its promises, the Bloc Québécois is attempting to find all manner of reasons to justify its existence and to hide the fact that it has done nothing in this place for 18 years. However, Quebeckers have a long memory. There is a reason why Quebec's motto is “I remember”.

In the next election, we will ask Quebeckers: who solved the fiscal imbalance, the Bloc Québécois or the Conservatives?; who gave Quebec a presence at UNESCO, the Bloc Québécois or the Conservatives?

An hon. member: The Conservatives.

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: Who proposed recognition of Quebeckers forming a nation within a united Canada, the Bloc Québécois or the Conservatives?

Some hon. members: The Conservatives.

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: Who reduced taxes, the Bloc Québécois or the Conservatives?

Some hon. members: The Conservatives.

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: The difference of opinion between our political party and Elections Canada is a serious matter. That is why we have turned to the courts. I find it very regrettable that the Bloc Québécois has decided to play political games with this controversy and this institution in particular. For this reason, I will vote against this misguided motion.

*Business of Supply***ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS**

●(1550)

[English]

MESSAGE FROM THE SENATE

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): I have the honour to inform the House that a message has been received from the Senate informing this House that the Senate has passed the following public bill, to which the concurrence of the House is desired: Bill S-204, An Act Respecting National Philanthropy Day.

* * *

[Translation]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—ELECTIONS CANADA

The House resumed consideration of the motion.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): We are now at the question and comment period.

The hon. member for Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord.

Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I listened carefully to the speech by the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities. Although he is an experienced parliamentarian, there were a number of times when he could have been called on relevance. The motion being debated today reads as follows:

That the House express its full and complete confidence in Elections Canada and the Commissioner of Canada Elections.

That is what this is all about.

My first direct question for the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities is the following: will he and his party support this motion and thus express the Conservatives' full and complete confidence in Elections Canada?

Second, my colleague, the leader of the Bloc and member for Laurier—Sainte-Marie, was not here to hear all the wonderful comments about his achievements and the files he has worked on on behalf of the party. I remind members that when the minister was talking about a high-speed train and all kinds of other things, it had nothing to do with today's debate.

Third, he mentioned that the Prime Minister was someone who kept his word. I would tell him that in 2001, when the Prime Minister was the president of the National Citizens Coalition, he harshly criticized the Chief Electoral Officer, accusing him of being a perfect politician who was able to give answers to questions no one was asking.

In conclusion, I will once again ask the question I asked the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities today during question period, for which he did not even bother to rise. I hope this time he will. Did he see the email that was sent to him by Michael Donison, the organizer of the Conservative Fund Canada, on December 19, 2005?

●(1555)

[English]

TABLING OF DOCUMENTS

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. Earlier today, the hon. member for Ottawa—Vanier asked that I table in the House the affidavit of Mr. Geoff Donald. I am rising to seek unanimous consent to table that document right now.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): Is there unanimous consent?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[Translation]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—ELECTIONS CANADA

The House resumed consideration of the motion.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): The hon. member for Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord.

Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, that is quite the tactic.

Does the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities acknowledge receiving an email from Michael Donison on December 19, 2005, with the subject line, "Quebec candidate, media buy", in which the scheme to be used is explained, whereby the party would exceed the national electoral spending ceilings?

I would like the minister to answer this question that he did not deign to answer today during oral question period.

Hon. Lawrence Cannon (Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my hon. colleague questioned the relevance of my speech in this House. In my opinion, we have provided ample proof of our relevance regarding this. I indicated a number of times in my speech that we would oppose the Bloc Québécois motion.

While we are asking questions, I would ask my hon. colleague why the leader of the Bloc Québécois did not answer the questions asked of him today regarding why the Bloc transferred some \$700,000 to local candidates during the 2006 election and billed them for more than \$800,000? During the election in 2004, the Bloc did exactly the same thing and transferred \$1.5 million to its candidates, its local candidates. It invoiced more than \$930,000.

I will close by telling my hon. colleague that we understand the Elections Act. Based on that understanding, we applied the measures that we thought were within the provisions of that legislation.

Business of Supply

The Chief Electoral Officer has a different version, which is why the courts will have to settle the matter. It is not the Bloc Québécois member, who can explain his own strategy here today. I invite him to explain himself—he did not wish to do so before a parliamentary committee—before the courts, if he thinks it a good idea.

We chose that path because it is the most proper path. It is the path of principles. This government and this political party continue and will always continue to obey the rules.

Ms. Louise Thibault (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, Ind.): Mr. Speaker, last Sunday, during an interview on the program *Les coulisses du pouvoir*, the minister answered questions from the interviewer, Mr. Lessard, by saying that none of the payments for advertisements involved taxpayers' money.

I would like to give him this opportunity to clarify or amend his thinking. Given that the expenses of any candidate, of any political stripe, qualify for a reimbursement of 60%—of taxpayers' money, we all agree—if that candidate receives 10% of the votes, would the minister now like to correct the information he gave and that his colleague, whose name and constituency I have forgotten, the one who has just tabled a document, repeated yesterday by saying that it was no big deal because it was not taxpayers' money?

I am offended, on behalf of the people I represent, to hear such misinformation.

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: Mr. Speaker, my honourable colleague knows perfectly well that the monies used, and that I was referring to during that interview, had been raised for and on behalf of the Conservative Party.

An hon. member: Oh, Oh!

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: The language used by my colleague from the Bloc Québécois, calling it dirty money, is completely inappropriate. He knows full well that those sums of money, used to fund our campaign at both local and national level, were legitimately raised under the legislation that governs the financing of political parties. That is what I was referring to specifically.

I still have had no answer from the Bloc Québécois about the transfer that was made from national to local level and from local to national level. I would like to hear what they have to say.

An hon. member: Oh, Oh!

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: I hear him yapping. Perhaps he could rise in his place and provide appropriate answers to this House.

•(1600)

[*English*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): There are one and a half minutes left. The hon. member for Peace River has 30 seconds to ask his question.

Mr. Chris Warkentin (Peace River, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in 30 seconds we cannot get to the root of this issue. The Bloc Québécois wants us to say that we have full and complete confidence in Elections Canada, and yet continually we have seen a litany of problems within Elections Canada. I take members back to the 2004 election campaign. That was the election campaign when Paul

Martin's face was on every single Liberal candidate's election sign from coast to coast—

Mr. Marcel Proulx: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. The hon. member is not allowed to mention a sitting member's full name. The one that he just mentioned, from LaSalle—Émard, is a sitting member.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): If I can have order for one moment, there is only one member standing here and it is this member. The hon. member for Peace River will sit for a moment.

I have, on a number of occasions, over the last two years invited all members not to name members of this House by their name but rather by title or by the name of their constituency. I am sure that the hon. member for Peace River, although he is a rookie like I am, will follow that rule. He has 10 seconds left of his 30 seconds.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: Mr. Speaker, I will take 10 seconds to apologize to the Liberal members over there for having selected that member as their leader. Obviously, their fortunes failed as—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): The Minister of Transport has the floor for 30 seconds.

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: Quite quickly, Mr. Speaker, for 30 seconds let me give the House another example of what I am talking about when I talk about the Bloc Québécois.

Christine Émond Lapointe was my opponent in the Pontiac riding for the Bloc Québécois. A total of \$17,700 was sent to the candidate in invoices on January 1, 2006. A cheque from the Bloc Québécois to the candidate for \$17,800 was deposited on May 17, 2006. A cheque from the candidate to the Bloc to pay for the invoices dated May 4, 2006 was cashed May 25, 10 days after the Bloc—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): Resuming debate. The hon. member for Berthier—Maskinongé.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Guy André (Berthier—Maskinongé, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the hon. member for Sherbrooke, Serge Cardin.

I am pleased to rise today to speak to the Bloc Québécois motion inviting the House of Commons to express “its full and complete confidence in Elections Canada and the Commissioner of Canada Elections”. The motion introduced by my colleague, the hon. member for Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, has proven necessary because the Elections Canada investigation shows that this government has very little in the way of morals and ethics.

Indeed, while the Conservatives were campaigning vigorously on the need to clean up the government, it appears that they deliberately violated election laws in the hopes of convincing voters to place their trust in them.

As you can see, I will address the motion, unlike the member who spoke previously. I would say that the motion we are debating here today is especially necessary because, ever since this government has been under investigation, the Conservatives have been trying to undermine the credibility and integrity of Elections Canada using attacks that are dishonest and misguided.

Business of Supply

These attacks are very serious and demonstrate this government's lack of transparency on the issue. They are serious because they are an attack on the very principle of democracy. In any democracy, the concept of free and honest elections is a fundamental principle. I am not referring only to the right to vote, but also to the rules that establish and enable free, democratic and honest elections.

There are many of these rules; for example, they govern contributions to political parties, in order to avoid having wealthy people and corporations fund a candidate's election campaign, thereby buying an MP who will look out for their individual or corporate interests instead of the interests of all citizens.

There also are rules setting election spending limits. These rules exist to prevent giving one candidate an advantage because he is able to spend more than his opponents and plaster his riding with his party advertisements.

In democratic societies, an election cannot be bought. There are rules, and they must be followed. This government did not do so during the last election. For these rules to work, they must be enforced by an organization that operates independently of the government. In Quebec, the Chief Electoral Officer of Quebec is responsible for this. For federal elections, it is Elections Canada.

In a democracy, the government does not interpret and enforce election legislation. The organization that oversees elections must remain absolutely independent of the government. What the Conservative Party is trying to do now is to control this institution. Elections Canada reports directly to Parliament so that it is protected from any pressure from the government.

Confidence in Elections Canada, the independent organization that oversees federal elections, is completely indispensable. But in response to the overwhelming arguments made by Elections Canada, the Conservatives want to hide all these allegations. We saw that in the remarks of the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, who completely avoided discussing this motion.

• (1605)

We can understand that the Conservatives are embarrassed about their actions. Not only did they come up with a fraudulent scheme in order to claim rebates to which they were not entitled, but now instead of admitting guilt and cooperating with Elections Canada representatives, they have decided to attack the credibility of Elections Canada for blatantly partisan purposes.

They have chosen confrontation, which has forced Elections Canada to take extraordinary action in asking the RCMP to go to Conservative Party headquarters to access incriminating documents.

In these irregularities under the Canada Elections Act—an unfortunate matter for parliamentary democracy—we now know that the Conservative Party, during the 2006 election campaign, transferred funds and invoices from the party to some candidates in order to get around spending limits. In return, the candidates having agreed to take part in this scheme became eligible for up to a 60% rebate from Elections Canada. This scheme likely allowed the party to exceed the limit for that election by more than \$1 million.

The Conservatives are now claiming that they are being unfairly attacked by Elections Canada. They are going so far as to talk about

retaliation by Elections Canada, saying that the organization is seeking revenge for the Conservative Party's lawsuit on behalf of the dozens of candidates who were denied rebates for election expenses.

This argument does not hold water for anyone who is informed. In fact, let us admit that the Elections Canada investigation is revealing in a number of ways.

During the election campaign this party declared the importance of and need for cleaning up government, but we have just heard a speech by a minister who is quite simply denying that there is any form of retaliation against Elections Canada.

The Conservatives got elected in 2006 by maintaining that they would be the best party to change the culture of patronage criticized by Justice Gomery. We all remember that. Now, two years later, that same Justice Gomery is criticizing the actions of the Conservatives.

In addition to the irregularities under the Canada Elections Act, we could also talk about the contracts awarded to cronies. For example, the Minister of Finance has acknowledged granting—without calling for tenders—a \$122,000 contract to Hugh MacPhie, a former Mike Harris aide. We could list many other cases of political interference in favour of cronies or for partisan appointments.

As we saw in the Flaherty and Cadman cases—

• (1610)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): I regret that I must interrupt the hon. member, but I have already had to call out a government member for naming other members. This is the second time that the hon. member has done this in a short speech. I raised this point not even ten minutes ago.

I would therefore ask the hon. member that he be so kind as to not do so again, at least not for the rest of today.

Mr. Guy André: Mr. Speaker, your comment is noted.

I will close by stating that we in the Bloc Québécois, along with all members here in this House I hope, cannot accept the government's attacks on Elections Canada. Such attacks are a blot on democracy.

So, in the name of democracy, I call upon all members to vote in favour of this motion in order to reiterate our full and complete confidence in Elections Canada as an impartial, neutral and essential arbiter of the rules to ensure that the election process is democratic.

Mr. Steven Blaney (Lévis—Bellechasse, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have a question for my hon. colleague. I would like to inform him that, in his speech, he has misinformed the House because it has been demonstrated very clearly that the Conservative Party has cooperated fully and entirely with Elections Canada in order to clarify the interpretation of the legislation on election expenses.

It is very clear to those on this side that the Conservative Party is an open book, and if that information had been wanted, all they had to do was come and get it — there was no need of strong-arm tactics.

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We are an open book, but is the Bloc Québécois prepared to open up its books? A parliamentary committee wanted to address this, and we said that there was no problem, that we were opening our books, that we wanted to be transparent and accountable.

Who was it that refused? The colleagues in the Bloc Québécois are refusing to open their books. Do they have something to hide? The Bloc Québécois transferred \$1.5 million to candidates. It even invoiced its candidates.

My question for my colleague is very clear: does the Bloc Québécois have something to hide from its constituents and from the Canadian taxpayer? On this side of the floor, we are an open book, and proud of the results we have achieved for Quebeckers since we were elected.

• (1615)

Mr. Guy André: Mr. Speaker, I enjoyed listening to my colleague's comments. However, I am somewhat disappointed because he knows very well that at present—it has been said several times—the election expenses of all Liberal, Bloc and NDP members have been reimbursed in full by the Chief Electoral Officer.

The only remaining problem concerns some members of the Conservative Party who have not been reimbursed. I imagine that their expenses were not in accordance with the rules and as required by Elections Canada. The Bloc Québécois and the members present were reimbursed for 2004 and 2006 election expenses, which is quite simply not the case for the Conservative Party.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): The member for Chambly—Borduas has the floor. I would like to simply point out that he has two minutes remaining; if he takes one minute for the question, there will be one minute for the answer.

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): It is very kind of you, Mr. Speaker to provide this information. Thank you for that.

First, I would like to congratulate my colleague on the clarity of his remarks. We know that the opposition parties that form the majority in this House are not being investigated by Elections Canada.

The Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities asked a number of questions in this House that had nothing to do with today's motion. I will ask my colleague some questions about this motion.

Can he tell us who is presently being investigated by Elections Canada? Who is being accused of using the in and out scheme? Who is being accused of submitting false invoices? Who was and is still being investigated by the RCMP? Who did not receive Elections Canada approval for the reimbursement of their campaign expenses?

Does my colleague believe that, in ridings such as Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, Louis-Hébert and Beauport—Limoulu, where the Conservatives won by a few hundred votes, money was spent improperly on the election and that this may have influenced the result of the vote such that, today, these members are in this House?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): The member for Berthier—Maskinongé has 30 seconds to reply to a question that took a minute and a half.

Mr. Guy André: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for all of his questions. I will answer the first one: who are the people Elections Canada is after? The party that campaigned in Quebec in 2006 and said that it was clean. It promised to be very transparent in managing affairs of state—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): Resuming debate. The hon. member for Sherbrooke.

Mr. Serge Cardin (Sherbrooke, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to rise in the House today to speak to the following motion: "That the House express its full and complete confidence in Elections Canada and the Commissioner of Canada Elections". Not only do I support this motion, I personally champion it. I am championing this motion because I audited various candidates' election reports many times over the years.

I also did several stints as official agent for candidates for many years. That gave me opportunities to deal with and talk to auditors from the Chief Electoral Officer's office. I found them to be competent, professional and independent.

It seems that all of these dealings were very discreet. However, when I found out about it through the media, and through the actions of the Chief Electoral Officer, of course, I wanted to make up my own mind. I wanted my opinion to be well structured and based on facts.

In all honesty and sincerity, I am saying that the Chief Electoral Officer is right to ask these questions. Furthermore, of course he needed documentation to confirm any doubts that could remain after the Conservatives' reports had been examined. What is more, Mr. Caldwell's remarks led me to go and look deeper. Mr. Caldwell, remember, was a candidate in Compton—Stanstead against a colleague of mine who was elected without manipulating the elections laws. Mr. Caldwell claims that he trusted the party leadership when he agreed to funds being deposited into the local organization's account. He said "The money was intended for local advertising, but it was not used that way."

Clearly, that was certainly not done everywhere. I felt obliged to check two candidates at least: I looked into one in more depth, and the investigation on the other is on-going. The first is the Conservative candidate in the riding of Sherbrooke. I can mention his name because, obviously, he was not elected. He is Marc Nadeau. There is also the person who, at the time, was the Conservative candidate in Mégantic—L'Érable, now a member of this House. We can see that some large transfers were made.

In the case of Marc Nadeau, the candidate in Sherbrooke, we see a transfer of \$57,531.46 that came from the Conservative Fund Canada. When we look at the financial report of the 2006 election campaign, under the heading "media advertising", we see \$51,566.46 in advertising expenses.

We know full well that when we pay election expenses—this case gets worse—we normally make a cheque out to the person or organization to whom the money is to go. There is then a confirmation and a returned cheque and documents are available. In this case, it is worse because we clearly have the invoices. The first one was paid. In response to my colleague, our party whip, who spoke previously and who addressed the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, there is an invoice from the Conservative Fund Canada for *Candidate share of media buy*. There is one invoice for \$10,000 and a second invoice for \$41,566.46. However, when we read the bank statement that provides us with the information, we see that no cheque was issued.

• (1620)

There were, however, cash withdrawals. It appears that another Conservative candidate did a Mulroney and carried a briefcase containing \$51,000. We might ask ourselves all kinds of questions. Did the money make it to its destination? What happened? Did the party issue instructions to the effect that, whenever possible, people were supposed to make cash withdrawals and carry around the cash? What would anyone do today with \$51,000 in cash to pay bills? It was to pay the Conservative Fund Canada invoices. The money had to be given to it directly. Does one ask for a receipt?

Now the Conservatives are upset that we are presenting a motion calling on the House to reaffirm its confidence. I definitely have confidence in Elections Canada officials. I am convinced they will get to the bottom of this. It is clear that the Conservative Party did not want to hand over things like that. The RCMP had to go into their offices.

I am anxious to see how the matter plays out regarding the Conservative candidate in Sherbrooke. I still wonder if it was a Conservative Party directive.

The second part of my audit, although it is unfortunately not yet complete, nevertheless raised some interesting points. We were talking about \$51,000 in the first case. In that case, there were transfers from the Conservative Fund for \$40,000. There was a transfer from the riding to the Conservative Fund for \$23,000, an amount that was included in the advertising expenses. What could this possibly correspond to? Upon checking the other expenses, we see that there were silkscreening expenses. That was probably for signs, at least those that were paid for. It is impossible to know exactly what is going on.

We do know one thing, though: the populations of the two ridings are similar. Let us start from the following premise: one person, one vote, one expense, that expense being the national spending limit for the Conservative Party. But the Conservatives exceeded that limit. They decided to divide their spending among specific ridings. The proof is that the expenses are different in two potentially identical ridings. For one, it is \$51,000, while for the other, it is \$23,000. The money was therefore not allocated according to the number of voters. Even worse, that gave the Conservative Party even more flexibility, because it had reached the limit.

If the Conservative Party had wanted to make the ridings pay for national expenses, it would have acted properly and divided the expense among all 308 ridings, according to the number of voters. It did not do this. All the Conservatives wanted to do was use their

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surplus and keep on paying the expenses they had incurred. It is obvious.

I repeat that I have the utmost confidence in the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer, the auditors and the investigators. I cannot wait to see what will come out of the investigation. I am especially anxious to find out what happened to the briefcase containing \$51,000 in cash. Was it a party directive? These are likely some of the things we will learn.

Moreover, candidates can claim a rebate of 60% on these amounts spent over and above the election spending limit. The Conservative Party hoped to receive 60% of these expenses. What is happening to democracy?

The Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities mentioned that he was going to vote against the motion. Is it because he has no confidence? No, it is because the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer does not want to accept the incorrect interpretation made by the Conservative Party. It is easy to discuss interpretations, but in this case, the supporting documents will clearly show that the Conservative Party issued a directive in order to exceed the election spending limit, in addition to being reimbursed with taxpayers' money.

We must not forget this principle: one person, one vote, one expense—not two.

• (1625)

[*English*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): It is my duty pursuant to Standing Order 38 to inform the House that the questions to be raised tonight at the time of adjournment are as follows: the hon. member for Pickering—Scarborough East, Foreign Affairs; the hon. member for Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine, Fisheries.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Christian Ouellet (Brome—Missisquoi, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I congratulate my colleague from Sherbrooke for the clarity of his remarks. From start to finish, he stuck to today's subject, unlike the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities. I congratulate him.

I would like to know if the hon. member for Sherbrooke is aware of the fact that a Conservative candidate in my riding refused \$30,000 from the Conservatives' national office in the last election. I am not making it up; it is in all the papers this week.

The candidate was Mr. Marler. I can say his name because he was not elected. I was pleased that I beat him. He is a lawyer. He knows the law and he is a man of integrity. He refused the \$30,000 and because of this was thrown out of the Conservative Party. He did not even attend the most recent nomination meeting.

I would like to know if my colleague is aware of other unfortunate candidates like him who were honest enough to refuse such money. If they were honest and were thrown out, does my colleague believe that there is a plot to force candidates to accept money from the Conservatives' national office?

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•(1630)

Mr. Serge Cardin: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague for his question. I have not toured all the ridings in the region and in Quebec, but Mr. Caldwell was clear. It would seem—and I have no reason to doubt him—that the directive was that money would be sent for local expenses. What candidate could refuse substantial help from the party? Nonetheless, he realized this was not the case, that it was not for local expenses, but for national expenses. The Conservatives could not assign those expenses nationally because they had reached and exceeded the spending limit.

Mr. Caldwell says that is when he filed his report. In the end he paid back the money. If it was not for local expenses then it was for national expenses in a context where it was impossible to accept because that was not allowed. The Conservative Party did indirectly what it could not do directly. It went through the back door.

If the auditors had not paid particular attention to this matter, we would never have known. This insults the Conservatives to no end. They are not in control. They call it a matter of interpretation. They are going to battle against the Chief Electoral Officer because they think there was a misinterpretation.

In light of the few little invoices I referred to earlier, this makes sense. Obviously those invoices correspond to money that was spent. They do not correspond to local advertising expenses. They do not correspond to the allocation per constituent. I have said it before and I will say it again, this may be a hobby horse but in my view, it is one person, one elector, one vote, one expense. Nonetheless, in some regions, the Conservatives tried to multiply the expenses by two for the national level because they were unable to cut the expenses they had incurred. The expenses had been incurred well in advance and once they are incurred there needs to be a scheme to get out of that situation in order to save face. Were they aware of what would happen? I believe that someone somewhere knew. They tried this scheme and then it was made public.

Again, I am reaffirming my confidence in the Chief Electoral Officer.

[*English*]

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak to the Bloc motion in the House today which is expressing confidence in Elections Canada and the Commissioner of Canada Elections.

I know that Canadians from coast to coast to coast are well aware of the important role that Elections Canada plays here in what we openly call a fair and democratic process. Canadians are well aware of the fact that Elections Canada plays a critical role not only in general elections but in byelections, in referenda, and certainly in the administering of the political provisions of the Canada Elections Act. Part of its role is to monitor compliance and to enforce electoral legislation. That is a role that Canadians feel confident that Elections Canada is able to perform to a very high standard.

In the event that one thinks that is just something that comes from Canadians and politicians, we are also known on the international stage for the good work that Elections Canada does and in fact there was a report after the 2006 election that talked about the role of

Elections Canada and generally on the conduct of elections in Canada.

The report was done under the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, also referred as ODIHR. Part of its role is to assist participating states to ensure full respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, to abide by the rule of law, to promote principles of democracy, and to build, strengthen and protect democratic institutions as well as promote tolerance throughout society.

Certainly, one of the ways that we protect democratic institutions is to ensure that political parties that engage in the political process follow the rules. That is a very important part of ensuring a democratic process that people respect and have confidence in.

The ODIHR website talks about the fact that it coordinates and organizes the deployment of thousands of observers every year to assess whether elections in the OSCE area are in line with national legislation and international standards. The office's democratization activities include the following thematic areas: rule of law, civil society, freedom of movement and gender equality.

The ODIHR sent an election assessment mission to the parliamentary elections in Canada on January 23, 2006 and of course there was an extensive report. I want to touch on a couple of points that highlight the fact that not only nationally but internationally Elections Canada is well respected for its ability to conduct elections and to enforce legislation.

The election assessment mission met with officials, candidates and representatives of civil society in order to get an overview of the election process and of specific legislative and administrative issues, and of course there were many things that it looked at but I want to quote specifically from its executive summary. It said:

The legal framework, especially the Canada Elections Act, provides a sound basis for the conduct of democratic elections. However, consideration should be given to enhance the right of domestic non-partisan and international observers to observe all stages of the electoral process, in order for the relevant legislation to be in line with OSCE commitments. In addition, the mechanism for appointment of Returning Officers who are in effect appointed by the party in government, as well as a review of legal provisions that limit the rights of non-citizens to participate in the campaign, could be considered.

The elections were administered by the Chief Electoral Officer and Elections Canada in a professional manner and according to procedures which enjoy the overall trust of candidates and voters.

So, this assessment was a fairly sound endorsement of the credibility of Elections Canada and it had the support not only of the political parties and their representatives but also of non-government organizations. Further on in the report it talked about the fact that:

Interlocutors from political parties stated that election officers' positions are no longer deemed as relevant as in the past due to the overall high level of confidence in Elections Canada.

It went on and said that it was consistent with the existing high level of overall confidence in Elections Canada.

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We have here an international body, independent observers, who talk about the importance of Elections Canada's work, about the overall trust and confidence that Canadians have in it, that it is an important process, that it is fair and transparent.

● (1635)

It recommends a few minor changes, including the ability of international observers to participate in the process, but, overall, I think this international assessment gives a high mark to Elections Canada in the performance of its duties.

The Bloc motion, in asking this House to state its confidence in Elections Canada and the commissioner, is well placed. I would anticipate that the members in this House would have little difficulty in supporting that motion of confidence.

I want to turn to another matter and this is partly what was raised in this overview of what the international agency could look at. One of the things that it talked about was gender equality. I would argue that it is quite unfortunate that what we are not debating today are some issues around gender equality. What we are not debating today in this House is cleaning up politics by demanding changes in ethics and accountability.

This is from a paper that Ed Broadbent, the former member from Ottawa Centre, put together. Part of the reason we are having this discussion is that there still are problems with ethics and accountability, whether real or perceived, and the fact that we have Elections Canada alleging that the Conservative Party conspired to construct a scheme in an attempt to exceed the central campaign spending limit in the last federal election and that devising such a scheme is illegal is an issue.

I want to turn briefly to this good document that Ed Broadbent put together. Unfortunately, he put it together prior to the last election in 2006. It looked like we were going to have some movement from the then Liberal government but at the last minute it backed out of the agreement to move forward with this. Under the Conservative government we have seen no move to actually look at serious, open, transparent electoral reform.

I want to touch on a couple of points in this paper because part of the reason we are having this conversation in the House today is because of that lack of trust. Mr. Broadbent put forward some very concrete suggestions and I will not go through them all but I want to highlight a couple of them. He said that Canadians were demanding changes in ethics and in accountability. He said that they wanted a strong Canada resting on ethically based, democratic institutions and that they wanted honesty, fairness and transparency to be the rule, not the exception in political life.

I certainly know from being in my riding of Nanaimo—Cowichan which, unfortunately, is one of those 67 ridings where these allegations took place. Many people are very disappointed that this kind of activity would take place here today in Canada. They call on all political parties to ensure that kind of action does not tarnish the perception that Canada has a very good electoral system.

In this paper, Mr. Broadbent talked about a number of issues, one being democratic accountability for MPs. We know that the member for Sackville—Eastern Shore has a private member's bill saying that when a member chooses to no longer represent the political party for

which he or she was elected, that person would sit as an independent, at the least, and, at the best possible scenario, the person would resign his or her seat which would trigger a byelection so the people in the riding would have a choice as to who will represent them. If someone ran for one particular party and, for whatever reason, the person abdicated that position, he or she should go back to the electorate to give them a choice about who should represent them.

He talked about fixed election dates, for which we now have legislation, and that is certainly progress. He talked about transparent leadership contests. One of the recommendations is that we should set spending limits and transparency conditions on leadership contests with political parties. We recently had a Liberal leadership contest. I am sure in the years to come we will have other party leadership contests. That would be a very important statement and commitment that political parties could make to ensuring transparency, openness and accountability within a party process.

He talked about electoral reform, which is something New Democrats have talked about for a number of years. The first past the post system does not reflect how the voters voted. It unfairly eliminates some people's choice. There are any number of reports that have talked about the importance of electoral reform.

● (1640)

I want to quote a bit from this paper, which states:

Ninety percent of the world's democracies, including Australia, New Zealand, Scotland, Ireland and Wales have abandoned or significantly modified the pre-democratic British system that still prevails in Ottawa. As the Canadian Law Commission recommended and five provinces seem to agree, fairness means we need a mixed electoral system that combines individual constituency-based MPs with proportional representation. The global evidence is clear: only such a system would positively redress the existing imbalance in the House of Commons in gender, ethnic, ideological and regional voting preferences.

I will touch on that again in a moment when I talk about the lack of gender representation in the House.

The report goes on to also talk about ending unregulated lobbying. The accountability act took some very small steps, but we know there is certainly more work that needs to be done around lobbying. It states:

Unregulated lobbying and political cronyism must end: We need tougher laws requiring disclosure of fees and expenditures of lobbyists. We also need to make illegal the acceptance of contingency or profit-based fees.

New Democrats, led by the member for Winnipeg Centre, certainly have talked about the very real and urgent need to make sure that lobbyists do not have unfair access to government.

On ethical appointments, again, we have pushed hard for changes in the appointment process. We see that cronyism continues. The report states:

Government appointments: Unfair and unethical patronage practice must stop in the appointments of thousands of officials to federal agencies, boards, commissions and Crown Corporations. The New Democratic Party proposes that the government develop skills and competence-related criteria for all government appointments, that these criteria be publicly released and that committees scrutinize appointments.

This would seem like a reasonable step to make sure that we are getting the best possible candidates for some of these very important appointments. We would look forward to further discussions in terms of changing this political patronage that abounds in this country.

Business of Supply

On access to information, I know that over these last two years probably many members in this House have struggled to get information out of the government. What we have seen is delay after delay. Some of us have been forced into filing complaints because we cannot get access to information, but then we will get hundreds of pages that are blanked out. I might add that we get charged for the hundreds of page that are blanked out.

That is not what the Conservative government ran on. When we are talking about accountability, transparency and ethical behaviour, we would expect that the mandate should be to provide as much information as possible to Canadians, not to delete as much information as possible.

On access to information, there were a couple of key points that Mr. Broadbent raised as part of his ethics and accountability package. He said in regard to access to information that we should extend the act to "Crown corporations and agencies previously excluded"; make "ministers of the Crown, their exempt staffs and officers of parliament subject to the Act"; bring "Cabinet confidences under the Act"; establish "the principles that records be provided without unreasonable barriers as to time and cost" and provide "a government institution with the discretion to provide them free of charge to users who request them in the public interest".

We see a number of areas where we are simply failing to provide to Canadians the open and transparent government they expect. They do not expect to have to jump through so many hoops to get very simple information.

I had a case around the gold digger clause. It involved a veteran who served his country. The so-called gold digger clause was an archaic piece of legislation back in the early 1900s. There is no good reason why that particular clause has not been eliminated.

When we attempted to get information such as briefing notes, documents or whatever, we got the runaround for weeks and weeks on end. Finally, we were told that the information had been moved into the Privy Council Office where it was no longer available to us. Mostly, this piece of information affects older men and their new spouses.

• (1645)

Some of them are getting to the age where they simply are running out of time to deal with it. Instead, it has been stall, denial, delay in terms of getting the simplest of answers about whether the government is considering changing that legislation.

It also saddens me today because there are many other issues we should be debating in the House of Commons. Over the last several months, one forestry-related company after another has closed in my riding. Hundreds of jobs have been lost over the last six months. That should be the topic of conversation in the House, not whether the Conservatives allegedly tried to spend more money nationally than they were entitled to spend. That should not be the topic of conversation here.

We should be talking about a national forestry strategy. We should be talking about the fact that communities are reeling from closures. We heard today in the House about another auto plant closing down. We heard about another plant in Listowel closing down. A pulp and

paper mill in my riding is in serious trouble because of the number of sawmill closures in the riding.

I will quote from an article in the *Vancouver Sun* on Saturday, April 12. The headline reads "Mill closures force firm to get sawdust from U.S.". It says:

Catalyst's search for fibre south of the border comes at a time when coastal mills are shutting down and timber companies are selling their logs by the bargeload to the Americans.

Catalyst needs sawdust to make a short-fibre pulp at its Elk Falls mill near Campbell River. But there are no longer enough lumber mills on the West Coast producing sawdust. Since 2002, at least 21 coastal mills have closed.

Campbell River is not in my riding, but there is a mill in Crofton.

The article goes on to say:

B.C. exported half a million cubic metres of logs from Crown lands in 2007, according to the Ministry of Forests. Private land exports are even higher. TimberWest alone shipped 489,000 cubic metres of logs to the U.S., and 521,000 cubic metres to Japan.

Later on in the article it states:

—the fibre crisis for pulp companies is a direct consequence of the decline in importance of the coastal sawmilling sector.

From that article one might presume that there are actually no trees left to cut. That is simply not true. Our coastal forestry sector is reeling from a lack of a comprehensive strategy. The provincial government certainly has a role to play here, but so does the federal government.

We call on the House to not spend its time talking about schemes and lack of trust in the political process, but instead spend its time talking about some of the real issues that are facing our communities such as rising gas prices, lack of housing, lack of child care, or waiting lists in health care.

I want to talk about the Ladysmith sawmill that closed indefinitely, and I will quote from an article in the *Ladysmith Chronicle* of April 22, 2008:

Economic downturn in the U.S. and the resulting forest industry crisis in Canada has claimed yet another island mill.

Forty people were told they're out of work Friday when Western Forest Products announced the indefinite closure of their last production line at the Ladysmith sawmill.

Those 40 are in addition to the 110 who were laid off earlier.

The articles goes on to talk about what people will to replace these jobs. It states:

—with the state of the forest industry being what it is, "the chances of these people finding jobs in the industry is nil."

"There's a ton of frustration."

Anybody who has been paying attention to the economics in the United States would know that what happens there will have an impact on us in Canada, particularly for provinces like British Columbia, which has a significant trade relationship with the United States. It is like the train at the end of the tunnel that everybody has seen coming forever, but we have done nothing about it. Instead, hundreds of jobs have been lost in my riding. We heard today thousands of jobs have been lost in other ridings.

Business of Supply

I fully support the Bloc motion around expressing confidence in Elections Canada and in the commissioner. I hope that when the House finishes voting on this motion today, it could turn its attention to some of the very serious manufacturing and forestry sector job losses facing our country and deal with some of the serious issues that really impact people in their communities each and every day.

A lot of what we are talking about today simply is not on the agenda of people who are struggling about whether they are going to be able to pay their rent.

• (1650)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Mr. Speaker, first of all, I would like to congratulate my colleague for her speech, which was quite timely under the circumstances. Above all, she reminds us that we must be vigilant and concerned about our democracy.

We often teach other countries about democracy. We even send our soldiers to other countries to defend or establish democracy, when in our own country there is sometimes some quite questionable or reprehensible behaviour.

I would like to know what her party thinks about the fact that the Conservatives, who are being investigated by Elections Canada and whose offices were searched by the RCMP, won in some ridings by a few hundred votes. Now the legitimacy of the voting results is being called into question.

Also, I would like to know what she thinks about the Conservative strategy to place the blame on the other parties, which have not been singled out by Elections Canada. What does her party think about this, and how should we react to such a situation?

• (1655)

[*English*]

Ms. Jean Crowder: Mr. Speaker, I do not feel I am in a position to speculate about whether seats would have changed based on what was alleged overspending, but it tarnishes the reputation of all politicians in the House when Canadians see an attempt to subvert the regulation.

It is also disappointing that the Conservatives, rather than taking a hard look at their own behaviour, are attempting to deflect it on to other parties. We need to let Elections Canada and that process play itself out in an open and transparent way so Canadians can get to the bottom of it.

There are very serious allegations about the scheme in an attempt to exceed national spending limits. We need to let Elections Canada do its job and have all Canadians hear the outcome of that.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure for me to stand in this place today and talk to this issue. What we have heard here today and we have heard over the course of the last number of months, both in and outside of the House, is a lot of commentary by members of the opposition parties, and that commentary, and this motion in fact, is nothing more than political posturing and political rhetoric.

That is to be expected. We all understand this is a political place, that many times members of the opposition will raise questions or raise objections for strictly partisan reasons, and this issue really fits that bill. As we have seen time and time again in this place, members particularly of the official opposition, members of the Liberal Party, try to create scandals where no scandal exists. The same thing can be said for this issue.

We have heard today, and we have heard over the course of the last number of weeks, a number of arguments raised by members of the opposition, which they say demonstrate the Conservative Party did in some fashion break electoral laws. I will take a number of those arguments, raised both by members of the opposition and by Elections Canada itself, speak to them and try to demonstrate to the House that those arguments are completely unfounded and baseless.

The first argument is that the Conservative Party somehow overspent the national advertising limit by transferring money to local campaigns and those campaigns then ran national ads. The argument then goes that the national ad that was run in a local riding should not be considered a local ad at all, that it should be considered a national ad, which would mean the Conservative Party overspent its limit.

First, as we heard here today, that is entirely false. Local candidates can choose to run ads that help get them elected. They can determine whether they want to run a national ad promoting the party, the prime minister or national policies if they feel it is in their best interest for their electoral success, or they can run an ad strictly locally, promoting themselves as the local candidate and perhaps on local issues.

However, it is their choice, and that is not only an opinion that I share, but it is stated in candidates' handbooks, printed by Elections Canada, which give clear guidelines to all candidates in elections. In that handbook it says quite clearly that candidates have the option of running either local messages or national messages. It is their choice. The only caveat is that if they choose to run a national ad, they tag it appropriately by saying "authorized by the official agent on behalf of", and then the name of the candidate.

This is quite common. All political parties have done exactly the same thing time and time again.

Hon. Maria Minna: No, we have not.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: I hear members of the opposition saying, "No we don't". We have given example after example of how they did. In fact, in the procedure and House affairs committee, of which I am a member, I spoke at great length, giving examples of all political parties that engaged in the same practice. During my presentation, I took great pains to point out that there was absolutely nothing wrong with the practices of the other parties. They engaged in the same practices we did, but there is nothing wrong with that because it is allowed by Elections Canada.

I will give one example, only because my hon. colleague from the New Democratic Party, who spoke just prior to my presentation, was in some fashion again saying that the Conservative Party had done something wrong. I want to quote yet another example and put it into the record of an action taken by a member of the New Democratic Party, the member for Vancouver East.

Business of Supply

● (1700)

I am going to quote from an affidavit that we tabled not only in the House today, but in Federal Court a number of months ago. It shows one more example of how, in this case the NDP, engaged in a similar practice.

This is paragraph 42 on page 18, for those who want to read along with me, and they are certainly welcome to do so. Let me read this:

With respect to the regional media buy set out at Exhibit 19, there is an invoice from the national office of the NDP to the official agent for [the member for Vancouver East's] campaign for "election period radio advertising paid by Federal Party", in the amount of \$2,612.00. The invoice was paid to the NDP national office by the local campaign by cheque dated March 31, 2006.

That same day, the local campaign received a transfer of funds from the NDP national office for \$2,600.00, almost the identical amount, in other words, the in and out.

This in and out nature is specifically set out in an email to the campaign from the NDP national office, which I will read in part. Again, this is an email from the national NDP office to the local riding association for the member for Vancouver East. This email from the national NDP office states, "the good news is that the federal party will transfer \$2,600 to the federal riding association as we agreed to pay for the ads".

The content of this ad is entirely national. This is a radio ad. I will read in part a copy of the ad:

After years of broken promises and corruption, the Liberals just don't deserve your vote.

Enough is enough—people work hard to pay their taxes.

Jack Layton and the NDP will work so we get the services we pay for. Fighting crime.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): Order. The hon. parliamentary secretary cannot do indirectly what he cannot do directly, so even when he is quoting articles, he should still use riding names or titles.

● (1705)

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, I will read it again, using the office of the member rather than the member's name. The leader of the NDP "and the party will work so we get the services we pay for: fighting crime, health care when we need it", et cetera.

The point is that the content of this ad was entirely national. It talked about the New Democratic Party position. It did not mention the local candidate whatsoever. It talked entirely of the national campaign and the party's policies. What we have is an example where the federal New Democratic Party paid \$2,600 to the local Vancouver East riding association to produce and run this ad. The riding association then repaid \$2,600 to the NDP national office. That is in and out and there is nothing wrong with that.

In addition of course, the Vancouver East riding association claimed for and received the rebate, 60% of that money, and there is nothing wrong with that. There is absolutely nothing wrong with that, but it points to the fact that the NDP certainly and all other parties have engaged in the same action that we did.

That brings me to the obvious question that members of the House have raised. It seems only the Conservative Party is being investigated, so that proves that it obviously did something wrong.

We ask the question why is the Conservative Party the only one? It is quite obvious that if all parties have engaged in the same practice but only one party is being investigated, there seems to be some lack of impartiality. I honestly ask the question as I do not know why that is and we would like to find out. In fact, that is why we have taken Elections Canada to court. We do not believe the interpretations made by Elections Canada with respect to this issue are correct or in fact are fair.

I would also point out to all members of this place who seem to think that if Elections Canada makes a ruling that it has to be correct because it is always right, that in fact, that is not right. We have heard time and time again over the last few days and certainly today that the Liberal member for Toronto Centre was initially refused rebate money from Elections Canada. He challenged that ruling and was found that he was correct in his assessment that he should receive the rebate and Elections Canada was wrong in its interpretation.

Elections Canada is not always perfect. Because it makes an interpretation, because it makes a ruling, does not mean that we just turn a blind eye to it and say that although we disagree I guess we have no option but to accept its ruling. That is not the way these things work. We have seen demonstrated evidence that Elections Canada from time to time makes an error in judgment and we certainly believe that in this particular instance, an error has been made.

We have the ability as candidates to determine what is in our best interests when we are running in an election campaign. What would get me as a candidate elected? Would it be the popularity of the national party? Would it be the popularity of our party leader? Would it be some national issues that resonate well with constituents in my riding? Or would it be a campaign that focuses on myself, my background, my abilities and local and only local issues?

I would argue with anyone in the House that we have all faced that situation time and time again in previous elections. We have made determinations whether we believe it is best to run a national ad in content, national in scope or whether it would be in the best interests of our electoral success to run a local ad. However, the issue is not whether Elections Canada makes that determination. Quite clearly, the handbook for all candidates that we read, that we examined in previous elections, states without equivocation that the choice is up to the candidate. He or she determines what ads would best serve his or her political purposes, his or her election campaign to give the candidate the best opportunity to be elected to this place.

● (1710)

The argument that local candidates running national ads somehow violates election law is absolutely incorrect and is a false interpretation by anyone who chooses to raise that argument.

I also point out a couple of other facts that have been raised here today that are absolutely integral to our argument with Elections Canada.

Business of Supply

One is that the transfers between a national party and local candidates somehow constitute an illegal activity, that if a national party gives money to a local candidate who then runs a national ad, it should be considered national advertising. That is simply not true. That has been documented not only in the returns of all candidates from all parties for the last number of years, but also in the candidates' handbook, which I referred to.

I only have a few moments left, but I do want to answer a question raised by my hon. colleague from Hull—Aylmer several times today. He referred to an example in his own riding of Hull—Aylmer, and said that the local Conservative candidate in the 2006 election participated in the program, received a transfer of funds from the national Conservative Party, ended up running ads which the member for Hull—Aylmer said were national in content and then received a rebate. The question raised several times in the House was what happened to the approximately \$30,000 rebate? Was that given back to the national party?

I suppose the purpose of asking that question was to imply that somehow this was part of this deal that the national party would give money to local candidates, they would receive the rebate and then be forced to give the money back to the national party. It is absolutely false. There is no truth to that whatsoever.

Rebates received by local candidates can stay right there in their local riding association. There was never at any time any suggestion or requirement for the national party to have local candidates submit the rebates back to the national party. I hope that is straightforward enough to answer the question asked by my hon. colleague from Hull—Aylmer.

That points out to me that once again, members of the opposition are trying to cast spurious allegations and create some sort of aura that this all points to some illegal activity by members of the Conservative Party, not by coming out directly and stating that this was a fact, but by trying to somehow run around the end and suggest that in some fashion the Conservative Party has broken laws. This of course is absolutely not true.

We heard also earlier today examples of how the Liberal Party of Canada in the 2006 election paid over \$1.7 million in transfers to local candidates, who then ran ads at a national level and \$1.3 million was invoiced back. It was the same in and out scheme. I would suggest that proves without a doubt that not only have all parties engaged in the same practice, which we contend is perfectly legal, but there is only one party being unfairly singled out for engaging in the same activities.

That is why in the procedure and House affairs committee we were the party that brought forward a motion saying that we would gladly do a complete and exhaustive investigation of the spending practices of election money during election campaigns with one caveat and one caveat only, that we examine the practices of all four national parties. We were the only party that voted in favour of that motion. The other parties did not want to take part in that practice.

Mr. Speaker, I can see that my time is up. I thank all members very much for their time this afternoon.

● (1715)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): It being 5:15 p.m., it is my duty to interrupt the proceedings and put forthwith every question necessary to dispose of the business of supply.

The question is on the motion. Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): All those in favour of the motion will please say yea.

Some hon. members: Yea.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): All those opposed will please say nay.

Some hon. members: Nay.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): In my opinion the nays have it.

And five or more members having risen:

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): Call in the members.

● (1740)

[*Translation*]

(The House divided on the motion, which was agreed to on the following division:)

(*Division No. 93*)

YEAS

Members

Alghabra	André
Atamanenko	Bachand
Bains	Barbot
Barnes	Beaumier
Bélangier	Bell (Vancouver Island North)
Bell (North Vancouver)	Bellavance
Bennett	Bevilacqua
Bevington	Bigras
Black	Blaikie
Blais	Bonin
Bonsant	Boshcoff
Bouchard	Brison
Brown (Oakville)	Brunelle
Cardin	Carrier
Casey	Chan
Charlton	Chow
Christopherson	Crête
Crowder	Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley)
Cullen (Etobicoke North)	Cuzner
D'Amours	Davies
DeBellefeuille	Demers
Deschamps	Dewar
Dhaliwal	Dhalla
Dosanjh	Dryden
Duceppe	Easter
Eyking	Faille
Folco	Fry
Gagnon	Gaudet
Godfrey	Godin
Goodale	Gravel
Guarnieri	Guimond
Hall Findlay	Holland
Hubbard	Ignatieff
Jennings	Julian
Kadis	Karetak-Lindell

Private Members' Business

Karygiannis	Keeper
Laforest	Laframboise
Lavallée	Layton
LeBlanc	Lemay
Lessard	Lévesque
Lussier	MacAulay
Malhi	Malo
Maloney	Marleau
Marston	Martin (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca)
Martin (Winnipeg Centre)	Martin (LaSalle—Émard)
Martin (Sault Ste. Marie)	Mathysen
McCallum	McDonough
McGuinty	McGuire
McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood)	McTeague
Ménard (Hochelaga)	Ménard (Marc-Aurèle-Fortin)
Minna	Mourani
Murphy (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe)	Murphy (Charlottetown)
Murray	Nadeau
Nash	Neville
Ouellet	Pacetti
Paquette	Patry
Pearson	Perron
Picard	Plamondon
Priddy	Proulx
Rae	Ratansi
Redman	Regan
Rodriguez	Rota
Roy	Russell
Savage	Savoie
Scarpaleggia	Sgro
Siksay	Silva
Simard	Simms
St-Cyr	St. Amand
St. Denis	Stoffer
Szabo	Telegdi
Temelkovski	Thibault (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les
Basques)	
Thibault (West Nova)	Tonks
Turner	Valley
Vincent	Wasylcyia-Leis
Wilfert	Wilson
Wrzesnewskyj	Zed— 152

NAYS

Members

Abbott	Ablonczy
Albrecht	Allen
Allison	Ambrose
Anders	Anderson
Baird	Benoit
Bernier	Bezan
Blackburn	Blaney
Boucher	Breitkreuz
Brown (Leeds—Grenville)	Brown (Barrie)
Bruinooge	Calkins
Cannan (Kelowna—Lake Country)	Cannon (Pontiac)
Carrie	Casson
Clarke	Clement
Comuzzi	Cummins
Davidson	Day
Del Mastro	Devolin
Doyle	Dykstra
Emerson	Epp
Fast	Finley
Fitzpatrick	Flaherty
Fletcher	Galipeau
Gallant	Goldring
Goodyear	Gourde
Grewal	Guergis
Hanger	Harris
Harvey	Hawn
Hearn	Hiebert
Hill	Jean
Kamp (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge—Mission)	Keddy (South Shore—St. Margaret's)
Kenney (Calgary Southeast)	Khan
Komarnicki	Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings)
Lake	Lauzon
Lebel	Lemieux
Lukiwski	Lunn
Lunney	MacKay (Central Nova)
MacKenzie	Manning
Mark	Mays

Menzies	Merrifield
Miller	Mills
Moore (Port Moody—Westwood—Port Coquitlam)	
Moore (Fundy Royal)	
Norlock	O'Connor
Obhrai	Oda
Paradis	Petit
Poilievre	Prentice
Preston	Rajotte
Reid	Richardson
Ritz	Schellenberger
Shipley	Skelton
Smith	Solberg
Sorenson	Stanton
Storseth	Strahl
Sweet	Tilson
Toews	Trost
Tweed	Van Kesteren
Van Loan	Vellacott
Verner	Wallace
Warawa	Warkentin
Watson	Williams
Yelich— 117	

PAIRED

Members

Asselin	Batters
Bourgeois	Chong
Freeman	Guay
Hinton	Jaffier
Lalonde	Nicholson
Pallister	St-Hilaire
Thi Lac	Thompson (New Brunswick Southwest)— 14

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): I declare the motion carried.

[*English*]

It being 5:44 p.m., the House will now proceed to the consideration of private members' business as listed on today's order paper.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

● (1745)

[*English*]

UKRAINIAN FAMINE AND GENOCIDE MEMORIAL DAY ACT

Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake, CPC), seconded by the member for British Columbia Southern Interior, moved that Bill C-459, An Act to establish a Ukrainian Famine and Genocide Memorial Day and to recognize the Ukrainian Famine of 1932-33 as an act of genocide, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

He said: Mr. Speaker, this year Ukrainian Canadians, Ukrainians around the world, and the international community, will mark the 75th anniversary of one of the most heinous crimes in modern history, the state sponsored famine genocide of 1932-33 perpetrated by the Soviet regime of Joseph Stalin against the Ukrainian people.

The deliberate planned famine was devised to destroy the Ukrainian nation's aspirations for a free and independent Ukraine. It killed seven to ten million Ukrainians. For decades the truth about this horrific crime was suppressed by Soviet authorities.

Private Members' Business

Canada has a longstanding history of condemning all war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocides. That is why today we are debating an act to establish a Ukrainian genocide holodomor and famine memorial day. This bill not only designates the fourth Saturday in November as a memorial day for the Ukrainian famine but also acknowledges the famine as an act of genocide.

Across Canada right now holodomor activities are taking place, largely sponsored by the Ukrainian Canadian Congress and its membership organizations. They are doing things such as holding memorials in a number of cities. Right now there is the international remembrance flame tour with the flame being carried by Stefan Horlatsch, who I had the pleasure of meeting a couple of weeks ago.

Stefan is a survivor of the holodomor, the famine in the Ukraine that was imposed upon him as a small child by Stalin. Stefan has some recollections of that horrific experience and is sharing that story as he travels across Canada carrying the international flame and talking about the problems that he endured as a child and his journey to get out of the Soviet Union.

I have been working on this bill for about 16 months. I know many members in this House have brought forward these types of bills in the past and in this current Parliament, and they feel quite strongly that this is the right issue to jump on board with.

I have to thank Senator Raynell Andreychuk who made sure that a motion like this was brought forward at the 70th anniversary back in 2003 and who had a motion in the Senate where senators discussed recognizing the holodomor as a genocide.

I also want to thank the Secretary of State (Multiculturalism and Canadian Identity) for his encouragement and help in drafting this bill.

I need to thank the Canadian Friends of Ukraine who have worked tirelessly not only to raise awareness of the holodomor but helped in drafting my legislation over a year ago. I especially thank Miss Lisa Shymko, who is the executive director and Mrs. Margareta Shpir, who is the first vice-president.

As I said, there are many other MPs here from all parties who know that this is an issue that needs to be recognized, one that all Canadians need to be better educated about, as well as making that recognition around the world.

I also want to thank the Canada-Ukraine Parliamentary Friendship Association of which so many of us are members.

I also want to make sure that we proceed in a non-partisan and timely manner in getting this legislation through the House, so that we recognize it before the 75th anniversary actually runs out.

I understand we need to make an amendment to my bill and I encourage that we do this at committee. When I first drafted the bill the one word that I actually did leave out was "holodomor", which is a Ukrainian term, and I am of Ukrainian heritage. For Canadian purposes we often just refer to it as the Ukrainian famine and I definitely wanted to use the word "genocide" in the bill. We need to put the word "holodomor" in the bill in about five or six different places and the best place to do that is at committee. I am asking my fellow members in the House to send the bill to committee and make those amendments there.

Although holodomor is a Ukrainian word and recognizes the famine of 1932-33, it is based upon two Ukrainian words "holod", which stands for hunger, starvation or famine, and "moryty", which is to induce suffering, to kill, to die. These two words together make the root for holodomor.

We need to put this in perspective. We are talking about seven to ten million Ukrainians who died over the fall of 1932 and most of 1933. At the peak, over 25,000 people a day were hauled out of the villages and off the farms, and just thrown on wagons and taken out back and buried in mass graves.

The only way we can really look at this is to know about that time. We are not sure what the statistics were like. We do not know solidly what the population of Ukraine was at the time. We know that the last solid census was taken about 1926-27 by the Soviet regime and it said there were roughly 28 million to 29 million Ukrainians at that time.

● (1750)

By just taking normal population growth with some of the statistics I saw in 1931, the population of Ukraine would have been about 31.2 million people, which is about the same population we have here in Canada, and over seven million were killed, maybe as high as ten million, if we ever could get our hands on the solid statistics of what happened during 1932 and 1933.

That would be like going to Manitoba today and taking away all the food that was harvested because we did not like the people and dumping all that food into Lake Winnipeg. Essentially, starving the entire population.

However, let us not stop there. If we are going to make a real comparison to what happened in the Ukraine, let us go to Saskatchewan, take all the food right off the farms and out of the houses, dump it into Lake Winnipeg and let those people starve to death.

However, we cannot stop there. We also have to go into Alberta, take all the food, all the grain, all the livestock, throw all that into the lake, and let those people starve to death.

However, that is not all. We also have to go to B.C. and starve all those people to death to have the same situation that the Ukrainian people lived through under Joseph Stalin from 1932 to 1933.

It is horrific. We have to make sure that the seven to ten million Ukrainians who died at the hands of the authorities of Joseph Stalin are remembered. The Soviet regime severely punished anyone who resisted it. In addition to starvation and killings by agents of the estate, cannibalism occurred. We know that. There were many suicides and mercy killings, which just kept adding to the death toll. As I said before, I have seen numbers as high as 28,000 people dying every day at the peak of it.

I want to thank Leo Ledohowski, the President and CEO of Canad Inns. He produced and sponsored a great video on the holodomor. He talked to Ukrainian Canadian survivors of the holodomor from across this country, a lot of them right in Manitoba, including Mike and Sonya Kushliak from Selkirk in my riding.

Private Members' Business

They spoke about horrible stories they remember when growing up. They spoke about people laying on the streets, dying, because they did not have the strength to walk to town. They spoke about people driving horses and buggies picking up the dead people and taking them out to the cemetery and putting them into mass graves.

They said that every time their parents tried to bring even a morsel of food home it seemed that the so-called "activists" of the communist regime would come into their homes and find it, even if it was just a sockful of wheat, and take it back and would not allow them to eat. All the crops were confiscated.

Ukrainians had a bountiful harvest in the fall of 1932, but all their root crops, all their vegetables, all the wheat that they had grown, all their livestock were confiscated and taken away, including their cows, their sheep, their goats and their pigs. They had absolutely nothing left and essentially were made to suffer a horrible death.

Essentially what was happening was the commitment of genocide. I want to read article 2 of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, which was drafted in 1948. It defines "genocide" as follows:

In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;

That is exactly what happened in the Ukraine. It continues:

- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;

So, definitely in part (c) of the definition: "Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part".

We know that the famine was not caused by drought or other environmental causes. There are plenty of records to show that there was a bountiful harvest, that exports of wheat from the Ukraine and from Russia were flowing into western Europe.

• (1755)

There was plenty of grain to go around. The carryover stocks of grain supplies of the Soviet Union would have been more than enough to feed the starving Ukrainians. We know that this was caused by the policies and actions of Joseph Stalin's Soviet authorization aimed at the forced collectivization of agriculture and achieving the maximum extraction of agricultural produce from the rural population.

These policies and actions included decrees "laying down grain procurement targets for Ukraine" and ordering that all collective farm property such as cattle and grain should henceforth be considered state property, "sacred and inviolable". Those guilty of offences against it were considered enemies of the people, to be shot unless there were extenuating circumstances including the penalty of imprisonment with confiscation of property. Severe enforcement measures included: death sentences, numbering in the thousands; imprisonment in concentration camps; and withholding of food rations and other supplies.

We always think of this in terms that this was based upon the collectivization of agriculture across the Soviet Union, but it was different in the Ukraine. It was different for a number of reasons. First of all, as well as forcing collectivization upon the Ukrainians and people of the Volga River district, Kazakhstan and the Kuban area of Russia, the Ukrainian people were unfairly targeted. They were not allowed to migrate within their own areas. They were not allowed to travel. There were blockades that were put in place to prevent the people of the northern Ukraine from going to Russia where the food was and be able to buy it at the stores, essentially forcing them to live in these starvation ghettos, these famine ghettos.

We know that in the other areas there was still the freedom of movement, that people could move around and find foodstuffs. We also know that they were not just targeting the farmers. They were not going after the peasants. It looked like they were going after the farming community across the Soviet Union. We must remember that 80% of the population at that time were peasant farmers. They were living on the land. Essentially, they were the basis of Ukrainian pride. They were nationalists. They wanted to see a free and independent Ukraine as Ukraine has often cried out for. Unfortunately, they were being quashed by Stalin himself and his thugs.

Anyone who was considered a nationalist, and most of them were peasants but there were many within communities as well, were often hauled out and put in front of firing squads or they were thrown on the train and sent off to concentration camps in Siberia. Some of the numbers I have seen indicate that over 250,000 Ukrainians were moved to Siberia into concentration camps.

Therefore, the Soviet regime was trying to kill the Ukrainian national movement and Ukrainian culture. The senior leadership of the Soviet Union, including Stalin, was directly involved in the development and implementation of these policies. The leadership under Joseph Stalin was apparently fully aware of its impact on the Ukrainian population, but nevertheless mandated actions which worsened the situation and maximized the loss of life from 1932 to 1933.

While these elements are widely acknowledged as historical facts the debate about whether the holodomor was an act of genocide, defined as a deliberate and systematic destruction of a radical, political, cultural or racial group, continues at the political level, and it has not been conclusively resolved by international academic research.

As I said, we know for a fact that there were these starvation ghettos. We know that anyone who considered themselves a Ukrainian nationalist was exterminated. We know that the Soviet regime tried to eradicate the culture by moving people to Siberia or by having this whole in flow of immigrants into the area to drown it out.

So why now? It is the 75th anniversary. Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko is coming to Canada to talk about the holodomor. He is promoting a UN resolution to recognize the holodomor as a genocide. There are many other countries that have declared it as such.

I want to thank all the members of Parliament who are supporting this, as well as the Canadian Friends of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Canadian Congress.

We need to correct history.

• (1800)

I call upon historians, journalists, educators to record and include the facts of this horrible genocide so that all Canadians can learn from this tragic piece of Ukrainian history.

Vichna yim pamyat.

Hon. Andrew Telegdi (Kitchener—Waterloo, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I agree wholeheartedly with what my colleague has said. There is no question in my mind that it was a genocide. I can speak from the viewpoint of someone who actually lived under the brutal heels of Joseph Stalin and what he did to societies behind the iron curtain.

When my colleague mentioned that people disappeared into Siberia and there was a state of terror, I can attest to that. I can attest to the paranoia when that black car came by or came down the street, as to who would be picked up and taken away.

The collectivization of the farms was tried all throughout eastern Europe. There was a real resistance by the farmers to go into the process of collectivization. It is well known that the small plots of land that people owned produced more than the collective farms that were put together.

The horrors of Joseph Stalin have to be recognized, and we have to recognize this as a genocide.

Mr. James Bezan: Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for his support. I hope all members of Parliament will support the bill, and recognize what Joseph Stalin and his communist regime did to the Ukraine and to many people across the Soviet Union.

Mrs. Joy Smith (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Mr. Speaker, 1932 and 1933 were definitely been one of the darkest chapters in human history. I feel very strongly that this was an engineered famine, that it was a genocide against the innocent men and women and children in Ukraine.

This year is the 75th anniversary of this terrible genocide, which was provided by the rule under Stalin to the innocent women and children of Ukraine. I was at a holodomor ceremony this Sunday and many people of Ukrainian descent were there. They were strongly mourning the loss and the genocide that was put upon the people of Ukraine years ago.

Could the member please explain why this should be termed a genocide and why there should be a special day to remember this genocide, this dark chapter in history against the innocent people of Ukraine?

Mr. James Bezan: Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for Kildonan—St. Paul for her work as president of the Canada-Ukraine Parliamentary Friendship Group.

There is no doubt in my mind that this was a genocide. If we look at the definition of what it is in the UN Convention, we can see it was a genocide. We already have a total of 20 countries that have recognized it as a genocide, including the U.S. Senate and the U.S.

Private Members' Business

Congress, the Canadian Senate, Argentina, Australia, Brazil and more.

Back in 1988, the U.S. conducted a commission, as asked for by the U.S. Congress, on the Ukrainian famine. In that, it made 19 findings. It said that in no uncertain terms this was a genocide, it was a man made famine and it was done to exterminate the Ukrainian people.

We have to recognize that in Canada not only do we have a lot of survivors of the genocide, but we also have not only those who suffered through the holodomor, but we have people like myself who are of Ukrainian descent. Luckily my grandparents were able to leave the Ukraine at the turn of the century, before the holodomor came into effect, before the communists ruled Ukraine.

All of us feel for the old country, as they often put it, and we want to ensure that everybody understands what happened. We want to ensure we correct the record so it does not happen again.

• (1805)

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I congratulate the member for Selkirk—Interlake on the motion. He might be rather surprised to see me participating in the debate, but I want to take this opportunity to express, as a private member, my strong support for his bill. I also want to reflect a little on the significance of this event, not only in the history of Ukraine but in the history of the world.

As the hon. member has rightly pointed out, the 20th century was, without question, the most violent century in history, in which human beings demonstrated their extraordinary capacity for evil and for creating hardship, havoc, death and destruction for literally tens of millions of their fellow citizens. It was a century in which powerful ideologies, ideologies at some basic level founded on hatred, seized hold of not only individual hearts and minds of men and women, but seized hold of whole countries and whole systems of government.

Far wiser people than I have described this in terms of how the ideology of Nazi Germany took hold through the 40 or 50 years prior to the emergence of Adolf Hitler as a significant leader in the 1920s and 1930s. Certainly others have looked at how the socialist ideology was twisted and turned, taken by Marxist, then by Lenin and then by Stalin and turned the Soviet Union into one of the most brutal and repressive dictatorships that the world has ever known.

It is because of these facts and also because of the tremendous human ties between the people of Ukraine and the people of Canada that it is entirely appropriate for the House to consider, even for a brief moment on a Tuesday, the importance of this question, the impact that it has had on Ukraine and on the people of Ukraine, but also the impact that it has had on the whole world.

The member has quite rightly described how for a long time there was kind of a debate as to whether what was known in some circles as the Ukrainian famine was in fact a famine or whether it was, as we now I think better realize and better understand, a deliberate attempt to subjugate, murder, repress and destroy the heart and soul of a people.

Private Members' Business

The member for Selkirk—Interlake has quite rightly described how twice in the last century we have seen this brutal process of collectivization, first in the Soviet Union and then in China, have an absolutely unbelievable impact on the existence of a people.

We are only now beginning to understand that the period known as the Great Leap Forward in China, which took place in the 1950s, was every bit as destructive as the Ukrainian destruction described by my hon. colleague in his private member's bill. It is enough to make us reflect on this forced collectivization, this determination to take away people's livelihoods, to take away their farms, their property, their ability to work the land, their ability to feed their families, their ability to provide for themselves and for their children, how all in the name of an ideology, all in the name of power, of extracting as much surplus as could possibly be extracted by the state and taken away from the farm population in the Ukraine as well as in China, and how destructive it was.

The lessons have been learned. In the case of China, the first thing that Deng Xiaoping did in 1979 was to say that the farmers had to be given back their stake in farming, that a greater opportunity for people had to be created, that the whole collectivist idea, the whole process of collectivization had to be completely deconstructed. We are seeing the same thing take place in Russia and Ukraine and it has taken place over a long period of time.

However, as Canadians, we should not forget the significance of what happened in those years of 1932 and 1933, the death and destruction that resulted, some estimates as many as seven million people may have been killed, those who were terrorized and sent off to gulags, those whose lives were completely destroyed and whose families were completely destroyed. Nor should we forget something else, and I will refer to this very briefly in my comments.

● (1810)

We should not forget the way in which the world watched and the world, to a considerable extent, either ignored or misunderstood what was happening. This is something we have to reflect on today. What are the lessons to be learned? How do we stand here proudly as Canadians and say “never again”?

Let us reflect on other genocides that have taken place in our own lifetime. We were all brought up to believe we would learn lessons from the holocaust, that we would learn lessons from the tragedy of Ukraine, that we would learn lessons from what has taken place in other countries. Yet in our own time and in our own generation we have seen mass murder on a huge scale. We now estimate that as many as four million people may have been killed in the conflict in the eastern part of the Congo. We know that as many as two million people have died in southern Sudan as a result of the civil war, which went on there for over a 20 year period. We know tragically, in the case of Cambodia and Rwanda, when these ideologies take hold how dramatic and destructive they can be, how little human life counts and how much murder and destruction can take place. It is almost mind-boggling to see it and to understand it.

What is particularly tragic about the situation in Ukraine is over the period in question, 1932-33, a number of so-called intelligent western observers went to Russia and were fooled. They had the wool literally pulled over their eyes. George Bernard Shaw, Sydney and Beatrice Webb, we can go down the list of all these so-called

really intelligent, bright, capable people. They did not see what was before them. They did not understand what was taking place and they simply could not comprehend evil of the dimensions, which we now know were taking place. That is enough to make us also reflect on the importance of objective observation, on the importance of our standing as witnesses to the evil which is taking place. It is enough to make us reflect on the importance of our speaking up and speaking out even 75 years later, even now documenting, going back into the records and into the archives and saying that we have to find out what happened and believe what happened.

An interesting suggestion was made to me the other day and it is something we should reflect on in Canada. Because we are such an international country and a country that really includes the world, and there are so many of our neighbours who are Cambodians, Laotians, Ukrainians and Rwandans and people of all backgrounds who know what has happened and who know what their experience has been, it seems to me it would be entirely appropriate for us, as a kind of place of memorial of the world, to become a centre of excellence for research, knowledge and understanding of how this destruction happens, how it begins, how it takes place, how it ends, how it is organized, how it is implemented and how it is tolerated. We need to become a centre in the world for these kinds of studies, for this kind of analysis so we can, through all the work we do on behalf of human rights, truly become a country that not only gives speeches and talks this through, but also consistently provides the documentation that we need to provide.

● (1815)

[*Translation*]

We must become witnesses for the future, witnesses to make sure that tragedies and disasters like these do not happen again. We must get to the point where we can say that we are the witnesses, that this can no longer go on, that things must change. And by remembering what happened in Ukraine, we now have the opportunity to make sure that these things do not happen again.

Ms. Meili Faille (Vaudreuil-Soulanges, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to begin by thanking my colleagues from Selkirk—Interlake and Toronto Centre for their speeches about the great famine in Ukraine. I am pleased to speak to this bill, which would recognize the great famine of 1932 and 1933.

Throughout human history, many peoples have experienced famines as great as this one. I would like to take advantage of Quebec City's 400th anniversary to invite people to visit Grosse-Île. Quebecers have witnessed mass migrations from all over the world. Some of these people were in terrible situations or experiencing great famines in their home countries. Among other things, the memorial there commemorates the great tragedy and suffering of the Irish. Canada witnessed that particular moment in history too.

That is not the purpose of this bill. We are talking about the great famine in Ukraine in 1932 and 1933. Many people of Ukrainian origin in my riding, Vaudreuil-Soulanges, have spoken of the atrocities they witnessed and the hopelessness they felt in the face of Stalinist repression. That was a tragic chapter in human history.

Private Members' Business

We have an important issue to deal with and we have to do so with great seriousness. That is why we support this bill in principle. As my colleague from Toronto Centre said earlier, this is a golden opportunity to hear about this issue from specialists, to study the causes of this great famine and to take a stand on this issue.

Nevertheless, we have some reservations about the term "genocide" used in the bill, not for political reasons, but for semantic reasons. Earlier, my colleague across the floor gave a presentation regarding the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Two criteria are important in recognizing a genocide. First of all, a distinction must be made between a crime against humanity and genocide. The consequences are similar. However, upon researching the matter internationally, it appears that the term genocide has not yet been recognized by Canada when it comes to what happened in Ukraine. In a moment, I will state the positions of various countries. Second, to acknowledge a genocide, there must be an explicit intent to eliminate a group for the mere fact that it exists. In Russia, other groups within the territory were also the targets of this famine. Of course, historians agree on the existence of the great famine, but where they do not agree is on the qualifier, that is, whether it was a crime against humanity or a genocide. In committee, members will be able to hear from witnesses and reach a conclusion.

As I was saying earlier, the famine affected all ethnic groups, including Russians living in Ukraine. There were also other famines elsewhere in the USSR, for instance, in Kazakhstan.

Historians are currently analyzing and studying existing documents and others more recently discovered. The famine resulted from grain quotas imposed. Later, I will also point out some historical factors, such as the context of the times, the collectivization of the land, which was a strategy that was used, and the issue of Ukraine's independence, which seemed to be at the core of this issue.

The famine came about because Moscow wanted to industrialize the USSR as quickly as possible by maximizing grain sales to other countries. Historical facts show that if that industrialization had occurred over several years, there would probably not have been as many deaths. Stalin was afraid of losing Ukraine to Poland. The Ukrainian resistance became stronger near the Polish border.

There are facts that must also be examined at this point.

● (1820)

These elements lead us to question the thesis of genocide as an explanation of the great famine, if we go by the definition in the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. This must not prevent acknowledgement of the tragedy that occurred.

The Bloc Québécois denounces and condemns in the harshest terms the actions of the Soviet Union toward Ukraine. This is why we would like to address the issue in greater depth in committee, in order to be able to hear from experts as to whether or not it was genocide.

As far as recent developments are concerned, Canada has never recognized the great Ukrainian famine as genocide. If adopted, this bill will have the effect of Canada's de facto recognition that there was indeed genocide in Ukraine. I thank the hon. member for giving

us the opportunity to research this matter in greater depth in parliamentary committee.

The question of the Ukrainian famine of 1932-33 was considered a state secret in the USSR. It was officially recognized for the first time in December 1987 by Volodymyr Shcherbitsky, party president in Ukraine. On November 26, 1998, a presidential decree set the fourth Saturday in November as the national day of commemoration of this collective atrocity. There is no mention of genocide.

During debate in the Ukrainian parliament, there was not necessarily support; there was a majority. Here are the results of the voting: 226 of the 450 members, or 50.2%, voted in favour of recognition of genocide. This matter was therefore decided by the Ukrainian parliament, but there was not a large majority.

According to public opinion polls, however, held at the same time, 70% of the population recognized that this was genocide. So we can see that at the present time there is an imbalance in the perception of whether or not this was genocide.

Russia was against recognition of the great famine as genocide, saying that the Ukrainians were not specifically targeted. In 2003, the Canadian Senate passed a resolution calling upon the federal government to recognize the Ukrainian famine as genocide. On October 20, 2003, the United States House of Representatives recognized the famine of 1932-33 as a man-made famine. The resolution makes no mention at all of genocide.

To mark the 70th anniversary of the great famine, the Ukrainian ambassador to the UN circulated a declaration co-signed by 26 states, including Canada, the US and Russia. This resolution was about recognizing a national tragedy, but made no mention of genocide.

On November 25, 2005, Ukrainian President Yushchenko called on the international community to recognize the great famine as an act of genocide committed by the Soviet regime. In 2006, the Ukrainian parliament voted again, this time favourably with a vote of 51.7%. In April, a Russian author denounced the movement to recognize the Ukrainian famine as an act of genocide. This author received the 1970 Nobel Prize for Literature for condemning Soviet Gulag camps. He is a Russian who ordinarily would probably have shown solidarity with the Ukrainians.

While in Bucharest for the NATO summit on April 2, the Minister of Foreign Affairs confirmed that the federal government had not made a decision about recognizing the Ukrainian famine as genocide. This is an important political issue with significant consequences. However, in terms of recognizing the genocide, I believe that efforts could certainly be made in committee to shed light on this historical event.

At present, there is no consensus. However, there is agreement that this crime could be considered a crime against humanity. Since we know that the Soviets played a role in the famine that resulted in the death of several million people, there is no question that it represents a crime against humanity. I will stop here as my time is up.

Private Members' Business

● (1825)

[English]

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis (Winnipeg North, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is a great honour for me to speak to this private member's bill, Bill C-459, which provides a means by which Parliament can formally recognize the Ukrainian famine as a genocide and to declare a special day for its commemoration.

I do not believe there is a soul in the House who disagrees with this private member's bill. My colleague from Parkdale—High Park is one among many in my caucus, dare I say all in my caucus, who believes that this bill ought to be supported. I am sure, having listened to members all around the House, that it is unanimously supported.

The question I have today is, why is it taking so long? Why has this become a political football in this chamber? Why do we not, by unanimous consent, consider all stages of this bill and adopt it here and now on the spot? That would be doing a great service to Ukrainian Canadians who have been fighting for this recognition for many years, certainly for as long as I have been in this place. I can recall that this discussion was before the House 13 years ago. There have been motions repeatedly over the course of the last decade. Yet for some reason we cannot seem to get the government of the day and all parties to give unanimous consent and see this as done. We do that from time to time. There is an ability in this place to compromise and collaborate and cooperate. We did it with respect to a bill I first introduced to recognize a national day of commemoration for the Holocaust. That bill was an idea that was grabbed on to by others and soon was adopted by the House. We could do the same here.

I am wondering why we have to go through another long debate and a rigorous process when in fact the House is in full agreement. Also, there is the precedent of the Senate, the other House, having passed a similar motion. There is no need for this to be delayed. There is no need for more procrastination. Let us just do it. Or am I missing something? Is there something that the member on the government side is not saying? Why has the government of the day not brought this forward as a motion and asked all members in the House to adopt it? What is there a delay?

I have read in the newspapers that the Ukrainian Canadian community has had meetings with the Prime Minister. The *Ukrainian News* back in December of 2007 said there was a meeting with the Prime Minister about this issue. The Ukrainian community was hoping that the Prime Minister would say yes, let us do it. Obviously he did not. According to this newspaper article, the Prime Minister felt that the government still had to do a little more homework at its end. What homework? What more is needed?

This is self-evident. The facts are in. There is no question that almost 10 million Ukrainians were killed as a result of a deliberate famine and genocide. That is a given. No one quibbles with the facts. Certainly all my colleagues in the New Democratic Party recognize this fact and are appalled by this chapter in history that saw the death and slaughter of so many innocent people because the Stalinist Communist regime wanted to put an end to the Ukrainian spirit that we hold so dear in our hearts in Canada and are so proud of.

Some of us of Ukrainian descent will never stop talking about the importance of recognizing this chapter in our history as a serious crime against humanity that must be remembered. We must remember so that we stop history from repeating itself. As other colleagues in the House have pointed out this afternoon, we live in an era where it is not impossible to see whole races of people being wiped out because of a desire to exterminate and practise genocide against a particular race of people in our society.

● (1830)

We have to remember and we have to act quickly. Manitoba passed such a bill over a year ago, setting aside November 26 as a day of remembrance for recognition of the Ukrainian famine and genocide. We ought to have done this by now here in the House. We should have set the stage. We should have been leading the way for Canadians to have this as a national day of commemoration.

My main question today is this: what is the delay?

Why are we taking so long? How can we speed up this process? How can we ensure that the campaign, the diligence and the commitment of the Ukrainian Canadian population over the years to have this day recognized in the books of this place and the history books of the nation make this happen immediately? How can we make sure that we do it before so many of the survivors of the Ukrainian famine actually pass on without having seen this day of commemoration?

We ought to do this immediately. It means saying out loud that the Ukrainian famine was a genocide. That is the first step.

Second, it means setting aside a special day for all in this country to remember what happened to Ukrainians back in 1932 and 1933.

Third, through our actions today, it is a reminder and a way of ensuring that this whole tragic chapter in our history is remembered and taught to future generations so they have an understanding of what happened and of how we can prevent similar genocides from happening in the future.

Finally, it is a moment when we actually say to the survivors that the pain they went through, the horrors they had to experience and witness, and the loss of so many of their relatives because of this deliberate famine, are important, and we want to acknowledge their pain and suffering and share that with all in our society so that we make a real difference in the end.

As others have mentioned, the international recognition flame passed through Winnipeg recently, as it has passed through so many other cities and villages across this country. That was just last week. It was remarkable to see the survivors still coming out, as they have done year after year for similar ceremonies, and to see the hope in their eyes that finally Parliament might do something. It is hard to describe here in the chamber, but there is an anticipation and an impatience among Ukrainian Canadians to see this done and to see it done right and done immediately.

Private Members' Business

Let us not forget why we are here. Let us not forget our obligation to keep alive the flame so that others can learn from the pain of the past. Let us not ever forget the fighting spirit of Ukrainians around the world and the contribution that Ukrainian Canadians have made to this country, because they brought that fighting spirit here to help pioneer and build this nation. They have made an incredible difference economically, socially, culturally and spiritually.

It is time that we paid tribute to that contribution by recognizing a chapter in the history of this world when Ukrainians were treated as less than second class citizens. It is time that we honoured those pioneers and those Ukrainian Canadians who continue to make a difference in this country. Let us get on with it, I say. Can we not find room to move on this immediately? Can we not make it happen so that not another day has to pass before the House recognizes a national day of commemoration for the victims of the Ukrainian famine and genocide?

Duzhe dyakuyu.

● (1835)

Hon. Jim Abbott (Parliamentary Secretary for Canadian Heritage, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today we are considering Bill C-459, which calls on the Parliament of Canada to recognize the victims of the Ukrainian famine of 1932-33 by establishing a Ukrainian famine and genocide memorial day and, furthermore, to declare the famine an act of genocide.

As many Canadians are aware, this year marks the 75th anniversary of the holodomor, an artificial famine created by policies promoting the brutal forced collectivization of agriculture throughout the Soviet Union. The famine affected Kazakhstan, parts of Russia and the Volga German Republic, but was most markedly felt in the Ukraine.

We may never know how many people died from starvation during the great famine in Ukraine. The Commission on the Ukraine Famine, created by the United States Congress, published the results of its research in 1990. The commission's findings, along with research undertaken by Ukrainian scholars in the 1980s, suggest that the number of victims in Ukraine alone—80% of the total victims of the famine—was 4.5 million to 5 million, approximately 15% of Ukraine's population at the time. Some may consider these numbers to be conservative. Ultimately, as many as 10 million deaths in Ukraine during the 1930s may be attributable to the famine.

How is it that this horrific famine occurred in Ukraine, which at least until the breakout of World War I was known as the breadbasket of Europe?

In the decade following the Russian revolution of 1917, Soviet policies were systematically aimed at the elimination of the better off farmers, the vast majority of whom, by Canadian standards, had only modest holdings. Beginning in 1927, increasingly harsh measures were taken against them. By 1930, nearly 250,000 Ukrainians were forcibly deported to Central Asia, Serbia and the Soviet Far East. Unfortunately, many perished in the process.

In spite of the elimination of those thought most likely to oppose collectivization, the Soviet policy of forcibly creating large state-run farms, the majority of farmers in Soviet Ukraine continued to resist. Between 1929 and 1931, an estimated 10,000 party functionaries

worked throughout rural areas in Soviet Ukraine expropriating property and livestock, coercing individuals into collective farms, and confiscating grain and eventually all other foodstuffs, including seed stocks.

Agricultural work understandably suffered greatly. Starting in 1931, harvests in the Soviet Ukraine became notably smaller. However, the central government's quota for deliveries did not decrease. By the spring of 1932, famine arrived in Ukrainian villages. By 1933, starvation became the norm in rural Soviet Ukraine.

Soviet officials not only denied the famine but continued to export grain abroad. Furthermore, unlike the famine of 1921-22, outside aid was not sought and indeed was turned away when offered. Some western governments and other observers and journalists, notably Walter Durante of *The New York Times*, also denied the existence of the famine. It is ironic that Durante was awarded a Pulitzer prize in 1932 for his reporting on the Soviet Union.

While the Soviet Union still existed, Ukrainians were not allowed to openly discuss the events of the 1930s. The Soviets even tried to paint western scholarship documenting the atrocities as propaganda. The suffering during the great famine, however, could not be erased from the collective memory of the Ukrainian nation. Allow me to quote from Robert Conquest, the noted scholar and chronicler of the great famine:

● (1840)

The Soviet assault on the peasantry and on the Ukrainian nation, in 1930-1933, was one of the largest and most devastating events in modern history. It was a tremendous human tragedy—with many more dead than in all countries together in World War I. It was a major economic disaster...[with] hideous consequences.

In Canada, the Ukrainian Canadian community of more than one million citizens was among the first to recognize the need to bring the great famine to the world's attention. Accordingly, Ukrainian Canadians have been at the forefront in ensuring that the famine is recognized for the terrible suffering it brought to Ukrainians. It brought devastation upon the countryside and Ukrainian agriculture, and ultimately it must not be forgotten by future generations.

In Edmonton, Calgary, Winnipeg and Windsor, the Ukrainian Canadian community has erected memorials to honour the victims. In November 2007, the Ukrainian Canadian Congress began a year of commemorative events to mark the 75th anniversary of the great famine, to bring the victims' suffering to the attention of all Canadians and to help prevent similar tragedies in the future.

As is well known, Canada has close bilateral relations with Ukraine. In recognition of this fact and to underscore our abhorrence of this calamity, Canada also co-sponsored a resolution, adopted at the 2007 UNESCO general conference in Paris, expressing sympathy to the victims of the famine and calling upon member states to consider promoting awareness of the great famine through educational and research programs.

Adjournment Proceedings

Canada further co-sponsored a ministerial declaration on the 25th anniversary of the famine at the 2007 Ministerial Meeting of the OSCE in Madrid, which underlined the “importance of raising public awareness of the tragic events...of promoting tolerance and non-discrimination, of strengthening the rule of law and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for prevention of [similar] human tragedies in the future”.

On November 28, 2007, the Prime Minister, at a commemoration ceremony on Parliament Hill, spoke of the famine as the result of Stalin's despotism and squarely laid the responsibility for the tragedy on his brutal policies. In his statement, the Prime Minister honoured those Ukrainians who suffered horribly during collectivization, noting that the result of the collectivization was:

—one of the worst famines the world has ever known, millions of men, women and children—mostly Ukrainian, but also some Kazakhs and Russians—died of starvation. Those who refused to yield were slaughtered.

The Prime Minister went on to say:

We in Canada are bonded to this dark chapter in human history by more than a million Canadians of Ukrainian descent, many of whom lost loved ones in the Holodomor. And so, all Canadians join us in commemorating this 75th anniversary of the terrible famine of 1932-33.

Our government supports the efforts to remember the victims of the great famine and the reasons behind their deaths as a way to prevent history from repeating itself. We believe that the famine of 1932-33 was a great tragedy which claimed millions of lives in the former Soviet Union, most notably in Ukraine. Canada believes that commemorating this event is one way to ensure that such tragedy does not occur again.

The bill before us seeks to recognize and honour the victims of the great famine. The government concurs wholeheartedly with the need for recognition of the victims and the commemoration of their suffering, to understand the reasons behind this tragedy. Not forgetting the horrors of the great famine is among the best memorials we can give its victims. Remembrance is a living memorial to the victims and their loss of life, human rights and dignity.

The member for Toronto Centre correctly observed the fact that there have indeed been a tremendous number of these events. Our government is working diligently with the Ukrainian community to bring this to a proper, correct conclusion.

• (1845)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): The time provided for the consideration of private members' business has now expired and the order is dropped to the bottom of the order of precedence on the order paper.

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

A motion to adjourn the House under Standing Order 38 deemed to have been moved.

[English]

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Hon. Dan McTeague (Pickering—Scarborough East, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, since my March 4 question to the Minister of Foreign

Affairs, there has been little progress in the government's efforts to have the death sentence of Mr. Mohamed Kohail commuted.

Aside from the serious problems caused by the change in government policy with respect to seeking clemency only in certain cases where Canadians have been sentenced to death in foreign countries, we know that the author of that misguided policy, the Minister of Public Safety, visited Saudi Arabia and talked with officials about Mr. Kohail's case. What good came out of those meetings the minister had is really not known. However, with less than four weeks left before the appeal ruling occurs, there is genuine concern that indeed time is running out on Mr. Kohail.

The entire trial of Mohamed Kohail only took 90 minutes. Moreover, there was no opportunity provided to Mr. Kohail's lawyers to cross-examine the witnesses testifying against Mohamed.

Canada should not only be seeking to have the death penalty against Mohamed Kohail overturned, the Canadian government should also be using every measure at its disposal to engage Saudi authorities.

Mr. Kohail's life hangs in the balance, and that is why I ask the hon. member if he can give this House his assurances that Canada will indeed do all it can to display to the Saudi government that Mr. Kohail deserves to have his life spared and the original guilty verdict overturned on appeal.

I also want to remind the hon. member that this is not a partisan issue. The life of a Canadian citizen is at stake. I believe that Canadians expect their government will do all it can to save Mr. Mohamed Kohail's life. I would like to believe that the government is engaging the Saudis and that our embassy is actively using its resources to this end.

There are just a few weeks remaining before the ruling on Mr. Kohail's appeal occurs. We have to ensure that this remaining time is indeed used wisely.

We are not lecturing the Saudis. We are not questioning their judicial system. Canada must, however, stand up for its citizens. I ask the hon. member to ensure that that is exactly what is being done in the case of Mr. Kohail in these few remaining days that are left.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs and to the Minister of International Cooperation, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. member for Pickering—Scarborough East for his comments in the House on the case of Mohamed Kohail, a young Canadian citizen sentenced to death in Saudi Arabia. I share his concerns very much, and I can assure him that the Government of Canada is doing everything possible to seek clemency for this young Canadian.

As the member stated, we are not interfering with the Saudi judicial system. What we are asking is that clemency be shown to this young Canadian as we are all appalled at the death sentence handed out to this young Canadian.

I would like to assure the hon. member that Mr. Kohail's case continues to be monitored closely by the Prime Minister, by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and by myself.

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I would like to point out that departmental officials in Ottawa and Saudi Arabia have been actively involved in the case since Mr. Kohail was arrested in January 2007. Our officials have also attended the court hearings. When consular officials were prevented from entering the courtroom to observe a session, our embassy in Riyadh sent a diplomatic note to the Saudi ministry of foreign affairs to protest this exclusion.

Canadian officials remain in close contact with Mr. Kohail's family and legal counsel, as well as the relevant Saudi authorities to explore all avenues available to assist Mr. Kohail, including the appeal of his sentence and the granting of clemency.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs has written to his Saudi counterpart to request that the government of Saudi Arabia review the verdict. On a recent visit, the Minister of Public Safety also reiterated this government's position and requested that a review of the decision be conducted in accordance with Saudi law.

The Minister of Public Safety also spoke with Mohamed Kohail and his family to convey his personal assurances of the importance that the government attaches to this case.

The Canadian ambassador in Saudi Arabia is actively involved and has personally met with Mr. Kohail, his family and legal counsel to discuss developments on the legal aspects. Our ambassador also recently met with the Saudi minister of justice to seek assurances that due process will be observed in the appeal.

As demonstrated by all our actions, the hon. member can see that this case is a priority for this government and will remain so until we are satisfied that Mr. Kohail is accorded due process and that his human and legal rights are upheld.

The Government of Canada continues to engage Saudi authorities to ensure that Mr. Kohail's rights are respected and that he is afforded due process. I can assure the member that repeated representations have been made and will continue to be made to senior level officials.

• (1850)

Hon. Dan McTeague: Mr. Speaker, I am very encouraged by the comments of the parliamentary secretary. I know how hard he works. I realize that he has read part of this and he looks pretty tired, as would anyone who has done as much travelling as he has done. I also know the hon. member is very committed to this issue.

I take it that he will have also taken into consideration the more positive news with respect to Mr. Kohail's brother, Sultan. I am hoping that these positive steps taken by another court to bring in and cross-examine the prosecution can also be suggested, or at least inferred, in terms of our deliberations.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. member, who keeps me busy by asking questions every night on consular affairs, but I am very happy that he does, because it shows concern on the part of both sides of the House for Canadians who find themselves in some legal dispute in other countries.

I can assure him that as he keeps the government in line, the government makes sure that our consular services are available and we will do everything possible to help Canadians who have been caught in some kind of a legal problem overseas.

[*Translation*]

FISHERIES

Mr. Raynald Blais (Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to come back to a question asked in this House on March 4, on the negotiations at the World Trade Organization and on the fisheries subsidies.

In many ways the minister's response was more than disappointing. I hope today that the parliamentary secretary's response will be a little more encouraging.

Far be it from me to use alarmist language, but the situation today is such that it is reasonable to think that it is important for the government to truly take an interest and develop a fisheries strategy, in light of the negotiations at the World Trade Organization.

Let me explain the situation we are in today. There is a text, a preliminary text, I agree, but a text nonetheless that stipulates that subsidies would be prohibited, in the event the text in question is approved or becomes part of an agreement. Under the text in question, all infrastructure, small craft harbours, would be affected, as well as everything involving fishing vessels, in terms of restoration and repair. This spells certain disaster.

Short of claiming, as the parliamentary secretary will probably do in the next few minutes, that these are preliminary texts, that the negotiations might come to an end, the government is truly burying its head in the sand and avoiding reality. I think that is absolutely irresponsible.

The responsible thing to do in this situation would be to say that a preliminary text has been circulating, that we do not like it, that we will work on it. In the meantime, however, this is an admission of failure. The text is circulating because we did not manage to get our point of view across. In our view, countries like Australia, New Zealand, the United States and others, that want to completely cut or eliminate certain subsidies from the fisheries are going down the wrong path.

We absolutely have to have a government that truly defends the fisheries, instead of simply navigating through murky waters without trying to correct the situation.

That is why I said that the minister's response was more than disappointing. I hope the answer we get today will be more encouraging.

• (1855)

[*English*]

Mr. Randy Kamp (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank my friend and colleague for his interest in this issue. I am pleased to be able to provide some clarification about these WTO negotiations, which began in 2001.

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[*Translation*]

Since roughly 85% of the fish and seafood we harvest is exported, there is no question that Canada needs free and fair trade. The reduction of subsidies and tariffs that are affecting our access to world markets is precisely what we are trying to obtain in these negotiations.

In addition, Canada has made it clear that it is against global overcapacity and overfishing, which result in part from irresponsible subsidies for deep sea fleets.

[*English*]

The chair introduced the first draft text at the end of November 2007 on his own initiative as an attempt to get countries to bring their diverse views together. When the chair of the negotiating group introduced his draft text, he indicated that he did not expect participants to agree to his text at this early stage but he wanted it to be used as a basis for discussion. The chair invited WTO members to accept all, or some, or none of his text.

The chair's first draft is unacceptable to Canada and virtually every WTO member has major concerns with one or more areas of the draft text. It includes aspects that we had thought from general discussions would be excluded. This could include income support, such as EI, and port infrastructure, such as small craft harbours. Canada has stated repeatedly that social safety net programs do not belong in the mandate of this negotiating group because they do not contribute to overfishing and overcapacity. As for port infrastructure, Canada has strongly objected to prohibitions in this area.

The chair also neglected to include certain exemptions, including an exemption for small programs which would have little implication for global overcapacity and overfishing, especially on the high seas, but which are indeed important aspects of domestic policy. Important programs for aboriginal and inshore fisheries would be included here.

In five WTO meetings since the release of the first draft text, Canada has repeatedly insisted that the chair issue a new draft text as soon as possible. The chair has in turn insisted that a first reading of the entire draft text must at least be concluded. That is still under way.

[*Translation*]

Even though some people have implied that the government is taking a *laissez-faire* approach to these negotiations, I can assure you that the interests of Canadian fisheries have been and continue to be actively defended in these negotiations. In addition, a huge effort has been made to ensure that the stakeholders, including the provinces, the territories, the first nations and the industry, are kept informed about what is happening.

[*English*]

Notwithstanding misinformation circulating that there is an imminent end to these negotiations, there will be no subsidy agreement until all agree. Decision making requires consensus, not

just on fisheries subsidies but on all other aspects of the general subsidy regime.

In conclusion, there are aspects of the draft fisheries subsidies text that Canada supports and that advance Canada's trade and conservation interests, but Canada will only agree to a regime that is acceptable to us and we will continue to work hard to ensure this.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Raynald Blais: Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate my colleague, the parliamentary secretary, on his efforts to speak French. Bravo. I acknowledge his effort, but unfortunately, it did nothing to allay my fears about what is now happening.

As I understand it, my colleague supports an approach that is even worse than *laissez-faire*. I might even call it indifference with respect to what is going on right now. The minister's response in March and the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans' response today did not suggest strength of will to not only protect but also promote the development of the fishery in Quebec and the other jurisdictions. I did not sense that in his answer.

Rather, what I sensed was that he does not care about what is going on. If I had to make a prediction, I would say that if attitudes do not change, the fisheries sector will be in danger because of the current government's indifference.

● (1900)

[*English*]

Mr. Randy Kamp: Mr. Speaker, I am surprised by that response.

This government supports the efforts that are being made in this round to liberalize trade in the fisheries sector.

[*Translation*]

These negotiations are also making it possible to eliminate the subsidies that contribute to global overcapacity and overfishing. On November 30, 2007, when the chair presented his preliminary proposal, he clearly indicated that he expected each party to find some things appropriate, others less so, and still others totally unacceptable.

[*English*]

Canada is clear that the chair's first draft proposal is unacceptable. A second draft must be produced and include more acceptable language.

Finally, the Doha round will not be over until all the negotiations in all areas, including fisheries subsidies, are concluded to the satisfaction of Canada.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): The motion to adjourn the House is now deemed to have been adopted. Accordingly, the House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 2 p.m., pursuant to Standing Order 24.

(The House adjourned at 7:01 p.m.)

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