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(HANSARD)

Tuesday, May 13, 2014



Speaker: The Honourable Andrew Scheer

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Tuesday, May 13, 2014

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, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 36(8), I have the honour to table, in both official languages, the government's responses to 14 petitions.

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INTERPARLIAMENTARY DELEGATIONS

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 34(1), I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the report of the Canadian delegation of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association respecting its participation in the bilateral visit to Mumbai, Bangalore, Trivandrum, and Kochi, India from August 31 to September 8, 2012.

Mr. Speaker, also pursuant to Standing Order 34(1), I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the report of the Canadian delegation of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association respecting its participation in the 59th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference held in Johannesburg, South Africa, from August 28 to September 6, 2013.

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NAVIGABLE WATERS PROTECTION ACT

Mr. Fin Donnelly (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-595, an act to amend the Navigable Waters Protection Act (Somass River).

He said: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to introduce legislation that would extend environmental protection to the Somass River. This legislation would restore the river to the schedule of waterways protected under the Navigable Waters Protection Act.

The government's recent overhaul of this act allows for the construction of dams and bridges on most Canadian waters without having to notify the government and without needing approval from

the Minister of Transport. This means that waterways like the Somass River are now unprotected against development, leaving residing fish and their dependent ecosystems vulnerable to habitat destruction.

I encourage all members of the House to support this legislation.
(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed)

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NAVIGABLE WATERS PROTECTION ACT

Mr. Fin Donnelly (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-596, an act to amend the Navigable Waters Protection Act (Fish Lake and other waterways).

He said: Mr. Speaker, I rise again to introduce legislation that would extend environmental protection to Fish Lake, Little Fish Lake, Big Onion Lake, Wasp Lake, Taseko River, and Beece Creek. This legislation would restore these bodies of water to the schedule of waterways protected under the Navigable Waters Protection Act.

These bodies of water would have been severely impacted by the proposed Prosperity Mine as documented by not one but two federal review panels conducted by the Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency. The proposed mine would have turned pristine Fish Lake into a tailings pond.

By gutting environmental regulations, including the Navigable Waters Protection Act, the government has broken trust in its ability to balance natural resource development with building healthy, sustainable communities.

This legislation is a small step in the right direction of restoring a more responsible and balanced approach.

I encourage all members of the House to support the bill.

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

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LINCOLN ALEXANDER DAY ACT

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC) moved for leave to introduce Bill S-213, an act respecting Lincoln Alexander Day.

He said: Mr. Speaker, I am honoured to rise today to introduce Bill S-213, an act respecting Lincoln Alexander Day, also passed by the Senate as Bill S-213. The bill would establish a day to pay tribute to a truly great Canadian.

Routine Proceedings

As a friend and the member of Parliament for a good part of what was Line's constituency when he was a member of the House of Commons, it is a great privilege for me to introduce this legislation.

(Motion agreed to and bill read the first time)

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PETITIONS

PUBLIC TRANSIT

Mr. Matthew Kellway (Beaches—East York, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is my honour to present two petitions today on behalf of Canadians in and around my riding of Beaches—East York. The first one notes that Canada is the only OECD country that does not have a national public transit strategy. It calls upon the Government of Canada to enact such a strategy, which would provide permanent investment to support public transit. That investment would be predictable and sustainable for the purpose of increasing access to public transit.

CONSUMER PROTECTION

Mr. Matthew Kellway (Beaches—East York, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the second petition takes note of the fact that Canadians face record levels of household debt: \$1.65 for every \$1 they take home. It calls on the Government of Canada to take significant, concrete steps to make life more affordable for cash-strapped Canadians.

IMPAIRED DRIVING

Mr. Mark Warawa (Langley, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am honoured to present a petition that represents thousands of people from British Columbia. The petition highlights that 22-year-old Kassandra Kaulius was killed by a drunk driver. Families For Justice is calling for changes to our laws. It is asking for mandatory minimum sentencing for people who have been convicted of impaired driving causing death.

●(1010)

FALUN GONG

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, my petition today deals with issues of corneas, hearts, kidneys, lungs, and livers. It is from Falun Gong practitioners. They are asking Parliament to condemn the Chinese Communist Party's crime of systematically murdering Falun Gong practitioners for their organs.

[Translation]

VIA RAIL

Mr. Philip Toone (Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today I would like to present a series of petitions signed by a few hundred people from my riding and ridings in northern New Brunswick.

We are delighted that the minister has announced \$10 million to ensure the survival of the railway in our region. Unfortunately, she forgot to invest in VIA Rail passenger service as well. I would remind the House that the train does not go through the Gaspé any more, but it goes through northern New Brunswick three times a week.

We absolutely must invest in VIA Rail. People are expecting an answer from the minister, and I hope that she will listen.

[English]

GENETICALLY MODIFIED ALFALFA

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have a petition signed by residents of the city of London about GM alfalfa.

HUMAN RIGHTS IN VENEZUELA

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise to present a petition signed by several residents of the province of Quebec with respect to the situation in Venezuela. They are calling on the Canadian government to take action through the Organization of American States, including economic sanctions, regarding the situation in Venezuela.

BLOOD AND ORGAN DONATION

Mr. Brian Masse (Windsor West, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have a petition signed by a number of individuals from around Windsor Essex County and also London, Ontario. It requests the Government of Canada return the right of any healthy Canadian to give the gift of blood, bone marrow, and organs to those in need. No matter the race, religion, or sexual preference of a person, the right to give blood or donate organs is universal to any healthy man or woman.

CANADA POST

Mr. Glenn Thibeault (Sudbury, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise today to table a new set of petitions calling on the government to reverse revenue—for example, by cuts to Canada Post. The hundreds of signatories believe that we should be instead looking for ways to generate additional revenue—for example, by establishing postal banking. The petitioners want the government to make it very clear that we should not be cutting essential services that Canadians rely on.

BLOOD AND ORGAN DONATION

Mr. Fin Donnelly (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise to present two petitions. The first is from petitioners across the country who say that discrimination against people in same-sex relationships is unconstitutional and goes against Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms. They are calling on the Government of Canada to return the right of any healthy Canadian to give blood, bone marrow, or organs to those in need. No matter the race, religion, or sexual preference of a person, the right to give blood or donate is universal to any healthy man or woman.

SHARK FINNING

Mr. Fin Donnelly (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the second petition is from Canadians who want the government to take measures to stop the global practice of shark finning and to ensure the responsible conservation and management of sharks. They call on the government to immediately ban importation of shark fins into Canada.

QUESTIONS ON THE ORDER PAPER

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

The Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

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PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

The Speaker: The Chair would like to take a moment to provide some information to the House regarding the management of private members' business.

[*Translation*]

As members know, after the order of precedence is replenished, the Chair reviews the new items so as to alert the House to bills which at first glance appear to impinge on the financial prerogative of the crown. This allows members the opportunity to intervene in a timely fashion to present their views about the need for those bills to be accompanied by a royal recommendation.

[*English*]

Accordingly, following the April 9, 2014, replenishment of the order of precedence with 15 new items, I wish to inform the House that there is a bill that gives the Chair some concern as to the spending provisions it contemplates. It is Bill C-584, an act respecting the corporate social responsibility inherent in the activities of Canadian extractive corporations in developing countries, standing in the name of the member for La Pointe-de-l'Île.

[*Translation*]

I would encourage hon. members who would like to make arguments regarding the need for a royal recommendation to accompany this bill, or any of the other bills now on the order of precedence, to do so at an early opportunity.

•(1015)

[*English*]

I thank hon. members for their attention.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[*English*]

FAIR ELECTIONS ACT

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC) moved that Bill C-23, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act and other Acts and to make consequential amendments to certain Acts, be read the third time and passed.

He said: Mr. Speaker, here we are arising to debate at third reading the fair elections act. This has been an excellent process in considering the democracy that we have been fortunate to inherit from our ancestors in this country, to build upon its foundations and to make it even better.

Today, we have before the House the fair elections act, a bill widely supported by the Canadian people, based on the principle of

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fairness and universal suffrage. It would make it easier for law-abiding Canadians to vote and harder to break the law. It would make it easier for law-abiding Canadians to contribute more financially to democracy while making it harder for special interest groups to break election finance laws. It would make it more difficult to vote illegally or fraudulently while giving new opportunities for Canadian voters to cast their ballots conveniently throughout an election campaign.

The bill has been subject to a great deal of debate, a variety of opinions, and some modest amendments, which built upon the foundations of the original document; so let us review now the final product that the House will consider with its vote on the bill tonight.

To start with, Canadians would be required to bring ID when they cast their ballots. In the last election, it was possible for people to arrive at their voting location without a single piece of ID and cast their ballot by having someone else vouch for their identity. Identity vouching would be no more. Every single Canadian voter would be required to bring ID showing who they are before they vote.

Beyond that, there would be a safety valve in the system to help those people whose address may not appear on their identification. For example, in communities throughout rural Alberta, Canadians often have driver's licences that do not contain a home address, but rather a post office box. That creates complications at the voting booth. In such circumstances, or ones like it, the voter would be allowed to co-sign an oath with another voter from the same polling division who does have ID and proof of residence in hand, to confirm the residency of the voter.

There would be a list of oath takers, and Elections Canada would be required by law to check that list for duplicates. Duplicates would of course be evidence of multiple voting. If that occurred, it would automatically be sent over to the commissioner, whose job it is to investigate breaches of the Canada Elections Act. Signing of a false oath or using oaths to vote more than once would subject a voter to a \$50,000 fine or up to five years in prison.

There would also be a mandatory external audit to examine whether or not Elections Canada followed all of these procedures. That is particularly important, considering the abysmal record of the agency in managing the vouching process during the last election. The agency had roughly 50,000 irregularities linked to vouching last time, and 165,000 irregularities throughout the organization in other areas of its management on election day. This mandatory external audit would hold the agency accountable for this kind of mismanagement and these sorts of irregularities. That is an enormous step forward. Those protections were not in place in the last election, nor was a mandatory ID required.

The presence of ID would ensure that we know who people are before they vote, so that if they, for example, misused, abused, or misled in the taking of an oath, we would be able to track them down afterwards, having actually seen their identification.

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•(1020)

Under the status quo, people who used vouching to commit voter fraud might never have been tracked down because they never provided ID and their identify is therefore not even registered in the system. These new safeguards would prevent against abuse, and they would embed a very simple principle into our system: if people want to vote, they must present ID.

I realize that this position is contentious within the House. The NDP and the Liberals believe that people should be allowed to vote with no ID whatsoever, that they should be able to walk in and have someone vouch for their identity. I disagree, and so do Canadians. Before I even announced that there would be some amendments to this bill, 87% of Canadians believed that identification should be required in order to vote. We agree with that 87%.

In addition to requiring ID, we would eliminate a form of identification that has proven unreliable and susceptible to abuse. In the last couple of elections, the agency has allowed voters to use their voter information card as a form of ID. This card is error-ridden. It has millions of mistakes. Some voters even get more than one of them, allowing for multiple voting to occur.

In the last election, there were errors with 12%, or roughly 1 in 6, of these voter information cards. Even today, the Chief Electoral Officer says there is a roughly 6% error rate within the voter information cards. That percentage might not sound like a lot, until we consider that there are 25 million voters in Canada, so off the top of my head, 6% equals almost 2 million errors in those cards. That presents an unacceptably high level of risk. As a result the fair elections act would end the use of the voter information card as a form of ID.

Furthermore, the fair elections act would close financial loopholes that have allowed some powerful interests to get around the donation limits. Some years ago, the House of Commons passed into place, with a great deal of consensus, restrictions on the amount that people could give and the sources from which those funds could come. Corporate and union money was no longer allowed. Individual donors were restricted to \$1,000 a year. With inflation, that is about \$1,200 now.

The problem is that some have found loopholes. Liberal leadership candidates, for example, took enormous loans from powerful interests and just never repaid them. In essence, those loans are identical in their effect to illegal donations. For some reason, Elections Canada did not pursue an investigation into this breach of the law, and these Liberals were allowed to get away with that practice.

New Democrats, on the other hand, were particularly creative. They invited people to leave enormous donations in excess of the donation limit in their testaments or in their wills. The NDP received hundreds of thousands of dollars in donations bequeathed to them because the limits did not apply to dead people. Although dead people cannot vote, they can contribute under the status quo. The fair elections act would put a nail in that coffin and end the practice of dead donors. From now on, wills and testaments would be subject to the same donation limits as those applied to living Canadians.

All this is designed to end the abuse and the loopholes that have permitted big money to creep back into our electoral system. We understand that big money can drown out the voices of everyday Canadians. That is why our laws would attempt to restrict the flow of that money. It is so that parties can never take enough money from one donor to require them to be indebted to that donor with their public policy decision making.

•(1025)

These rules, whether to prevent voter fraud or to keep out unacceptably large donations, would be useless without enforcement. That is why the fair elections act would strengthen enforcement by making the chief investigator of election law independent. We would be giving him sharper teeth, a longer reach, and a freer hand.

Sharper teeth means that he would have tougher penalties for existing offences. A longer reach means that he would have many new offences to crack down on big money, voter fraud, and other forms of abuse. A freer hand means that he would be completely independent.

Right now, the commissioner is subject to the control of the CEO. The CEO picks his staff, directs his investigations, hires him, and can fire him at any time without cause, according to the law. This is not independence.

The fair elections act would give the commissioner control of his own staff and his own investigation, and guarantee that he cannot be fired without cause. That is the kind of independence the Canadian people expect from a chief investigator. I expect that independence would vastly improve the quality and consistency of enforcement that Canadians enjoy in their electoral system.

One of the best ways to ensure that people do not break the rules is to make those rules known and consistently applied. For example, if the agency were to allow a practice for many years and then change its mind suddenly, as it has been known to do, then it is hard for political actors to know which set of rules they are supposed to follow. As a result, the fair elections act would require the CEO to issue legal interpretations and advance rulings on requests from political parties.

For example, if a party is unclear as to how the agency would enforce a certain rule, it could send a request for an advance ruling to ask the CEO if its plan to do *a*, *b*, *c*, and *d* would be allowed. The CEO would be required to respond within a confined time period, and the party would then be able to use that advance ruling to carry out its actions in compliance. The ruling would be binding on Elections Canada.

In other words, the agency would not be allowed to tell a party that something is allowed and then change its mind after the fact. Furthermore, it would set a precedent so that all parties could follow the same practice as one party had been allowed to do. In other words, there would be one set of rules for everybody. This is a massive improvement and it represents the use of an ounce of prevention instead of a pound of punishment.

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The democracy we enjoy should never be taken for granted. All of us have been given this sacred opportunity to choose who shall govern our country. Unfortunately, many Canadians choose not to exercise that right. One of the biggest obstacles to voter participation, according to Elections Canada, is a lack of basic information about how to participate.

Now most Canadians understand that they can vote on election day. That knowledge is widely understood. However, half of young people are not aware that one can vote before election day. A poll by Elections Canada showed that three-quarters of aboriginal youth were not aware that they could vote before election day, through an advance ballot, a mail-in ballot, or by going to the Elections Canada local office on any day throughout the campaign.

That knowledge would be useful in helping people get out and vote who are too busy, out of town, working, or having family or health obstacles. That is why the fair elections act would focus Elections Canada's advertising on where, when, and how to vote.

In fact, with the passage of the fair elections act, the agency would only be allowed to advertise on the basics of voting. That is a change from the system right now, and it would ensure that the information the people of Canada receive from their election agency is relevant to their role.

● (1030)

Finally, for the vote to matter, it has to be honoured. Under the status quo, Elections Canada is able to attempt to remove a member of Parliament, through suspension, from the House of Commons if there is a financial dispute over election spending.

I think all of us agree that if someone flagrantly and deliberately breaks election law in order to be elected, that person should be suspended, but we have to make sure that the allegation is in fact true before reversing the decision of thousands of voters by the edict of one agency head. Therefore, the fair elections act will allow any member of Parliament whose financial claims are disputed by the agency to exhaust all levels of legal appeal in the courts before the CEO can come to Parliament and ask for that MP's suspension. This is altogether fitting and proper. It is not right for an agency head to attempt to overturn the results of a democratic election and to cancel out the votes of tens of thousands of voters unless and until a judge has agreed with the allegation the CEO has presented. The fair elections act will imbed that required judicial proceeding in place, rather than the current system, which is undemocratic and unfair to voters.

We in this party and in this government believe that voting should be as easy as possible. That is why we are adding an additional day of voting during which Canadians can show up and cast their ballots in advance, in case they are not able to do so on election day.

This is a summary of the changes we are putting forward before the Canadian people. They have been widely debated and thoroughly considered in the committees of both the House and the Senate, and now we move forward to decision day. Having had all of this debate and having considered some modest but fair changes, it is time for people to decide.

This bill will allow Elections Canada to focus on its core mandate of running elections fairly and efficiently while removing from its

mandate aspects that really do not belong with the agency at all. It is a major step forward for democracy. It will protect the independence of our elections, and it will allow the Canadian people to have full confidence in the apparatus constructed to carry out the vote on election day.

I invite members of all parties, having carefully considered it, to vote in favour of the fair elections act tonight and to celebrate it as a step forward in the evolution of Canadian democracy, building upon our long-standing traditions and democratic heritage to move our country forward into the future of its democracy.

Mr. Craig Scott (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank the minister for outlining some of the benefits. I am also glad to say that, finally, the minister has contrasted what is back in the bill with something that was eliminated. He said that vouching for identity is no longer available, which means that he now accepts that he has restored vouching for address, and that certainly was the biggest concern of all the witnesses. I would count that not as a modest amendment but as a major amendment. The minister started out by saying that all the amendments were modest.

I thank the minister for that.

Did the minister listen to, and if he did, why did he not act on, the testimony from the commissioners for Canada Elections about the effects of transferring the commissioner to the office of the Director of Public Prosecutions? The concern was that a compliance model permeates the Canada Elections Act and that separating the commissioner from the CEO, the Chief Electoral Officer, is going to actually create serious effectiveness problems for the commissioner when it comes to assisting in compliance, versus prosecutorial enforcement. Did the minister listen? Did the minister not see the reason in that criticism? Why did he not leave, therefore, the commissioner with the Chief Electoral Officer?

● (1035)

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Speaker, the member addressed two issues. One is the issue of voting without ID. Under the status quo, people can vote without any ID whatsoever by having someone vouch for who they are. That is over. That is done. It is not coming back. It is a major improvement to require every single voter to present ID when he or she casts a ballot. I respect that he takes a different point of view, and though we are on opposite sides of that, I do not question his well-intentioned approach.

On the issue of the independence of the commissioner, there are two different functions. One is administration and the other is enforcement. The job of Elections Canada is to administer elections. If members read the Neufeld report, they will see that the administration had serious problems in the last election. There were 165,000 serious irregularities that represented breaches of practice, and that cannot continue. That is why we are focusing Elections Canada on its core job, which is to properly administer elections.

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As for enforcement, there are two parts to enforcement. One is prosecution and the other is investigation. In the past, those two functions have been housed not only in the same office but in the same person. Prior to 2005, one person was both prosecutor and investigator. What we are proposing now is that they not be in the same person but in the same office. The prosecutor will be responsible, when charges are recommended, for taking those charges before the courts, but the investigator will be completely independent of Elections Canada and will be able to exercise a free hand in seeking out wrongdoing. All that we have seen over the last several years suggests that this independence is needed and that it will be a major improvement when it is achieved.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, because the minister is the minister, he was afforded the opportunity to name the bill. He named it the fair elections act. That is anything but the truth. This is a Conservative election act. Every action taken by the government on this bill clearly demonstrates that it is a Conservative piece of legislation. There was time allocation, limitations, the lack of consultation, and the lack of respect toward the Chief Electoral Officer. The minister himself verbally assaulted the Chief Electoral Officer for expressing concerns that Canadians have with regard to this legislation.

My question for the minister deals specifically with the commissioner. It is only the Conservative Party that wanted to take the commissioner outside of Elections Canada. Not only did the CEO want to stay within Election Canada, so did the commissioner himself.

Can the minister provide any indication that there was any academic who made a presentation who suggested that the commissioner, among other things, had to be taken out of Elections Canada? Was there anyone outside of the Conservative Party or the PMO's office?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Yes, Mr. Speaker, there was Ian Lee, who is a respected professor in Ottawa. The Lortie Commission, which did a very thorough study on election law, suggested that there should be an independent commissioner, and that is what we have done. Through the fair elections act, the commissioner would be independent from the elected government, political parties, and Elections Canada.

Keep in mind that there are about three dozen offences in the act that would relate to the conduct of Elections Canada officials. How could he possibly investigate potential offences by officials within the organization for which he works? It is impossible. A basic precept of good governance is that enforcement is independent and separate and that people do not investigate themselves. The investigator should make his own decisions and have a free hand, and that is the decision we have made in the fair elections act.

•(1040)

Hon. Steven Fletcher (Charleswood—St. James—Assiniboia, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate the minister for an excellent bill. I had his portfolio a few years ago, and I think it is a terrific bill. It is a bill Canadians will respect. When I have heard about this bill in my constituency, people think it is common sense that people identify themselves.

I wonder if the minister could again reassure us that people who can vote will have that opportunity, and those who cannot vote will not vote. Perhaps he could share with us some of the other identification methods that are available under this new bill.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Speaker, the member was a great minister in the democratic reform portfolio. He also presided over crown corporations. He has a very distinguished record, and I thank him for the question and the kind words.

On the issue of voter identification, here is the fundamental difference between what the fair elections act proposes today and what existed in the last election. In the last election, people could go in with no ID whatsoever and cast a ballot by having someone vouch for who they were. That form of identity vouching is gone. Every single person who votes will have to present a piece of identification showing who they are before they vote. If that ID does not have an address on it, they can co-sign an oath with another elector as to their address. However, there is a big difference. From now on, the list of oath takers will be put before the eyes of Elections Canada right after the election to find out if there are duplicates so that we can catch people who voted more than once. There will be a \$50,000 fine for taking a false oath. Potentially, jail time could come along with that. There would be an external auditor to make sure that Elections Canada actually follows these legal requirements.

Because we will have required people to show ID proving who are before taking that oath, unlike under the status quo, if they have lied or cheated, we will be able to track them down. Under the previous model of vouching, where people could go in without any ID whatsoever and have someone vouch for who they were, if the system showed that they had voted more than once or had cheated in some way, we might not ever be able to track them down, because their identity had not been established. In other words, they could simply lie about who they were. There was no picture of them. There was no record of their existence. They literally vanished into thin air as though they never existed, but their vote was counted. That vote would have cancelled out the legitimate vote of an honest voter. That is another way of disenfranchising someone.

We are eliminating that practice and that possibility by requiring every single person to show their ID, by checking the list of oath takers for duplicates to catch people who vote more than once, and by having an external auditor oversee all of it so that we can ensure that Elections Canada actually follows its own rules.

Mr. Craig Scott (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to orient my remarks in the following way: first, to briefly situate why there was so much concern when the bill was initially tabled in early February and in the months leading up to major concessions by the minister, not the minor or modest amendments that he just referred to; second, to outline what those amendments were that constitute a major victory for civil society and the opposition in making a bad bill less bad; and, finally, to go through 10 points about what still remains in the bill that makes it a bad bill unworthy of the support of this House.

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On the first point, it has to be said that from the beginning, our worry was that the dozens of new provisions and changes in the bill created a tapestry that, in the result, whether or not by intention, would favour one party in the next election and lock into place a series of principles that were not themselves fair, despite the name of the act, the “fair elections act”. There was no better sign for those well aware of what the government is capable of and of the bill itself than the fact that on April 10 two very highly respected Progressive Conservatives joined in signing a statement about their concerns and about why the bill should actually be killed. Those persons were David Crombie and Allan Gregg.

They said:

This legislation is a blatant attempt by the Harper government to stack the deck in favour of the Conservatives in the next federal election.

These are two extremely knowledgeable members of Canadian society, one of them a former mayor of Toronto and a former Progressive Conservative minister and the other a deeply connected pollster and marketing person. Both these men knew what the current government was capable of. They read the bill, they understood it, and they used very strong language. “Stack the deck” is something that clearly suggests an effort to create an unfair elections act, the opposite of the title of the bill, the “fair elections act”.

With pressure from all sides—from civil society, from a vigorous opposition effort, from academics speaking out, and, I have no doubt, from a certain number of Conservative backbenchers who, either as a matter of principle or as a matter of feeling the pressure, weighed in—a number of major concessions were announced by the minister and indeed delivered upon in amendments at the procedure and House affairs committee.

I will list them. By listing them, I hope I convey how major they are and how the government was forced off of some elements that were at the very heart of the effort to “stack the deck”.

First, there was a fundraising exemption. Parties would be allowed to exempt from their campaign expenses all the costs of contacting previous donors from the last five years in order to raise more money from them. All the costs associated with that would not have to go into campaign costs. All kinds of reasons were given as to why this was a huge, unlimited exemption to the campaign caps at election time. That was removed.

Second, the government added to the original bill, Bill C-23, the fact that central poll supervisors would henceforth be de facto appointed by the first-place party's candidate or the first-place party going into the next election.

● (1045)

The central poll supervisor is in many ways the most important person at any given poll. The fact that this would unbalance the existing system—which unfortunately is already politicized, in that the deputy returning officer and the poll clerk are each appointed by the first-place and second-place parties respectively—was something that produced major concern. There was no logic as to why this should be the case. That was removed in one of the so-called modest amendments of the minister, but it is an amendment that I nonetheless would prefer to characterize as a major concession.

We have just had an exchange where the minister acknowledges that vouching for identity in and of itself is no longer part of Bill C-23 and remains so, but vouching for an address, which is the absolute key problem that had occurred when the vouching provisions of the Canada Elections Act were removed, has been restored.

That was not a modest amendment. That was a major victory for civil society and for the many witnesses who took the time and trouble to explain to Conservative members at the procedure and House affairs committee, to the media, and ultimately to the minister why the elimination of the current vouching provisions in the Canada Elections Act were deeply unfair and disenfranchising.

Fourth, there was a bordering on ludicrous limit on how long calling service providers and others had to keep data with respect to voter contact in the new voter contact registry. When Bill C-23 was initially introduced, it was to be only one year, which is barely enough time for information to come out in some context that there is a problem needing investigation. The minister caved with respect to the keeping of scripts and audio records. That was increased from one year to three years.

Many other problems remain with this voter contact registry system. I would call this a modest amendment, but nonetheless a significant one.

Fifth, the government heard early on that Bill C-23's elimination of the public education and information programming role of Elections Canada, especially targeted toward disadvantaged groups and those more likely to experience difficulties in voting, was an abomination. I knew early on that this was one area that a lot of Conservative Party backbenchers had great trouble with. I could have predicted from the beginning what would happen, which was that the public education role for Elections Canada was restored, albeit only for primary and secondary school students. All of the other outreach activities that Elections Canada had engaged in over the years or could engage in in the future have remained prohibited by the current version of Bill C-23.

Nonetheless, at least allowing a student vote and analogous programs to continue to be supported, funded, co-organized, and partnered by Elections Canada constitutes a major victory on the part of civil society, which very much put this issue near the top of its concerns.

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Sixth is the fact that Bill C-23 contained no provisions that are necessary in a bill, for technical reasons, to allow communications between the Commissioner of Canada Elections and the Chief Electoral Officer after the commissioner would be moved from Elections Canada to the Director of Public Prosecutions. That was rectified by putting in communications authorizations. They are minimal and do not go as far as we wanted, but they are nonetheless important.

Seventh, it was very clear that the new section 18 of the Canada Elections Act was written in such a way that the Chief Electoral Officer would henceforth be prohibited from communicating with the public other than to provide information to the public on a very narrow set of functional questions, such as where one can vote, how one can vote, and what identification one can use to vote. The reason was that section 18 was worded to say that the Chief Electoral Officer shall “only” communicate about the following. Therefore, there was great concern that, whether intentionally or not, it had been written in a way that meant the Chief Electoral Officer could communicate on nothing other than that in the future.

• (1050)

Early on, the minister said that was not the intention, and when he announced his other concessions, he said that the Chief Electoral Officer could communicate freely in his own capacity. When the time came for the amendments at the procedure and House affairs committee, it was never expressed that the Chief Electoral Officer could communicate freely henceforth, but the way in which section 18 was rewritten satisfies me that the result would be that he could now communicate freely. I only wish the government had agreed to an NDP amendment to make that clear for the sake of certainty. However, I will go on record here, as I did at the committee, to say that it is clear from the record that the Chief Electoral Officer would now be able to say whatever he wants in whatever context, in Canada or outside of Canada.

Finally, of the concessions made by the minister, there was a very puzzling provision in Bill C-23 that basically said the Commissioner for Canada Elections could not begin an investigation until he or she had reasonable grounds to suspect an offence had been committed.

Anybody involved in the criminal law or investigative sphere knows that is a standard not for beginning an investigation but for receiving things like orders for wiretaps or other kinds of investigative measures. However, in common law and in every other investigative context, all investigative officers need is a reasonable suspicion to start an investigation.

That was changed in committee, and I am willing to concede that it was simply a mistake on the part of the drafters, although a puzzling one that I cannot understand being made by anybody who understands how criminal law investigation works.

The point is that a number of major concessions arose as a result of fierce opposition, an engaged civil society, and either persuaded or somewhat fearful backbenchers, who obviously weighed in with the government.

I would like to now move to why, despite all those concessions, there still remain so many problems with this bill that it does not deserve our support, quite apart from all of the process concerns

about how it was generated and how even the amendments process was non-consensual, in that not a single opposition amendment of any substance was accepted. Despite the concessions that I mentioned earlier, there are so many problems that it deserves not to see the light of day. I will briefly now indicate 10 points.

First, the current Bill C-23 on which we are about to vote today would continue to eliminate the power of the Chief Electoral Officer to implement public education and information programs designed to enhance knowledge of our electoral democracy and to encourage voting. It would only bring back one context, and that is for primary and secondary school students. All other public outreach would remain prohibited.

Second, Bill C-23 would prohibit the Chief Electoral Officer from authorizing the use of voter information cards, or VICs, as a piece of voter identification to be used not on their own but alongside a second piece of identification. It would do this despite the fact that such cards are a method of enfranchisement that were introduced because of concerns about limited forms of identity showing address and despite the fact that smoother administration of voting on election day resulted from their use in various contexts in 2011. It would be prohibited despite there being no evidence whatsoever for believing these cards are, or are likely to be, a source of fraud. This remains the case, no matter how many times the minister gives an example of a hoax that was attempted by the television show *Infoman* that never actually reached fruition.

• (1055)

Third, Bill C-23 would require that the Chief Electoral Officer and the Commissioner for Canada Elections must now get the permission of government officials in order to remunerate experts and investigators whom they find necessary to hire on a temporary basis. Previously, they could have direct access to the consolidated revenue fund. Now the CEO would have to go through the Treasury Board and the commissioner would have to go through the Director of Public Prosecutions.

Fourth, it refuses to legislate powers that are necessary for full compliance with, and enforcement of, the Canada Elections Act, in light of the experience with fraud and breach of other electoral law rules in the elections of 2006, 2008 and 2011, notably, the power of the CEO to require registered parties to provide receipts accounting for their election campaign expenses and the power of the commissioner to seek a judicial order to compel testimony during an investigation into electoral crime.

Fifth, it unnecessarily transfers the commissioner to a government ministry, the ministry of the Attorney General, and away from the current location within the office of the Chief Electoral Officer, who is, I will remind the House, an officer of Parliament. This thereby creates corresponding negative consequences for the effectiveness of commissioner investigations and for the complementary roles that the Chief Electoral Officer and his or her staff and the commissioner and his or her staff play in securing compliance with the Elections Act, well ahead of and well beyond the relatively limited number of contexts in which their focus is enforcement.

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Sixth, the commissioner is fettered in ways that other investigative agencies are not. In particular, he or she is required to inform suspects if they are under investigation, and he or she is prohibited from explaining to Parliament and Canadians why an investigation has not led to charges of prosecution.

Seventh, it leaves serious loopholes in the voter contact registry system that is to be administered by the CRTC, which is a welcome addition to the Canada Elections Act, but which does not go far enough. The loopholes include: the fact that the voter contact scripts for live calls and audio recordings of robocalls do not have to be conveyed to the CRTC; the fact that no person or group is under any obligation to retain phone numbers of persons called, let alone to convey those numbers to the CRTC; and the fact that no affirmative obligations are placed on the CRTC to proactively inform the commissioner if and when a CRTC employee suspects wrongdoing. I speak obviously not of wrongdoing on the part of the CRTC, but on the part of the actors who have to report to the CRTC.

Eighth, the Canada Elections Act, through Bill C-23, retains a politicized system of appointing deputy returning officers, poll clerks and registration officers as elections officials or officers for election day. As such, the Canada Elections Act does not grant Elections Canada the full authority to appoint all elections officers on the basis of merit, with corresponding detrimental effects for Elections Canada's capacity to minimize election day irregularities through more timely recruitment and training for elections officers. It is one of the major outcomes of the Neufeld report saying that the ability of Elections Canada to appoint all elections officers would be the single most important way to enhance the capacity of elections workers to minimize irregularities that the government from the beginning tried to leverage as evidence of fraud, which it was not.

Ninth, is the problematic provisions relating to voter identification that create the danger of harassment and intimidation of voters, because identity documents can now be inspected by party scrutineers. They also dissuade people from actually vouching for an address because of the fear that the requirement that the person must have known personally the person being vouched for is very unclear as to how long and how well the voucher must have known the elector.

Finally, it increases the role of money in politics through unjustified increases in donation limits and also by creating an unworkable banking loan system that would actually, in ways that are too complex to explain, benefit well-resourced candidates and parties.

• (1100)

Therefore, I would like to move a reasoned amendment. I move:

That the motion be amended by deleting all of the words after the word "That" and substituting the following:

this House decline to give third reading to Bill C-23, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act and other Acts and to make consequential amendments to certain Acts, because, amongst other things, it:

(a) was rushed through Parliament without adequately taking into account the concerns raised by over 70 expert witnesses and hundreds of civil society actors that speak to a wide array of provisions that remain problematic in this bill;

(b) prohibits the Chief Electoral Officer from authorizing the use of 'Voter Information Cards' as a piece of voter identification to be used alongside a second piece of identification, despite such cards being a method of enfranchisement and promoting smoother administration of the election-day vote and despite there

being no basis for believing these cards are, or are likely to be, a source of voter fraud;

(c) refuses to legislate the powers necessary for full compliance with, and enforcement of, the Canada Elections Act in light of experience with fraud and breach of other electoral law in the 2006, 2008 and 2011 general elections, notably, the power of the Chief Electoral Officer to require registered parties to provide receipts accounting for their election campaign expenses and the power of the Commissioner for Canada Elections to seek a judicial order to compel testimony during an investigation into electoral crimes such as fraud;

(d) eliminates the power of the Chief Electoral Officer to implement public education and information programs designed to enhance knowledge of our electoral democracy and encourage voting, other than for primary and secondary school students; and

(e) increases the influence of money in politics through unjustified increases in how much individuals may donate annually and how much candidates may now contribute to their own campaigns, thereby creating an undue advantage for well-resourced candidates and parties.

• (1105)

The Deputy Speaker: The amendment is in order and will be accepted.

Questions and comments, the hon. member for Kitchener—Conestoga.

Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC): Mr. Speaker, a number of months ago, I had the privilege of serving with my colleague on the procedure and House affairs committee. I know my colleague does his homework and is very well-informed on this bill, so I was rather surprised to hear him, at many times throughout his speech, use words like "mistakes", "concessions", and "changes", as if this was something unusual that would happen at committee level.

One of the things that he referred to was the retention of the student vote program. I can say, with confidence, that many of us approached the minister and said that in our ridings, this system was working well. That is the reason for having studies at committee: to allow input into that committee to conduct a more in-depth study than we can do in the House with all 308 members.

I am rather surprised, then, to hear my colleague refer to these changes as somehow "big concessions". The very point of having our committees is to study in-depth the legislation that is proposed and to then make recommendations to the House after the in depth study.

Why is my colleague implying that the committee's work is somehow to simply rubber-stamp a bill that was passed here at second reading? This is the job of our committees. Why is he implying otherwise?

Mr. Craig Scott: Mr. Speaker, I am actually implying no such thing. I just wish this was the norm. This is an extremely unusual outcome for a government sponsored bill in this Parliament of the last two years. Amendments of this nature, coming for government legislation, are almost unheard of—

Mr. Harold Albrecht: No.

Mr. Craig Scott: Yes, Mr. Speaker. As such, these were major concessions. The minister had no intention of making these kinds of concessions at the beginning.

It was not just good faith efforts in a committee; it was the overall pressure on our civil society, which realized what was going on in the bill.

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•(1110)

[Translation]

Mr. Alain Giguère (Marc-Aurèle-Fortin, NDP): Mr. Speaker, first and foremost, this electoral law is unprecedented. Traditionally in Canada, electoral laws were more or less consensual in that all of the political parties supported them, with the consent of the vast majority of civil society actors. For the first time in this country's history, an electoral law will be enacted in defiance of the majority of stakeholders.

My question for my distinguished colleague, who has clearly understood and defended the democratic perspective, is as follows. What fate awaits such a bill, which will immediately come under attack by first nations representatives? This electoral reform, this unfair elections act, will make it harder for aboriginal people to exercise their right to vote. It will also come under attack by students at schools and universities, who will no longer be encouraged to vote or motivated by this kind of electoral participation, which is the very essence of democracy. They, too, will have the power to mount a legal challenge. All other stakeholders who find their powers diluted, especially their legal powers, such as the bars of Quebec, Canada and Ontario, will intervene.

Can my distinguished colleague tell me what fate awaits such a bill, which will probably soon be passed thanks to the government's majority, a bill that offers so many grounds for legal challenge? What legal fate awaits this bad bill?

[English]

Mr. Craig Scott: Mr. Speaker, my hon. colleague's question actually builds into it an extremely strong set of arguments about why the legacy of Bill C-23 will be a lack of public trust and confidence in our electoral system.

We have given extremely good reasons why a whole range of sectors of society have not been dealt with fairly by the bill. We have not simply raised this for opposition sake, but the result is that the bill will be passed against major opposition, not just in the House but in society. As such, the former auditor general for Canada, Sheila Fraser, was correct when she said that the ultimate impact of this was going to be diminishing public trust in both our parliamentary institutions and our electoral system.

At some level it will be very important that we revisit key elements of the bill in a future Parliament and start again, more consensually, to produce a final version of the Canada Elections Act in which all parties and all key actors in civil society feel an ownership.

•(1115)

[Translation]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet (Hochelaga, NDP): Mr. Speaker, earlier, my colleague talked about the banking loan system. He said it was very complicated, but I would like more information about it. Can he provide a brief explanation?

[English]

Mr. Craig Scott: Mr. Speaker, in what began two years ago as a good faith effort on the part of the former minister for democratic reform, a system of political loans was inserted into the Canada Elections Act, whereby essentially banks are now the central actor in

providing candidates with loans in order to start up campaigns, before they may have raised money. The problem is with a whole series of limitations on how those loans can be guaranteed.

The banks appeared before the procedure and House affairs committee almost two years ago with respect to a previous incarnation of this legislation. They said there would not be the right kind of incentives for a bank to chase down all the guarantors in order to give out these loans. The Chief Electoral Officer said it would be unworkable because those who could guarantee and give loans within their individual donation limits would be impossible to track because of a whole series of fluctuations over the course of a year.

It was unworkable according to the Chief Electoral Officer and unworkable according to the banks.

The result is that those who need loans, especially non-incumbents because they have not yet raised money, are going to be at a disadvantage versus those who have had a chance to raise a lot of money, mostly incumbents, or can receive direct transfers or loans from a well-resourced national party and therefore have no need whatsoever to turn to the banks to help start up their campaign.

I think it is in the result. I do not think this is intentional on the part of the government, although it heard the concerns before. In the result, this bank loan system would give advantage to parties and candidates who are well resourced because access to it would only be needed by those who do not have resources. It would also be the case with this system that, when individuals try to access it, they may find the banks' doors are closed.

Mr. Ryan Leef (Yukon, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to touch on the point my hon. colleague is making about parties being well resourced. Parties that are well resourced are indicative of parties that have the support of the Canadian public. The resources are provided by people who take out memberships in the party, believe in party philosophies, and are willing to donate money. It would only stand to reason that parties that are not well resourced are not well supported.

I am not sure I understand the member's logic that parties that are not supported by a membership and by membership donations, and do not have broad Canadian support, should somehow be given financial resources through some other means.

The member's argument about resourcing being indicative of incumbents' positions is not actually the case. I was not an incumbent in the last election but I was resourced. Resources do not equate to election success because the incumbent in the last election in the Yukon spent \$20,000 more than he had in the election before and lost by 1,500 votes. That resourcing did not equate to election success, and that is not broadly the case across this country.

Maybe the member would wish to comment on some of those remarks.

Mr. Craig Scott: Mr. Speaker, if fundraising and resourcing do not affect elections, then we should talk about lowering campaign expense limits entirely. We should make sure every candidate has a much lower limit because it does not have impact, as the hon. member has indicated.

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At the same time, unfortunately, in the norm, that is not the case. Especially with the spending limits per constituency election that we currently have, spending can make a major difference, especially major gaps in what candidates can spend.

Beyond that, the fact that a party has a lot of money is a sign of which sectors of society may be supporting that party and may be in a position to donate to that party. It has nothing to do with the level of support from society as a whole. Equating the fact that a party has been able to raise a lot more money from a stronger donor base with wealthier donors, on average, says nothing about its political support.

• (1120)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mauril Bélanger (Ottawa—Vanier, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise to speak today to a very problematic bill that may put Canada in a very difficult situation down the road.

I will begin by trying to put the bill into context, the way I see it. After the last election, Elections Canada launched investigations into some of the practices that came to light during the election. I am talking about the mechanism one political party had created in order to get around the spending limits for national campaigns. The party would lend money to riding associations or local campaigns, which would then transfer the money to the central party to spend on advertising. This was the famous “in and out” scandal. Naturally, this led to a lawsuit, and the party was found guilty of breaking the law and had to pay a fine. This left a stain on this party, which is now in power.

The other incident began shortly before the last election. In a new approach to running an election campaign, the party would suppress the vote and reduce voter turnout in an effort to get its own candidates elected. The thinking was that it might have the better team or a better machine to get out the vote, so if it succeeded in discouraging others from voting, this would increase the chances of its candidates getting elected. I am referring to the robocalls.

By the way, this is a misnomer because in the riding that I have the pleasure of representing, people did not receive a robocall. They received a call from a person who gave them false information. That happened a number of times. I asked everyone who notified me of this to sign an affidavit. Everything I received I passed on to Elections Canada and the RCMP.

For example, a woman of a certain age had lived in a building for about 60 years. When there is a municipal, provincial or federal election, the polling station is always in the building. On election day, the woman received a call informing her that her polling station had been moved. She laughed at them, called them idiots and told them that she had already voted in her building and that what they were trying to do was wrong. That was one of the women who signed an affidavit in front of a lawyer. This complaint was sent to Elections Canada, and there were others.

This whole affair left a very bad taste in Canadians' mouths and put a black mark on the political party in power. It may have generated interest in amending the law. Canadians and parliamentarians called for amendments. In his reports, the Chief Electoral

Officer called for changes to the law and the government promised to make some.

The previous minister had told the House that the bill would be introduced in a few days. We learned that he consulted his caucus and instead of introducing the bill the next day, as he was supposed to, he went back to the drawing board. With the last cabinet shuffle, the appointment of the new Minister of State for Democratic Reform caused quite a stir among Canadians.

• (1125)

As we know, the minister who introduced the bill is another sort of person, someone who is a little more acerbic and a little more partisan.

This resulted in the bill to amend the Elections Act, which was introduced a while ago. Canadians and MPs began to react. I would like to remind members of the reactions to the bill from right across the country.

The *Cape Breton Post* said:

[*English*]

Conservatives' Fair Election Act anything but fair

[*Translation*]

That was in February.

An Edmonton, Alberta, newspaper called *Le Franco* published an article titled “Election Tension Intensifies”. The article said:

The 242-page fair elections bill was rushed through, even though it will have a significant impact on the democratic process. The bill, introduced on February 4, fundamentally changes the rules.

A headline in *The Gazette* read:

[*English*]

Bill could end vote drive campaigns
Elections Canada ads failed, minister says

[*Translation*]

A *National Post* headline read:

[*English*]

Electoral officer slams reform bill at meeting, vows not to resign
Draws applause

[*Translation*]

That article was written by Glen McGregor.

The Gazette said:

[*English*]

Anti-vouching provisions unconstitutional: critics
Fair Elections Act measure could affect the young, seniors and aboriginals

[*Translation*]

In another article in *The Gazette*, Andrew Coyne wrote:

[*English*]

What election problems do Tories want to solve?

[*Translation*]

The *Winnipeg Free Press* said:

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[English]

Election bill helps Tories exclusively

[Translation]

The Chronicle Herald said:

[English]

Former watchdog slams electoral reform bill

[Translation]

Another headline in *The Chronicle Herald* read:

[English]

Some good, some bad

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[Translation]

There are a few nuances here and there.

Another headline in the same newspaper read:

[English]

New Fair Election Act: not exactly as advertised

[Translation]

The *National Post* said:

[English]

Electoral reform based on mistrust

New bill removes chief electoral officer's power

[Translation]

An article in *Le Devoir* was titled “The Poisoned Ballot Box”.

A headline in *La Presse* read: “Ottawa wants to remove the CEO's power to investigate”.

Those are the reactions we saw across the country. Well-known and well-respected individuals even made some surprising comments. The first was Preston Manning, who was quoted in *The Globe and Mail* on March 1, if I am not mistaken:

[English]

Conservatives are increasingly not viewed as the party that most champions democratic values....

[Translation]

It was Mr. Manning who said that.

This created a situation in which we were forced to ask ourselves some questions. Some changes made to the law were completely unacceptable.

I was there when the Chief Electoral Officer spoke to the committee on March 6. I listened to his statement and shared it with my constituents. He tore apart the bill as it had been introduced.

Members will recall a situation we had never seen before. One of the country's top newspapers, *The Globe and Mail*, published scathing criticisms of the bill in five editorials—one a day. The following Monday, another editorial was published, entitled:

[English]

Kill this bill

[Translation]

Many people across the country shared the same opinion. They were not satisfied with the bill the government had introduced. There was a public outcry. Many organizations started petitions, as did the opposition parties in the House. As a result, the government realized that there might be a problem. The minister often quoted the Neufeld report in his answers in the House. He used the report to support an argument contrary to what the report was actually saying. It became clear that he was hurting his own party. Earlier, I listened to what the member for Toronto—Danforth said. I agree with him.

• (1130)

Some members likely exerted pressure within the government caucus. Others shared their opinions anonymously. This led the minister to change his position and make some amendments. I believe that 45 amendments were proposed in the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

All of these amendments were accepted by the government majority. However, approximately 150 amendments were proposed by members of the committee belonging to the opposition parties. I believe that only one of those amendments was accepted and it was a small amendment regarding a technical error in the bill. All of the other amendments proposed by the opposition parties were rejected. Members of NDP, the Liberal Party, the Bloc Québécois and the Green Party, as well as independent members, consulted their own constituents. Canadians reacted very strongly, so these members tried to amend the bill so that the unacceptable provisions would not be included in the Canada Elections Act.

Of course, amendments were made. I agree with what has been said. The bill has been improved somewhat, but not enough. That is where things stand today. Yesterday evening, we voted for two hours. That whole time, the government majority systematically rejected all the other amendments, even though many of those amendments made a lot of sense. They would have strengthened the Canada Elections Act and Canadian democracy. They would have protected Canadians' rights. Those amendments were not accepted.

Other troubling incidents have occurred throughout the process. Sheila Fraser, the former auditor general of Canada, made a rather strong statement. She said:

[English]

“...it really is an attack on our democracy....”

[Translation]

The government's reaction was vicious. The Conservatives accused Ms. Fraser of being a spokesperson for Elections Canada and of being paid to say what she did. However, she earned the respect of all Canadians during her 10 years as auditor general of Canada. She did a remarkable job that affected all of us, as a government. I really must commend the work she did as Canada's auditor general. She has a great reputation, yet the government, or some of its spokespersons, were quick to try to destroy her reputation. It really is unbelievable. There is clearly a problem when something like that happens.

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The government may well have realized that resistance was mounting when they saw how the Senate would react, in advance of the study of the bill. They heard fairly strong comments from their own senators, who said that certain amendments would be appropriate. That is how we got to where we are now.

I would also like to point out that it was at that point that the government was quick to introduce a time allocation motion: the guillotine. At that time, we were just beginning to perhaps see, or hope to see, some openness to make this bill acceptable to Canadians and to parliamentarians. However, the government said no, that it was done and that we had to vote. There would be one day of debate at the report stage, which was yesterday, one day for third reading, which is today, and it will be over tonight.

I certainly intend to support the motion of the hon. member for Toronto—Danforth, seconded by his colleague from Sudbury, not to go ahead with this bill and pass it because I think that passing it would be a step backward, not forward, as the minister claims.

There is a list of proposed amendments, which are correct, but also a list of shortcomings in the bill that still does not recognize voter cards as a piece of identification. It is only recognized as proof of address. Voters can use it if they have someone there with them, but that is not always the case.

• (1135)

Elections Canada's role is seriously limited. It is unacceptable to separate the Chief Electoral Officer and the commissioner by sending the commissioner to a government agency where he will lose the independence of being an officer of Parliament.

Increasing the limit for contributions to political parties, just like the \$25,000 contribution, I believe, that candidates can make to their own campaigns, is good for the wealthiest people in our country.

That is not a direction the government should be heading in. On the contrary, I do not think anything should be changed, unless the limits are reduced. Yes, that is challenging for political parties, but it forces them to open up to the public and encourage people to get involved in and contribute to their movement. That strengthens democracy and makes people feel like they are living in a country where their voices make a difference. I wish the limits had not been increased, but that is what will happen.

[*English*]

There is another thing that is really bothersome. Elections Canada has, over the years, developed a fabulous international reputation. I have had occasion to travel in a number of countries, Africa in particular, where there are electoral commissions.

[*Translation*]

These temporary or permanent electoral commissions are rather clumsy, poorly organized and highly controlled by governments.

[*English*]

These bodies are problematic, and the people rely quite a bit, when they have elections, on external bodies, and I have heard about Elections Canada's fabulous reputation in terms of going there to help.

[*Translation*]

Under the former chief electoral officers, Mr. Kingsley and Mr. Hamel, Elections Canada was able to build a solid reputation over the decades. However, if the bill before us today is passed by the House and the Senate and receives royal assent, it is a step backward. This will weaken Elections Canada and its ability to ensure that the electoral process is sound and transparent. This agency is supposed to be independent and report to the House, not the government. The agency has the ability to enforce legislation and, when that legislation is violated, to conduct investigations and impose penalties. The agency is asking for investigative powers, which it will not have, to maintain its reputation.

If this bill is passed, I think the government is going in the opposite direction and taking a step backward. This will weaken Elections Canada and its national and international reputation. It blows me away to see a government do this.

This was one of my responsibilities when I was a minister. We made a minor change to the criteria for redistributions. To make this change, I consulted with the officers of Parliament and with the opposition parties. That is how we went about amending the Elections Act. We did not go about it in a cavalier fashion as we are seeing today. The minister misinterpreted a report and made claims that were the opposite of what the report said. He made some amendments only because he was forced to do so, but he rejected all the other amendments presented by the opposition.

I hope that some of their members will heed the call to vote against this bill and that it will not become law.

• (1140)

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine (Châteauguay—Saint-Constant, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I also want to thank my colleague for his speech.

He spoke about a number of egregious aspects of this bill. We must remind Canadians that this is the first time in Canadian history that a party in power is forcing through a democratic reform bill that opposition parties and civil society do not want. The government's actions with respect to this electoral reform are quite simply disgraceful.

This bill is disgraceful because it will suppress the vote of people who are not partisan, such as seniors, students and aboriginal people. The government is trying to prevent them from voting by refusing to allow them to use the voter card, which is ridiculous. Nothing is being done to promote democracy or to encourage Canadians to get out and vote. At the same time, the government is encouraging shameful and undemocratic practices such as robocalls, which served to irritate voters and discourage them from voting.

This bill will not do anything to support the Chief Electoral Officer in his investigations. On the contrary, it will give him fewer powers. I would like to hear what my colleague thinks about that, since the party will be able to continue to cheat, as it did before, without being bothered by the Chief Electoral Officer, since he will not have the powers to investigate fraud.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Mr. Speaker, the lure of power is very strong. When you have power, you want to hold on to it.

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However, in a democracy, there are limits to what you can do to hold on to power. Over the past few elections, we have seen the systematic introduction of mechanisms and strategies to reduce voter turnout. This trend started in the United States with the Republicans. I guess it was imported to Canada to see if it could work here, along with the politics of division.

Unfortunately, it seems to be working because the Conservatives used certain methods to discourage people from voting and cause confusion. It is absolutely imperative that an independent agency, namely Elections Canada, which reports to the Parliament of Canada, maintain all its powers and be able to seek more. In fact, it asked for the power to compel witness testimony, which it is not being given. If Elections Canada is not getting the power it needs and is losing its independence, then we are heading in the wrong direction.

Ms. Francine Raynault (Joliette, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his speech.

By the way, I have been voting for decades and I have never received two voter cards in the mail. The bill would prohibit the Chief Electoral Officer from implementing public information programs. That bothers me because when we inform the public about bills and government measures, then the public is in a position to criticize the way the public good is managed.

What does my colleague think of the fact that the Chief Electoral Officer can no longer inform the public? I think this is dangerous because people will no longer get all the information they need to vote.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Mr. Speaker, if I understand the meaning of the bill correctly, the only information that Elections Canada will be able to give the public is information about when elections will take place, where people can go to vote, and what they need to be able to vote.

Elections Canada is losing its freedom to encourage Canadians to vote, which is what it has always done. It encouraged young people of all ages, not just students, to vote. That kind of activity had a positive impact. Now Elections Canada will no longer be able to do it. If I understand correctly, it will now have to restrict such activities to students in elementary and secondary schools. It will not be allowed to encourage young people, seniors, aboriginal people and others, including homeless people, to vote. This is a step backward.

An organization like Elections Canada had the power to encourage Canadians to exercise their fundamental right to vote, but now it will no longer be able to do that. Why? We have asked this question but have never received an answer. Elections Canada should definitely be able to keep playing this role.

•(1145)

[English]

Mr. Matthew Kellway (Beaches—East York, NDP): Mr. Speaker, one of the amendments NDP members of the committee studying this bill put forward at committee was to insert a provision in the fair elections act to allow for the study of proportional representation systems that would ensure that every vote of every Canadian counted in an election.

Unfortunately, the Liberal member of that committee voted down that proposed amendment. I was wondering if our friend could explain why the Liberals voted against an amendment to study proportional representation.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Mr. Speaker, I will have to talk to that member to see why he did. I do not know. I will find out.

However, for the information of my colleague, he should know that the position of our party is indeed that when we form a government, proportional representation is one of the things we will look at very seriously. I, for one, have always supported an element of proportionality in our electoral system, not full proportionality but an element of proportionality. I have said that publicly before. I have had great discussions with Mr. Broadbent on this, and I would love to have the same discussion with that member, should he so desire.

[Translation]

Mrs. Djaouida Sellah (Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I listened closely to my colleague's speech. I have a very simple question.

In Quebec right now, in proceedings like the Charbonneau commission, people are fighting for more transparency around political party funding. However, the Conservatives have changed the rules in their own favour using the reform we are now debating.

I would like my colleague to comment on the influence of money in politics.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Mr. Speaker, I have always been in favour of limiting the influence of money in politics, be it corporate money or big union money.

Mr. Chrétien's government introduced a public funding formula for elections that was based in part on the formula introduced in Quebec by Mr. Lévesque. I supported that formula, and I still do, but the government is using its majority to eliminate it.

First the Conservatives lowered the limits, and now they are using the bill before us to raise them. Why? Are they doing it because the opposition parties, the Liberals and the NDP, are starting to catch up to them? Our fundraising efforts are going really well right now. We actually have more donors than the Conservatives. Is that why they decided to raise the limits? We will see.

Still, to answer my colleague's question, I think we definitely have to limit the influence of money on the electoral process.

•(1150)

[English]

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will be splitting my time with the member for Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington.

It is a privilege for me to rise in the House to speak to the importance of the fair elections act, also known as Bill C-23. Today I will be focusing on the important measures taken by our government to protect democracy and to ensure the integrity of the voting process as well as on our commitment to combatting big money and minimizing the possibility of fraudulent voting.

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We are very fortunate as Canadians to be able to exercise our right to vote through our democratic system. Sadly, in many countries, the voices of their citizens are frequently stifled by dictatorships and/or communism. We often hear news of fixed or rigged election results in these countries, which result in civil unrest, division, and violence. This is why our government fully commits itself to protecting the core Canadian values of democracy, fairness, accountability, and transparency through the fair elections act.

[*Translation*]

Our Conservative government is focusing on the Canadian value of democracy and it will continue to do so.

I believe that the bill will strengthen the integrity of the voting process. We continue to build on our record and, under the leadership of our government, we have taken action and introduced the best measures to protect and improve the electoral system. Complicated rules result in unintentional breaches and discourage ordinary people from taking part in democracy. That is why the fair elections act will make election rules more clear, predictable and easy to follow.

In order to follow the rules, parties must know what they are. The fair elections act will ensure that they know what they are by requiring the Chief Electoral Officer to take appropriate action. To ensure that the laws reflect the reality of the overall election process, an advisory committee of political parties would be created through legislation. It would be composed of the Chief Electoral Officer and two representatives of each registered political party.

The role of the committee would be to ensure that the views of the parties represented are considered in administering the election laws. Its mandate would be to provide useful advice and comments on any administrative or legislative issue related to the law or the administration of elections by Elections Canada.

The bill establishes that the committee's advice and recommendations are not binding on the Chief Electoral Officer. It should be noted that Elections Canada would have the power of final interpretation, but that the committee would safeguard the independent administration of elections. The committee would examine the Chief Electoral Officer's interpretations and suggest improvements when necessary.

However, we should understand that there is no perfect election system. Even though Canada has a particularly solid democracy, there are always things that can be improved. We believe that the measures I have just mentioned will help fine-tune the system.

[*English*]

Our government continues to take action when it comes to improving our voting system. In light of accountability and transparency, the fair elections act would help combat big money to encourage small donations and to eliminate taxpayer-funded handouts. This would also keep special interest groups, such as unions or individuals with deep pockets, from drowning out the voices of everyday citizens.

We believe that political parties should interact and engage with the public to advocate their cause, to be meaningful to Canadians, and to seek their financial support. This means that political parties

and candidates need to be engaged, committed, and most importantly, relevant to Canadians so that they will make contributions from their own hard-earned money.

Political parties need to do their own fundraising and utilize resources at their disposal to encourage individuals to come out to vote. That seems like a win-win to me. As MPs who hold public office, we have a responsibility to keep ourselves and those around us accountable.

• (1155)

All of us here must lead by example come election time. The spending limit, although increased by our government from \$1,200 to \$1,500, would help political candidates do just that. Along with ensuring accountability, this spending limit would allow Canadians to make meaningful contributions to the parties they support.

Although I appreciate and listened to the views and concerns of the members opposite on the matter of vouching, it is my opinion that they do not understand that the majority of Canadians agree with our position that a person must show identification to vote.

I can assure this House that we are committed to strengthening our voting process and procedures. We will take the necessary action to reduce high levels of irregularities, which have been noted in studies, resulting from a process known as vouching.

It is indeed reasonable to ask people to produce identification prior to their casting a vote. When Canadians pick up a parcel at a post office, they are asked to produce a valid piece of ID. When Canadians embark on a plane, they are asked to produce a valid piece of ID. When Canadians set up new bank accounts at banks, they are asked to produce a valid piece of ID.

My point is that if one requires a piece of ID for many day-to-day dealings and activities, it is entirely reasonable that one would produce a piece of ID to prove one's identity to vote. What the opposition clearly does not understand is that Canadians agree that this is, indeed, entirely reasonable.

Our government has made the process simple, accessible, and clear for Canadians. There are currently 39 forms of authorized ID to choose from to prove identity and residence. I will not go through the list, for the sake of time, but I can assure members that it is extensive. That there are 39 forms of approved identification facilitates the ability of Canadians to show who they are.

What the members of the NDP and Liberal Party need to do is lay aside their ideological opposition to the fair elections act and a matter such as this and instead recognize that the measures are fair and reasonable and are considered to be so by Canadians.

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[Translation]

To conclude, I would like to express my unwavering support for this bill. It is a remarkable initiative, especially when we consider that no one other than the Conservative government could achieve such an objective. Moreover, we worked with opposition members and, as a result, we made amendments to an already solid bill. We then introduced the improved version.

This bill will simplify our voting system and will protect Canadians from abuse of campaign donations—big money—and fraudulent phone calls. Our government is committed to protecting core Canadian values by applying this law. Unfortunately, the NDP and Liberals have always voted against these important initiatives.

As an MP, I often think about the importance of democracy in Canada. I sincerely believe that this bill is firmly based on the idea of an accountable, transparent and impartial democratic system for this country. I invite opposition members to join with us in supporting the bill, which is designed to defend our democratic system and improve the voting system.

[English]

Canadians want accountability, transparency, and fairness. This is what we are delivering through the fair elections act.

[Translation]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet (Hochelaga, NDP): Mr. Speaker, last week, I was at an event in my riding: the opening of a place called Dopamine. Many of the people who go there are homeless. There are many reasons for homelessness, including addiction. This community organization offers a service to help homeless people obtain ID cards.

I asked people in the organization whether that is an easy or difficult task, and they said that in order to get an ID card, you need ID. It takes months. There are a lot of hoops to jump through, and it is very difficult. That means that we are taking the right to vote away from a growing segment of society, the homeless. They are already disadvantaged. Now, democracy could not care less about them. Many of them will not have the right to vote because they will not be able to get ID cards.

In addition to all of that, those who look after the homeless in places like Dopamine will not be able to vouch for them because they do not have the same address. Earlier, the minister said that it has to be someone who lives in the same polling division. A person who is helping the homeless does not necessarily live in the same area, so the homeless are literally left out on street once again.

• (1200)

[English]

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Mr. Speaker, I am surprised at the question from the member. As I mentioned in my speech, it is entirely reasonable to ask Canadians to prove their identity before they vote, and Canadians actually support this initiative.

As for those who are homeless, many homeless people receive support from various levels of government, federal, provincial, or municipal. If they receive a cheque with their name on it, that government-issued cheque would count as ID.

There is an amendment in place with respect to vouching for address to allow that process to occur. In other words, the obligation now is simply that one produces a piece of valid ID with one's name on it. I think it is entirely possible for Canadians to have access to this type of ID. If they need to vouch for their address, the fair elections act would accommodate that.

Mr. Ryan Leef (Yukon, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we have had a discussion about identification.

A couple of weeks ago now, I went back to my riding in the Yukon and got a fishing licence. That fishing licence required an address on it. One of the 39 pieces of identification that is acceptable to vote in the next general election is a fishing licence.

One other thing in terms of the 39 pieces of identification is that they are reasonable, fair, and supported by 89% of the Canadians who were asked whether or not ID should be required.

In contrast, the comment has come up around elections in other countries. In Kenya, for example, in certain electoral districts, one must produce a piece of identification and also give a thumbprint. One's fingerprints would be scanned to ensure the security and integrity of that electoral system. Clearly, we are not going that far, but of all the 39 pieces of identification, right down to a provincially issued fishing licence, I think all Canadians agree that those are reasonable pieces of identification to provide when one goes to the polls to cast one's ballot to influence the outcome of a federal election.

I wonder if the parliamentary secretary would agree with that and maybe add some additional comments from his experiences.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Mr. Speaker, I absolutely agree with my colleague on the 39 different pieces of ID. A lot of Canadians do not realize it, but this list of 39 pieces of ID is published on the Elections Canada website. It includes such things as a bus pass; a library card; any bill that is received, such as a cellphone, telephone, cable, hydro, heating, or oil bill. It includes a hospital card or a hospital bracelet if one had been hospitalized. It also includes a letter from a seniors residence that simply attests to one being a resident in that home. The list is extensive with 39 pieces of ID. I think Canadians, in general, are shocked that the NDP members feel that anybody should be able to show up at a poll with absolutely no identification whatsoever and cast a ballot in a Canadian election. That is clearly unacceptable.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I, too, am rising today to address Bill C-23, the fair elections act, and some of the very significant and beneficial reforms that it is making to the Canada Elections Act and to the conduct of elections in this country.

I will run through a couple of things, and if I have time within my ten minutes, I will go through some of the amendments that were made in committee, amendments that I think show a genuine commitment on the part of the government and on the part of the responsible minister to take into account a wide range of inputs and to alter the bill in order to make it better reflect those inputs.

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Let me start with what I think are the four key themes of this legislation. As someone who sat through all of the many hours of committee hearings on the bill and who has been involved in one form or another in every stage of the process of its adoption and amendment, it seems to me that these four themes come out very clearly.

First, there is an attempt to limit the influence of big money. This is a continuation of a theme that began when Jean Chrétien was Prime Minister and donations were limited to \$5,000 per person. Before that there were no limits on how much an individual could donate. Anybody who has an interest in these things can look at the records of Elections Canada to see the enormous donations, to the tune of quarter of a million dollars, from major institutions. That was changed. It was tightened by this government in its first term, reducing the amount of donations to \$1,000 and eliminating all forms of corporate and union donations.

The bump upwards in this piece of legislation, in the fair elections act, to \$1500 is merely a reflection of inflation over that period of time. I should add that we have done a few things, entirely non-controversial but I think very beneficial. This bill eliminates the possibility of the one kind of giant donation that still exists out there, the donation in the form of a bequest.

A few years ago, the New Democrats received a donation in a bequest, in a will, of over \$300,000 from a single individual. Clearly, this kind of very large donation, which could, in theory, allow for donations in bequests in wills of up to millions, would destabilize a political system in which every other input of cash has been reduced. I think that is a very significant step that this bill has taken.

Second, we have greater certainty in the administration of elections and of the rules. Elections Canada is now required to prepare rulings in advance. It cannot make retroactive rulings. The rules are this now, but we also say that in the past they have changed from what we said they were in the past or what a reasonable person might have thought they were in the past. It is bound by their own rulings. It is no longer in a position to sign compliance agreements with a party, as it did with the New Democratic Party following its convention and following the large corporate donations that were given in the form of sponsored advertising at that convention for a very large consideration. The compliance agreement is a secret. The CEO knows what it says. The New Democrats know what it says, and none of them want to reveal it to the general public. That cannot happen any more. That is vital for the rule of law.

Third, there is greater integrity and protection against voter fraud. Much has been spoken on that subject; I will only say that I think the measures taken here are reasonable, balanced and, especially once the amendments occurred, do everything they can to ensure that there is fairness and that the restrictions that are placed on the ability of people to vote without identification are applied with as a light a touch as is realistically possible. I applaud the minister for having made those amendments.

Fourth, there is greater knowledge by Canadians of what their rights are under the law. Canadians have the right to vote, not only on election day, but also in advanced polls. They have the right to vote at the returning office throughout the election period, or most of it. They can vote by mail. If they are visually disabled, they have the

right to go in and vote with a secret ballot through the use of an ingenious template that lets them know that their candidate is the candidate whose name is listed third. They have to count down one, two, three, and tick off that ballot. It remains their secret ballot. That is a very clever solution for a minority of the population, but I know, and members can check the *Hansard* of the committee hearings, that the representative from the Canadian National Institute of the Blind did not know that right existed.

My point is, Elections Canada has done a very poor job, a really poor job, of informing people of all the different ways in which they can exercise their franchise.

• (1205)

An examination of Elections Canada's own reports on the subject indicate that youth in Canada, the group with the lowest voter participation, indicated that one of the primary reasons they do not vote is because they do not know where to vote. They do not know and are not given that voter information card because they moved recently. The absence of the voter information card, which is Elections Canada's way of attempting to assist youths to find out where to vote, was cited as one of the key reasons they did not vote.

If information such as how to get youths onto the voters list, how they can vote in advance, and all the rights that we have were publicized properly by Elections Canada, I make the modest suggestion that we would see youth voting rates go up substantially and the voting by disabled people and others go up substantially. The CEO is now mandated to engage in a series of these kinds of acts of publicity which in the past, as I said, he had not done to nearly the adequate level.

The bill has been the subject of a great deal of debate including a motion that was put forward by the New Democrats under the name of the member for Toronto—Danforth about a month ago in which they expressed particular concern with regard to the ability of certain groups in society to vote if there were requirements that they prove their identity and their place of address. They cited in particular three groups. I want to talk about how the amendments to the bill have dealt with these three groups.

The three groups they mentioned were seniors living in residence, long-term care in other words; aboriginal people, and I think by this they meant aboriginal people living on reserve, although that may not be exactly how the motion was worded; and finally, students living in residence on campus. They felt these groups were potentially deprived of their franchise, if we read the rhetoric of the NDP, which was a little overwrought at the time.

Even in its original form, I think the bill was pretty good at dealing with people in these categories, but the amendments to the bill did a significant amount to ensure that these individuals would be able to cast their vote. I would add to these people another group that was not mentioned in the NDP motion and that is the homeless. All of these groups have one thing in common and that is that they have moved their residence recently or else are residing in a place where having the normal forms of identification such as a driver's licence or bills they would pay are not readily available. Therefore, they find themselves unable to prove their place of residence.

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In some of these cases it is obvious that the person is in residence where they say are. The best example of this is a senior living in long-term care. These are often closed facilities. People cannot come into them because of the fear of spreading pathogens. The notion that someone could show up claiming to be John Smith who lives down the hall is preposterous, yet under the existing legislation there is a problem that no one is available who can vouch for them. The administrators were unable to do so. There is a provision for attestations to be given, but for reasons of their own, these residences have on occasion been reluctant to issue such attestations.

The impression I had from listening to testimony is that homeless shelters are in general better at this. There appears to be a problem where full use of the attestation provisions in the current law is not exercised as much as it should be on some aboriginal reserves. That would vary from one reserve to the other, but the point is that in dealing with the issue of identity, the bill, through its amendments, specifically through amendments that were made to section 143 of the bill, would allow the use of attestations as a proof of residence on a more widespread basis.

Some people have called it a kind of vouching for residents. I am not sure that is exactly the right way of putting it, but what happens now is that voters can vote with two pieces of ID that prove their identity and a written oath as to their residence, providing that another elector from the same polling division, who has proved his or her identity and residence by providing documentary proof, takes a written oath as to the elector's place of residence.

People still have to prove they are who they say they are, but they do not have to prove their place of residence the way that would have otherwise been required. That has now been adjusted and taken care of through this amendment to the bill. That is very significant and it deals with the fundamental issue, which is not that people would be unable to prove who they are, but rather they could not prove where they live. There were a number of very empathetic examples and in my last five seconds I want to give one example.

A witness at committee offered the example of a woman who has had to flee her home and is now living with a relative because of an abusive relationship with her spouse. She would be unable to prove her new place of residence. That person, it was suggested, would have been unable to vote. That was a legitimate concern, and it would now be dealt with through this amendment to the law.

• (1210)

We have done as much as can reasonably be done to ensure that every Canadian will be able to vote, while still ensuring proper security against improper voting by those who are either not eligible to vote, or who are voting in the wrong constituency.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, to begin, I would like to say that I will be sharing my time with my hon. colleague, the member for Victoria. I would like to take this opportunity to say that it is an honour and a pleasure for me to share my time with a member who is so active, eloquent and involved.

Unfortunately, I often have to say that my democracy is suffering. The electoral “deform” bill that we are discussing today, which was

concocted by the Conservatives, is another step in the Conservative government's slow destruction of our democratic institutions.

Allow me to provide a bit of context so that people can understand what is happening. Ever since the Conservatives won a majority of the seats in Parliament—and I would like to emphasize that is a majority of seats—which they achieved in our parliamentary system without having the support of the majority of Canadians, they have been attacking the institution of Parliament itself by imposing a record number of gag orders. It is fairly ironic that we are discussing a fair elections act under another gag order. That is what is happening with a bill that is so important that, according to British tradition, it must be developed and passed by an all-party consensus. Even knowing that, the Conservative government has the nerve to limit debate. It is unbelievable.

In the past, we have also seen the government prorogue Parliament in an abusive manner. We know that the Conservatives refuse to work with the opposition parties, even though—it is important to remember—they represent the majority of the population. We know that the government has attacked our officers of Parliament and that it recently attacked the Supreme Court itself. The Conservatives will stop at nothing. The government has also muzzled public servants, scientists and civil society organizations. The Conservatives have fought tooth and nail against anyone who dares to have an opinion different from their own.

Incidentally, Elections Canada is among the institutions that have been attacked by the Conservatives. We saw it again this morning with all the accusations and innuendo the minister responsible for the election “deform” bill hurled against Elections Canada.

The bill, as proposed, was another of these attacks. What it all boils down to is an attack against Canadians and their right to vote. In my opinion, this attack is a logical extension of the robocalls, which sought to prevent people from voting, given that the Conservative database was the source of those calls.

Fortunately, these same Conservatives pulled back on some particularly problematic aspects of the bill because of pressure that we, the NDP, put on them and because of the exceptional work by my colleagues from Toronto—Danforth, Louis-Saint-Laurent and Hamilton Centre. It is extremely important to mention that it is also thanks to and very likely because of all the Canadians who stood up and to everyone who spoke up, wrote in and signed petitions to oppose the Conservative scheme.

As an aside, there were a lot of constituents from the Laurier—Sainte-Marie riding who spoke up and took action. I would like to thank them today and salute their commitment and determination. I would also like to say that, as always, it is a great privilege for me to be their voice in this House.

Together, we managed to make the Conservatives backtrack on some important issues.

• (1215)

In particular, they backed down on vouching to enable voting and on polling supervisors. With their bill, the Conservatives were trying to politicize the polling supervisor appointment process even more. It makes me wonder who would benefit from that.

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Obviously, the entire bill was designed to benefit the Conservatives. For example, in the case of fundraising campaigns, more and more contributions were going to be allowed to fly under the radar, if I can put it that way, and not be taken into account. That would have increased the power of money even further in the context of elections. There was a victory there, too. Together, Canadians and their spokespersons in the opposition, the NDP, managed to make the government backtrack on that.

We made a few gains with respect to educating the public to encourage people to vote, which is an extremely important issue in Canada, as it is in many countries around the world.

We managed to make these gains, which is a good thing, but there are still a lot of major problems, unfortunately. I could talk about many issues remaining in the bill, but what concerns me in particular is the powers of the Chief Electoral Officer. As I said, we made small gains in public education, but they are small. There is a big difference between what is in the bill before us today and what the Chief Electoral Officer used to be able to do. Now, he will basically be able to promote voting to students in elementary and secondary schools. I do not have anything against that. That is very good, but why not promote voting to college and university students, who are of voting age and will vote in the next election? That makes absolutely no sense. Why would the Chief Electoral Officer not be able to encourage young people who are able to vote to do so? That is quite something.

In addition, the Chief Electoral Officer will not be allowed to partner with other groups to raise awareness and promote voting. He will not be allowed to partner with groups such as Apathy is Boring, an extraordinary group that I know well because I had the opportunity to meet with the founders of the movement. This group does an outstanding job with young people between 18 and 25 years of age. However, game over, they can no longer work together.

● (1220)

That is rather ironic, because it means that, under the new provisions, Elections Canada will have to cancel Canada's Democracy Week, which it used to organize. Once again, that speaks for itself. In effect, Canada's Democracy Week will be cancelled because the Conservatives do not like it. That is quite something.

The Chief Electoral Officer will also need the approval of the Treasury Board to hire technical experts. I just love that. Picture a party in power that committed a bit of electoral fraud—of course, I am not referring to anyone in particular. The Chief Electoral Officer needs technical advice to investigate the situation, and a Treasury Board minister, a member of the party in power, can deny the request. That is totally absurd.

The government is limiting the Chief Electoral Officer's existing powers and, at the same time, is refusing to grant him the new powers he needs to do his work, such as the ability to request financial documents from political parties or to compel witnesses to appear.

We were able to fight back and prevent some of the damage, but there is still work to do. I cannot vote in favour of this bill.

● (1225)

[*English*]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to highlight some of the presentations of the commissioner and the Chief Electoral Officer on Bill C-23. The Chief Electoral Officer said that the commissioner should remain within Elections Canada. We all know that the CEO for Elections Canadian is in fact a man of great stature, truly independent, and so forth. Then we had the commissioner come before the committee and indicate that he was quite comfortable in the current situation, being at Elections Canada, and felt that he was truly independent and was favourable to staying there.

Why does the member think the government took it upon itself and went against the Commissioner of Canada Elections and the Chief Electoral Officer and pulled that office outside of the Elections Canada?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Mr. Speaker, it is very troubling. Everyone is saying that they are completely comfortable with the situation. The electoral “deform” minister is saying that if the Commissioner is not part of Elections Canada, he will be less partisan, as though Elections Canada were partisan. It is the same old pattern: Elections Canada investigated the Conservatives and put the blame on them. Elections Canada did its work with regard to the party in power, and the party in power took that as partisanship—as a bias against the party—and responded with accusations about the integrity of Elections Canada.

It makes no sense, especially since the Commissioner is being placed under the authority of the Director of Public Prosecutions. He will have less protection from government interference or interference from the party in power. That is another very odd measure.

Ms. Francine Raynault (Joliette, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for her speech and all of the work she does in the House and in her riding.

We have often said that there are some key elements missing from the infamous Bill C-23. No one supports the bill. Even in my riding, Joliette, people have often spoken out against this method of reforming the Canada Elections Act.

The Commissioner of Canada Elections requested the power to compel witnesses to appear. However, that is not in the bill and the Commissioner, who will now work for the Director of Public Prosecutions, was not granted that power. I would like to hear what my colleague has to say about that.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague for her excellent question.

We repeatedly asked for the commissioner to have the power to compel witnesses. This is not a complex or revolutionary idea. Many provinces in Canada do it. Many countries do it. It would be one more way to ensure the integrity of elections in Canada. However, I do not think that the integrity of elections in Canada is one of the Conservative government's priorities.

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[English]

Mr. Murray Rankin (Victoria, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I congratulate my colleague for her spirited and passionate presentation on the unfair elections act. I believe we are debating the amendment moved by the member for Toronto—Danforth in which he proposes that we decline to give third reading to this legislation. I entirely agree with my colleague.

By way of introduction, I would like to comment on the process and comment on the implications of this legislation for my riding of Victoria.

I am deeply proud of my fellow citizens in Victoria. I had a sign on the window of my office on the main street of Victoria asking people to come in and sign a petition registering their concern with this legislation. I can say without fear of contradiction that the number of people who came in was extraordinary, and they came from all political walks of life. Members of all political parties came in and expressed their disdain for this proposed suppression law that the bill clearly has become.

Progressive Conservatives such as David Crombie and Allan Gregg expressed their concern earlier with the bill, indicating that it was a blatant attempt to suppress votes. That was loud and clear in one of the meetings that was held in my riding. Business people, wealthy people, poor people, and people from all political parties expressed their deep concern over the bill.

I was very proud of the people of Victoria for speaking up against this atrocious legislation. As I said, people from all political parties and from all walks of life expressed their concern.

It was the elephant in the room when in question period the Minister of State for Democratic Reform could not bring himself to utter the words “Sheila Fraser”, who said that the bill was an attack on our democracy. That refusal to even acknowledge someone Canadians hold in such great esteem was an indication of what the Conservatives thought of her commentary. They then trivialized her, saying that she was being paid or something. Those statements were made to take away from the serious concerns that this great Canadian had expressed.

Our leading newspaper, *The Globe and Mail*, published five editorials in a row, ending with one that said “Kill the bill”. Newspapers across this country and speakers on the radio said the same thing in different ways in speaking to their parts of the country. It became clear to Canadians that it was not just the official opposition that was doing everything it could to stop the bill.

I am so proud of my colleague from Hamilton Centre, who filibustered in committee. I am proud of the enormous work that was done by the member for Toronto—Danforth and the member for Louis-Saint-Laurent. This upheaval in Canada was astounding. Civil society, academics, people on the street, and people in all walks of life were rising up and saying this travesty must stop.

I was pleased that the government accepted some of the proposed amendments that were made by the official opposition. We made 100 of them. Of course, the Conservatives let their ideology undermine this once again, and they shut us down in committee with only half of our amendments debated, something that should cause Canadians deep concern. However, perhaps that is not surprising, given the

track record of the Conservatives in breaking elections law, overspending, the in-and-out scheme, attempts to suppress opposition votes, and so forth.

For the Prime Minister to say that the Chief Electoral Officer was “wearing a jersey” was shocking to a lot of Canadians. This is an officer of Parliament who is only appointed after consultation with other parties in the House and who enjoys virtually the same kind of independence that judges do. The statement was shocking because the Chief Electoral Officer was only doing his job, and people understood that. He was trying to prosecute Conservatives for their rule-breaking. That was his job, but perhaps he did it too well, and that is why that attack was levelled against this officer of Parliament, a development that a lot of us found very concerning.

The minister said this morning that the bill is widely supported by Canadians. He has not been to my riding of Victoria to take that position. If he had seen the people on the streets demonstrating against the bill, if he had come to a meeting I organized that had hundreds of people in attendance from all walks of life, he would not have said that.

● (1230)

The changes that were made, some of which I would like to comment on, are very good in some cases. I agree entirely with the minister's suggestion that the bill now incorporate advance rulings and legal interpretations that other parties could use as precedents. I salute that as an effective amendment and something that we should support.

However, I still do not understand the government's perspective on voter participation as it is reflected in this bill. We have a crisis in our democracy of young people not voting. It is a shocking statistic to see that two-thirds of people under the age of 30 do not bother to show up and vote, yet the effectiveness of this bill in trying to promote voting would be limited to high schools and elementary schools. What about the university sector? What about the outreach that the Chief Electoral Officer was trying to achieve? That seems to have been shut down in the face of what is our biggest problem, which is not voter fraud but voter participation. That is something that needs to be addressed, since the agency can only advertise the basics of the election. I am distressed that it continues to be a problem in this legislation.

The Chief Electoral Officer can suggest that MPs be suspended for disputes over election spending irregularities, but apparently now that can only happen when the entire appeal process has been exhausted. Therefore, even in cases of glaring, obvious errors and overspending problems, we presumably would have to wait until it got to the Supreme Court of Canada, which in some cases might mean the person would be elected for his or her entire term, given the way our appeal structure works. In at least some circumstances, that seems to be inappropriate indeed.

Government Orders

In his presentation, my colleague from Toronto—Danforth characterized this as a bad bill that is less bad now. I would say it is a terrible bill that is simply now a bad bill in light of the amendments.

As two prominent Progressive Conservatives, David Crombie and Allan Gregg, have said, this is a blatant effort to stack the deck for the Conservatives. I think Canadians understand that.

For example, the fundraising limits have been raised in this legislation. The fundraising limits now suggest that individual contributions would go from a \$1,200 maximum to a \$1,500 maximum. Clearly that would favour the party that receives the biggest contributions. That would be the Conservative Party. As well, it would allow candidates to contribute up to \$5,000 to their own campaign. I wonder who that would favour. That would be the Conservatives.

Every NDP amendment to remove these provisions was categorically refused by the government. Those concerns are still with us.

Many speakers have talked about the unnecessary separation between the Commissioner of Canada Elections, Elections Canada, and the Chief Electoral Officer. As the minister said, there is administration and there is enforcement, but since the commissioner agreed with that and wanted it, it is hard for us to understand why that change was necessary. According to the old adage, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it”.

In addition, powers were also sought for the commissioner to compel witnesses, as in section 11 of the Competition Act and as is done in other provinces and other countries routinely. That was also sought by the commissioner; the government, of course, would have none of it and moved it outside of the Elections Canada apparatus. It now, at the last moment, has to change it to have information-sharing agreements to deal with the problem it created in the first place through an absolutely unnecessary and uncalled-for amendment.

In conclusion, I would support the amendment of the member for Toronto—Danforth that we decline to give third reading to this bill. I wish we were not in this state. I wish the government had not moved closure to limit debate on one of the most fundamental bills in our democracy, but here we are, and I sadly rise in utter opposition to this voter suppression legislation.

• (1235)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I will pick up on the member's concluding comments. He was talking about how sad it is to see the bill go through a terrible process, given that it is an election law that we are talking about. The Conservative majority government is using its majority and not doing the consultation that is important to do and not working with the different stakeholders on the issue.

In fact, it bears repeating that numerous amendments were brought to the committee, and a good percentage of those amendments were never debated when the motion was called. A good number of those amendments were quickly tossed to the side because at the end of the day the Conservatives moved a motion to impose a deadline of May 1 at 5 p.m. It did not matter what stage the committee was at.

It speaks volumes that even at second reading, we had time allocation. At third reading, where we are today, there is time allocation. The government has taken it upon itself to ram through this Conservative election bill.

I wonder if the member might want to provide some additional comment on the management of one of those fundamental pillars of our society, which is democracy and the importance of election laws.

• (1240)

Mr. Murray Rankin: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague from Winnipeg North for his very thoughtful commentary and question.

The process that has accompanied this organic law that is one of the fundamentals of our Canadian democracy is nothing short of appalling. Of course, hundreds of academics from Canada and around the world called attention to that situation.

The record speaks for itself. We had time allocation, as it is called, imposed very early in the process. The NDP provided 256 questions along with our cross-country hearings, which of course the Conservatives chose not to support and indeed attempted to squelch. In addition to all of that, the filibustering that was necessary and the fact that half of the amendments were not even allowed to be debated in the committee speak volumes to the disdain with which the government addressed our opposition amendments to improve this bill in good faith. If it was not the Conservatives' idea, it could not be a good one, so the only amendments accepted in committee were those that dealt with grammar and the like. It is shocking.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe (Pierrefonds—Dollard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his speech.

He discussed how the committee went about studying the bill. Specifically, he talked about how the amendments were presented. I would like him to share his opinion about how the committee dealt with witnesses.

Some 70 witnesses appeared to speak to this bill. Although they were virtually unanimous on several aspects of the bill, the Conservatives do not seem to have taken that into account with respect to several potential amendments.

For example, with respect to the powers of the Chief Electoral Officer to investigate electoral fraud, the witnesses seemed to nearly unanimously suggest changes to the bill. The bill before us at third reading does not reflect that at all.

Was the government's purpose just to invite people to appear, let them talk, and then carry on doing what it planned to do in the first place? I thought that the whole point of committee work was to invite experts and take their opinions into consideration. If that is not the point, then why bother asking witnesses to appear before committees?

[*English*]

Mr. Murray Rankin: Mr. Speaker, the way in which this bill was addressed in committee was shocking.

Government Orders

We are always told in this place that we should wait and do the hard slogging, the clause-by-clause analysis, and hear from expert witnesses at committee, because that is where we can improve the bill. That is the way in which it is supposed to work.

However, in my short experience in this place, amendments proposed by the opposition are virtually never accepted, because if it is not the government's idea, it cannot be a good one. That is reflected in spades in what happened in the procedure and House affairs committee during the process of this debate. We invited experts with different perspectives from all across the country to make their presentations. They spoke as one on the need to change key elements on this bill, and all of their efforts were in vain. Nothing was accepted. Half of the amendments never even got debated.

Mr. John Carmichael (Don Valley West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is my great pleasure to rise today to speak in support of Bill C-23, the fair elections act. I would like to take this opportunity to outline how this bill would be a great benefit to our democracy.

Our government understands that the integrity of Canada's voting system is paramount to our democracy. It is vital that we protect the integrity of the system, so that everyday Canadians remain in charge of our democracy. That is why the bill has been met with support by Canadians from coast to coast to coast.

My hon. colleagues have spoken at length about the many facets of this landmark legislation. The fair elections act would ensure that our elections are fair and democratic. As members of all parties, we are entrusted by Canadians to act in the interests of protecting the integrity of our electoral process. The fair elections act would provide all members an opportunity to uphold that obligation.

I would like to add that the government undertook extensive consultations in drafting this legislation. The bill brings to light concerns raised by Canadians, various groups and think tanks, Elections Canada, and parliamentarians themselves. The fair elections act addresses those concerns and would improve the system by introducing a new standard of consistency.

We promised to examine the bill with openness to ideas that would strengthen this common sense bill. That is why on April 25 the government announced it would support amendments to the fair elections act.

The committee has had a long and extensive study of Bill C-23. There have been 15 meetings, amounting to roughly 31 hours of study. In addition, 72 witnesses appeared at committee to offer insight into how we could further strengthen this bill.

I would like to begin by discussing the issue of vouching. First, I want to emphasize an important element of the fair elections act, which is the changes it would make to the identification process. As it stands, the current system has been unable to preserve the integrity of the electoral process. In fact, serious errors of a type the courts consider "irregularities" that can contribute to an election being overturned were found to occur in 42% of cases involving identity vouching.

Overall, the Neufeld report estimates that irregularities occurred for 1.3% of all cases of election day voting during the 2011 federal election. More than 12 million Canadian citizens cast ballots, and the

audit indicates that the application of specific legal safeguards, in place to ensure each elector is actually eligible to vote, were seriously deficient in more than 165,000 cases due to systematic errors made by elections officials.

Averaged across 308 ridings, elections officers made more than 500 serious administrative errors per electoral district on election day. These levels are just too high. We must recognize that a fraudulent or illegitimate vote has the same mathematical effect as denying honest Canadians their constitutional right and privilege to cast a ballot.

The Neufeld report cites cases of fraudulence and irregularities that are far too high. We cannot let the electoral system continue on its current flawed trajectory. That is why the fair elections act would finally end the use of vouching as a means of identification.

Our government believes that it is important to let every eligible voter cast a ballot. By the same token, we believe that fraudulent voters should be ineligible to cast a ballot. The safeguards that current laws established to halt fraudulent voters were violated in 50,735 cases, 42% of the time, in the 2011 election according to Elections Canada's own compliance report. We cannot continue to abide by the current vouching procedures and expect different results in future elections.

It is evident that changing times have brought about changing threats to the integrity of the electoral process. That is why I am pleased with the direct manner in which the fair elections act would proactively keep up with changing conditions.

The fair elections act represents a giant leap forward in ensuring that the integrity of the electoral process is upheld.

● (1245)

The bill would require voters to choose from some 39 pieces of acceptable identification to prove their identity and residency. Photo ID would not be required. However, simply having someone vouch for a voter's identity, without so much as a utility bill to back it up, would no longer suffice.

While the fair elections act would require people to show ID proving who they are before they vote, we supported an amendment to help people whose address is not on their ID. If someone's identification does not have an address on it, they would need to sign a written oath of residence. Another voter with fully proven ID would be required to co-sign the oath, attesting to the voter's address. This would only be required for people whose identification does not have an address.

Government Orders

This is one of the reasons why Canadians overwhelmingly support the bill. In fact, 87% of Canadians believe it is reasonable to require someone to prove their identity and address before they can vote.

As a resident of Ontario, I recently had the opportunity to apply for a new OHIP card in my riding of Don Valley West. In applying for Ontario health insurance, one must provide proof of citizenship, proof of residency, and support of identity. That is three pieces of identification. With that level of scrutiny required for an OHIP card, it is only right to support a bill that requires a similar level of identification be provided for voters in our federal elections. What our government will not support is the opposition suggesting that people should not require any ID to vote.

This is another reason why Canadians are on board with the bill. According to an April 24, 2014, Ipsos poll, 70% of Canadians believe it is acceptable to eliminate vouching and require voters to personally prove their identity and address before voting. Our government believes that in a democratic country all eligible citizens have the right to participate in making the decisions that affect them. The fair elections act would ensure that an honest vote is not denied by fraudulent votes. The fact is that the fair elections act represents a giant leap forward in ensuring that the integrity of the electoral process is, in fact, upheld.

Another important element of the bill is that it would separate the Commissioner of Canada Elections and the Chief Electoral Officer. Quite simply, the Commissioner of Canada Elections should not serve at the pleasure of another official. He should have control over his staff and his budget, and no one should have the power to dictate what he investigates. It just makes sense that the commissioner should not work for one of the entities he might investigate. This is in keeping with basic fiduciary accountability and standards that government departments and institutions use to ensure their functions are carried out properly and ethically.

Our government understands that separating administration from enforcement is vital to upholding the integrity of our electoral process. That is precisely why the fair elections act would house the commissioner with the director of public prosecutions. There, elections law enforcement would be held under the auspices of a strong commissioner. We have made him completely independent by giving him authority to investigate offences. The commissioner would also be afforded full independence with regard to being in charge of his own staff and his own investigations, as well as a fixed term of seven years, in which he could not be dismissed without cause. We gave him new offences to help him in his investigations, such as obstructing an investigation and providing false information.

Our government also supports an amendment that would give the commissioner the unrestricted ability to begin investigations by removing the bill's proposed evidence threshold before the commissioner may begin an investigation.

Working in different entities, our government understands that a line of communication between the Commissioner of Canada Elections and the Chief Electoral Officer would be required to perform their duties effectively. As a result, our government supports an amendment that would allow the Chief Electoral Officer and the Commissioner of Canada Elections to exchange information and documents.

● (1250)

Meanwhile, the CEO currently has the power to adapt provisions of the Elections Act during emergencies. It is highly unusual to give an unelected agency head the power to rewrite any section of an act of Parliament. Our government believes that the purpose of this power should be limited to protecting the right to vote, which is in line with basic democratic principles.

In addition, members of all parties have complained that the rules are unclear and complicated. Complicated rules cause unintentional breaches and intimidate Canadians from taking part in democracy. That is why the fair elections act would make the rules for the Chief Electoral Officer clear, predictable, and easy to follow.

The fair elections act would continue to equip the CEO with key responsibilities, especially as they relate to educating voters. That is why our government supports an amendment with regard to the education mandate of the Chief Electoral Officer. The Chief Electoral Officer may communicate with the public. Where he advertises to inform electors about the exercise of their democratic rights, he can only do so on how to be a candidate; when, where, and how to vote; and what tools are available to assist disabled electors. Further, the CEO may support civic education programs for primary and secondary schools, something that I know in my riding is a very important element.

I am pleased with the direct manner in which the fair elections act and its amendments would establish ethical and fiduciary investigative independence that is in line with good governance.

Another essential element of this bill is that it would redirect Elections Canada back to its core mandate. As recent elections have shown, Canadians are participating less and less in the voting process. In my constituency of Don Valley West, 67% of eligible voters cast a ballot in the last federal election. Federal voter turnout, however, was even lower at 61%.

Since Elections Canada began promoting voter participation campaigns, turnout has actually plummeted from 75% in 1988 to a low of 61% in 2001, where it has stayed. The facts show that Elections Canada's campaigns are not working. As a result, the bill would amend section 18 of the Canada Elections Act to focus all of Elections Canada promotional campaigns on two purposes: informing people of the basics of voting—where, when, and what ID to bring—and informing disabled people of the extra tools available to them to help them vote and participate in their democracy.

Government Orders

Let me be clear. Elections Canada would continue to be the organization responsible for the administration of our elections. However, the job of generating interest would be left to aspiring candidates and parties. Government bureaucracy should continue to focus on administrative functions and leave the duties of generating interest to the parties and the candidates. That is why the fair elections act would allow parties to better fund democratic outreach with a small increase in spending limits, while imposing tougher audits and penalties to enforce those limits. Aspiring candidates and parties, not a government agency, have a duty to reach out to voters, to inspire them and give them something worth voting for. It is time for the agency to get back to the basics, while political parties get down to the work they are prescribed to do.

Finally, the fair elections act would introduce additional measures to crack down on lawbreakers and fraudsters. These would strengthen the penalties for election lawbreakers, including introducing prison time for serious offenders and tougher fines for rule breakers. For example, anyone caught bribing or obstructing an election official could receive upward of five years in prison, and anyone who makes a false statement could be fined up to \$50,000. Investigators would also be afforded more extensive capacities to fulfill their mandates; a number of new rules would close loopholes, crack down on influence of big money, and help stop the election fraud that jeopardizes the system. This includes enhanced protection for voters against robocalls, cracking down on voter fraud by prohibiting vouching, and banning the use of loans used to evade donation rules.

• (1255)

In addition, the fair elections act would introduce guidelines for clear and transparent tracking and records retention of telemarketing, which would help prevent rogue calls and voter deception. It would also introduce measures to track mass calls to protect voters and prevent fraud by creating a mandatory public registry for voter contact services by telephone. The fair elections act would make it an offence to impersonate an election official and increase penalties for deceiving people out of their votes. That is why the fair elections act is a major improvement of the status quo.

It is clear that Bill C-23 is not only constructive, but very reasonable, and we are moving forward.

In closing, the bill would make it harder to break the law and easier to vote, not to mention it would close loopholes to big money. Election laws would be tough and predictable, but easy to follow. Life would be harder for election lawbreakers, and easier for honest citizens, who merely wish to take part in their democracy.

Our government continues to be a leader when it comes to enforcing greater accountability in politics. When we first took office, we passed the most comprehensive anti-corruption legislation in Canadian history, the Federal Accountability Act. This important legislation increased oversight, cracked down on lobbying and expanded transparency in government spending. Now, through the fair elections act, we are building on that strong record in helping to ensure that Canada's democracy remains strong and that its integrity remains upheld.

The fair elections act is an important step forward toward greater transparency and accountability in our elections. These meaningful

changes would help strengthen Canada's electoral system and ensure that our democracy would remain in the hands of everyday Canadians.

That is why I vote in favour of the fair elections act. I hope my colleagues on both sides of the House will join me in doing the same.

• (1300)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe (Pierrefonds—Dollard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his speech.

A little earlier he spoke of the power to investigate in the event of electoral fraud and I am rather surprised at how different our interpretations are of the effectiveness of the measures in this bill for properly investigating electoral fraud.

I think everyone in the House recognizes that there was major electoral fraud in 2011 and that we must provide essential tools to those who need them in order to shed light on these incidents. Not only was there fraud in 2011, but those responsible for the fraud still have not been identified.

In his 2012-13 annual report, the Commissioner of Canada Elections raised the need for the power to compel witness testimony. The Chief Electoral Officer is calling for more power, including the power to ask for supporting documentation for the expenses claimed during election campaigns. Bill C-23 does not respond to any of those requests.

Does my colleague think that the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada and the Commissioner of Canada Elections do not know what they are talking about? Does he think that a political party is less partisan than these independent experts who are making these types of requests?

[*English*]

Mr. John Carmichael: Mr. Speaker, respectfully, I disagree with the premise on which the question was launched.

The commissioner and the CEO would be separated, according to the bill. Under good governance, fiduciary responsibility is now entrenched in so many parts of our society that it is important the premise be maintained and underpinned in everything we talk about today. We would do that from the perspective of separating the CEO in managing the process and the commissioner in managing investigations and so on.

The commissioner would have the same powers that he has today, and the same powers as the RCMP. We agree that the commissioner must be free to do his job without impediment. That is why the separation of the two would fall with the commissioner working under the Director of Public Prosecutions. That way, he would, very reasonably, be able to operate in an unfettered environment and according to the fiduciary standards that are, again, inherent in our society.

Government Orders

•(1305)

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia (Lac-Saint-Louis, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, one aspect of the member's speech I want to draw attention to are the requirements to obtain an OHIP card. I wonder if we are not comparing apples to oranges here. When it comes to OHIP cards, we know that, unfortunately, people over the years have tried to defraud OHIP, but that is a very different case than trying to vote illegally.

In the case of defrauding OHIP, there is an actual financial benefit to the person who would defraud that system. However, when it comes to committing election fraud, and we are talking about one person voting who would not have the right to do so, first, it is not a financial benefit and second, it is not benefiting the person directly, but may benefit that person's candidate, party or whatever. Therefore, I do not think that is a fair comparison.

I would like the hon. member's comments on that.

Mr. John Carmichael: Mr. Speaker, let me be clear. I did not want to use the comparison to necessarily say that one equals the other. Clearly, there are differences between OHIP and the right of a voter.

In fact, the privilege and the right to vote is more important than any other democratic standard we have available to Canadians today. I merely pointed that out to the degree that from an identification process, the Ontario health insurance program has rigid rules and processes in place where one simply cannot get a health card without three very well-defined pieces of identification, including photo identification.

I believe, very consciously, that our right to vote is the greatest privilege we as Canadians have today. To that end, we must take very seriously the identification processes, the issue of eliminating vouching to the degree that we have for identity as a mandate to ensure we uphold the very highest level of electoral standard that we possibly can.

Clearly, I outlined that in my presentation today.

Hon. Bal Gosal (Minister of State (Sport), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague for an excellent interpretation of the fair elections act. It is greatly appreciated by Canadians, after travelling around and talking them about the identification about which the member talked.

When my colleague went back to his riding and consulted with the people who elected him, what were their views on the fair elections act?

Mr. John Carmichael: Mr. Speaker, I was involved actively at the grassroots level talking to my constituents. Clearly, there have been opinions on both sides, but any time I talked to my constituents in Don Valley West about vouching, they mirrored or exceeded the 87% of Canadians who were polled in the Ipsos poll of April 24. They said that it was a reasonable expectation that identification should be proven by the voter.

I have talked to Canadians within my riding, across the city of Toronto and, in fact, across Canada as I have had opportunity. Also, I should add, in my riding I led a round table discussion on this very issue at the Canadian National Institute for the Blind to address issues of voting for the disabled, in this case, the sight impaired and

the blind. Clearly, our position on this is well entrenched in the minds of the people to whom I have talked, and they are very supportive.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Giguère (Marc-Aurèle-Fortin, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the speech of my distinguished colleague with whom it is always a joy to work.

The problem is that the bill was introduced without consensus of Parliament. That is a problem. This is the first time in the history of Canada that a political party is introducing a bill that tips the scales in favour of its re-election. Generally speaking, for electoral law to be credible in the public's eyes, it not only has to be independent, but it also has to have the appearance of being independent. In that sense, Bill C-23 has completely missed the mark.

Every stakeholder, every editorial writer, every representative from the Barreau du Québec and every stakeholder on the electoral front have said that this is a bad bill. Thankfully some amendments were proposed. Indeed, we went from an unacceptable and anti-democratic bill to just a bad bill. It is still bad because no one approves of it except for the Conservatives.

Is it okay for legislation as important as the Canada Elections Act to be introduced without consensus?

•(1310)

[*English*]

Mr. John Carmichael: Mr. Speaker, in my speech, I talked about the extent to which the committee opened its doors and heard the views of Canadians, many eminent and very well-respected Canadians, who took the time and energy to come to Ottawa to present their testimony as witnesses at committee.

In my numbers, just to reflect briefly, the committee had a long and extensive study, with 15 meetings, accounting for roughly 31 hours of study. This was no trivial exercise. This was an extensive study in the House. There were 72 witnesses who appeared at committee. I should also mention that, with regard to my hon. colleague's comment, we allowed every witness the opposition brought forward to committee to testify. That is an incredible statement.

It ran hearings across the country and brought a series of witnesses for whom the government, the committee itself, opened its doors to and clearly heard from.

I believe the democratic process has been well entrenched in the bill and that hearing the opinions of Canadians has been more than adequately met.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Djaouida Sellah (Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives are yet again showing their contempt for our democracy by restricting debate on a bill that addresses such an important issue as electoral reform.

Bill C-23 would make significant changes to the quality of our democratic institutions without in-depth public consultations and without the expert opinions of the Commissioner of Canada Elections and the Director of Public Prosecutions, or even the Chief Electoral Officer.

Government Orders

This bill is quite simply a partisan stunt on the part of the government, which sees this bill as a way to hold on to power. This bill is an attack on the democratic rights of vulnerable groups.

Now, in order to vote, a voter is able to present their voter information card or show up with someone who can vouch for their identity. However, the Minister of State for Democratic Reform wants to eliminate that possibility because he claims that:

...one out of six electors may get a card with the wrong address. That allows some to vote in a different riding than they live in, or to potentially vote more than once.

Instead of fixing this problem, the government chose to eliminate this option altogether, which will have some serious consequences for some groups. During the last election, Elections Canada made a special effort to use voter information cards in various situations, in order to make it easier to vote for certain segments of society who have lower voter turnout, such as aboriginal people living on reserves, young people on campuses or seniors living in seniors' residences.

The provision allowing someone to vote with a voter information card along with a piece of ID, which will be abolished, was used successfully during the last election and it received an incredible amount of positive feedback.

The minister certainly loves to claim over and over that a person will be able to use 39 different pieces of ID to prove their identity. However, what he is forgetting is that only a few of these pieces of ID show a person's address. I repeat: only a few. For example, a health care card does not have an address, nor do passports and student cards. I could go on. As a result, a number of people will have to present two documents to have the right to vote, and those documents will have to be from the list.

As we all know, voter turnout in Canada is plummeting. Why is the government making it more difficult for seniors, students and aboriginal people living on reserves to vote by prohibiting the use of the voter information card as proof of address?

I am also concerned about another related factor. This bill prevents the development of electronic voting. From now on, Elections Canada will have to seek Parliament's approval to set up pilot projects of this kind. The purpose of Elections Canada is to improve our electoral system. Electronic voting would allow seniors and people with disabilities to vote, but again the government is turning a deaf ear and restricting Elections Canada's work.

The government is amending the law in its favour by changing the funding rules. This is a thinly veiled attempt by the Conservatives to serve their own interests by increasing the maximum annual donation from \$1,200 to \$1,500. The Conservatives are doing the exact opposite of what they say they are trying to do, which is reduce the influence of big money in elections.

The fact that candidates will be able to invest \$5,000 in their own campaigns will give those with the ability to do so a significant advantage. What kind of democracy is that?

● (1315)

The NDP proposed close to 100 amendments to improve this bad bill. None of the substantial amendments proposed by the NDP were accepted by the Conservative Party, which of course had a majority

in committee. One of these amendments sought to remove the provision on funding. Unfortunately, it was rejected, much like most of the NDP's amendments.

In a move that showed their contempt for Canadian democracy, the Conservatives shut down the work of the committee that was examining the electoral "deform" bill when half of the amendments proposed by the NDP had not even been debated yet.

Since this government came to power, it has done nothing but restrict Canadians' rights. It abuses its majority to impose bills that are not in the best interests of Canadians.

This is another sham of a debate. The Conservatives have once again imposed a time allocation motion, which prevents us from conducting an in-depth examination of this elections bill. The way the government is behaving and preventing us from fulfilling our parliamentary mandate is shameful. We are being silenced. The government must know that it needs a consensus to change the Elections Act. It should not be resorting to the tyranny of the majority to impose changes that serve its own needs.

Mr. Speaker, excuse me, but I would like to let you know that I am going to share my time with my colleague from Châteauguay—Saint-Constant.

The Conservative government wants to make the voting process more difficult for the most vulnerable Canadians, especially those who do not support their ideology. It is a form of discrimination that calls to mind some American practices under the Bush Republican presidency.

How can we encourage Canadians to participate in their country's democratic process when their institutions are broken?

Obviously, I oppose this bill, and I encourage my colleagues to do so as well, in the name of democracy.

● (1320)

Mr. François Choquette (Drummond, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for her excellent speech. She did a remarkable job in clearly explaining the whole anti-democratic nature of this bill. Changes should not be made to democratic institutions without first consulting the opposition parties and the civilian population to ensure there is a consensus.

We know that in Quebec, the province I represent, a change was made recently to our democratic institutions to reduce party funding to \$100 a person, instead of increasing it. You heard that right: \$100 a person. Why did they do that? To limit the influence of corporations that might then ask the government for benefits that the corporations would feel were owed to them.

This amendment to the Quebec legislation was adopted unanimously. A consensus was obtained before the bill was introduced. Unfortunately, the Conservatives did not do their job. They did not try to obtain a consensus by drafting a good bill that would have supported democratic reform for the good of Canadians. Unfortunately, the Conservatives are not representing Canadians through this bill. They are only representing the Conservatives, which is appalling. When you are elected to government, you must represent all Canadians, not just the interests of the Conservatives.

Government Orders

I wanted to add that comment to my colleague's excellent speech. I do not know whether she wants to add anything about the need to obtain a consensus before reforming democratic institutions or about the need to reduce the limit of donations from Canadians instead of increasing the power of money.

Mrs. Djaouida Sellah: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for his pertinent and very clear comment.

As he mentioned, in Quebec we are working on transparency and reducing the influence of money in politics. Unfortunately, since arriving in the House, I have the impression that this Conservative government does not have a handle on reality, or that it is wearing blinders and is making a beeline for its objective, which serves the interests of the Conservatives and not of Canadians.

Once again, today's debate is a charade. Things must change. We have to talk to one another. We are in Parliament and the word "parliament" contains the French word "parler" or to talk. Unfortunately, that is missing from the government's actions.

[*English*]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I wonder if the member could provide comment on the fact that the Elections Act and the Parliament of Canada Act are fundamental to our democracy, and changes to them must be achieved by a broad consensus and backed by solid evidence. This is something we in the Liberal Party would advocate in the strongest ways.

Once again, through closure, the government is forcing the vote later on today. I wonder if the member might comment on how important it is, when we pass this type of legislation, that it is done with a broader sense of consensus, as opposed to the manner in which the majority Conservative government has used its majority to push through this Conservative election act. It was done without any consultation from organizations such as Elections Canada and many other stakeholders, including political parties that are in opposition to the government.

• (1325)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Djaouida Sellah: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my Liberal colleague for his pertinent question.

As I mentioned earlier, there is a complete lack of transparency with this government. Everything is opaque and everything serves its interests. We can no longer have faith in the Conservatives and in the Minister of State for Democratic Reform when it comes to improving election laws. That was clear when the committee was shut down even before the NDP had a chance to move all its amendments.

Unfortunately, as my colleague clearly said, this government is using its majority to impose the rule of tyranny on Canada's Parliament.

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine (Châteauguay—Saint-Constant, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would describe today as a very dark day. In fact, it is the last day of debate on Bill C-23, the government's electoral "deform", as we rightly refer to it.

This bill was not introduced with a view to better protecting our democracy and our electoral system. Changes are being made to

benefit the Conservatives in the next election. Tactics include voter suppression and the ability to continue to get around the election rules without the slightest concern.

What the government is doing today is outrageous. It is steamrolling over the opposition parties. This is actually the first time in Canadian history that a government has used its majority to impose its views and anti-democratic changes, without coming to an agreement with anyone, with any of the opposition parties or members of civil society. Everyone is against this bill; that is unanimous. Seldom have we seen all segments of civil society join forces to speak so strongly against a bill.

The content of this bill is anti-democratic. In addition, true to form, the Conservatives trampled over and circumvented our Parliament's democratic procedures in the way they introduced and debated this bill in the House. Showing contempt for Canadian democracy, the Conservatives once again imposed time allocation motions, which means that debates were limited. In fact, this is the first time I have been able to speak to the bill. I have not been able to do so previously because debates on bills are constantly being limited. Some of my colleagues definitely would have been interested in speaking out against this terrible bill.

Furthermore, the Conservatives put an end to the committee's study of this electoral "deform" bill, even though half of the amendments proposed by the NDP were not even debated.

Furthermore, the first draft of this bill was extremely outrageous. This one is a bit better, but it is still outrageous. This shows that the government has no respect for its democratic institutions. It proposed amendments that elected members of Parliament themselves had submitted during the parliamentary committee's study. It wanted to change Canadian democracy by first studying this bill in the Senate. It is rather ironic that the government would propose amendments in the Senate and that an unelected chamber would make changes to our democracy. That is absolutely ridiculous. Furthermore, this shows what kind of respect this government has for its democratic institutions.

The Conservatives rejected the amendments that would have given investigators the tools they need to combat election fraud, that would have kept Elections Canada independent from government and that would have given the Chief Electoral Officer the right to encourage Canadians to vote.

The Minister of State for Democratic Reform did not even consult the CEO on this bill. He misled the House during question period. He indicated that he had consulted the CEO, but that was absolutely not true.

The minister has been going after Elections Canada for years, and more recently he has been going after the Chief Electoral Officer by undermining his credibility and attacking him, as he has done with all the officers of Parliament. That is absolutely outrageous and disgraceful on the part of a government.

Government Orders

The minister has been going after Elections Canada for years. He says that this agency is biased because it has criticized the Conservatives' non-compliance with election laws. They were caught with the in and out scandal. I want to explain to Canadians what that scandal involved. In Canada, each party has a maximum amount for election spending. They circumvented this maximum by diverting funds through riding associations that had \$90,000 maximums but where the party had no chance of winning. These associations were made to pay invoices that should have been charged to the national party. The party was circumventing the law.

• (1330)

The Conservatives got caught and pleaded guilty. This bill will allow them to keep circumventing election laws without being concerned about the Chief Electoral Officer or the commissioner, even though he has some investigative powers. The Conservatives want to get rid of all of the measures so that they can keep bending the rules illegally without the slightest concern. We need to keep in mind that the Conservative database was used to send voters to the wrong polling station.

Instead of complying with election laws, the Conservatives decided to take direct aim at Elections Canada by limiting its investigative powers, even though they voted in favour of the motion we moved in 2012 that called for more investigative powers for the Chief Electoral Officer. Elections Canada's powers were completely eliminated, thus allowing the Conservatives to keep bending the rules without a care in the world.

Our party, all of the opposition parties and Canadians in general oppose this bill. Canadians from coast to coast voiced their disapproval. Faced with such a public outcry, the Conservatives had no choice but to back down on some fundamental aspects of the original bill.

We obtained a number of concessions, which proves that the NDP is a strong opposition, worthy of being the government in waiting. Soon, we will no longer be waiting because we will form the government in 2015. I would remind the House that in the wake of the robocall scandal, it was the NDP that demanded changes to the Elections Act, notably to strengthen the powers of the Chief Electoral Officer, not weaken them as the government is currently doing.

The NDP is there to protect Canadian democracy. We stand at the ready when the government attacks our democracy. We are there to make sure the government is accountable to Canadians.

One aspect of the bill that the government partially backed down on is the Chief Electoral Officer's ability to participate in public education campaigns to increase voter participation, which is plummeting. The government wanted to see those numbers drop even further in the next election so that it would increase its chances of getting re-elected.

The Chief Electoral Officer will no longer have the authority to educate Canadians about the importance of voting. From now on, the Chief Electoral Officer will only be able to publicize certain aspects of the voting process, namely, when and where to vote. Unfortunately, they are limited to just that. The Chief Electoral

Officer will no longer be allowed to reach out to certain groups to help them encourage voter turnout among the people they represent.

We feel that public education is an essential function of the Chief Electoral Officer and that these changes will certainly not help boost voter turnout, but will instead have the opposite effect and lower turnout among young people, seniors and aboriginal groups living on reserves. All these groups will have more difficulty voting because, in a way, their right to vote will not be recognized.

Canada's Democracy Week, which was organized by Elections Canada, is a glaring example. From now on, Elections Canada will no longer be able to organize this important week to raise awareness about democracy.

Furthermore, the Chief Electoral Officer will have to ask the Treasury Board for permission to hire private companies to help in conducting an investigation or drafting reports like the report on the robocalls case. The government will be interfering in the work of an officer of Parliament, who must have complete independence from the government. The Treasury Board's control is unacceptable.

As I mentioned previously, one of the bill's main objectives is voter suppression. Someone using a voter information card as proof of address will be prevented from voting under this bill. That provision will create serious problems for Canadians who have difficulty providing proof of address when they go to vote.

• (1335)

Students, seniors and aboriginal communities are affected by this change.

Since I do not have a lot of time left, I just want to say that we have been strongly opposed to this bill from the start and will continue to be until the end. In a few hours, we will continue to denounce this dishonest strategy the government is using to try to secure its re-election.

[*English*]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as we have pointed out in the past, one of the greatest deficiencies within this legislation is the government's failure to recognize the importance of compelling a witness. In the last federal elections we saw literally thousands of Canadians from all across our country who expressed concerns in regard to public confidence in the last federal election. One of the ideas that came out of that was that Elections Canada needed to have the ability to compel a witness.

I see my colleague, the former MLA from Burrows in the Gallery. He would recall that Elections Manitoba has the authority to compel a witness, as an example. There are other jurisdictions that have the authority to compel.

We had the Chief Electoral Officer come before the committee, along with the Commissioner of Canada Elections. They both felt that it was important to strengthen our election laws so that they would have the ability to compel a witness. The government has decided not to enable them to compel. Thereby, we in the Liberal Party would argue that it is a fundamental flaw within the legislation, and we have challenged the government to allow for—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The hon. member for Châteauguay—Saint-Constant.

Government Orders

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his comments and question.

That is one of the major problems with this bill. It is a strategy that the Conservatives borrowed from the Republicans in the United States and used during the last election. The Bush administration used this strategy in 2001. The Conservatives looked at this strategy and knew that it would work to call voters to discourage them and tell them that the polling station had moved, when that was not true, and send them in the wrong direction. One in three people who received that type of call did not vote because they thought the polling station was too far away, for instance.

After this scandal, Elections Canada showed that the Chief Electoral Officer did not have the power to investigate or compel witnesses to testify. He did not get the desired co-operation from the government and, as such, Elections Canada could prove only that the Conservatives' database was at the origin of this scandal.

Mrs. Djaouida Sellah (Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague for his passionate debate on this issue that is important to our democracy.

The Conservatives rejected the NDP's amendment that sought to ensure that the Chief Electoral Officer did not need the Treasury Board's consent to hire electoral experts to conduct studies and prepare reports, such as the Neufeld report and the one on the robocall scandal.

Can my colleague tell the House what he thinks the Conservatives are afraid of?

• (1340)

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for her excellent question.

Hon. members opposite must surely be afraid of losing the next election. That is why they are in the process of implementing measures that will allow them to keep getting around the rules governing elections without being bothered by the Chief Electoral Officer. He will not have the power to do the necessary investigations or to compel witnesses to testify.

In addition, if there is another electoral fraud like last time, he will have to consult the Treasury Board in order to be able to hire a firm with the expertise to prepare a proper report. This is interfering in the work of an officer of Parliament. It is completely unjustifiable, it makes no sense, and it undermines the credibility of the Chief Electoral Officer.

The Conservatives are afraid of losing the next election.

[*English*]

Mr. Jay Aspin (Nipissing—Timiskaming, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure for me to rise in this House to speak about Bill C-23.

Over the past few months, the opposition parties have been tirelessly trying to portray the fair elections act as undemocratic and sinister. Before the bill was introduced, even before they had had a chance to read it, they were against it. They have consistently tried to misinform Canadians about why the government was implementing Bill C-23. They have tried to build a narrative of the government

ramming legislation through without proper consultation or investigation. Quite frankly, nothing could be farther from the truth.

It seems to me that the opposition parties have forgotten how our legislative process works. I would like to use my time today to highlight two issues. First is how the progress of Bill C-23 thus far exemplifies the integrity, utility, and efficacy of our legislative system. Second is what Canadians have really been saying about Bill C-23, not the fabricated stories the opposition parties have been desperately trying to sell.

The 2011 election saw several irregularities. While courts recently determined that nothing illegal had been done, Canadians, Elections Canada, and our government were concerned about the integrity of our electoral system and the process by which any irregularity would be investigated and prosecuted. This was the true motivation behind the fair elections act.

Although the opposition parties like to throw around alarming phrases like “voter suppression tactics” and other wild descriptions, this bill started out like any other. A problem was identified that needed a government legislative fix. There is nothing controversial or new about this. This is how our democracy has functioned for nearly 150 years.

Before Bill C-23 was introduced, the government spent a great deal of time examining the various issues raised by Elections Canada, as well as court cases related to the robocall scandal and other irregularities. I myself was inadvertently, and quite frankly, unnecessarily, dragged into the robocall case by the Council of Canadians. The court found, after close investigation, as we had stated all along, that nothing illegal had been done by any of the MPs involved.

If Elections Canada had sharper teeth, this entire investigation could have been completed more quickly, saving thousands of taxpayers' dollars. If Elections Canada had only had the proper investigative tools from the get-go, it would have been straightforward to discover the evidence, if any existed. Only charges with substantive evidence would have progressed, and countless hours of the court's time and taxpayer resources would have been saved.

Since Bill C-23 was introduced, the opposition parties have been trying to misinform Canadians by stating that the government had not consulted with Canadians or experts. They have continuously tried to convince Canadians that this bill was being rammed through Parliament without any debate or proper investigation.

Let me provide the House with some facts about what has actually transpired on Bill C-23. In committee, the bill has had a long and exhaustive analysis. There have been over 15 meetings, amounting to roughly 31 hours of study, with testimony from over 72 witnesses.

In addition, Canadians have continued to voice their concerns to their MPs, who have duly consolidated these concerns and have informed the minister and his department accordingly.

Government Orders

In my riding of Nipissing—Timiskaming, I have received input from 45 constituents. As people wrote in, the overwhelming majority of concerns were focused on one particular part of the bill, and that was the elimination of vouching. As their MP, I communicated this to the minister. The Minister of State for Democratic Reform was always open to the feedback I shared on behalf of my constituents.

● (1345)

In addition, the Senate conducted its own study of the bill and conveyed to the minister its thoughts and concerns. What was the result? On April 25, the government announced that it would support amendments to the fair elections act in anticipation of the clause-by-clause review of the bill by the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. These amendments included voter identification and vouching, the mandate of the Chief Electoral Officer to include engaging the public on voting, the appointment of central poll supervisors, fundraising exceptions that would constitute an election expense, and several others.

While the opposition continues to pine and misinform Canadians, our government has methodically, in combing through the bill, listened to Canadians and experts and has made modifications that better reflect expert insight and essentially what Canadians want. That is not controversial or sinister. That is, quite frankly, democracy in action. In fact, I am currently in the process of sending correspondence to every single one of the constituents who expressed concerns about the bill to inform them about the details of the amendments so that they know that their letters, calls, and emails played a direct role in the legislative process of fine-tuning the bill before it becomes law.

Here are some of the details. First is voter identification. The bill would allow an elector to vote with two pieces of identification that prove identity and a written oath as to his or her residence, provided that another elector from the same polling division who proves his or her identity and residence by providing documentary proof also takes a written oath as to the elector's residence. This new measure would allow those who do not have identification proving their residence to register and vote on polling day.

Second is the public information and education mandate of the Chief Electoral Officer. The bill specifies that the Chief Electoral Officer may communicate with the public, but where he advertises to inform electors about the exercise of their democratic rights, he can only do so with respect to how to be a candidate; when, where, and how to vote; and what tools are available to assist disabled electors. Further, the Chief Electoral Officer may support civic education programs for primary and secondary schools.

Third is the appointment of central poll supervisors. The legislation would retain the current appointment process for central poll supervisors.

Fourth is the fundraising exception and what constitutes an election expense. We are eliminating the proposed exception as to what constitutes an election expense in the case of expenses incurred to solicit monetary contributions from past supporters.

Overall, thanks to input from experts, Canadians, and legislators, 14 substantive and 45 technical amendments have been introduced

by the Minister of State for Democratic Reform to further improve the quality of the fair elections act.

Now that we have an appreciation of how Bill C-23 has carefully gone through analysis, consultation, and revision, I can briefly discuss what Canadians outside the Ottawa bubble have actually been saying about it.

A recent Ipsos poll conducted on behalf of CTV demonstrated that the overwhelming majority of Canadians believe that it is entirely reasonable for voting to have identification requirements. We require Canadians to have ID to drive, travel, purchase alcohol, and do countless other tasks. Canadians recognize the good common sense in requiring identification for one of the most fundamental acts citizens can do, and that is elect their government. This makes abundant common sense.

● (1350)

This poll demonstrated that 70% of Canadians believe that it is acceptable to eliminate vouching. This reflects the desire of Canadians to ensure the integrity of their electoral system.

Canada is a very tolerant and diverse society. If resident non-Canadians want to vote, they are always more than welcome to apply for citizenship. However, the responsibility of choosing our federal government belongs to citizens and citizens alone, and we must protect that important privilege from those who would seek to abuse it.

The opposition parties protest that ID requirements would disenfranchise some Canadians. For example, they argue that ID requirements would make it more difficult for students to vote. This is a perfect example of the kind of fearmongering and misinformation the opposition has been propagating. All Canadian universities and colleges issue their students ID cards. These same cards can be used to vote.

However, the issue of ID raises a more important question. If the right to vote is reserved for Canadian citizens, how does one prove that he or she is a citizen? ID requirements are just good common sense. However, and although it is highly unlikely, for citizens who do not have access to any of the 39 pieces of acceptable ID, including basic and easily obtainable documents such as bank statements, hydro bills, or library cards, we have retained vouching as an assurance, because we recognize that improbable does not mean impossible. We want to make sure that every citizen who makes the effort to come out and cast a ballot has a reasonable way of proving his or her status as a citizen. This would ensure that no Canadian citizen would be deprived of the right to vote.

Citizens who could not obtain the necessary ID could request that another voter from the same poll vouch for them, but this person would have to first prove their identity and would only be able to vouch once.

This change to vouching is in line with the March 6 recommendations of the Chief Electoral Officer, when he said, "vouching procedures should and can be simplified.... The need to rely on vouching should also be reduced". We agree with that.

Statements by Members

This amendment is a perfect example of how the bill has been fine-tuned through the legislative process after extensive review and consultation. In fact, for all the sound and fury the opposition has been making about Bill C-23 and how allegedly outraged the majority of Canadians are, the same poll indicates that some 23%, that is one out of every four Canadians, are closely following the issue. Clearly, this reflects the fact that most Canadians have come to the conclusion that the fair elections act is nothing but common sense, a common sense response to some very serious issues.

The opposition parties have tried to mislead Canadians by calling Bill C-23 a scheme intended to disenfranchise voters. This is simply not true, and Canadians know that it is not true. Sixty-one per cent, six out of every 10 Canadians, disagree that Bill C-23 is a scheme, and only 15%, fewer than two in 10 people, strongly agree.

Finally, when asked if requiring voters to personally prove who they are and where they live is essential to eliminating potential fraud in our electoral system, 86%, nearly nine out of every 10 Canadians, agreed. Only one in 10 Canadians disagreed with that statement.

• (1355)

There is evidence that the opposition parties are desperately trying to distract Canadians from the fact that they have no policy or plans of their own, except for possibly a \$21-billion job-killing carbon tax. They have tried to mislead Canadians into thinking that this is a scheme and that the majority from coast to coast are upset about it.

As I said throughout my speech, over the past few months, only 45 constituents in my riding of 96,000 have raised concerns about Bill C-23. The majority of these concerns dealt with vouching. That issue has now been put to bed.

Once again, the opposition opines and fusses instead of making meaningful and critical positive contributions to our legislative process.

I would certainly like to commend our Minister of State for Democratic Reform for his principled commitment and leadership of guiding Bill C-23 through the legislative process.

While the NDP and the Liberals have tried to misinform Canadians about the contents of the bill, how it was drafted, how it continues to be fine-tuned, our government has attentively listened to Canadians, experts and legislators in order to improve the fair elections act.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Giguère (Marc-Aurèle-Fortin, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my question will be quite simple.

The aim of an elections act is to allow people to vote freely, knowing that the election has not been fixed. Does the hon. member really believe that, with this act, first nations and student participation will increase? Does he feel that Pierre Poutine, the professional election rigger, will be going to jail? That is the question. What will be the purpose of this act?

Everyone involved has said that the act will not make for more voter participation.

[*English*]

Mr. Jay Aspin: Mr. Speaker, there those members go again, as I said, fearmongering, negativity. I am more than convinced that Bill C-23 would provide the environment so students, native people and, in fact, all Canadians would come out to vote in the next federal election.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The time for government orders has expired. The hon. member for Nipissing—Timiskaming will have nine minutes remaining for questions and comments when this matter returns following question period.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

[*English*]

EDMONTON OIL KINGS

Mr. Brent Rathgeber (Edmonton—St. Albert, Ind.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate the Edmonton Oil Kings on winning the championship of the Western Hockey League last night, and doing so in a very dramatic fashion.

For the second time in three years, the Oil Kings have captured the Ed Chynoweth Cupas WHL championship. After posting a 50-19-3 regular season record, capturing the eastern division of the WHL, the Oil Kings swept the Prince Albert Raiders 4 games to 0 in the first round, then bested the Brandon Wheat Kings 4 games to 1. In the eastern conference final, the Oil Kings beat the Medicine Hat Tigers 4 games to 1, setting the stage for an exciting 7 game championship against the defending champions, the Portland Winterhawks.

Each of the seven games was riveting. After losing game 6, 6-5 in overtime, the Oil Kings prevailed last night in game 7 in Portland with a 4-2 victory, taking the championship 4 games to 3.

The Oil Kings will now travel to London, Ontario, where they will be hosted by the Minister of State for Science and Technology where they will compete for the Memorial Cup.

I would like to congratulate head coach Derek Laxdal and the entire Oil Kings organization, and wish them well in their quest to capture the Memorial Cup. Go, Oil Kings, go.

* * *

• (1400)

MISS UNIVERSE CANADA PAGEANT

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill Gordon (Miramichi, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise in the House today to acknowledge and salute Miss Breanne Tozer of Miramichi, who will be representing New Brunswick in the Miss Universe Canada pageant this month.

Breanne is a bright and talented young lady who holds degrees from the University of New Brunswick and St. Thomas University. She received several scholarships, including the prestigious National Millennium Excellence Award. Breanne now has a career in the Canadian construction and mining services industry.

Statements by Members

Breanne has a big heart, and is a volunteer in her community. Through the Miss Universe Canada pageant, Breanne will be helping to raise awareness and support for two of these wonderful organizations: Operation Smile and SOS Children's Villages.

On behalf of Miramichiers, I wish Breanne good luck in Toronto. We are very fortunate to have such a capable and caring young woman representing all of New Brunswick on the national stage.

I also encourage people to visit missuniversecanada.ca and vote for Breanne.

* * *

FABIO BELLI

Mr. Glenn Thibeault (Sudbury, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today is my first opportunity in the House to pay tribute to Fabio Belli, a dedicated family man and city councillor from my riding of Sudbury, who passed away suddenly a month ago yesterday.

Fabio was only 37 years old, and he was known as an award-winning business leader. He channelled that spirit into getting elected as councillor. He worked hard for his constituents, as well as on major projects, especially for a new arena for his beloved Sudbury Wolves.

More than anything, Fabio was a committed family man. To his wife, Sue, his two young daughters, Emma and Brianna, his parents and extended family, I thank them for sharing Fabio with us. As political colleagues, we would meet, but as friends, we would talk about our families, our community, and how Italy was always the favourite to win the World Cup.

My city lost a good a man, a great husband and father, and I lost a friend. I truly hope this tribute will be looked upon by his daughters in the years to come, and it will remind them of how great a man their father truly was.

* * *

CAREER PROTESTERS

Mr. Rick Norlock (Northumberland—Quinte West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it has been my experience and the experience of many others that when someone says that it is not about the money, it is always about the money.

Recent media reports about the expansion at CFB Trenton indicate that career protesters, the ones I mentioned in my previous statement in this chamber, can now be described as paid professional protesters. Despite the efforts of the member for Ottawa Centre and a Liberal senator from B.C., this issue is all about the money. These media reports show that these career protesters are being paid to protest. How sad.

We will continue forward with our government's original intent to create long-term, secure jobs and countless opportunities for the Quinte region. Our government is committed to the base expansion and the transfer of JTF 2 to CFB Trenton.

* * *

ELIZABETH HARVEY

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay (Cardigan, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to honour Elizabeth Harvey, who passed away recently.

Ms. Harvey, from Isle-aux-Morts on Newfoundland's southwest coast, spent many years fighting on behalf of fishermen treated unfairly through the Atlantic groundfish licence retirement program. She led a campaign for justice and equality.

In 2011, the result of her fight led to a victory in the Federal Court for over 750 fisherman, who finally received tax payments that were owed to them. Her determination and hard work led to fair tax treatment for many former fishers throughout Newfoundland and Labrador and across the east coast of Canada.

I know Ms. Harvey will be thoroughly missed and that her tireless and determined efforts will be remembered for many years to come.

On behalf of all members, we offer our condolences to Elizabeth's family, her friends, her community, and the many people throughout the Atlantic region who worked with her to see that justice was done.

* * *

●(1405)

SAM HERMAN

Mr. Leon Benoit (Vegreville—Wainwright, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am proud to rise today to recognize Sam Herman for a lifetime of service to the people of Lloydminster and area and to our country, Canada, which he loved so much.

I first met Sam through politics in 1988. He was a driving force in building the Reform Party of Canada through immense contributions of hard work, money, and, most important, well-considered policy ideas.

He led the way in building the constituency association for the Vegreville and Lloydminster areas and helped me get elected as a candidate and then as the first Reform member of Parliament for Vegreville.

As campaign manager, Sam took the best part of a year to get me elected. I found out later that he never really thought he could accomplish that task. When I asked him why he contributed so much time and effort, he said, "Because it was the right thing to do". That was my good friend Sam.

He deservedly was named Reformer of the Year in Ottawa in 1994. Sam's contributions to his community did not stop with politics. He was involved in Rotary, the Rotary Young Entrepreneur Program, his church, and so much more.

To Sam, his wife Ardis, his children, and his God were his greatest loves and the source of so much pride.

Statements by Members

[Translation]

YOUNG VISITORS FROM PORTNEUF—JACQUES-CARTIER

Ms. Éline Michaud (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today, I am pleased to welcome to Parliament Hill a group of young people from the Saint-Augustin-de-Desmaures and Sainte-Catherine-de-la-Jacques-Cartier youth centres.

These young people from my constituency of Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier are already very involved in school and in the community. They are here to find out how our parliamentary system works and what kind of work federal members of Parliament do in Ottawa.

These young people from my constituency are shining examples of the vitality and incredible potential of Canadian youth. It is a privilege for me to welcome them. Their presence in Ottawa shows that they are already committed citizens; their voices must be heard by this government, so that it can finally provide them with all the support they need.

Whether by developing initiatives to encourage young people's active participation in the labour market or by funding programs aimed directly at our youth, such as the Coopératives jeunesse de services, the time for action is now.

As elected representatives, we have a duty to find room in our debates and in the policies we adopt for the young people whom this government too often neglects.

* * *

[English]

CALGARY EAST

Hon. Deepak Obhrai (Calgary East, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my current riding of Calgary East is fortunate to have strong, vibrant community associations, namely Riverbend, Marlborough, Dover, Marlborough Park, Millican Ogden, Southview, Lynnwood, Crossroads/Mayland Heights, Forest Heights, Albert Park/Radisson Heights, Penbrooke Meadows, Forest Lawn, Erin Woods, Applewood Park, Inglewood, Douglas Glen, and Abbydale.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the volunteers of all the community associations in Calgary East for their hard work and commitment to keeping the Calgary spirit of community bright.

With new boundaries taking effect during the election in 2015, I warmly welcome the new communities of Vista Heights, Rundle, Pineridge, Monterey Park, and Coral Springs

I look forward to working with these communities in the coming years.

I also would like to thank those whom I have had the honour to represent since 1997.

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INTERNATIONAL TIBET SOLIDARITY DAY

Mr. Bernard Trotter (Etobicoke—Lakeshore, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Etobicoke—Lakeshore is home to a growing number of Tibetan Canadians, many of whom fled religious persecution and made Canada their adopted land. Within a short time, they

established the Tibetan Canadian Cultural Centre in Etobicoke. Draped in prayer flags, the centre actively promotes the distinct Tibetan culture of non-violence and tolerance.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama, an honorary Canadian citizen since 2006, visited Etobicoke—Lakeshore and inaugurated the centre in 2010.

May 17 is International Tibet Solidarity Day. On this day, let us recall how Tibetans face difficulties in practising their religion. We renew our calls for the release of imprisoned religious leaders, including the 11th Panchen Lama, who disappeared 19 years ago at the age of six, and Khenpo Kartse and Tenzin Delek Rinpoche, who are being denied medical attention.

Canada's Ambassador for Religious Freedom recently met the Dalai Lama to reaffirm our commitment to the Tibetan community. Canada stands in solidarity with the people of Tibet. We call on the Government of China to let people living in Tibet realize their political, cultural, religious, and linguistic rights.

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● (1410)

[Translation]

EURÊKA SEARCH AND RESCUE

Ms. Ruth Ellen Brosseau (Berthier—Maskinongé, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today I would like to applaud the remarkable work of Eurêka recherche et sauvetage, a non-profit organization whose volunteer members specialize in searching for people who have disappeared or gone missing.

Last month, I met members of the group. I was impressed by their work and their generosity. They work with Sûreté du Québec and the Quebec emergency preparedness organization when disaster strikes, searching for people who have gone missing.

The important work these dedicated volunteers do in emergency situations enhances the effectiveness of the Sûreté du Québec's activities. On May 31 and June 1, Eurêka members are holding a garage sale in Saint-Étienne-des-Grès to raise money for equipment they really need.

I encourage everyone to check out the garage sale. Let us make sure that Eurêka has everything it needs to help our communities. Once again, I would like to thank all of the Eurêka volunteers who sometimes get the feeling nobody knows what they do.

Your work does not go unnoticed.

Thank you.

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RELAY FOR LIFE

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lotbinière—Chutes-de-la-Chaudière, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today I would like to tell you about an event that many people in our community have decided to participate in: the Relay for Life.

This non-competitive, 12-hour overnight walk allows people to fundraise, celebrate life, and fight cancer.

Statements by Members

Relay for Life is a worldwide movement to fight cancer that takes place in 20 countries including Canada, where there are 500 different event locations. From coast to coast, in communities of all sizes, thousands of Canadians get together to fight for life. Last year in Canada, 16,224 teams collected \$46.5 million.

I invite everyone to visit the site cancer.ca in order to find a relay that has been organized in their region or to put together a team of 10 to 15 people and stay up all night for a cause that affects all of us either directly or indirectly

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[English]

LYNN WILLIAMS

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to pay tribute to a great Canadian labour leader, Lynn Williams, who passed away on May 4, just a few months short of his 90th birthday.

Lynn started his union career in the late 1940s as a member of United Steelworkers Local 2900 at the John Inglis plant. His links with the industrial and manufacturing core of the city of Toronto would later result in a street being named after him.

Lynn also became the first Canadian to lead an international labour union when he was elected president of the steelworkers' union in 1983, and in that role he skilfully led the steelworkers until his retirement in 1994.

He was a man devoted to his family, which he believed was the reason for everything that he did on behalf of other working families.

Lynn was known to many as a labour intellectual who considered all the consequences of his actions and those of the union he led. He understood politics, the nature of capitalism, and the need for social justice at every level.

This made Lynn a much sought-after media commentator long after his so-called retirement.

His wisdom, his strength, and his love for Canada led to his being invested as an Officer in the Order of Canada in 2005.

Yes, Lynn Williams was a labour giant and a great Canadian. He was well loved and he will be missed.

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AFGHANISTAN VETERANS

Mr. Bryan Hayes (Sault Ste. Marie, CPC): Mr. Speaker, on Canada's National Day of Honour this past Friday, Canadians across our nation paused to look back on our contributions and achievements in Afghanistan with tremendous pride and appreciation, knowing that those who served made a positive difference in the lives of the Afghan people.

It was a privilege to represent Sault Ste. Marie at the National Day of Honour ceremony on Parliament Hill. This was a historic event that will be embedded in my memory forever.

This was an occasion for all Canadians to remember the valour and dedication of our troops and pay tribute to the fallen, including Sault Ste. Marie's very own Master Corporal Scott Francis Vernelli

and Sergeant John Wayne Faught, both of whom made the ultimate sacrifice in service to Canada.

We will remember their courage and bravery forever.

Lest we forget.

* * *

IRAN

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we are in the midst of the third annual Iran Accountability Week, which occurs as nuclear negotiations with Iran risk overshadowing, if not sanitizing, the regime's massive domestic repression.

It also coincides with the sixth anniversary of the imprisonment of Iran's Baha'i leadership, an execution binge that has seen 650 executions since Rouhani took office last August, and the continuing unjust imprisonment of more than 900 prisoners of conscience.

Today parliamentarians heard from FDD experts Mark Dubowitz and Ali Alfoneh on the importance of sanctioning human rights violators and terrorists and from former Iranian political prisoners Marina Nemat and Suzanne Tamas of the Baha'i on the importance of standing in solidarity with political prisoners.

The centrepiece of this week is the Global Iranian Political Prisoner Advocacy Project, which pairs parliamentarians with an adopted political prisoner on whose behalf they advocate. I am advocating on behalf of the seven imprisoned Baha'i leaders.

Two of the prisoners whose cases we took up last year, Nasrin Sotoudeh and Hamid Ghassemi-Shall, have since been released.

Inspired by their courage and by the courage of those who remain in prison, we will continue to sound the alarm until the Iranian people—

●(1415)

The Speaker: The hon. member for Westlock—St. Paul.

* * *

NATIONAL POLICE WEEK

Mr. Brian Storseth (Westlock—St. Paul, CPC): Mr. Speaker, on behalf of our Conservative government and Canadians across the country, I would like to commend law enforcement officers for their commitment to ensuring the safety and security of our communities.

This week marks National Police Week, when we take a moment to think about the valuable services these men and women provide and to thank them for their dedication and professionalism.

Law enforcement officers work hard in our communities, on our highways and waterways, at our airports, at our ports of entry, and in foreign countries.

During National Police Week, let us also think of the families of law enforcement officers. It is the people who are closest to them who really know the sacrifices they make to help keep us safe.

This past weekend there was an incident in my home town of St. Paul, where RCMP officers were injured while putting themselves in harm's way to keep their fellow Canadians safe. On behalf of our government, I wish a quick recovery to all of the injured officers.

I would also like to thank all law enforcement officers across our country for keeping us safe each and every day.

* * *

DEMOCRATIC REFORM

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, last night the Conservatives disappointed Canadians and voted down improvements to the unfair elections act. The Conservatives opposed giving the Commissioner of Canada Elections the power to compel testimony. They opposed requiring political parties to provide receipts and documentation for their activities. We are now getting a better picture of why.

Conservative lawyer Arthur Hamilton, who was already caught dragging his feet and not co-operating fully with authorities, has now been fingered for deliberately misleading investigators. He provided them with false information about Conservative calling scripts and then did everything possible to prevent witnesses linked to the Conservatives from providing information to investigators.

The unfair elections act would make it even harder to investigate and catch Conservative voter suppression, but then that is what this bill is all about, stacking the next federal election in favour of the Conservatives.

New Democrats are not going to let that happen. We have been showing up for work, standing up for Canadians, and getting ready to replace the Conservatives in the next election.

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AFGHANISTAN VETERANS

Mr. Erin O'Toole (Durham, CPC): Mr. Speaker, last Friday was the National Day of Honour, and Canadians gathered to mark the conclusion of the Canadian Armed Forces' 12-year mission in Afghanistan.

Our duty as Canadians to honour and remember that mission has really only begun. In my riding of Durham, last Friday we commemorated the National Day of Honour. We will continue to remember the mission, standing alongside the families of Trooper Darryl Caswell and Colonel Geoff Parker, who gave their lives on our mission in Afghanistan.

I am proud that our government has announced that we will build a permanent monument here in Ottawa for the Afghanistan mission. Whether it is the small town cenotaphs or a grand monument here in the nation's capital, these symbols will allow us to remember the service and sacrifice for generations to come, lest we forget.

Oral Questions

ORAL QUESTIONS

[English]

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, can the Prime Minister please update Canadians on what assistance Canada is providing to help locate the 300 schoolgirls kidnapped by Boko Haram?

[Translation]

Can the Prime Minister tell Canadians what assistance we are providing on the ground in Nigeria to find the girls kidnapped by Boko Haram?

• (1420)

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the government condemns these acts in the strongest possible terms.

[English]

The kidnapping of these schoolgirls by Boko Haram is obviously repugnant to everything that we believe in as Canadians and that most people in the world believe in. Our hearts are with these girls and their families. There are Canadian personnel now present in Nigeria. They are there to provide liaison and to assist Nigerian authorities in their search.

* * *

[Translation]

JUSTICE

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank the Prime Minister for that answer.

[English]

Did the Prime Minister advise Marc Nadon to resign from the Federal Court before naming him to the Supreme Court?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I have said before, we received expert legal opinion on the eligibility of Federal Court judges for appointment to the Supreme Court of Canada, as, by the way, had been a long-standing practice, not just in cases of previous processes, including processes with Quebec judges, but in cases where Federal Court judges have actually been named to the Supreme Court of Canada.

The recommendation of legal advice was they could be directly named, and that is what I had done.

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the question was whether he suggested to Marc Nadon that he resign from Federal Court. We notice we did not get an answer.

[Translation]

Which of the Prime Minister's employees, then, asked Justice Nadon to resign from the Federal Court? Did the Prime Minister know, yes or no?

Oral Questions

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I do not comment on rumours. I can only say that we received legal opinions that Mr. Nadon was eligible for appointment to the Federal Court, and I appointed Mr. Nadon directly to the Federal Court.

* * *

RAIL TRANSPORTATION

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, he actually appointed him to the Supreme Court. The question was whether the Prime Minister was the one who asked Mr. Nadon to resign from the Federal Court.

Yesterday, criminal charges were filed in the Lac-Mégantic train crash. The court will have to rule on the charges laid against the company and certain individuals. The fact remains that the safety of Canada's entire rail network is in question.

Will the Prime Minister take action and impose severe financial penalties on companies that violate the rail safety rules?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the government has already made a number of amendments to the railway safety rules in the past and since the accident. We will continue to examine this situation in co-operation with our friends in the United States.

I would like to congratulate the police on their progress in this case. Criminal charges have now been laid against the company and certain individuals. Since this matter will be before the courts, I have nothing more to say.

[*English*]

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister is right: we have made, together, amendments. One of them was about two years ago, when Parliament gave the government the power to enact financial penalties against unsafe railways. The problem is it has been 10 months since Lac-Mégantic and it still has not done a thing. What is the Prime Minister waiting for?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, once again, we need to look at the big picture and the facts here. The fact of the matter is, as many of us suspected, that the rules in this case have not been respected. As members know, we congratulate the police, who have now laid some criminal charges on the company and on a number of individuals.

That matter will be before the courts, so we are not going to comment on it, but obviously this government will continue to move forward on any measure necessary to improve railway safety.

* * *

EMPLOYMENT

Mr. Justin Trudeau (Papineau, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have just returned from yet another great visit to Fort McMurray, where residents are frustrated at being taken for granted by the current government.

On top of that, we have learned from the C.D. Howe Institute that the Conservative decision to loosen the temporary foreign worker program has actually increased unemployment in Alberta.

Will the government adopt our plan and fix this program?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I do not know what the Liberal plan would be. Until very recently, the Liberal Party was inundating us with demands to increase the number of temporary foreign workers to their ridings. That is the opposite of where this government has been going. We have tightened up rules over the past several years. Applications under the low-wage stream for temporary foreign workers have fallen by some 30% as a result of the reforms we have put in place thus far.

We will continue to act, because it is our policy to make sure, as an absolute principle, that if Canadians are available and ready to work, that Canadians get jobs.

● (1425)

Mr. Justin Trudeau (Papineau, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in 2006, the Conservatives trumpeted that they had made it easier for employers to hire temporary foreign workers instead of Canadians. Their plan actually allowed businesses in Alberta and B.C. to stop looking for Canadian workers after only one week instead of the month of advertising previously required.

Our plan requires all possible efforts to hire Canadians first. Will the government adopt it?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, of course, it is actually quite the contrary. Until just a couple of weeks ago, the Liberal Party was continuing to demand that we bring in more temporary foreign workers. Obviously, that has not been our position for the last three years.

We have been concerned. We have brought in a tightening to the program and we will continue to do so recognizing the fact that while there is some need for temporary foreign workers, it must never become a business model, and eligible Canadian workers should never be counted out for work.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Justin Trudeau (Papineau, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Government of Quebec had just barely taken office when its new minister of inclusiveness left Ottawa frustrated.

As a result of the Conservative government's mismanagement of its temporary foreign worker program, employers and job seekers in Quebec are frustrated.

Will the Prime Minister finally fix his broken program by implementing our plan?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Liberal Party is contradicting itself on this issue, since the party leader is asking for more temporary foreign workers.

The rate of unemployment in Quebec is very high. That is why we are continuing to reform the program to ensure that these unemployed Canadian workers are the first in line for jobs.

*Oral Questions**[English]*

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims (Newton—North Delta, NDP): Mr. Speaker, after claiming otherwise, the Minister of Employment and Social Development now admits that he knew all about the low wages, terrible working conditions, and abuse of the foreign workers program for years and yet failed to fix it. When he did act, it was based on faulty data.

No one is buying the minister's weak attempt to change the channel from his mismanagement. Why is he failing to protect jobs for Canadians and why is he refusing a full and independent program audit?

Hon. Jason Kenney (Minister of Employment and Social Development and Minister for Multiculturalism, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are in the final phases of a comprehensive review of the program designed to ensure that Canadians always come first in our labour market. Indeed, there are independent audits conducted by the new integrity branch of Service Canada to audit employers and to ensure that those who are non-compliant face the increased sanctions.

However, it is the NDP that wants various exemptions. Those members have written letters asking for streamlining and simplifying the LMO screening process. They want exemptions for the computer gaming industry. They want exemptions for international musicians.

Would the NDP, if it wants to have a constructive role in this debate, actually come to a coherent position?

[Translation]

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé (Saint-Lambert, NDP): Mr. Speaker, yesterday the Minister of Employment rejected the Quebec government's request and said that a moratorium was necessary as time was needed to clean up the temporary foreign workers program, especially since unemployment among youth and immigrants is so high.

Either the minister was ill or he had an epiphany, because he is now citing as his own all the reasons that we have been giving for weeks.

Now that he recognizes that the temporary foreign worker program needs some housecleaning, will he ask the Auditor General to get involved?

Hon. Jason Kenney (Minister of Employment and Social Development and Minister for Multiculturalism, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we have no intention of meddling in the Auditor General's work. Naturally, we co-operate with the Auditor General when he wants to examine specific files.

Five years ago, the auditor general at the time studied this program and we have since implemented almost all of her recommendations. We will continue to tighten the program rules to ensure that Canadians come first in the labour market, even if that goes against the advice of the NDP, which wants to make it easier for their constituents to access the program.

• (1430)

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé (Saint-Lambert, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the other problem that we have been raising for weeks is the absence of reliable labour market data. The Auditor General and the Parliamentary Budget Officer in particular have shown that the

government does not have the right tools to assess labour needs. To paraphrase Pat Burns, trying to fight unemployment with bad data is like going bear hunting with a butter knife.

When will the Conservatives get serious about tackling unemployment, starting with getting reliable labour market data?

[English]

Hon. Jason Kenney (Minister of Employment and Social Development and Minister for Multiculturalism, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is the NDP that wants exemptions for all international musicians to come and take jobs from Canadian musicians without any screening.

It is the NDP that wants to open the floodgates with no verification for the computer gaming industry in Montreal, because, I guess, they talk to them.

It was the NDP critic who lobbied me for a crane operator to come into her riding as a temporary foreign worker.

It was the MP for Halifax who asked us to streamline the LMO screening process.

It was the MP for Western Arctic who said that our wage levels were too high in the temporary foreign worker program.

We will not listen to the NDP on this.

* * *

*[Translation]***ETHICS**

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, there are 400,000 temporary foreign workers in this country, and there are 1.4 million unemployed Canadians. That is shameful, and it is their fault.

Let us play a game: who am I? I am one of the Prime Minister's friends who has been in hot water more than once. Wright? No. Duffy? No. Brazeau? No. I am a former adviser to the Prime Minister whom the RCMP has charged yet again with illegal lobbying. I was hired in 2006 even though I was a convicted criminal. Who am I? Bruce Carson, of course.

Did any minister, former minister or employee of the Conservative government have anything to do with this person while he was engaged in illegal lobbying, yes or no?

[English]

Mr. Paul Calandra (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and for Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, these allegations are with respect to a private citizen who did not get a contract with the government. As soon as we found out about these allegations, we referred the matter to the RCMP, the Ethics commissioner, and the Commissioner of Lobbying. We will not tolerate rule breaking. If this individual is found guilty, he should suffer the severest consequences available under the laws that we brought in.

Oral Questions

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, speaking of being soft on crime, the Prime Minister hired convicted criminal Bruce Carson to be his chief adviser, who now stands charged not just of influence peddling but illegal lobbying in the case of trying to rip off poor first nations that need clean drinking water.

The Prime Minister only called in the cops after the media started asking questions. What was the Prime Minister thinking when he allowed a convicted criminal to slip through all the security checks so that he could be his chief adviser? What was he thinking?

Mr. Paul Calandra (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and for Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I just said, these are allegations that concern a private individual who did not receive any government contracts. As soon as we found out, we referred this to the Commissioner of the RCMP, the Commissioner of Lobbying, and the ethics commissioner. We brought in a number of very tough rules that the opposition consistently votes against. If this individual is found guilty, he should suffer the severest consequences available under the rules that we brought in.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, every time I hear that Elmer Fudd routine, I know the Conservatives are on the ropes.

To be fair, it was not just Conservatives who were hanging out with Bruce Carson. Dan Gagnier, the senior adviser to the Liberal leader and co-chair of the Liberal Party, was also very chummy with this convicted criminal.

We know that APTN blew the whistle on this affair, but will the Prime Minister tell us when he was first informed about Mr. Carson, his former chief adviser's illegal activities within his department, with his staff, and his office? Will the Prime Minister tell us that?

Mr. Paul Calandra (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and for Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it was this government that brought in the Accountability Act as one of the first measures that we passed. We know that the opposition is consistently voting against those measures that would further accountability in government.

This particular person, if he is found guilty, should suffer the severest consequences available to him under the laws that this government has brought in. It is worth noting, of course, that as soon as we found out, we informed the Commissioner of the RCMP, the Commissioner of Lobbying, and the ethics commissioner.

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ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, over the last 30 years, at least 40 indigenous women have gone missing or been murdered each and every year.

Indigenous women are three times more likely to be murdered by a stranger than other women in Canada. Victims, families, and communities need answers, justice, and hope. More and more Canadians are echoing their calls.

Why are the Conservatives deaf to the many voices demanding a national inquiry into the missing and murdered indigenous women?

• (1435)

Hon. Peter MacKay (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that is factually incorrect. We are not only listening, we are taking concrete, substantive action.

In addition to the 30 justice bills, we have taken steps to ensure we are specifically targeting funding for programs, targeting funding for significant steps to address the issues of violence on reserve; making efforts to support women on reserve, including giving them matrimonial property; renewing the aboriginal justice strategy.

The time for talking about this has passed. We have many reports, many studies that have directed us, and that is exactly what we are doing, taking action.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jonathan Genest-Jourdain (Manicouagan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, day after day, the Conservatives keep telling us that they are taking steps to protect aboriginal women, yet still these women continue to disappear and be murdered. Whatever it is they claim to be doing is not working.

The Minister of Justice keeps telling us that the time for studying the situation is done. I would like him to tell me what, based on previous studies, is the main cause of these murders and disappearances, and what specific measures the government has come up with to prevent more women from going missing and being killed.

[*English*]

Hon. Peter MacKay (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, CPC): Mr. Speaker, first, I would invite the hon. member to read some of those reports, those many reports that point to the specific causes, and they are, first and foremost, criminality and violence directed at women.

That is why we are working closely with law enforcement across the country, giving them more tools. That is why we have put in place a national centre for missing persons. That is why we have worked with law enforcement to improve their databases, worked to improve the ability that we have to investigate and find the perpetrators. In addition, there are programs aimed specifically at aiding aboriginal women who fall victim.

Continuing to improve the life and quality of life of aboriginal women is what this government is doing.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Romeo Saganash (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, NDP): Mr. Speaker, that must be why they are cutting back funding for first nations services and police forces.

If their policies were so effective, the grim list of aboriginal victims would not be growing longer by the day. They have no idea what is causing this tragedy.

To understand what happened and to prevent it from happening again, we need an independent public inquiry.

Can the minister provide even a single explanation for why these disappearances are happening?

[English]

Hon. Peter MacKay (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we know what the causes are. The causes in fact are well known and have been outlined in numerous reports. In fact, the Oppal report out of British Columbia quite recently went into significant detail to direct us to ensure that we are working closely with law enforcement, that we are working directly with communities on reserve, with advocates, listening to those who ensure that we are getting the information that we need to respond directly to aboriginal women and girls.

I would encourage the member opposite, and I say to him emphatically, to work with us to come forward with solutions. This will not happen overnight, clearly. This will require significant—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Toronto Centre.

* * *

EMPLOYMENT

Ms. Chrystia Freeland (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, StatsCan has released jobs data for April and the news is dire. Among young people aged 15 to 24, employment fell by 27,000. Among women between 25 and 54 years old, employment fell by 29,000. Overall, 31,000 full-time jobs were lost in April.

This is a dreadful employment picture, particularly for young Canadians and women. When will the government fix this jobs crisis and stop laughing about it?

Hon. Joe Oliver (Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, individual monthly numbers can be volatile, so we sympathize with those Canadians who lost their jobs in April, but as we have said repeatedly, Canada is not immune to the fragility of the international economy.

However, our job growth record has been very strong since the depths of the global recession. We are among the best in the G7 and have created over one million net new jobs, nearly 85% in the private sector and nearly 90% full time.

Hon. John McCallum (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, soon after taking office, the government started loosening every rule in the book on temporary foreign workers, from looser advertising requirements to accelerated labour market opinions. They even let employers pay less for foreign workers.

The minister is now working to tighten what his predecessor loosened, trying to put the toothpaste back in the tube.

Is this not a tacit admission that Monte Solberg and the now Minister of Public Works and Government Services had it all wrong? If not, why is he undoing all their work?

•(1440)

Hon. Jason Kenney (Minister of Employment and Social Development and Minister for Multiculturalism, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in point of fact, this program exists as a last resort when employers are unable to find qualified Canadians available for

specific jobs. We are concerned about reported incidents of abuse, and we want to ensure that this program does not lead unintentionally to distortions in the Canadian labour market, which is why we tightened it last year and why we will be announcing further reforms in a few weeks' time to further tighten the program, ensuring that it does not result in the displacement of Canadians, but that our economy can continue to grow in all cylinders.

* * *

[Translation]

ETHICS

Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg (Bourassa, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the chair of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

He passed a motion asking the House administration to send him any documents related to mass mailings by the NDP.

Mailings were delivered in my riding of Bourassa. My constituents deserve answers, because House resources were used.

Has the committee received those documents? If not, when will it receive them and will it make them public?

[English]

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Mr. Speaker, first of all, it is a special occurrence to be asked a question in question period.

In preparation for the visit this Thursday from the Leader of the Opposition at committee on the issue of using House resources for political benefit, we have been trying to gather a number of documents together, and even this morning at committee we discussed the documents that still were not delivered, including the ones on the mailings. I will endeavour with my hard-working committee clerk to ensure that we receive them today or by Thursday.

* * *

[Translation]

PRIVACY

Mr. Murray Rankin (Victoria, NDP): Mr. Speaker, a most troubling clause is buried in the omnibus budget implementation bill. This clause allows the Canada Revenue Agency to forward, secretly and without a warrant, Canadians' tax information to the police.

If the government believes that Canadians' personal information needs to be sent to the police, it must follow the proper procedure and wait for a mandate to be issued.

Why is the minister trying to eliminate this important measure that protects Canadians' privacy?

Oral Questions

Hon. Kerry-Lynne D. Findlay (Minister of National Revenue, CPC): Mr. Speaker, there are rare occasions when CRA officials in the course of their regular duties become aware of information that any reasonable person would believe is evidence of serious criminal activity.

Let us be clear. Officials cannot share information on the mere suspicion of criminal activity or based on a request initiated by law enforcement authorities.

The amendments proposed in Bill C-31 will enable CRA officials to provide information to an officer—

The Speaker: Order. The hon. member for Victoria has the floor.
[*English*]

Mr. Murray Rankin (Victoria, NDP): Mr. Speaker, given the way these Conservatives consistently mount personal attacks against anyone who disagrees with them, Canadians rightly want the personal information they provide to their government to be properly safeguarded. If there is a good reason for government to be sharing around people's personal information, it should make that case to a judge. Tax data is the second most sensitive kind of data that citizens share with their government, after health information.

Therefore, does the minister think it is appropriate to permit the sharing with police of deeply personal information without a warrant?

Hon. Kerry-Lynne D. Findlay (Minister of National Revenue, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government will continue to protect Canadians, particularly their tax data, while ensuring their privacy is protected. There are rare occasions, I repeat, when CRA officials, in the course of their ordinary duties, become aware of information that any reasonable person would believe is evidence of serious criminal activity.

Let me be clear. Information cannot be shared on the mere suspicion of criminal activity or based on a request initiated by law enforcement authorities. It should be noted that this legislation responds to a recommendation from the OECD for member countries to adopt such measures.

* * *

•(1445)

[*Translation*]

EMPLOYMENT

Mr. Guy Caron (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, NDP): Mr. Speaker, according to Statistics Canada's most recent employment numbers, almost 30,000 Canadians lost their jobs last month. What is more, according to the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, 95% of the jobs created in 2013 were part time.

The youth unemployment rate is twice the national average, and household debt keeps climbing.

When will the Minister of Finance put measures in place to help the middle class and economic recovery, such as reinstating the small business hiring tax credit?

Hon. Joe Oliver (Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government is focusing on what is important to Canadians: jobs and economic growth. Although the global economy remains fragile, our

economic policies have helped protect Canada. More than one million net new jobs have been created since July 2009, almost 90% of which are full time and more than 80% of which are in the private sector.

[*English*]

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Speaker, that is quite an answer. I hope we have better ones from the minister tomorrow when we have four hours together at the committee of the whole; he will have some support.

Conservatives have, once again, been caught making up statistics about the economy. This time it was the Bank of Canada that shed a little light on the reality of the Canadian economy.

The real fact is that long-term unemployment has not improved since the start of the recession. The real fact—that is, according to the Chamber of Commerce—is that 95% of all jobs created in 2013 were in the part-time wage sector. The fact is that Toronto is now seeing unemployment at almost 10%.

Will the minister drop his make-believe statistics and admit that the jobs that have been created are precarious, part time, and of a poorer quality?

Hon. Joe Oliver (Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we know that the hon. member has problems with numbers and problems listening. The fact is that over one million new jobs were created. The member is picking and choosing among different studies. There are different ways to analyze, but the fact is that Canada is doing better than most other G7 countries. We are very confident that we are going to continue the growth and reach a budgetary surplus next year.

* * *

PUBLIC SAFETY

Hon. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, yesterday in Edmonton the Prime Minister announced the introduction of Quanto's law. The story of Quanto's sacrifice certainly touched Edmontonians and many others.

This legislation would ensure that those who harm law enforcement, service, and military animals would face serious consequences.

I know that the member for Richmond Hill was instrumental in getting this bill to the house.

Would the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration tell us a bit about this signature piece of legislation?

Mr. Costas Menegakis (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the inspiration for my private member's bill was the tragic death of Brigadier, a Toronto Police Service horse killed in the line of duty. I was touched by the many constituents who shared the tragic tale of Brigadier.

Quanto's law would honour the memory of Edmonton Police Service dog Quanto, as well as Brigadier and many other law enforcement animals that made the ultimate sacrifice.

Oral Questions

It is my hope that my colleagues opposite will join us in supporting this important piece of legislation to ensure its speedy passage through the House.

* * *

[Translation]

INFRASTRUCTURE

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet (Hochelaga, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in 2013 the Conservatives promised that the Building Canada fund was going to be transferred to cities and municipalities in April 2014. However, the Conservatives are constantly changing the rules and demanding more information from municipalities, thereby delaying the approval of the projects.

In the middle of the construction season, the Conservatives are building nothing but confusion. Municipalities do not even know how to apply for infrastructure funding. Why have the Conservatives decided to put last-minute obstacles in the municipalities' way?

Hon. Denis Lebel (Minister of Infrastructure, Communities and Intergovernmental Affairs and Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the only confusion is in the minds of the NDP. That has been clear from the outset.

Cities know full well that in Quebec, every municipality must first submit its projects to the province. For provinces to receive money from the gas tax fund, they have to sign an agreement. It is simple.

The new government in Quebec is working on the agreement that was provided last November 5. As soon as it is signed, no construction season will be lost. Everyone in Quebec knows that the work will be done—everyone, that is, except the NDP.

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet (Hochelaga, NDP): Mr. Speaker, urban centres across the country are waiting to receive funding in order to replace aging infrastructure. Some of their projects could be delayed for a full year because of this. Construction jobs may never see the light of day. Major infrastructure projects may be delayed for a year.

The federal government has only one job: hand over the money. Can the minister do that? The municipalities cannot do the minister's job for him.

• (1450)

Hon. Denis Lebel (Minister of Infrastructure, Communities and Intergovernmental Affairs and Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this is incredible. Never in the history of this country has a government done more for infrastructure in Canada than ours. Never.

After the billions and billions of dollars in investments, which the NDP has always voted against, not only does the NDP not understand the programs, it votes against them and then tries to take credit for them. That is the height of irony.

Municipalities and the provinces know full well that the program is working. The money for the Building Canada fund has been available since April 1, and only a few provinces have yet to sign on for the gas tax.

[English]

Mr. Fin Donnelly (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Conservative mismanagement of the Building Canada fund is leaving municipalities struggling to get shovels in the ground on vital infrastructure projects. Municipalities are raising concerns that the application process is causing delays and leaving provinces like British Columbia struggling.

This year's construction season is already under way. These projects are too important to be stalled in Conservative red tape for another year. Why is the government making it so hard to get the funds flowing to these much-needed infrastructure projects?

Hon. Denis Lebel (Minister of Infrastructure, Communities and Intergovernmental Affairs and Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this year, there is still \$6 billion of the former program that will flow all across the country this summer. That is already done, and the new program is on its way. We are working with the provinces and territories. FCM was at all the round tables that were held during the process to set up the new program. It knows everything that is going on in the project, and all the information is available on the Infrastructure Canada website.

Mr. Matthew Kellway (Beaches—East York, NDP): Mr. Speaker, ever since the Liberals' 1996 budget took funding for housing out at the knees, Toronto's infrastructure has been neglected by the federal government. Now Canada faces a deep and deepening infrastructure crisis in our cities.

Conservatives are playing games with the rules, municipalities are fed up with the gamesmanship, and Torontonians are frustrated. When will the Conservatives do what the Liberals failed to do and make real investments in Toronto's infrastructure?

Hon. Denis Lebel (Minister of Infrastructure, Communities and Intergovernmental Affairs and Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, 71% of the funds of the new program go directly to municipalities in our country. That is more than what FCM was asking for at the beginning of the process.

For sure, we will continue to work with the provinces, territories, and municipalities. We do not prioritize the projects; they do that. We will continue to support them. There is \$53 billion, \$70 billion in 10 years, including the federal investment in our organization in our own buildings, and we will continue to support the municipalities and provinces all across the country.

*Oral Questions***THE ENVIRONMENT**

Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, NASA has now confirmed that the ice melt in western Antarctica is “almost certainly unstoppable” and that a three-metre rise in sea levels may now be almost “inevitable”. Meanwhile, we have a Minister of the Environment from Iqaluit, which will almost certainly disappear, giving nonsense answers in question period. If the minister refuses to give meaningful answers here, will she at least, this afternoon, meet with the press and share her thoughts on this impending climate catastrophe?

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq (Minister of the Environment, Minister of the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency and Minister for the Arctic Council, CPC): Mr. Speaker, for the record, I am from Gjoa Haven.

Since 2006, our government has invested significant funds in more efficient technologies, better infrastructure, and adaptation in clean energy. We have taken action on two of the largest sources of emissions in the country, transportation and the electricity sector. In fact, in the first 21 years of our coal regulations we expect to see cumulative reductions in greenhouse gas emissions equal to removing about 2.6 million vehicles per year from the road.

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NATURAL RESOURCES

Ms. Joyce Murray (Vancouver Quadra, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, soon the Conservatives will make their decision on the northern gateway pipeline. Because of environmental concerns, indigenous peoples, the Kitimat community, and British Columbians do not support it. The Supreme Court of Canada itself requires that the federal government consult and accommodate first nations interests, but this has not happened. Yesterday the UN top advocate for the rights of indigenous peoples agreed, saying the government should not go forward with this project. Will the government finally listen to these collective voices and reject this pipeline?

• (1455)

Hon. Greg Rickford (Minister of Natural Resources and Minister for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, first nations have made and will continue to make important contributions as a full partner in the development of our natural resources. In fact, the natural resources sector is the largest private employer of first nations people in Canada, and the success of this sector depends on their full participation, from environmental stewardship to the economic benefits of responsible resource development.

* * *

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Mr. Robert Chisholm (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Conservatives promise greater transparency with their new Social Security Tribunal. Instead—surprise, surprise—there is more secrecy than ever. Before the new tribunals were established, all decisions were made public. Since, only 18 of nearly 1,000 decisions have been made public. Canadians are left wondering what the Conservatives have to hide. What is the government going to do to make sure this problem is corrected?

Hon. Jason Kenney (Minister of Employment and Social Development and Minister for Multiculturalism, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is a bit embarrassing that the member opposite does not know or understand that this is an independent, quasi-judicial body that is not managed by the government. Those charged with responsibility for the Social Security Tribunal determine what they report publicly. They tell me that they will be increasing the number of decisions they put online, so if he has an issue with this, I encourage him to contact the chair of the quasi-judicial, independent Social Security Tribunal.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Aubin (Trois-Rivières, NDP): Mr. Speaker, transparency and equal access to justice are non-negotiable. That is why the Barreau du Québec is concerned.

One year after it was created, the Social Security Tribunal has made less than 2% of its decisions public. However, the tribunal said that the vast majority of decisions would be available.

Government lawyers have access to all of the case law, but the lawyers who represent the unemployed do not.

Can the minister tell us when the tribunal will make all of the information available and why it has not yet done so?

Hon. Jason Kenney (Minister of Employment and Social Development and Minister for Multiculturalism, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will say it again. The Social Security Tribunal is a quasi-judicial body that is independent of the government. The chair has said that they will be increasing the number of decisions put online. If the member would like to see changes to the tribunal's policies, I encourage him to contact the chair of the independent quasi-judicial Social Security Tribunal.

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[English]

TRANSPORT

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill Gordon (Miramichi, CPC): Mr. Speaker, last month the Minister of Transport met with stakeholders from my province of New Brunswick and listened to the concerns regarding CN's plan to discontinue rail operations in the Newcastle subdivision. Yesterday my home province was pleased to host the minister for an important announcement regarding passenger rail service in New Brunswick.

Can the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Justice please update this House on the agreement reached between VIA and Canadian National Railway?

Mr. Robert Goguen (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Justice, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hard-working member for Miramichi for her great work on this important file to deliver the goods again.

Our government supports an efficient use of taxpayers' dollars in delivering a rail service that meets the needs of today's Canadian citizens. We are very pleased to announce that VIA and CN have made a tentative agreement on the remediation and repair of the middle portion of the rail in the Newcastle subdivision in northern New Brunswick. This represents a \$10-million investment to begin the repair of the tracks.

Oral Questions

Of course, we are doing this in an efficient manner, and this shows our government's commitment to the local economies of New Brunswick—

The Speaker: Order. The hon. member for Guelph.

* * *

GOVERNMENT ADVERTISING

Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, during last year's NHL playoffs, the government spent over \$1 million on ads for a job grant that did not exist. Do members remember that?

Feeding on Canada's heightened sense of veterans' issues, now it is running ads on an underfunded and failing veterans' career services program during this year's playoffs. Why would it spend millions of dollars more on ads while not properly funding the very programs veterans have been pleading for?

• (1500)

Hon. Julian Fantino (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that assertion is absolutely incorrect. I have heard time and again that Veterans Affairs needs to improve its communication with Canadian veterans, and indeed Canadians. Canadian veterans need to know that they have financial support available to them in addition to the rehabilitation and mental health support they need. Is that member really saying that we should not be telling veterans and informing them and their families how they can access benefits?

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FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, last month the Sri Lankan government launched a smear campaign against international civil society groups, including ones right here in Canada. These groups helped lead the successful push for an international independent investigation into the atrocities committed during the Sri Lankan civil war.

What action is the government taking to protect peaceful Canadian citizens from the Sri Lankan ban? Will the minister consider targeted sanctions against those responsible for abuses and repression, as was recommended by the foreign affairs committee in 2009?

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, no government anywhere in the world, no leader of any government in the world, has stood up more strongly and more loudly than the Prime Minister of Canada when it comes to the challenges facing the people of Sri Lanka.

I want to tell the member opposite that we are certainly very pleased to continue our strong leadership on Sri Lanka. We are pleased to work with him and his ideas and suggestions on how we can build on the strong record we have taken to stand up against war crimes, to call for accountability, and to stand up against a growing authoritarian trend across Sri Lanka.

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MINING INDUSTRY

Mr. Jay Aspin (Nipissing—Timiskaming, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this week is National Mining Week. The mining sector is very important to the residents of my riding of Nipissing—Timiskaming

and the Canadian economy as a whole, supporting 400,000 jobs and contributing \$60 billion to our GDP. Mining workers in communities across Canada can count on our government to stand up for their jobs.

Can the Minister of Natural Resources update this House on the action our government has taken to support the mining sector?

Hon. Greg Rickford (Minister of Natural Resources and Minister for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for his tireless efforts in showcasing North Bay as a world-class mining service and supply centre.

We are proud of Canadian mining activities here at home and abroad. We have a strong record of support for the mining sector, supporting workers, extending the mineral exploration tax credit, and renewing the geo-mapping for energy and minerals program, to name a few.

We will continue to attract investment, support innovation, and maintain Canada's position as a world leader in mining through responsible resource development.

* * *

[Translation]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach (Beauharnois—Salaberry, NDP): Mr. Speaker, even though the manufacturing sector is struggling to recover from the 2008 crisis, the Conservatives are failing to support our businesses that want to take advantage of new international markets.

According to the Governor of the Bank of Canada, the Conservatives' mismanagement represents a \$40-billion shortfall for Canadian exporters.

According to the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, our country should be learning from the United States, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand, all countries that have revamped their trade policies.

When will the government come to its senses and finally put a real policy in place to support our exporters?

[English]

Mr. Erin O'Toole (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Trade, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for the question.

Actually, the Canadian Chamber of Commerce report showed that the progress our government is making is in the right direction: opening new markets for Canadian exporters and expanding the trade commissioner service.

Government Orders

NDP members should finally show their true colours and show Canadians that they oppose trade agreements. We have heard from over 80 witnesses at the trade committee, most of whom are really excited about these new markets and the jobs that come from them. It is only the NDP witnesses who are there to hold back trade and keep jobs suppressed.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-François Fortin (Haute-Gaspésie—La Mitis—Matapédia, BQ): Mr. Speaker, dairy and cheese producers in Quebec need to hear the real story on the agreement with the European Union.

The federal government needs to stop leaving them in the dark with respect to the compensation they will receive to make up for the losses incurred as a result of the 17,000 additional tonnes of European cheese that will be imported.

Quebec's agriculture minister is officially requesting that the government provide a clear picture of the situation and he wants the opinion of Quebec producers to be taken into consideration.

When will the Minister of Agriculture give dairy and cheese producers in Quebec some information and when will he give them their compensation?

• (1505)

[*English*]

Hon. Gerry Ritz (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am not sure anyone is entitled to compensation. We have not actually finalized the deal through this House of Commons, so I am not sure what the member is talking about.

Those consultations continue with dairy farmers and cheese producers across Canada. We look forward to the positive results of that trade agreement.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Chris Alexander: Mr. Speaker, I am rising on a point of order. The members of the NDP like to act self-righteously, but during a question last week, the member for Acadie—Bathurst, who is the official languages critic, deliberately tried to mislead the House, which is obviously very unfortunate. The member implied that we had cut funding for the Multicultural Association of the Greater Moncton Area—

[*English*]

The Speaker: Order, please. The hon. minister seems to be getting up to allege that a member has deliberately misled the House, which is normally raised as a question of privilege, not a point of order.

I have not received any such notice, which is normally a requirement, unless it happened in this immediate question period. I think he indicated that it was from a question period some time ago. Does the hon. minister wish to clarify?

Hon. Chris Alexander: Mr. Speaker, your guidance to us has been to correct the record as soon as the opportunity arises. This is the first opportunity.

The Speaker: If the minister has reason to believe that a member has deliberately misled the House, of course he can raise it as a

question of privilege with the due notice. Otherwise, it sounds like it might be a continuation of debate and a different interpretation of the facts, so I will wait. If there is notice of a question of privilege, of course the Chair will deal with it accordingly.

At the great risk of continuing what seems to be the continuation of debate, the hon. member for Acadie—Bathurst is rising on the same point.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Speaker, if the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration wants to start a debate, I am ready for it.

The Speaker: I will call orders of the day.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[*English*]

FAIR ELECTIONS ACT

The House resumed consideration of the motion that Bill C-23, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act and other Acts and to make consequential amendments to certain Acts, be read the third time and passed, and of the amendment.

The Speaker: There are nine minutes left for questions and comments for the hon. member for Nipissing—Timiskaming.

The hon. member for Winnipeg North.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, one question that needs to be answered is why the government has chosen not to amend the legislation or election laws to enable the Commissioner of Canada Elections to compel witnesses. By not doing that, it is important to recognize that the Government of Canada is actually weakening our election laws.

That is one reason we were not able to get to the bottom of the matter at hand in terms of the many violations of election laws. The Chief Electoral Officer has indicated that he needs the ability to compel, and so does the commissioner.

Why is the government not recognizing the value of allowing Elections Canada to compel a witness?

Mr. Jay Aspin (Nipissing—Timiskaming, CPC): Mr. Speaker, quite frankly, as I indicated in my speech, we listened hard to constituents across Canada. We listened to experts. We had a great deal of discussion at committee.

We have never done what the hon. member suggested before. That is an area of policing jurisdiction.

We have come up with a bill that is not perfect, but it certainly goes a long way to improving elections in Canada.

Government Orders

•(1510)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothé (Pierrefonds—Dollard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to talk about the answer my colleague just gave, because I do not agree with what he said. The opposition is not alone in calling on the Conservatives to give the commissioner sharper teeth and more powers to investigate election fraud. Experts are saying the same thing. For example, in his 2012-13 annual report, the Commissioner of Canada Elections pointed out that it was necessary to be able to compel witnesses to testify.

Does my colleague think that the Commissioner of Canada Elections is not aware of which tools could help him investigate? I want to point out that there was a serious case of election fraud in 2011 and that the causes and guilty parties have yet to be uncovered. That is proof that those responsible do not have enough powers to be able to investigate properly. A look at Bill C-23 shows us that the Conservatives are not prepared to make those tools available. Why?

[*English*]

Mr. Jay Aspin: Mr. Speaker, as I indicated, we consulted far and wide in a thorough consultation on this bill. This was deemed an area of policing jurisdiction, and therefore we did not deem it was necessary in the changes of the bill. We stand firm and fast behind our amendments.

Mr. Ryan Leef (Yukon, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my hon. colleague mentioned in his speech about improving the integrity of the electoral system. We heard the opposition members say yesterday that there was absolutely no fraud and therefore there was no need to deal with any fraudulent issues. Then today, they are talking about robocall fraud, and there is still no need to make any changes. Which is it? Was there or was there not? Do we need to make changes, or do we not?

My hon. colleague has made it very clear that, despite opposition members incoherent position on this topic, to protect the integrity of the electoral system these changes are needed before a problem exists. We do not need to wait until one happens. We are moving forward to ensure we deal with this before there is a problem.

I would invite my hon. colleague to talk a bit about those important changes that would only serve to strengthen the electoral process.

Mr. Jay Aspin: Mr. Speaker, the member for Yukon, my hon. friend, is right. The way we have attacked this bill is we want to improve on our electoral system. We want to look at the measures that would tighten up the system. Throughout this whole process, we have used positive measures that would make the election system stronger. We fully realize there were problems in the 2011 election, and we do not want those problems to persist.

We have been thorough in our analysis in consulting with experts, with Canadians, with our caucus and with other members, and we feel we have come up with a package that would improve the integrity of the Canadian voting system. That is what we are proud of in Canada, and that is what we want to maintain.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Raymond Côté (Beauport—Limoulu, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member for Nipissing—Timiskaming clings to every branch

within his reach. The hon. member for Yukon held out a big branch to him, but it broke.

The Conservatives are trying to create confusion about the irregularities in voter identification. However, there are no related cases of alleged fraud. The Conservatives are abusing the language terribly in this regard.

I will remind the hon. member, as my colleague did previously, that there was an alleged case of fraud involving the Conservative Party's database. Unfortunately, the Commissioner of Canada Elections ended his investigation because he was unable to get to the bottom of things.

On March 12, 2012, my colleague voted in favour of the NDP motion to give the commissioner more authority. Why is he going back on his word now?

•(1515)

[*English*]

Mr. Jay Aspin: Mr. Speaker, quite clearly there is no confusion on that item. We have been clear on where we want it to go with vouching right from the get-go.

It is clear from surveys and polls that have been taken that 86% of, or nearly nine out of every ten, Canadians agree with it. Therefore, there is absolutely no confusion. The only confusion that exists is the confusion in the opposition parties, where those members continue to fearmonger and create all kinds of misgivings about the legislation that are not valid.

Mr. David McGuinty (Ottawa South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Canadians who have been studying the bill and watching the debate on it have come to a natural conclusion. Normally, when we change something as fundamental as our election system, we would expect all-party consensus. That is how most governments have operated in the last century.

However, here is what Canadians also hear. One hundred plus experts in Canada and around the world are opposed to the bill. The former head of Elections Canada is opposed. The existing head of Elections Canada is opposed. Former auditor general Sheila Fraser, a Conservative hero for a decade, is opposed. The Commissioner of Canada Elections is opposed.

Why are all of these experts, who are seized with this question of democracy in Canada and our election system, wrong?

Mr. Jay Aspin: Mr. Speaker, the member mentioned several people who were opposed to the bill. I just told the House that 86% of Canadians were for the bill. Nine out of every ten Canadians are for the bill.

We are not about satisfying the elite. We are about satisfying the majority of the electorate that we represent.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, that last answer was a bit rich. I will be sharing my time with my colleague from the riding of Louis-Saint-Laurent.

Government Orders

I only have 10 minutes, so it is not a lot of time to try to hit the highlights and the low lights of Bill C-23. I am glad to see the chair of the committee is here to join in the heckling. He does not get to do that when we are at committee, but he is glad to get a chance to do it now.

Bill C-23 really does deserve to be called the unfair elections act. I ask anyone watching to hear the evidence and conclude for themselves whether they believe the process is anything close to fair or reflected Canadian values, or is the way we should make laws in our country.

First, there was no consultation with anyone who did not have a Conservative membership card. We did not find one witness, although I think the leader of the Green Party said that she had an opportunity to give some input on something, or expert, or involvement of the opposition parties, or consultation with anyone except card-carrying Conservatives. In fact, I would be surprised if the bill was even drafted on Parliament Hill. I suspect it was probably drafted in the private sector somewhere at a law firm that was a good friend of the government. However, that is mere speculation because we did not have time to go down that road.

Right off the top one would think that common sense would dictate that if we are to change our election laws, the first thing we would do is talk to the Chief Electoral Officer. Is that so shocking and difficult to figure out? Step one of changing our election laws is to talk to the individual who is mandated, not by the government, but by Parliament, hired by Parliament, accountable to Parliament on our election laws.

The Chief Electoral Officer was not even consulted after the minister tried to make his little one-hour meet and greet, how-de-do and tried to turn that into a consultation. That did not work because it was not a consultation. The Commissioner of Canada Elections was not consulted. Both of their opinions of the bill are that they do not support it. Neither do either of their predecessors.

How do opposition members feel about having involvement in Bill C-23? We did not get any. There was no involvement by anyone who did not carry a Conservative membership card.

When my friend across the way makes comments that Conservatives represent ordinary people, that they do not want to hear from elites, fine. If they want to call the Chief Electoral Officer an elite, they can play whatever word game they want. However, the fact remains that the person Canadians trust, not the government and sure as heck not the Minister of State for Democratic Reform is the Chief Electoral Officer who Conservatives did not talk to and when the opposition gave him voice, he was against it. He had serious concerns about it as did the Commissioner of Canada Elections and as did the Director of Public Prosecutions, whose whole department is being moved. He was not consulted either, and he expressed some concerns.

The government did not talk to anyone. Conservatives brought in this unfair elections act into the House at first reading. The first thing we did was try to save the government from itself, if it was sincere about a fair process. We offered to use a mechanism in the House, which we adopted at Queen's Park when I was there, because it is a good mechanism. The minister of the day can take an issue that is

brought to the House at first reading and send it directly to committee. The reason to do that is because at second reading, we all put political skin into the game, we argue what our point of view is, defending attacks from others and taking a position and voting.

● (1520)

By the time we get to third reading, it gets politically difficult to start making major changes in position after the bill was at second reading. By sending it to committee ahead of time, members are free to set aside their partisan membership cards and just work at committee as MPs. Then the bill can come back to the House at second reading and if they do their work, in a fair world that report would come back having the unanimous support of all members who were on the committee, which would hopefully lead the House to support it unanimously. Then we would have an election law that we can all agree on.

This was brought in when the Olympics were on, if members recall, a major distraction, of course, but the fact is it is a good example, because in the Olympics it is not the host country that decides what the rules are for the Olympics. Those are decided when? They are decided ahead of time and everybody agrees on them. Then they have the races, the jumps, the swims, and all the things they do, because they have all agreed on the rules. We can remember when we were kids that we would spend our time in the back alley playing a pick-up game of ball. We would spend half our time fighting about what the rules were going to be rather than actually playing the game. If we set the rules ahead of time, everybody agrees and everybody understands, great. Then we can get to the business at hand. In the case of the Olympics, it is sports. In the case of making laws, it is getting unanimity in the House around election laws and rules, so they are fair for everybody.

New Democrats were not seeking any advantage. If anything, we were trying to stop the Conservatives from putting advantages in the bill for themselves. We offered to do that, they said no, it went to second reading, and guess what happened? At second reading, boom, the government brought in closure. That was it, it shut down debate. There was no more debate.

Let us see if I have this right. Only Conservatives had input, the Chief Electoral Officer was not spoken to, the Commissioner of Canada Elections was not spoken to, there was nobody else spoken to, and when it was brought to the House for debate, the first chance the Conservatives had, they shut down debate. Where is the fairness in that? Off it went to committee and the first thing that we as the official opposition wanted was to take the bill, guess where, out to the public to give Canadians, who actually own the election laws, an opportunity to comment in the communities where they live.

Government Orders

The Conservatives would not go for that and New Democrats had a rather protracted filibuster to make our points. We did the best we could and at the end of the day, since the government has a majority, it won every vote 10 times out of 10. We had hearings. The Conservatives are now saying they shut it down in the House because they sent it to committee, which is where the real work gets done, so it does not mean anything that they shut down debate on the floor of the House of Commons. When it got to committee, people would think that members would go through this 242-page bill very carefully, line by line, make comments, and vote on the clauses and amendments if necessary. One would think so. We did not even get halfway through the amendments or the bill when the May 1, 5 p.m., deadline came along and, boom, again democracy was shut down.

There is probably this much of the bill that nobody who does not have a Conservative membership card got a say in because there was no consultation ahead of time, it was not reviewed at committee, and we cannot review it now because this debate is being shut down through closure. Therefore, this part here, at the very least, is pure Conservative Party documentation, because nobody else has had a chance to look at it due to the Conservatives shutting down debate. That alone should worry people, that there is so much shutting down of debate on a fair elections act.

I have to get this in. I am not at my segue, but I am going to say this anyway because it needs to be said. Just the other day, Senator Marshall, who is the government whip in the Senate, said this:

As the government whip in the Senate, when a government bill comes forward, I would expect our Conservative Senators to support it.

Therefore, anybody who is under any kind of illusion that there is real democracy happening over there, even if it is not happening here, is wrong. There is no democracy there, there is no democracy here. There is no fairness there, there is no fairness here.

• (1525)

We will continue with every breath that we have and every vote that we have to try to stop this bill and amendment to its very end, which is coming very quickly.

Make no mistake, Canadians know that this is a bill that is meant to help the Conservatives get re-elected, not make our democracy stronger. The NDP will stand up for a proper and fair elections process every day.

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have to say that I agree absolutely with every single thing my colleague has said.

This is an affront to democracy, no matter what you say. If the government had confidence, it would not be afraid of having hearings on something as important as the future of democracy in this country.

Rather, I would suggest that what the Conservatives are trying to do is completely get it in a way so that not only do they use the rules and go around everything possible in the last election to win, they have less confidence in winning the next one so they are rejigging every rule possible to make sure they win the next election. That is what the Conservatives think.

I would like to hear more comments from my colleague on that issue.

Mr. David Christopherson: Mr. Speaker, it is true, as far as we are concerned on the opposition benches, this is not a partisan matter.

The shame of it is the government has made it a partisan matter. We are united on the opposition benches.

Let me give a key example. The government makes a big deal about the changes it made. There are big changes that did not happen. For instance, there is now a registry for robocalls, which the government is touting as a great thing. That is not a bad idea.

Originally, the government was only going to let the records be kept for one year, and through pressure we got it changed to three years. However, the fact remains that that information is still not going to be sent from the companies that do the robocalls to the CRTC. If it were sent to the CRTC, it would have that information, it would be protected, and it would be dealt with as part of a public trust.

The bill does not do that. The information is still left in the hands of the individuals. If there are investigations afterward, we will not have the power to compel witnesses to give testimony. We are going to have to chase these people.

What happens if somebody sets up a robocall firm before the election and then declares bankruptcy afterward? What happens to all that information that is supposed to be kept? Gone. That is why we wanted an amendment to send the information to the CRTC right away. Then it would be there and it could be used if necessary.

The government would not do that. That is just one more example of the unfairness that exists in Bill C-23.

• (1530)

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my colleague made some comments about how nobody has had time to see this bill, how nobody has had time to study this bill, and how the House has not been informed on this bill.

However, I would like to tell the House what Canadians probably, hopefully, already know. There were a total 15 committee meetings on this specific bill, amounting to roughly 31 hours of study. There were 72 witnesses who came in front of the committee to present their viewpoints on this bill. In terms of debate here in the House, it is going to be approximately 22 hours of debate.

I would ask this member to apologize to Canadians for having misled them on the amount of exposure this bill has had both within Canadian society and the House. He should apologize.

Mr. David Christopherson: Yes, Mr. Speaker, like that is going to happen.

The fact of the matter is the government members can make 22 hours sound like a lot, but in this place that is not very much.

Let us look at the record. I have already said that neither the committee nor the House has had a chance to look at half of this bill. Half the bill has not been looked at by the House nor the standing committee.

How can anybody say that it has been thoroughly looked at when the pages were not even turned?

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[*Translation*]

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse (Louis-Saint-Laurent, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to sincerely thank my colleague from Hamilton Centre for his speech and for the work he has done on this issue from the very beginning.

I find it particularly offensive to hear the question that was just asked, knowing that my colleague and I are on that committee. We have an insider's perspective on how these consultations went.

If the Conservatives had considered the opinion of a single expert who appeared in committee, we might believe that they did indeed consider some opinions and that they changed their minds about certain things. That was not the case.

We do not want to hear any more about the hours of consultation that were held since we know full well that the government MPs simply sat on the committee and nodded their heads, but once the witnesses were gone, they did not stray a single step from their plan.

Could the hon. member comment on that and tell us just how offensive it is that, even though a lot of people appeared before the committee, their opinions were not taken into consideration?

[*English*]

Mr. David Christopherson: Mr. Speaker, there are two things. Every time the bill has come to the House the government has imposed closure, meaning it has shut down debate every single time. This is another time.

When we were in committee the government said that on May 1 at 5 p.m., no matter where we are, we are done reviewing it. On May 1, we were done only half.

This bill has not been thoroughly dealt with. There was no consultation on it. The last thing this is is a fair elections act. The process was totally unfair. The government knows it, the public knows it, and they are going to pay a price.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse (Louis-Saint-Laurent, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to give special thanks to my colleagues from Hamilton Centre and Toronto—Danforth for their exceptional work on this file since the very beginning. They are really committed to upholding the integrity of our elections and of our democracy.

Because of their relentless work and the continuing pressure they have put on the government, I think that we really have succeeded in making the government retreat on some of the really harmful aspects in this file. Therefore, I really have to thank them. Each time they get involved, they give me hope for our country and for our political system.

I would like to revisit the question that my colleague raised earlier by making some additional comments about the various aspects of the process established for Bill C-23.

First of all, I was here yesterday making a speech that was unfortunately very similar when we were studying Bill C-23 at report stage. I made additional comments on the process in general. I also made a short historical presentation about the way in which Bill C-23 had been introduced.

Today, I would like to speak a little more specifically about incidents that occurred in committee and about amendments that were rejected. In my view, this is a problem and it shows how unhealthy it can be for the majority party to decide to govern while listening to no one other than its friends in a corner, and while covering their ears and governing like despots.

The Conservatives keep repeating ad nauseam that 70 witnesses testified in committee, that the committee sat for 30 hours and therefore the bill has been thoroughly studied. They wonder why the opposition is complaining. It is outrageous. I sat on that committee for all those hours and, really, one witness after another told us about the huge problems that had to be completely eliminated from the bill and that we should go back to the legislation as it was previously. The testimony kept coming and coming. Not one single Conservative ever said that the testimony was interesting, that they had not looked at things that way or that things could perhaps be improved. Never. They did not budge and kept clinging to their positions.

Some witnesses, like the aboriginal women's groups, were treated with all but contempt. They were not listened to at all and they were told, in a truly paternalistic tone of voice, that everything would be explained to them and then they would understand. Watching what was going on, I was ashamed to be sitting there as part of that process. It was shocking.

At the end of the day, after starting the clause-by-clause consideration, we only got through half of the amendments, as my colleague mentioned. As for the bill itself, we only got to page 44, out of 250 or so pages. Does that make sense as a process for changing our electoral law?

That represents barely one-fifth of one of the most important bills for our democracy. However, we were told that we had studied it enough and that it would suffice. Debate was ended because the Conservatives no longer want to listen to us. In my opinion, that is a major problem.

Today, I will speak more specifically about different things that happened in committee. One of the most contentious aspects of the bill concerns all the changes made to section 18, which deals with the powers of Elections Canada. With Bill C-23, the Conservatives tried to completely muzzle Elections Canada and the Chief Electoral Officer by preventing them from communicating anything other than basic information, such as the location of polling stations, how to vote and the people eligible to vote. Elections Canada would no longer be able to communicate anything more than this basic information to the public.

Many people told us that it made no sense and that this had never happened before in any democracy on the planet.

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•(1535)

In the long run, with all the people who protested, we managed to get the government to back down. However, what concessions did they make? It is important to have a good understanding of what the Conservatives changed. Now, Elections Canada's advertising messages can address only those topics. The bill deals with advertising messages, which means that it does not limit other forms of communication too much. The Chief Electoral Officer can therefore hold a press conference about a subject and so on. That is not so bad. We like the existing version of the Canada Elections Act the best, but if we have to choose between the first version of Bill C-23 and the amended version, we will take the amended version.

There is more to it than that, though. Now it says that the Chief Electoral Officer can deliver programs to promote democracy to primary and secondary school students. Why that, specifically? Four times in committee, I asked my colleagues if that meant there could no longer be any programs to promote democracy to university students. Did it mean there could no longer be programs to promote democracy to aboriginal people or any other target group that Elections Canada thinks might benefit? I did not get an answer. I really tried because I wanted to know. Maybe that is not the case. The way I read it, I get the impression that it cannot do anything else, but I just want someone to tell me I have got it wrong. That would be fine by me because I would rather see programs like that. Still, the way it is written right now, I honestly do not think that Elections Canada will be able to deliver programs like that to other target groups.

I found something else in here that is absolutely ridiculous. The government says that people can no longer use a voter information card to identify themselves and provide their address when they get to the polling station. We fought to keep that. We had excellent arguments in favour of it. We tried everything we could think of and presented every possible amendment to keep that card, but in the end, we had to give up because the Conservatives had made up their minds to get rid of that use of the card. Instead, we tried to mitigate the damage.

For all those who take it for granted that they can vote using that card, why not include an amendment to tell the Chief Electoral Officer and Elections Canada to write a message in big, highly visible letters on the voter information card that the card cannot be used as a form of identification when a person goes to vote? It is quite simple, really. All we want to do is avoid confusion. Many people show up to vote with their card and another piece of ID. Then they find out that that is not enough, and they are told they cannot vote. These are people who might have taken their lunch break during work to go vote, or maybe they live far from their polling station. Who knows—there can be any number of scenarios. I think that a lot of people will show up not knowing that. They will end up going home and will likely not go back to the polling station to vote.

I do not understand the logic behind that. I cannot come up with a single reason why the government would refuse to agree to write that visibly on the card. I cannot think of a single reason. I asked the question again in committee. I asked why the government would refuse to provide these people with a clear notification. The only explanation I can come up with is that the government wants to

suppress the vote. I see no other explanation. I have looked for, asked for, and tried to get answers. At the end of the day, that is all I can come up with.

Finally, as my colleague mentioned during his questions and answers earlier, everything having to do with the registry of the companies that are going to contact the voters is generally good. It is better than nothing. However, as many witnesses in the know pointed out, this will not be very useful because the companies will not have to keep a list of the phone numbers that were contacted or a recording of the phone calls. It would be quite easy to do. They could start immediately with no problem at all, but no. We are going to be left with a registry that will keep the data for an insufficient amount of time, without the phone numbers, without the scripts, and without the information needed to make it truly useful in fighting electoral fraud.

•(1540)

Bill C-23 is truly a missed opportunity to reform our electoral law in an intelligent and consensual way that is respectful of our Canadian democracy. It is too bad.

Mr. David McGuinty (Ottawa South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for her speech.

I would like to ask her a question about the Conservative government's approach in this entire debate. This has been going on since the Prime Minister came to power with his regime. It is a bad habit that consists of personal attacks.

Since this government came to power, we have seen the attacks on Linda Keen, who was yanked from her position, the former parliamentary budget officer and the head of Statistics Canada. Recently, the government has gone after the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada and Ms. Fraser. Last week, the president of VIA Rail was personally attacked and so was the Chief Electoral Officer. The list goes on.

Can the hon. member tell us what she thinks about this approach to something as important and fundamental in Canadian society as democratic reform?

•(1545)

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague from Ottawa South for his question.

I honestly think this is a major problem that we have never really seen in Canada before. This is pure contempt, a total lack of respect for people that goes completely beyond any partisanship. I am not saying that personal attacks should be part of partisanship, but those people are there for the common good, for the good of all Canadians, and they are constantly under attack by the Conservatives.

I think this was especially a problem with this bill, specifically with the attacks against Mr. Mayrand. When the minister said that Mr. Mayrand was opposed to Bill C-23 just because he wanted more money and power, I, for one, was disgusted.

I think our Chief Electoral Officer has been doing an outstanding job from the outset. He always tries to do everything in his power to be as fair as possible and to do the best possible job he can. He really did not deserve to be attacked like that.

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Mr. Romeo Saganash (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague from Louis-Saint-Laurent for her excellent speech.

I am blessed to have her for a colleague. I am not a member of the committee she is on, but she did a good job of explaining the troubling situation we are facing today. While I was listening to her, I was not sure whether she was talking about Canada. That is how troubling this is.

Since my arrival three years ago, I have been witness to the Conservatives' dismantling of Canadian institutions. We have watched them dismantle human rights, the environment, the country's economy, and we are now witnessing them most definitely dismantle Canada's democratic institution. This troubles me.

Why does she think that there is nothing to be done with these people before us, despite the sensible recommendations that we have put forward to improve this bill? It is important to mention that this legislation affects Canada's democracy.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Mr. Speaker, obviously I thank my esteemed colleague from Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou for his question and his comments. He has a good understanding of the issues we are currently facing.

Yes, it really is a problem when you get to the point of attacking something as basic as democracy. This specific case involves legislation affecting all Canadians, without exception. It will change the order of things and, at the end of the day, will do nothing but harm our democratic institutions.

To summarize the context this was done in, I will quote my leader, who aptly described the Conservative mentality as follows: "they love being in power, but they do not like governing".

[English]

Mr. Costas Menegakis (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is with great pleasure that I rise today to speak in support of the fair elections act, and I appreciate the opportunity to do so.

Bill C-23 addresses important issues that are fundamentally essential to a strong democracy, and it has succeeded in bringing them to the forefront for public discussion. It is important that my constituents in Richmond Hill and Canadians across our country be aware of how this important legislation would strengthen the integrity of our voting processes. That is why I am pleased to highlight some of the important improvements this bill would bring to our democratic system. Bill C-23 would ensure that everyday citizens are in charge of their democracy.

In response to many of the issues identified by the Chief Electoral Officer in terms of where improvements are needed, the fair elections act would implement 38 of the recommendations found in the Chief Electoral Officer's report following the 40th general election and in his more recent report on deceptive communications. The fair elections act addresses many of the recommendations made in the Neufeld report, which was commissioned by Elections Canada following the 2011 general election, such as the recommendation to do the following:

To further support the simplification of procedures for polling staff, request the following amendments to the Canada Elections Act: Reduce, as much as possible, the number of verbal oaths required from electors. Where legal formality is warranted to ensure procedural integrity, instead require signed declaration forms.

It also addresses the recommendation to

Ensure there is a supervisor in charge at every voting site, that their authority is clear, and that each supervisor has the power to ensure polling staff comply with legally required procedures

as well as the recommendation to

Investigate ways to reduce the number of voters who must have their identity and address of residence vouched for on Election Day, for instance by:

- i. Improving and extending the pre-vote advertising campaign that encourages electors to bring appropriate identification to the polling site with them.

Bill C-23 addresses important issues, such as the significant drop in voter turnout that has been taking place over the last 25 years and the need to improve the integrity of our voting system.

We simply need to do a better job of motivating electors to vote. Citizens in countries around the world have fought and died for their access to democracy and their right to vote. We here in Canada must not be complacent, nor should we take this very special privilege for granted.

We cannot afford to stand still on these issues, and we will not. Let me explain how Bill C-23 would improve the integrity of our democratic system.

The amended bill proposes to eliminate identity vouching. The fact that this is currently allowed has actually been a surprise for many of my constituents and to many Canadians, who were dismayed to learn that this practice even exists.

By Elections Canada's own admission, the practice of vouching, whereby someone states that he or she knows someone else who has no identification, is rife with irregularities. I would like to read into the record an important passage from Elections Canada's own compliance review, or the Neufeld review, as it is commonly referred to, that was undertaken following the 2011 election. It states:

All Canadian citizens, 18 years of age or older, have the right to vote in the federal electoral district in which they reside. The Canada Elections Act provides a wide range of procedural safeguards designed to protect the integrity of the electoral process. A subset of these safeguards requires voters to demonstrate eligibility (identity, citizenship, age, and residency) before they can receive a ballot.

For the vast majority of electors who are already registered at their correct address, Election Day procedures involve a simple, efficient check of a single piece of photo ID to confirm identity and address of residence. However, for any persons who are not registered, or do not possess accessible identification documents at the time of voting, election officers must administer special "exception" procedures prescribed in legislation.

Ensuring voter eligibility through the administration of these special "exception" procedures is an expected part of election officers' duties. Errors that involve a failure to properly administer these procedures are serious. The courts refer to such serious errors as "irregularities" which can result in votes being declared invalid.

● (1550)

The report goes on to say that most Canadian elections officers struggle to administer the complex rules of exception procedures they are expected to conduct as part of their temporary election day roles.

I quote again from the Neufeld report. It states:

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An estimated 15 percent of voters need some type of “exception” process to be administered before they can be issued a ballot. While administering “regular” voting procedures is usually straightforward, the audit showed that errors are made in the majority of cases that require the use of non-regular processes. Serious errors, of a type the courts consider “irregularities” that can contribute to an election being overturned, were found to occur in 12 percent of all Election Day cases involving voter registration, and 42 percent of cases involving identity vouching.

Overall, the audit estimated that “irregularities” occurred for 1.3 percent of all cases of Election Day voting during the 2011...election. More than 12 million Canadian citizens cast ballots on May 2, 2011 and the audit indicates that the applications of specific legal safeguards, in place to ensure each elector is actually eligible to vote, were seriously deficient in more than 165,000 cases due to systemic errors made by election officials. Averaged across 308 ridings, election officers made over 500 serious administrative errors per electoral district on Election Day.

Obviously, this is unacceptable.

I think most Canadians would be concerned to hear that serious errors, ones that can contribute to an election being overturned, were found to occur in 42% of cases involving identity vouching. In the 2011 election, the Neufeld report found that there were 45,868 cases where no record was kept of who the voucher or the voter was. That is 45,868 cases where no record of the voucher or the voter was kept.

This same report goes on to suggest that public trust and proper administration of the electoral process is at serious risk if these error rates are not addressed. It says that the overly complex procedures to administer vouching cannot be remedied simply by improving quality assurance and concludes that redesign through simplification and rationalization is necessary to reduce the risk of such errors.

That is precisely why we have brought forward Bill C-23, the fair elections act, to address these concerns in a practical, transparent way. The status quo is simply not an option.

I agree with this statement in the Neufeld report, which states:

Citizens' trust in their electoral institutions and democratic processes are put at risk when established voting rules and procedures are seen not to be followed. Even the perception of problems can be extremely detrimental to this trust. Public trust in an electoral process is fundamental to perceptions about the legitimacy of democratic governance.

How does Bill C-23 propose to solve these problems as identified by Elections Canada? It is by allowing electors to vote with two pieces of identification that prove their identity and by taking a written oath as to their residence, provided that another elector of the same polling division who proves his or her identity and residence by providing documented proof also takes a written oath as to the elector's residence. The difference between this and what we have now is that electors will have to prove their identity.

• (1555)

There are 39 pieces of possible identification that could be used, including a driver's licence; health card; citizenship card; birth certificate; social insurance number card; student ID card; utility bill; hospital bracelet, worn by residents of long-term care facilities; correspondence issued by a school, college, or university; statement of government benefits; or attestation of residence from a shelter or soup kitchen or a student or seniors residence.

This new measure would allow those who do not have identification proving their residence to register and vote on polling day. By ensuring that electors could properly identify who they are within these acceptable 39 ways, we would help to restore faith and trust in the system.

To ensure the integrity of the vote, we are also proposing a verification of potential non-compliance, to be conducted after polling day, and an audit of compliance with registration and voting rules after every election. These changes would add procedural safeguards to protect against duplicate voting and impersonation.

I would also like to highlight the important ways Bill C-23 provides better customer service for voters.

In 2011, indeed 60% of non-voters cited everyday life issues as the reason for not voting. These included reasons such as travelling, work or school schedules, not enough time, or lack of information. We believe that better customer service would help remove these practical obstacles.

For example, Bill C-23 would add an additional day for advanced voting. It would also bring forward changes that would reduce congestion at the polls. Additional election officers would be appointed at the polling stations. Liaison officers would be appointed to facilitate communication between the Chief Electoral Officer and returning officers in ridings, and the time allowed for election officer training would be increased. Bill C-23 would return the role of Elections Canada back to the basics.

As noted earlier, voter turnout in general has decreased from 75% in 1988 to 51% in 2011. During this same time period, Elections Canada had responsibility for promotional campaigns. A Library of Parliament analysis also shows that from 1984 to 2000, voter turnout for youth aged 18 to 24 dropped 20 percentage points. Unfortunately, this trend has not been reversed in recent years.

It has been found that the main reason for youth not voting was not knowing where or when or how to vote. The job of an election agency is to inform citizens of the basics of voting: where to vote, when to vote, and what ID to bring. It is also incumbent upon the agency to ensure that disabled people know about the extra tools available to help them vote, such as wheelchair ramps, sign language services, or Braille services for the visually impaired. We need to devote our full attention to getting this complete information into the hands of electors.

Bill C-23 would define the public information and education mandate of the Chief Electoral Officer by specifying that advertising by the Chief Electoral Officer would focus on informing electors about the exercise of their democratic rights; about how to be a candidate; about when, where, and how to vote; and about what tools are available to assist disabled electors. The Chief Electoral Officer could also support civic education programs for primary and secondary schools.

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In addition to these important changes, the fair elections act also proposes to protect voters from rogue calls and impersonation with a mandatory public registry for mass calling, prison time for impersonating elections officials, and increased penalties for deceiving people out of their votes. It would also allow the commissioner to seek tougher penalties for existing offences.

The bill would ban the use of loans to evade donation rules, and it would uphold free speech by repealing the ban on the premature transmission of election results. The bill would provide for more than a dozen new offences, making it easier for the commissioner to combat big money, rogue calls, and fraudulent voting.

• (1600)

We have listened to Canadians and our colleagues throughout this important debate and have supported a number of amendments to the original bill to make it even better. I thank everyone involved in this process, including the witnesses at committee, my colleagues, and the residents of my riding of Richmond Hill for their input.

Some of these amendments I have already mentioned, such as allowing vouching for residency and clarification of the mandate of the Chief Electoral Officer to include the support of civic education programs for primary and secondary schools.

Other amendments include retaining the current appointment process for central poll supervisors; eliminating the proposed exception as to what constitutes an election expense, in the case of expenses incurred to solicit monetary contributions from past supporters; and amending the provisions to require that the Chief Electoral Officer consult with the Commissioner of Canada Elections before having to issue an advance ruling or interpretation note. This would provide more time for the Chief Electoral Officer before having to issue an advance ruling or interpretation note while reducing the consultation period with the registered parties. It would give advance rulings precedential value for the Chief Electoral Officer and the commissioner with respect to similar activities or practices carried out by other political entities.

Other amendments include requiring calling service providers to keep copies of scripts and recordings for three years instead of one; allowing the Chief Electoral Officer and the Commissioner of Canada Elections to exchange information and documents; allowing the commissioner to publicly disclose information about investigations where it is in the public interest; increasing the spending limit for elections, with a longer writ period than the 37-day period; adding a clear prohibition against a third-party unable to show a link to Canada incurring more than \$500 in an election; clarifying the intent of giving the commissioner the unrestricted ability to begin investigations by removing the bill's proposed evidence threshold before the commissioner may begin an investigation; clarifying the intent of having no limitation period for offences under the Canada Elections Act that require intent; making the term of the Chief Electoral Officer non-renewable; clarifying that all those who apply for a special ballot and vote at the office of the returning officer must prove their identity and residence, as they would at a polling station, thereby closing a potential loophole; and clarifying that the annual report of the Director of Public Prosecutions must contain a section prepared by the Commissioner of Canada Elections through which

the commissioner would report on the activities of his office, without providing information about specific investigations.

These are common sense principles, and Canadians agree.

The Chief Electoral Officer has been very clear in saying that reform needs to be in place before the next general election.

I applaud the good work of the Minister of State for Democratic Reform in preparing the bill, which will significantly restore confidence in the electoral system and will improve voter turnout. I am proud to support the bill, and I urge all my colleagues in the House to support it.

• (1605)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Raymond Côté (Beauport—Limoilou, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the member for Richmond Hill certainly has enough hot air to brag about this bill. I actually do not know how he manages to meet with his constituents and tell them with a straight face that he is improving the democratic process and making it more accessible.

In December 2005, at the press conference where I launched my first federal election campaign, I highlighted the fact that, unfortunately, 40% of our voters in Canada do not exercise their right to vote. Of that group, an even larger proportion of young and very young people, who are just becoming eligible to vote, do not participate. We are not even talking about aboriginal people who unfortunately do not participate in large numbers.

The participation rate of the most vulnerable groups of our society, which are far too easily held hostage by the powers that be, is much lower. The rate is barely 30% or 40%. In his work *The Price of Inequality*, Joseph Stiglitz, Nobel Prize winner in economics, described the Tea Party approach, which is used to exclude disadvantaged segments of society through methods like the ones found in Bill C-23.

How can the member for Richmond Hill exclude the weakest and most vulnerable Canadians, including those in his riding, from our country's democratic process?

• (1610)

[*English*]

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Mr. Speaker, I find the member's commentary rather disturbing.

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First, let me assure the member that I am very proud to represent the good people of Richmond Hill, and I make every attempt to engage my constituents in important pieces of legislation and the work that happens in the House, as I have done with this one. I can assure the hon. member that despite his fearmongering and very partisan commentary in his question, my constituents in Richmond Hill are with the 86% of Canadians across the country who support this legislation and they are onside with the 89% of all Canadians who say we need some form of identification in order to vote. There were 165,000 cases in the 2011 election.

If the hon. member can look his constituents in the eyes and tell them they can trust that every one of the cases of vouching across the country that has ever happened, or will happen if things were to transpire the way he would like them to, has been honest, then he would be disingenuous in communicating with his constituents.

Mr. David McGuinty (Ottawa South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have a very direct and specific question for the member.

Why does this bill not provide the Commissioner of Canada Elections with the power already held by the Commissioner of Competition under section 11 of the Competition Act; that is, the power to ask a judge to compel witnesses to testify in cases of electoral fraud? Why does this bill not contain the power already held by several provincial chief electoral officers or commissioners in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Alberta and Yukon? Internationally, other electoral management bodies have this very same power, such as Australia and the United States.

Without bobbing and weaving, without making up facts or inventing crises, can the member explain to his constituents of Richmond Hill why this is the only order of government in Canada right now that is preventing this power from going forward?

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Mr. Speaker, I find it somewhat questionable that the member from the party that invented bobbing and weaving would be using those two words in a preamble to his question.

His question was specific to the role of the commissioner. It is very clear. This is a direct answer for the member, and I hope he stops speaking and listens to the answer, because he asked for it. The commissioner has similar powers as the RCMP. We have made him completely independent, giving him sole control of his staff in this bill, sole control of his budget and his investigations. We also give the commissioner, in this legislation, new offences to help him in his investigations.

Mr. David McGuinty: That's not the answer and that's not the question.

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Mr. Speaker, if the member would stop chirping over there, he might be interested to know that for the first time the commissioner will have powers like obstructing an investigation and providing false information as extra tools that he can use to enforce his power during his election investigations.

The hon. member should stop fearmongering, stop with this nonsense, and get on board with this legislation so we can all be proud of the results of the 2015 election process.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask my colleague about the position of the opposition parties. They stake out their ground on vouching and the argument that somehow Canadians should be able to vote without any ID whatsoever. They have fought a long and hard pitched battle on this one aspect of the bill.

As I look at the Elections Canada website, I see 39 different pieces of ID that Canadians can use to prove their identities, including library cards, credit-debit cards, liquor identification cards, student ID cards, health cards, passports, driver's licences. The list goes on. Unfortunately for the opposition parties, Canadians do not agree with them and find it quite reasonable that Canadians provide some ID to exercise their right to vote.

Could my colleague comment further on that and on what he has heard from Canadians about vouching and providing ID? Is that reasonable based on what he has heard?

•(1615)

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Mr. Speaker, for me to try to understand the logic or strategy behind the opposition's trying to justify the lack of providing some kind of identification when people show up to vote, the most sacred right we have as Canadian citizens, is not something I wish to attempt.

However, I want to add to the list of what we heard from the hon. member. Voters will have 39 forms of authorized ID from which to choose. It is reasonable to expect Canadians to bring ID when they cast a ballot. It is reasonable for Canadians to expect that their fellow citizens will prove who they are when the come to cast a ballot.

Maybe members of the opposition are concerned about not being able to obtain one of these 39 pieces of identification. Canadians can get them. I do not know why opposition members are having trouble getting them.

I would like to field some more questions, if possible.

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Mr. Speaker, if he wants another question, I will throw one at him.

The member talks about voting Canadians who do not want to tell the truth and who commit fraud. Canadians know who had the problems with the in-and-out scandal 2006 election. It was the Conservative Party.

Do Conservatives think all Canadians are like the Conservative Party? They are ones who got caught, went to court, and then stopped the court until the next election. Why do we not go to court to find out who is telling the truth?

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Mr. Speaker, that is the most ridiculous question anybody has ever asked me in the House, but I will answer it for the hon. member.

It is unbelievable. The only party that was caught taking illegal union fees, dues and donations, and had to pay it back was the New Democratic Party. Of all the nerve, to stand here, questioning.

Government Orders

Here is what I believe. Canadians by a large majority, probably 99.9% of Canadians, are honest, hard-working people who are very sincere when they show up to vote on election day. We want to ensure that the other 0.1%, or whatever that number is, does not have an opportunity to perpetrate fraud on election day.

* * *

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

Mr. Dave MacKenzie (Oxford, CPC): Mr. Speaker, discussions have taken place among all parties in the House and I believe that if you seek it, you would find unanimous consent for the following motion. I move:

That, during the debate on May 14, 2014 on the business of supply pursuant to Standing Order 81(4), no quorum calls, dilatory motions or requests for unanimous consent shall be received by the Chair and, within each 15-minute period, each party may allocate time to one or more of its members for speeches or for questions and answers, provided that, in the case of questions and answers, the minister's answer approximately reflect the time taken by the question, and provided that, in the case of speeches, members of the party to which the period is allocated may speak one after the other.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the hon. member have the unanimous consent of the House to propose the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: The House has heard the terms of the motion. Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to)

[*Translation*]

The Deputy Speaker: 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 Malpeque, Public Safety; and the hon. member for Cape Breton—Canso, Employment.

The hon. member for Saint-Laurent—Cartierville.

* * *

● (1620)

FAIR ELECTIONS ACT

The House resumed consideration of the motion that Bill C-23, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act and other Acts and to make consequential amendments to certain Acts, be read the third time and passed, and of the amendment.

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent—Cartierville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to be sharing my time with the member for Lac-Saint-Louis.

Seldom has a bill been so flawed even though it deals with one of the most fundamental aspects of our democracy: the rules governing federal elections. Bill C-23, the fair elections act, was attacked from all directions and for good reason. The government has only itself to blame for that. It consulted no one and was hostile towards anyone who did not agree with its views.

A solid democratic tradition in Canada requires the largest possible consensus for the law that sets out election rules. This time it is a complete failure. The government isolated itself. Nevertheless,

in the face of relentless pressure, the government backed down and withdrew some of the worst parts of its bill.

Before this series of amendments, Bill C-23 was definitely a dangerous bill. The amendments have transformed a dangerous bill into just a bad bill. The government would have had to do more to make it a good bill, but that was certainly too much to ask.

Nevertheless, let us be thankful that one of the government's steps backwards allowed us to close the loophole that the Conservatives wanted to introduce in the control of election expenses. The first version of Bill C-23 exempted fund-raising costs from the limits on campaign expenses in the case of donors who had previously donated more than \$20.

By pure coincidence, that favoured parties with long lists of donors, such as the Conservative Party. Letting money influence the result of elections in such a way would have gone against the principles of political equality and democratic fairness.

In other good news, the government gave up on adding polling station supervisors to the list of partisan appointments at polling stations. The risk of that becoming political was too flagrant. However, it is a pity that the government did not extend its *mea culpa* further and agree to depoliticize the entire administration of elections. They only had to follow the recommendation in the Neufeld report, which proposed choosing elections officials solely on the basis of merit and administrative neutrality, in accordance with established international election practices.

There was more partial progress, insofar as the government reconsidered, though only in part, its plan to abolish the vouching system, which protects the right to vote of Canadians without forms of identification. The vouching system allows those citizens to identify themselves under oath and to have another Canadian from the same electoral district vouch for them. This provision enables many Canadians, including students, seniors, and first nations people, to exercise their right to vote; coincidentally these groups are the least likely to vote for the Conservatives.

Whereas the first version of Bill C-23 removed any right of vouching, the new version allows voters who have proof of address to swear to the address of those who can only prove their identity, provided they live in the same polling district. That was partial progress.

However, the government has stubbornly refused to let the voter information card be recognized as a voter identification card.

[*English*]

Bill C-23 would still eliminate the voter identification card as identification that could be used to vote. The government failed to support Liberal amendments to restore the voter identification card, the only universal piece of federal identification to contain an address and widely used by the population.

Government Orders

There has been no proven fraud using voter identification cards. Removing the identification card is a solution in search of a problem. The facts on the voter identification card are clear. The data of the card is based on regular updates from driver's licence bureaus, the Canada Revenue Agency, Citizenship and Immigration Canada and various other authoritative sources.

• (1625)

During the election period, revision activities at the local level also increase the accuracy of the voter identification card. This likely makes it a more current document than even a driver's licence, which is authorized by law and used by the vast majority of voters.

The Chief Electoral Officer has pointed out that seniors who live in long-term care facilities, and who vote on-site and do not have proper ID or utility bills, rely heavily on voter identification cards to vote. Elimination of the voter identification card would disenfranchise many Canadian seniors.

[*Translation*]

Now I would like to talk about how this bill infringes on the Chief Electoral Officer's freedom of speech. The government barely budged on this.

[*English*]

While the government would allow the Chief Electoral Officer to continue public education and information programs to students at primary and secondary levels, the government would still severely limit how the Chief Electoral Officer and Elections Canada could communicate with Canadians. The Chief Electoral Officer would be specifically limited to speaking publicly only about where, when, and how to vote.

[*Translation*]

Elections Canada will no longer have the right to run campaigns that encourage people to vote nor will it have the right to publish research papers on the electoral process. Canada will be the only democracy to impose that type of gag order on its electoral agency.

It is an odd situation. Elections Canada will be able to encourage voter turnout among children and teens, but not adults. It will be able to encourage voter participation among those who are too young to vote, but not among those who can actually vote.

Does that make any sense? I would be surprised if it does because this government does not make sense to Canadians.

On the topic of voter fraud, the government stubbornly refused to include in its bill the main recommendation put forward by the Chief Electoral Officer and the Commissioner of Canada Elections, namely, that the commissioner be given the power to apply to a judge for an order to compel any person to provide information that is relevant to an investigation.

[*English*]

The Conservatives failed to support a Liberal amendment to finally give the Commissioner of Canada Elections the power he desperately needs to enforce the Canada Elections Act; that is the power to ask a judge to compel witnesses to testify. The commissioner has stated that this would force him to abandon election fraud investigations.

Are the Conservatives not willing to give the commissioner the power to compel witness co-operation because they are afraid of what this might reveal about the source of the fraudulent election calls and who may have used the Conservative database to deny Canadians their right to vote during the 2011 election?

The question the minister failed to answer is the following. Why does his bill not provide the Commissioner of Canada Elections with the power already held by the Commissioner of Competition under section 11 of the Competition Act or the power already held by several provincial chief electoral officers or commissioners? This includes New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Alberta, and Yukon. Internationally, other electoral management bodies have this power. These include the Australian Electoral Commission and the Federal Election Commission in the United States.

[*Translation*]

To conclude, if the minister stubbornly refuses to include that honest, common-sense measure in his bill, the Liberals and our leader are committed to adding this provision to the elections law when Canadians vote in a Liberal government.

[*English*]

In the meantime, Parliament should say no to this unfair elections bill.

• (1630)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse (Louis-Saint-Laurent, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague from Saint-Laurent—Cartierville for his speech. I know that he closely followed the progress of the bill in the House and in committee. He delivered a very interesting speech that underscores some things that, I agree, are extremely problematic in this bill.

I share his opinion on the final point that he made: something major is missing from this bill and that is the power of the Commissioner of Canada Elections to compel witnesses to testify. I would like to read what the commissioner himself said when he came to committee.

...I want to be absolutely clear: if this amendment is not made, investigations will continue to take time, and in some cases a lot of time. Importantly some investigations will simply be aborted due to our inability to get at the facts.

The commissioner himself came and told us that in committee. If the person who is called to investigate electoral fraud in Canada tells us something as loud and clear as that, then I would like the hon. member to explain to me why, in his view, this amendment was not included among those proposed by the government.

Why would the government deny this right, which seems extremely important for getting to the bottom of real electoral fraud in our country?

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague for her question. I also want to thank her for the efforts she has made over the past few weeks by our side to get answers from the government, including the answer to the following question. How come what is good for Quebec, Ontario, the Yukon, Manitoba and the competition commissioner is not good for the Commissioner of Canada Elections?

Government Orders

The minister gave only one answer and repeated it like a parrot, as did all his Conservative colleagues. They said that the commissioner has the same power as the police. The police have all sorts of powers and recourse that a commissioner does not. That is like comparing apples and oranges. If we are comparing apples and apples, there is a government that is soft on crime right now and that is the Conservative government.

[*English*]

Mr. David McGuinty (Ottawa South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask my colleague if he could help Canadians interpret what is going on with the government's approach to the bill, because weaving its way through the debate in terms of the tone and character from the government is what I think most Canadians would describe now as just simply meanness. I think it perhaps culminated or peaked when the minister responsible for this bill made specious and spurious allegations at the Senate, the other place, in committee, when he alleged that the head of Elections Canada was opposed to the bill because he was personally looking for more power and for more money.

For Canadians who are watching this, it is the tone of meanness that is, I think, now getting them very worried indeed about the bill. We have seen the pattern of conduct in other areas manifested by the government: other firings and pushing out of senior officers of Parliament, Linda Keen of the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission, and the former parliamentary budget officer; a recent attack on the Supreme Court of Canada chief justice; an attack on Sheila Fraser, the former auditor general of Canada; an attack last week on VIA Rail's outgoing president; and of course this ridiculous and unacceptable attack on Mr. Mayrand as head of Elections Canada.

Could he help us understand what it is at play here? What is it that motivates this regime to personalize its attacks when there are dissenting voices that speak truth to power?

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Mr. Speaker, my hon. colleague from Ottawa South has asked me a very difficult question. I am afraid I have no answer.

The government is behaving as if it is paranoid. It is sure that it is surrounded by enemies. Elections Canada is an enemy. The Chief Justice of Canada is an enemy.

It is the Prime Minister's style of governing his country. It is time to end it.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia (Lac-Saint-Louis, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to follow my colleague, the member for Saint-Laurent—Cartierville.

Opposition and government members can agree that the fair elections bill has been a mess from beginning to end. This legislation reflects the incompetence and stubbornness of the Conservative government.

Indeed, the government stubbornly refuses to deal with the facts and the reality of what actually happens on the ground when voters go to the polls. It also refuses to see what is not happening. The bill attempts to eliminate fraud that has yet to be identified.

It also reflects the government's usual bad faith in its approach to governing, as pointed out a few moments ago by my colleagues from Saint-Laurent—Cartierville and Ottawa South.

The government created ghosts to justify the measures included in its legislation. What did we see in the House? What did Canadians across the country see? They saw the government's ideological approach, as always. More than that, we saw a partisan approach. We saw the government playing politics. Worse yet, when it comes to improving the efficiency of our electoral system, we are now behind where we were before the bill was introduced.

One might even say that things were better before the government got involved. We suffered a setback because the credibility of the electoral system among Canadians was undermined as the government took every opportunity to foster political cynicism. It did so by engaging in shenanigans and taking an overly aggressive approach.

However, the government was successful in two ways. I suppose it can pat itself on the back for that achievement. First, it drew the attention of Canadians to the ins and outs of our electoral system. After all, this is not an everyday topic. It is not something we discuss every evening, around the dinner table. We rarely discuss the workings of the electoral system among friends. However, because of the introduction of this bill and the related controversy, I noticed that people in my riding were quite aware of what was going on. They did not really like what they saw and their response was rather negative.

The second thing the government managed to do was that it showed Canadians how it likes to operate. Canadians saw that the Conservatives love to play politics on issues that the government should consider in a serious and dignified manner. I will add that the government did itself a disservice in terms of public opinion. At the beginning of March, Angus Reid published a poll, and I will give you the headline. It said that the more Canadians are aware of the fair elections act, the more they oppose it.

According to the poll, nearly two-thirds of respondents firmly believed that the government introduced the bill to settle its score with Elections Canada, in particular, and with other political parties. Why are Canadians responding so negatively to this bill?

● (1635)

As members who are in touch with our constituents' values, we know that Canadians have a very keen sense of fair play. This bill flies in the face of Canadians' sense of fairness. In other words, Canadians recognize that we should not change the rules of the game without the consensus of all parties involved, including the voters themselves.

We called on the government a number of times to go out and consult Canadians on this highly controversial bill. The Conservatives replied that they were not interested, that they would rather stay here in Ottawa, that they would not hear what Canadians think about this bill and that they would stick to discussing the bill around a table on Parliament Hill.

Government Orders

On the one hand, this bill does not go far enough, as others have already mentioned. Elections Canada will not be able to compel testimony from someone who is aware of a case of election fraud, as the Commissioner of Competition can do. On the other hand, it goes too far when it transfers the duties of the Commissioner of Canada Elections, who operates under the purview of Elections Canada, to the office of the federal chief prosecutor, which will now be responsible for investigating cases of election fraud. This office, however, does not want that power.

What a farce. The person being given the responsibility is saying he does not want that additional power. The prosecutor himself said that it would be dangerous for him to have oversight of the electoral system because such an arrangement could undermine voter confidence and give the appearance of a conflict of interest. Any appearance of conflict of interest undermines the credibility of the process, and people lose confidence.

The electoral system is a sacred democratic institution. The government must not undermine the people's confidence in their electoral system. I think that doing so is very dangerous. This is a farce because the person to whom the government wants to give the power is saying, "no, thanks".

At the heart of the controversy is the vouching system, which seemed to be working just fine until now. Nobody complained about the system. Our vouching system is fine, but the government wants to change it even though there is no empirical evidence of any fraud.

Earlier, the member for Don Valley West drew a comparison to the pieces of ID required to obtain a health card in Ontario. He said that people have to present three pieces of ID. That is quite a stringent requirement.

Similarly, my colleague from Saint-Laurent—Cartierville said that, when we ask the government questions, it compares apples with oranges when it should be comparing apples with apples.

There are cases of fraud involving health cards. We know it; it has been proven. People who obtain health cards fraudulently have a pretty clear motive: they want benefits. That is what motivates fraud.

However, when a person wants to vote despite not having the right to, he derives no monetary benefit. He is not really helping himself. Basically, he is helping an organization, a party or a candidate.

• (1640)

Even then, it is not clear that he will be able to influence the outcome of a vote in a particular riding. They are comparing apples with oranges when they should be comparing things that are actually comparable.

I will end there. This bill is an absolute disaster, and the opposition will vote against it categorically this evening.

• (1645)

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach (Beauharnois—Salaberry, NDP): I completely agree with my colleague that this bill is not at all democratic and that it ensures that fewer and fewer people will be encouraged to vote and will understand the electoral process.

This bill will not in any way help the Chief Electoral Officer or the Commissioner of Canada Elections conduct investigations and more

efficiently uncover election fraud. It makes me sad to learn that some young people will not be able to exercise their right to vote simply because they will not have access to the information required. We have learned that the Chief Electoral Officer's work with primary and secondary schools will be very limited.

There is a college in Beauharnois—Salaberry, and the students will not have access to the information because the Chief Electoral Officer will not be able to talk to college or university students or other targeted groups such as seniors. The Akwesasne reserve is located in my riding, and advertising will no longer be permitted there either.

I would like to know what my colleague thinks of this inability to provide future voters with information.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: Mr. Speaker, I was going to talk about this in my speech, but the time has passed rather quickly.

It is very disappointing that the Chief Elections Officer cannot encourage people to vote. In the Senate some senators said that this authority had to be taken away from the Chief Electoral Officer because it was a conflict of interest. They seemed to be saying that because the CEO wanted to get more people to vote, he would not look into fraud.

That makes no sense. Agencies that monitor financial markets also have a dual role. They monitor the integrity of the system and they also want people to participate in financial markets. That is a false argument.

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent—Cartierville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask my colleague three very quick questions.

First, does my colleague know of any other democracy that prohibits or quite simply limits the responsibility of the chief electoral officer to encourage voter turnout? Is there another democracy that does that?

Second, are there any democratic countries that are allowed to promote voting among people who are too young to vote, but not among people who are of age to vote? Is there any logic to that nonsense?

Third, does my colleague know of a single study on the sociology of voting that shows that the main reason why people, especially young people, do not vote is that they do not know when, where and how to vote? Is there a single study that came to that simply absurd conclusion?

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: Mr. Speaker, I cannot name a single study or a single democracy.

This bill is harming Canada's international reputation. There are even experts in the United States who have spoken about our electoral reform bill. An expert came from Europe to tell us it is a mistake.

As a country, we should be feeding the flame of Canadian democracy, not depriving it of oxygen. We must protect our international image as a healthy, well-developed democracy.

Government Orders

•(1650)

[English]

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is great to stand and speak to the fair elections act. As the chair of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, I have gone what seems many months not being able to say too much about what I was, I will not say forced, but forced to sit and listen to, but it certainly was a long study. I was proud to commit the time to try to move forward and work together with the members of the committee on this piece of legislation.

I would like to start with the fact that the members of the committee worked very hard together and worked fairly well together. Sure, we had our rough points, but we worked pretty hard.

If you will indulge me, Mr. Speaker, the member for Louis-Saint-Laurent contributed well and even had to celebrate her birthday at a night meeting of the committee, so we thank her for that sacrifice, also the member for Toronto—Danforth and the member for Hamilton Centre whose voice rings in my ears even when I am away from this place. There was the member for Regina—Lumsden—Lake Centre, the member for Wild Rose, and the member for Etobicoke Centre. A great fill-in member, the member for Oxford was there a lot. The member for Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington and the member for Saanich—Gulf Islands spent a great deal of time with us at committee to look at this legislation and move it forward.

We know it was long hours and I am told it was around 31 hours of study at committee. As the chair, one must pay attention and the hours seemed much longer than 31. Some 72 witnesses appeared at committee. On top of that, there were many more briefs from people who were unable to attend or who sent us briefs with their opinions. We had witnesses by teleconference from Australia, more than one from the United States, and from across Canada by teleconference and in person at the committee.

Every witness who was asked for by every party in the House to attend was asked to come. Those who could, did. Those who could not, sent briefs or at least shared with us their information. We wanted to make sure that we gave every opportunity to each person who asked could those good people attend.

From the beginning the committee set a date for the completion of its study by motion to the committee, so it was not a surprise to anyone at committee when we were going to end. The pile of work heading toward that date sometimes seemed like it would not move, but it did. The reason for the date for the conclusion is that the Chief Electoral Officer had told us ahead of time the election legislation coming forward needed to be in his hands by a certain date so that by the election 2015 in October, he would be able to run an election on that piece of legislation. We set the date.

All members knew of this deadline. Some chose to use their time for other purposes, some for much longer debate than perhaps was needed, but all in all, we shared good information with each other. As a committee, I am very thankful we were able to work together and at the end of the day, take a pretty great piece of legislation and make it even better with some amendments that we were able to move forward.

Let me discuss some of those. Canadians have spoken. The information we are hearing from them, certainly on the voter identification side, is that they are reasonably pleased with where we are headed. I can say now what I heard in my riding while in coffee shops, at church suppers and yes, I do attend the odd one. People would come to my constituency and ask questions about the fair elections act. There are a number of people who watch this on TV and say they know I am the guy from the fair elections act.

•(1655)

Yes, I know; I have a cult following out there now, but even in my own constituency office, I was able to share with them where we are headed.

My constituents would say, “What about this voter ID thing?” I would say, “Well, I know you as a good Canadian citizen. What part of it is bothering you?” They said they had heard that some people would not get to vote. I asked them if they believed that people in Canada, in a modern democracy, should be able to go to the polls and not have to prove who they are. Every person I spoke to in my riding, bar none, asked what I meant when I said that people could vote without proving who they were. What did I mean when I said that no identification was needed?

I told them that was the difference. That was what we were discussing at committee. What we were trying to deal with was whether it is okay for people to come in and have someone else say who they are, or whether they should have to pull out something and say, “This is who I am and this is where I live”.

We have made an amendment to the bill to help with this last part about saying where they live. We did that because we think that if someone can say, “Hi, this is who I am”, then someone else at the same poll who has identification could help them with the part about where they live.

Many people in the riding during that time talked about how there are 18 months until the next election. If someone knew right now that they did not have the identification that they needed, could they not go and get it? We even heard this from some of the testimony at committee.

There are some great community groups out there. I think it was the London Homeless Coalition member who told us at committee that the organization had a whole group that does nothing but help people get ID, because people do not need ID just for this. It is really important to them and they really want to make sure that people can vote, but the organization worries about people needing identification for some other basic things in life, so it has a group that helps people find identification.

Government Orders

Voters and constituents in the riding suggested that with enough notice of what the requirement might be, people should be able to go out and get ID in order to vote. Both of the parties across from me require ID to vote in specific party functions in their parties. Members of both opposition parties must show ID if they want to pick a leader, and the great citizens of Elgin—Middlesex—London at least agreed with me at the time that it would probably be a good idea to have to show ID to vote.

While we were at this committee, many people were following us, whether it was on CPAC or in other ways. A high school group in my riding was following closely on CPAC, and after one of the meetings, I had a meeting with them by Skype. I love to get out and speak to all the high school groups that I can about what the job of a member of Parliament is like.

This high school spent a great deal of time following this committee, and because of the length of the meetings, I could not always be in my riding, so I met with them on Skype one day. Online, we went round the room, and I asked if there was anybody there who could not vote tomorrow. They all said no, that ID was or could be available to them if they wanted to go out and get it, and that they could certainly get it by the October 2015 deadline.

Again, we can make a great piece of legislation even better by amending it to include taking an oath. If a person goes to vote and can prove who they are but not their address by showing ID, and they are at a polling station with someone else who has ID displaying who they are and where they live, both of them can sign an oath attesting to the address of the person who does not have the ID with an address on it.

• (1700)

As one of my constituents who I believe was a farmer said to me, “I can get all the ID I need to go vote, yet other people could go into a voting station without all that ID. Why don't they just do the same work I did to get it?”

I also wanted to share that there have been a number of elections over the years I have been on this committee, and after every election the Chief Electoral Officer sends a report to our committee for us to review. I have now been through three of them, perhaps four, and three times the Chief Electoral Officer sent us a group of recommendations to look at. Many of the recommendations over the years from the Chief Electoral Officer for additions or changes to the Elections Act are in fact in the fair elections act. I wanted to make sure we shared that also.

While I am talking about the Chief Electoral Officer and his powers, his ability to run elections, we should compliment Elections Canada on what it does. In my riding, there are over 200 polls. There are 308 ridings across this country, so Elections Canada runs an event that has many points of interest and many places someone can go. Hopefully it gets all the people to the right place at the right time, which is part of why I think the great suggestion is that Elections Canada spend the majority or all of its time telling people when and where and what time to go vote.

Many of the surveys that we heard during this study and have heard at procedure and House affairs when looking at previous Chief Electoral Officers' reports tell us why people do not vote. The

question is always asked after every election, after the votes are cast and we are all here. Elections Canada does a pretty good job of doing surveys itself or of hiring other people to do surveys to find out whether an individual voted, and if not, why not. In every case the leading answer was, “I was really busy. I did not find the time”. In this piece of legislation we have created another whole day of pre-election dates that we can now vote on.

Many citizens say in those same surveys that they did not know they could go to the election office and vote at any time during an election. They say they did not know there was a special ballot or that there were different election days. They thought that they had to show up on election day but did not really know where it was. That is why they did not vote, so telling people where and when and what ID to bring is pretty important.

I was searching through the paper on the weekend, trying to decide what else I might do. I was in the movie section, and there were some great ads for movies. The ads told me what time the movie started and what theatre they were at. Based on that, I could make my decision about what I might do that evening. There was no place in the ad that told me why I should go to see that movie. It might have listed who the stars were, and that might help me make up my mind. However, I think it is our job as the 308 men and women in this House to really provide the why to voters. It is our job to tell people why they should come out and vote for Joe. or why they should come out and exercise a ballot at any time.

It is not clear that it is the job of anyone other than the political people in this country to do the why. If Elections Canada does a great job of telling people the where, the when, the ID to bring, the different methods, the visit to the returning office, or the using of the special ballot for voting offshore, that would be one job absolutely taken care of. They can leave it up to us to talk about the why.

• (1705)

As I said, I spent some time in this job talking at schools. I love going to schools and talking to students about my job as a member of Parliament, which, by the way, is the best job one could ever have, and we certainly share that.

I mentioned in my statement about even using Skype to talk to high school classes. We have asked the Chief Electoral Officer to keep that in place as another way of making a great bill better. There was an amendment to ask Elections Canada to please keep things like the student vote in place. I have been active, and I know many of my colleagues from both sides of the aisle have been very active, in student votes in past elections. We get high school students talking about how elections work, what they look like, what it takes to be a candidate, and then they actually hold an election at the high school level. We get them very interested in being voters from that point on.

I am glad with the changes allowing the Chief Electoral Officer to use a program called “Student Vote”. Getting it back into the schools is a fantastic change in this piece of legislation.

Government Orders

One of the other things we talked a lot about and heard about at committee was something we heard about more before the legislation came forward and maybe less afterward. It was using the CRTC as a way of watching and regulating voter contact. I think I can safely say that in the last election—and I will try to underestimate it—I made about 200,000 phone calls in my constituency. We had two town hall meetings calling every house in the riding, and then there were a number of others, whether it was to get out the vote or to tell people about advance poll day. We called just about everyone there too. A great number of phone calls were made in the riding. Did I ever hear from anyone from CRTC? No, because if there are rules and we follow them, this is not a problem.

If the phone call comes in and it is “Hi, I’m Joe Preston. I’m your Conservative candidate, and I—”

The Deputy Speaker: Order, please. It is unparliamentary to use a member's name, including one's own name. It is the third time it has happened in the last week, so you are not the only one guilty of the practice, but it is in fact improper.

Mr. Joe Preston: Mr. Speaker, I forgot I cannot refer to members of Parliament, including myself. I take it back and I apologize profusely for that breach in procedure. It is probably wrong that the chair of the procedure and House affairs committee did not do that right.

I made a number of phone calls. Every one of them said what my name was and who I was representing and gave a phone number where I could be reached. Then it went on with whatever the message was, such as reminding people that advance polls were tomorrow. At the end of it I again said what my name was and where I could be reached. If that is done properly, there is no trouble at all.

The CRTC told us at committee that there is much good use of telephones during campaigns, and they would be able to take on the role of how we work together as politicians during campaigns. There would be certain rules to follow, and we should all know them ahead of time or we should all be aware of them if we are not, but the CRTC would be able to take over and tell us if anything like robocalls happened. By adding this piece, by taking that whole electronic monitoring aspect and putting it into CRTC, I think we have been able to make it a better piece of legislation.

I would like to finish by thanking the committee, all of our witnesses, and Canadians who care a lot about how we get elected, how important it is that we do it properly, and how important it is that it be a rules-based system. In a mature democracy, from what I have heard from my constituents, asking people to prove who they are before they vote is probably appropriate. I also thank my helpers, the other members of the committee, for doing the hard lifting.

• (1710)

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, as one of the hon. member's little helpers, I am pleased to ask a question.

The member tries very hard to be a fair-minded chair. I think he was a little more successful in a minority government, but that is probably as much a biased comment as anything.

I will be very direct. Given that the member worked very hard to be seen as fair-minded and reasonable, as the chair of the procedure

and house affairs committee, I would like to ask if he believes that it would be fair-minded and reasonable, before any government attempted to change the election laws in Canada, for the government to at least consult the Chief Electoral Officer and the Commissioner of Canada Elections? Is it not common sense to consult at least those two people before any government were to bring in a brand new election law?

Mr. Joe Preston: Mr. Speaker, as I said, I hear that voice in my sleep. Sometimes I sleep with the TV on, and he might very well be on it.

The answer is, as I shared during my speech, that over my number of years as the chair of procedure and House affairs, the Chief Electoral Officer has had much contact with us, has appeared at committee a number of times after each election, and shares with us a group of recommendations that he would like to see as changes to the Elections Act before the next election.

Of course he has done that. I think some 38 of his recommendations are in the fair elections act. The consultation at the committee level and in conversation with the Chief Electoral Officer has taken place.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, my friend and colleague and big London Knights fan, in his speech, identified the fact that Elections Canada should not be putting forward a reason why Canadians should be going to vote. It should not be involved in the why, just in the where and when.

However, last year the government, in the Canada job grants ads that it spent millions and millions of dollars on, told Canadians why they should be accessing this program that did not even exist. There was a why there.

Could the member square that circle for me?

Mr. Joe Preston: Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for noticing my green suit today in honour of the London Knights.

We have had a great number of good times together. The member served on the procedure and House affairs committee, and he remembers our good times together and what we were able to do.

I cannot speak for the Canada job grants. I guess the chair of the human resources committee could stand up here and tell us about that one. However, as chair of the procedure and House affairs committee, having heard the number of witnesses, and having shared anecdotal parts in my speech, I suggested why the why was our job.

I know in the member's riding he is the why. In my riding, hopefully I am the why, and the other candidates might be up against me.

The Deputy Speaker: It being 5:15 p.m., pursuant to an order made on Thursday, May 8, 2014, it is my duty to interrupt the proceedings and put forthwith every question necessary to dispose of the third reading stage of the bill now before the House.

• (1715)

The question is on the amendment. Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the amendment?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

The Deputy Speaker: All those in favour of the amendment will please say yea.

Some hon. members: Yea.

The Deputy Speaker: All those opposed will please say nay.

Some hon. members: Nay.

The Deputy Speaker: In my opinion the nays have it.

And five or more members having risen:

The Deputy Speaker: Call in the members.

• (1800)

(The House divided on the amendment, which was negatived on the following division:)

(Division No. 138)

YEAS

Members

Allen (Welland)	Andrews
Angus	Atamanenko
Aubin	Ayala
Bélangier	Bennett
Benskin	Bevington
Blanchette	Blanchette-Lamothe
Boivin	Borg
Boulerice	Boutin-Sweet
Brahmi	Brisson
Brosseau	Caron
Casey	Charlton
Chicoine	Chisholm
Choquette	Christopherson
Cleary	Comartin
Côté	Cotler
Crowder	Cullen
Cuzner	Davies (Vancouver East)
Dion	Dionne Labelle
Donnelly	Doré Lefebvre
Dubé	Dubourg
Duncan (Etobicoke North)	Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona)
Dusseau	Easter
Eyking	Fortin
Freeland	Freeman
Fry	Garrison
Genest	Genest-Jourdain
Giguère	Godin
Goodale	Gravelle
Grogulic	Harris (Scarborough Southwest)
Harris (St. John's East)	Hsu
Hughes	Hyer
Jacob	Jones
Julian	Kellway
Lamoureux	Lapointe
Latendresse	Laverdière
LeBlanc (Beauséjour)	LeBlanc (LaSalle—Émard)
Leslie	Liu
MacAulay	Mai
Marston	Martin

Masse
McGuinly
Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue)
Morin (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine)
Morin (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot)
Murray
Nash
Nunez-Melo
Papillon
Péclet
Plamondon
Rankin
Raynault
Rousseau
Sandhu
Scott
Sgro
sor)
Sims (Newton—North Delta)
St-Denis
Stoffler
Thibeault
Trudeau
Valeriote— 123

Government Orders

McCallum
Michaud
Morin (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord)
Morin (Laurentides—Labelle)
Mulcair
Nantel
Nicholls
Pacetti
Patry
Pilon
Quach
Rathgeber
Regan
Saganash
Scarpaleggia
Sellah
Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Wind-
Sitsabaiesan
Stewart
Sullivan
Toone
Turnel

NAYS

Members

Ablonczy	Adams
Adler	Aglukkaq
Albas	Albrecht
Alexander	Allen (Tobique—Mactaquac)
Allison	Ambler
Ambrose	Anders
Anderson	Ashfield
Aspin	Bateman
Benoit	Bergen
Bernier	Bezan
Blaney	Block
Boughen	Braid
Brown (Leeds—Grenville)	Brown (Newmarket—Aurora)
Brown (Barrie)	Bruinooge
Butt	Calandra
Calkins	Cannan
Carmichael	Carrie
Chisu	Chong
Clarke	Clement
Crockatt	Daniel
Davidson	Dechert
Del Mastro	Devolin
Dreeshen	Duncan (Vancouver Island North)
Dykstra	Falk
Fantino	Fast
Findlay (Delta—Richmond East)	Finley (Haldimand—Norfolk)
Fletcher	Galipeau
Gallant	Gill
Glover	Goguen
Goodyear	Gosal
Gourde	Grewal
Harper	Harris (Cariboo—Prince George)
Hawn	Hayes
Hiebert	Hillyer
Hoback	Holder
James	Kamp (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge—Mission)
Kenney (Calgary Southeast)	Kerr
Komarnicki	Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings)
Lauzon	Lebel
Leaf	Leitch
Lemieux	Leung
Lizon	Lukowski
Lunney	MacKay (Central Nova)
MacKenzie	Maguire
Mayes	McColeman
McLeod	Menegakis
Merrifield	Miller
Moore (Port Moody—Westwood—Port Coquitlam)	
Nicholson	
Norlock	Obhrai
O'Connor	Oliver
O'Neill Gordon	Opitz
O'Toole	Payne
Poillievre	Preston
Rajotte	Reid

Government Orders

Rempel
Ritz
Schellenberger
Shea
Shory
Sopuck
Stanton
Strahl
Toet
Trottier
Uppal
Van Kesteren
Vellacott
Warawa
Watson
Sky Country
Wilks
Wong
Yelich
Young (Vancouver South)

Richards
Saxton
Seeback
Shipley
Smith
Sorenson
Storseth
Sweet
Trost
Truppe
Valcourt
Van Loan
Wallace
Warkentin
Weston (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to
Williamson
Woodworth
Young (Oakville)
Zimmer— 146

Dykstra
Fantino
Findlay (Delta—Richmond East)
Fletcher
Gallant
Glover
Goodyear
Gourde
Harper
Hawn
Hiebert
Hoback
James
Kenney (Calgary Southeast)
Komarnicki
Lauzon
Leef
Lemieux
Lizon
Lunney
MacKenzie
Mayes
McLeod
Merrifield
Moore (Port Moody—Westwood—Port Coquitlam)
Nicholson
Norlock
O'Connor
O'Neill Gordon
O'Toole
Poilievre
Rajotte
Rempel
Ritz
Schellenberger
Shea
Shory
Sopuck
Stanton
Strahl
Toet
Trottier
Uppal
Van Kesteren
Vellacott
Warawa
Watson
Sky Country
Wilks
Wong
Yelich
Young (Vancouver South)

Falk
Fast
Finley (Haldimand—Norfolk)
Galipeau
Gill
Goguen
Gosal
Grewal
Harris (Cariboo—Prince George)
Hayes
Hillyer
Holder
Kamp (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge—Mission)
Kerr
Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings)
Lebel
Leitch
Leung
Lukiwski
MacKay (Central Nova)
Maguire
McColeman
Menegakis
Miller
Obhrai
Oliver
Opitz
Payne
Preston
Reid
Richards
Saxton
Seeback
Shipley
Smith
Sorenson
Storseth
Sweet
Trost
Truppe
Valcourt
Van Loan
Wallace
Warkentin
Weston (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to
Williamson
Woodworth
Young (Oakville)
Zimmer— 146

PAIRED

Nil

The Speaker: I declare the amendment defeated.

The next question is on the main motion. Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

The Speaker: All those in favour of the motion will please say yea.

Some hon. members: Yea.

The Speaker: All those opposed will please say nay.

Some hon. members: Nay.

The Speaker: In my opinion the yeas have it.

And five or more members having risen:

• (1805)

(The House divided on the motion, which was agreed to on the following division:)

(Division No. 139)

YEAS

Members

Ablonczy
Adler
Albas
Alexander
Allison
Ambrose
Anderson
Aspin
Benoit
Bernier
Blaney
Boughen
Brown (Leeds—Grenville)
Brown (Barrie)
Butt
Calkins
Carmichael
Chisu
Clarke
Crockatt
Davidson
Del Mastro
Dreeshen

Adams
Aglukkaq
Albrecht
Allen (Tobique—Mactaquac)
Ambler
Anders
Ashfield
Bateman
Bergen
Bezan
Block
Braid
Brown (Newmarket—Aurora)
Bruinooge
Calandra
Cannan
Carrie
Chong
Clement
Daniel
Dechert
Devolin
Duncan (Vancouver Island North)

Allen (Welland)
Angus
Aubin
Bélangier
Benskin
Blanchette
Boivin
Boulerice
Brahmi
Brosseau
Casey
Chicoine
Choquette
Cleary
Côté
Crowder
Cuzner
Dion
Donnelly
Dubé
Duncan (Etobicoke North)
Dusseau
Eyking
Freeland
Fry
Genest
Giguère

NAYS

Members

Andrews
Atamanenko
Ayala
Bennett
Bevington
Blanchette-Lamothe
Borg
Boutin-Sweet
Brisson
Caron
Charlton
Chisholm
Christopherson
Comartin
Cotler
Cullen
Davies (Vancouver East)
Dionne Labelle
Doré Lefebvre
Dubourg
Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona)
Easter
Fortin
Freeman
Garrison
Genest-Jourdain
Godin

Goodale	Gravelle
Groguhé	Harris (Scarborough Southwest)
Harris (St. John's East)	Hsu
Hughes	Hyer
Jacob	Jones
Julian	Kellway
Lamoureux	Lapointe
Latendresse	Laverdière
LeBlanc (Beauséjour)	LeBlanc (LaSalle—Émard)
Leslie	Liu
MacAulay	Mai
Marston	Martin
Masse	McCallum
McGuinty	Michaud
Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue)	Morin (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord)
Morin (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine)	Morin (Laurentides—Labelle)
Morin (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot)	Mulcair
Murray	Nantel
Nash	Nicholls
Nunez-Melo	Pacetti
Papillon	Patry
Péclat	Pilon
Plamondon	Quach
Rankin	Rathgeber
Raynault	Regan
Rousseau	Saganash
Sandhu	Scarpaleggia
Scott	Sellah
Sgro	Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Wind- sor)
Sims (Newton—North Delta)	Sitsabaiesan
St-Denis	Stewart
Stoffer	Sullivan
Thibeault	Toone
Trudeau	Turmel
Valeriotte— 123	

PAIRED

Nil

The Speaker: I declare the motion carried.

(Bill read the third time and passed)

The Speaker: It being 6:08 p.m., the House will now proceed to the consideration of private members' business as listed on today's order paper.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

•(1810)

[English]

MEAT INSPECTION ACT

The House resumed from March 31 consideration of the motion that Bill C-571, An Act to amend the Meat Inspection Act and the Safe Food for Canadians Act (slaughter of equines for human consumption), be read the second time and referred to a committee.

Hon. Mark Eyking (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise to speak to Bill C-571, An Act to amend the Meat Inspection Act and the Safe Food for Canadians Act.

I will begin by stating that the Liberal Party supports this bill. I would also like to recognize and thank all those who have written letters and shared their thoughts and concerns with me about this piece of legislation. I have heard from many of our American neighbours who also want to see this bill enacted.

Bill C-571 amends the Meat Inspection Act and the Safe Food for Canadians Act to ensure that any horse slaughtered for human

Private Members' Business

consumption has a medical record containing all treatments over the course of its lifetime.

There are serious health concerns regarding horsemeat that may contain harmful substances if that horse was not raised primarily for human consumption. Horses sent for slaughter come from various backgrounds, and because they are not raised as food animals, they often receive medications that are banned from the food chain.

Currently, record keeping for horses bred and raised in Canada or the United States is not mandatory. The transfer of information regarding the substances a horse has received is not required when that animal is sold. This bill seeks to provide a reliable system for recording medications given to horses throughout their entire lifespans to prevent forbidden substances often found in horsemeat from entering our food chain.

Before we came here to vote tonight, I spoke to the member for British Columbia Southern Interior, who introduced a similar piece of legislation last year, Bill C-322, which did not have the parliamentary support needed to withstand a vote at second reading. Bill C-322 would have prohibited the transportation, import, or export of horses or horsemeat for human consumption altogether.

This new draft, Bill C-571, is an extension of the previous bill, which now provides for an exemption to that prohibition. Only horses raised primarily for human consumption that are accompanied by a complete medical history will be transported for slaughter for meat. This expansion of Bill C-322 better confirms the trade regulations and would fulfill Canada's food safety requirements.

Most Canadians do not realize how much horsemeat we sell all over the world. In 2013, more than 72,000 horses were slaughtered in Canada. That is nearly 1,400 killed each week. It is important to reiterate that Canada has a horsemeat industry worth \$19 million, 85% of which is for export, and employs 500 Canadians. We do not want to take any livelihoods away from the people who make a living from it.

The U.S. eradication of its horsemeat industry in 2007 now leaves only two countries in North America that use horses for slaughter, Mexico and us. There are only five processing plants across Canada. Two are in Quebec, two are in Alberta, and one is in British Columbia.

While the consumption of horsemeat is not very popular with Canadians, there is a growing interest in Quebec, where it is often sold in supermarkets. Horsemeat is also eaten in many other countries around the world, over 15 that we export to, including France, Russia, all the "stans" in the Russian orbit, China, and Italy.

I believe that this bill achieves the necessary boundaries to sustain the horsemeat processing sector while respecting those who choose to incorporate this type of meat into their diets.

Private Members' Business

Bill C-571 proposes that we continue with this industry and that we breed horses the way we breed other livestock, such as cows and pigs, to ensure that these animals are not injected with chemicals that might hurt the food chain, because the rest of the animals in our livestock industry are not. These animals would not be injected or fed anything that would render the meat unsafe. All the bill is saying is that there needs to be some sort of assurance so that we do not endanger human health.

Some argue that this is an overly emotional debate. It is not, actually. There is a lot of evidence showing that horses not bred for slaughter carry medications that could harm people. A couple of years ago, Belgium authorities notified the European Commission about the reported presence of two forbidden substances in horsemeat imported from Canada.

• (1815)

The whole issue of the humane treatment of horses sent to slaughterhouses is another issue, but it is important to address it here.

I am a horse owner. My parents were from the Netherlands in Europe, and horsemeat was a staple of their diet. Sometimes it can be emotional for me also, but it is an industry, and it is very important.

We also have to address how we treat these animals before they are slaughtered. There have been many documented cases of cruelty and neglect in Canadian slaughterhouses. The larger issue is that when these great creatures are with us, they should be treated in an humane manner, which is not currently the case in many instances. The reality is that our current transportation regulations for horses are poor, allowing for horses to be transported for up to 36 hours, without food, water, or rest, in confined trailers.

Bill C-571 would impose certain limits on the horse slaughter industry that did not exist before. The main objective is to have safer horsemeat to export around the world. The legislation will help modernize regulations in the horsemeat processing sector in terms of food safety. It may also pave the way to adjusting the transportation of these animals when they are sent to slaughter for human consumption.

In conclusion, as the agriculture critic, I believe that Bill C-571 is a step in the right direction. The question today is not whether we should be using horsemeat or disposing of horses in this way. The question today is whether horsemeat is safe. We have to make sure that it is safe and that there are no chemicals or medications in the meat when we sell it or consume it ourselves in this country.

The bill is a step in the right direction for maintaining and improving the horsemeat processing sector in Canada, which is still a big industry. We support the bill.

Ms. Libby Davies (Vancouver East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would first like to thank my colleague from British Columbia Southern Interior, whom I have known for many years as a very great member of Parliament in the House, for bringing forward this bill. I know that the member is very diligent in his work. He is a member who has a long history in the agricultural industry. He was the agriculture critic in the NDP for many years, and I know the riding he represents has a number of agricultural producers, so it is an issue he is very familiar with.

I also know he is a member who is very diligent in the research he does and the issues he brings to the House. I was very interested when he first brought forward Bill C-571, an act to amend the Meat Inspection Act and the Safe Food for Canadians Act concerning the slaughter of horses for human consumption. I know he brought forward this bill because of the research he has done, the people he has spoken to, and the concern he has that the status quo in Canada is very unsatisfactory. Indeed it is not safe and is something that needs to be debated in the House and looked at. It is very meritorious that this bill has been brought forward and we are having the debate in the House. We will vote on it, I believe, tomorrow.

I would like to agree with my hon. colleague from the Liberal Party who spoke before me that for many people it is an emotional issue. He articulated very well the fact that he himself is a horse owner, his family comes from a community where horsemeat is eaten, and yet there are issues that we have to sort out. For parliamentarians, the primary issue is to ensure that the safety of Canadians is paramount, that it is our first priority, and that the food chain is safe in this country.

Due to some of the quite shocking cases of contamination in various plants across the country, we know this is something the federal government must not only have oversight of; but strict laws, regulations, and inspections must be in place to guarantee safety. It is not a chance thing; there has to be a guarantee that our food supply system, the production system, food processing, from beginning to end, is something Canadians can rely on. Our faith in that system has been shaken on a number of occasions, which is all the more reason that, with this bill, we need to look at this issue in the cold light of day and examine whether the provisions we have in Canada that supposedly provide the required protections are actually working.

Having read the material that has been sent to us from many different perspectives, certainly by the member for British Columbia Southern Interior but also by others, I would say this bill is needed. It is a bill worthy of being sent to committee for further examination. We have to recognize that the system in Canada in terms of horses going to slaughterhouses is not foolproof. There are many loopholes. We have an industry where horses, particularly those used in racing but in other activities as well, contain all kinds of medications and drugs that are unfit for human consumption. For those medications to be in our food chain is very serious.

I agree with the underlying and fundamental premise of the bill that it is critical that we ensure there is a separation of streams. If horses are being raised primarily for the food chain, accompanied by a lifetime record such as we see in the European Union, in chronological order with all the medical treatments, that is fine. The issue is not about whether there is consumption of horsemeat and if it is good or bad. That is a matter of choice, and it is a consumer choice, as it is globally. The issue here is whether or not there is a separation and a prohibition to absolutely guarantee that horses being conveyed to slaughter that do not have that full medical record are not then being used for human consumption.

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•(1820)

On this issue, we do have to err on the side of caution. We have to take the precautionary principle and ensure that the measures that are in place are foolproof and transparent, not just random sampling, and that there are proper inspections that take place. We have to ensure that these lifetime records, such as those we have seen in the European Union, are valid documents that can be counted on.

I am the health critic for the NDP, and I am very proud to do work as the health critic. I can tell the House that every day, when I speak with constituents, stakeholders, and organizations, the issues of food safety, labelling, transparency and ensuring that our food industry is working in a way that puts Canadians' safety first are things that I hear about very frequently. There is a lot of concern in the country about the fact that the federal government has retreated and we do not have the kinds of inspections, for example, under the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

In fact, we know that there are no laws or restrictions in place that exclude racehorses from entering the slaughter system. There is no law that prevents that. Supposedly, we have something called an equine ID document that requires the medications that the horse has been on within the previous six months to be shown. However, that is something that has been so easy to get around.

I know that the member for British Columbia Southern Interior has information from horse owners that shows that the documentation that they get is sometimes non-existent. It certainly does not contain the kind of information that is required to give someone a sense of the record of that particular animal's life. I know this because I just talked to the member a few minutes ago before the debate here tonight.

I am glad that we are debating this bill. There are different perspectives, but it comes down to the need to make sure that there is a clear separation when it comes to horses that are raised specifically for meat. There should be very clear rules around that. For other horses that have been used for other activities, we have to make absolutely sure that they do not end up being part of our food chain and our food system.

I would like to thank the member for British Columbia Southern Interior for having the courage to bring forward this private member's bill to allow us to have this debate. I hope that members will consider the principle on the bill and, on that basis, agree that it should be supported to go to committee. I am sure that there will be all kinds of interesting witnesses who will want to come forward. There will be questions. There will be amendments. That is what our process is about here. That is why we have it.

At this point, we are here debating this bill in principle. On that basis, I support the bill, and I congratulate the member for the work he has done in bringing forward this important issue.

•(1825)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Mylène Freeman (Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to participate in the debate on the bill introduced by my colleague from British Columbia Southern Interior concerning the horse slaughter industry.

As my colleague from Welland, who is the NDP agriculture critic, already stated, this bill would essentially put an end to the horse slaughter industry in Canada. It would require that horses be raised for slaughter and that they have a medical record. However, we know that horses in Canada are not raised for slaughter. The majority of them are raised for other purposes, including racing or recreational use.

We have to put this in context. The United States cut all funding to the United States Department of Agriculture for inspections. Meat could then no longer be exported given that the industry was no longer subject to federal inspections. Since the market for slaughtered horsemeat was primarily an export market and not an internal market, slaughter facilities were shut down. The horses still had to be slaughtered, so they were transported to Canada. Since then, more horses have been abandoned in the United States when they could be sent to slaughter facilities.

My riding has one of the few slaughterhouses in the country for horses. The plant is called Les Viandes de la Petite Nation and it employs about 70 people in Saint-André-Avellin, a town of less than 4,000 residents. Therefore, it is a very important employer in the RCM of Papineau.

The handling of horses at that facility is viewed as one of the best in North America. The slaughtering is conducted according to government regulations. The meat is tested, examined, and batches are identified to avoid any problem. If there is contamination, the whole batch is traced and pulled out. That plant's modern system for the handling of animals was designed by Temple Grandin, a professor at the University of Colorado who is a professor of animal science and an internationally renowned expert in animal husbandry. The goal is to respect the animals and ensure their well-being to reduce their stress.

All the meat from the horses slaughtered at Les Viandes de la Petite Nation is exported to Europe. That meat is not for our domestic market. The plant is not responsible for buying horses for slaughter. European companies buy the horses and have them slaughtered and packaged at the plant.

I should point out that there is already legislation on health and safety for that industry. We have regulations about transport, about how horses should be slaughtered, and about the types of drugs that are allowed or not allowed. All this is regulated by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

I agree that it is always possible to improve inspections—it is clear, as we can see and as we know—to ensure that horses in auction houses have correct documentation and that the Canadian Food Inspection Agency meet standards and respect animals.

Some people are also very concerned about phenylbutazone, and rightly so. In fact, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency takes those concerns very seriously. The name of that product is on the list of controlled substances, and the CFIA has made sure it is not allowed. The evidence on phenylbutazone is clear. No one challenges the fact that it is a dangerous substance and that we must be careful. I do not think any member would question that.

Private Members' Business

Finally, the rules must be followed to ensure that we can continue exporting this meat. These are jobs in my region. The United States has already gone further in that direction and, when done properly, slaughtering actually reduces the mistreatment of horses.

To duly represent my constituents of Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel, I must oppose the bill put forward by the hon. member for British Columbia Southern Interior. Therefore, I will not be supporting it.

•(1830)

Ms. Christine Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak to this bill, since it bears some explanation in our current situation.

I want to make it clear that the bill is not designed to determine whether or not horses should be slaughtered as a general practice. Personally, I agree that if a horse is healthy and its meat is healthy then it can be slaughtered and its meat can be consumed. It would not bother me in the slightest to eat it. I would be pleased to do so if I knew it was safe.

The problem identified by my colleague's bill is the safety of horsemeat. Currently, food safety inspection systems do not allow us to be sure that the meat we are eating is safe. The various food crises we have gone through testify to that. No one here would want to eat meat that was likely to make them sick.

That said, the horses slaughtered in Canada have often not been raised for the end purpose of human consumption. This includes slaughtered race horses. They are given injections of a number of medications, treatments and analgesics. Several of those products can end up on our plates.

Unfortunately, some drugs are impossible to detect, so even if the meat is tested to find out whether it has been contaminated by such and such a product, it could test negative because the substance in the meat is not there in sufficient quantity to be detected. However, it would still be toxic for a human consuming it. Even at levels that are undetectable by conventional tests, substances of that kind could be dangerous. That is the problem we currently face.

What my colleague is specifically saying is that, while we wait for food inspection systems that are safe, especially for horsemeat, we cannot continue to do nothing, knowing that the meat is not only consumed in Canada, but is also exported. We have to consider this bill in the context of food safety.

We can all understand that a person who raises a horse for consumption will not give it the same substances as a person who raises a horse for performance purposes. That is why certain products end up in that meat.

As far as raising animals in general is concerned, if I raise cows or cattle, I know they are going to end up on someone's plate. I will therefore pay a lot more attention to what my animals consume. I will obey the rules.

Standards are established based on scientific research, among other things. They help determine exactly how the meat of another type of animal may be safe for humans and what we must do to ensure food safety. Very detailed inspection systems are in place and

people may lose the right to raise animals. There are very specific rules in place for the other types of meat.

As far as horse is concerned, not many people raise horse for consumption.

•(1835)

That being said, if someone decides to do so and has the medical reports for his horses, we totally agree that he can use them. We can be assured of the safety of the horsemeat. Unfortunately, that is not the case at this time.

If the government is prepared to pass my colleague's bill and implement measures to ensure the safety of horsemeat, then my colleague's bill will become law. If the law becomes unnecessary, the government could choose to repeal it and that would be entirely appropriate.

However, in the meantime, we cannot continue to allow people to eat meat that is not safe. Often, food products that are not so healthy, cost very little at the grocery store. The risk is that people who are especially vulnerable will buy this meat believing that it is safe.

For most people, it is logical to believe that if a product is sold in Canada, then it must be safe. That is what most people think. They believe that if the product is on their grocery store shelf, then it is a safe product. People with health problems may be more vulnerable, as may be single mothers who have to feed their children. They may say to themselves that the meat is less expensive. However, if they feed it to their children, it could cause health problems, especially if the children are more sensitive to certain substances.

I would like to remind members that this bill does not take a stand on the slaughter of horses. This bill is about the safety of horse meat, and we must vote accordingly.

I believe that there is enough literature available to realize that, at present, it is not safe to eat horse meat. That is why the United States took action. It understood the problem.

At present, the horses that the United States does not want are sent to Canada to be slaughtered. That makes no sense.

Food safety should be one of the government's priorities. That is why I urge my colleagues to vote in favour of this bill. I urge them to do so, but I also particularly urge my Conservative colleagues and the critics associated with agricultural issues to adopt the bill. If they refuse to act now, the NDP will act in 2015.

We need to find solutions to make horsemeat safe. We need to work on this right away and introduce a more comprehensive bill. Some flexibility is needed, but there is less flexibility when dealing with a private member's bill. Government bills can include budgetary measures, but this is not possible with private member's bills.

I therefore urge them to think about this and to pass my colleague's bill in the meantime. We cannot stand by when there is a health risk. We cannot wait for people to die or become seriously ill. We need to take action. We need to look at this issue to resolve, once and for all, the problem with the safety of horsemeat in our country.

I want to repeat that this bill is not against the slaughter of horses. If someone were to offer me horsemeat and could guarantee that it was safe, I would be happy to eat that meat.

• (1840)

[*English*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Resuming debate. Accordingly, I invite the hon. member for British Columbia Southern Interior for his five minute right of reply.

The hon. member for British Columbia Southern Interior.

Mr. Alex Atamanenko (British Columbia Southern Interior, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to begin by thanking all of my colleagues who will be supporting my bill, especially those who have taken time today to speak out in favour of it, and also especially the official party support from the leader of the Green Party and the health and agriculture critics of the Liberal Party.

Bill C-571 is about the safety of our food supply. The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture in his speech on March 31 said, "While this bill is being presented as such, in fact it is not." This is false. He also stated, "This bill includes preventing horses from moving from one province to another within Canada". This is also false.

Annex E: Equine Information Document of the CFIA, on page 20, clearly states that phenylbutazone is one of the long list of veterinary drugs not permitted for use in equine slaughter for food, meaning that no safe limits have been established. On page 21, there is a list of drugs permitted with a six-month withdrawal period; bute is not on this list. Therefore, we can conclude that the parliamentary secretary was incorrect in his comments regarding the Equine Information Document when he said, "The six-month period exceeds the recommended withdrawal period for a number of veterinary drugs, including bute". This is more false information.

Let me turn to the speech from my hon. colleague from Welland, the agriculture critic for our party. He stated that the CFIA takes concerns about bute seriously and has ensured it is not allowed. A couple of years ago, *The New York Times* printed an explosive exposé on the problem of doping in the horse-racing industry, which prompted the U.S. government to conduct a committee study. The transcript of testimonies by veterinarians, breeders, trainers, and owners at all these committee hearings were shocking to me in their revelations regarding the overuse and abuse of a wide variety of legal and illegal medications on American racetracks. The CFIA has no laws or restrictions in place excluding racehorses from entering the slaughter system. In fact, Canada's horsemeat industry is deriving a significant portion of its product from racehorses, which should alarm us.

It has been shown time and again that our EID system is fraught with loopholes. In fact, the European Commission's veterinary office has deemed these documents to be frequently fraudulent.

Private Members' Business

I received an email today from a woman who recently purchased three horses at a horse auction. She did not receive any information about previous owners, nor were there any EIDs accompanying the animals. She also found out that the previous owner was not required to fill out an EID. She said:

If I were a kill buyer this casual transaction would please me greatly. I could then obtain fresh EIDs and fill them out as I pleased, while stating with complete honesty that "to my knowledge" the horses had not been given any substances banned for human consumption.

Henry Skjerven, former director of Natural Valley Farms in Saskatchewan, said:

The system as it stood when we were killing horses was in no way, shape or form, safe, in my opinion.

He went on to say:

We did not know where those horses were coming from, what might be in them or what they were treated with.

Equine Canada has upset many of its members over its lack of consultation before taking a position against Bill C-571 and issuing a lobby letter to me and my hon. colleagues. Many members of this organization are strongly opposed to horse slaughter.

Furthermore, the position Equine Canada has taken seems to be based on a few misconceptions. It states in its letter, quite incorrectly, that record-keeping such as would be required by Bill C-571 does not take place for horses in other countries, whereas in fact in the EU, Canada's main market for horsemeat, it is required that all horses, not just slaughter horses, have a passport within six months of the horse's birth or by December 31 of the year of its birth, and with this passport the horse's comprehensive lifetime medical record must be maintained.

I find it striking that by presenting arguments based on food safety, science, and legal accountability, renowned international equestrian Victoria McCullough and Florida state senator Joseph Abruzzo recently effected a nearly unanimous and non-partisan decision in the U.S. Congress to keep American slaughterhouses closed to horses.

Should we not be holding ourselves at least as accountable to food safety as the U.S. when it comes to slaughtering horses for human consumption? Should the same high standards that we require for all animals not also apply to equines?

Let us get Bill C-571 to the committee and to the debate it deserves and Canadians are expecting.

• (1845)

[*Translation*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): 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. Bruce Stanton): All those in favour of the motion will please say yea.

Some hon. members: Yea.

Adjournment Proceedings

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): All those opposed will please say nay.

Some hon. members: Nay.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): In my opinion the nays have it.

And five or more members having risen:

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Pursuant to Standing Order 93, a recorded division stands deferred until tomorrow, Wednesday, May 14, 2014, immediately before the time provided for private members' business.

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

A motion to adjourn the House under Standing Order 38 deemed to have been moved.

[English]

PUBLIC SAFETY

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, on March 31, I asked the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness about neglecting to ensure that Canada's laws are maintained by the Canada Border Services Agency. I referred to a directive by a director general who stated, in part, "...export examinations...including outbound smuggling of narcotics...should not be undertaken".

Imagine, a directive from the agency under the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness to not look for narcotics.

I asked if the minister could come clean and explain how this directive was put out there and if he was going to maintain Canada's laws. The question I posed to the minister on March 31 has yet to be answered, although the minister had ample opportunity to answer the question. I see his parliamentary secretary and I hope she will answer that question tonight.

I will go back to the quotation, which is in a document dated June 29, 2012. It was to the regional directors general from Maureen Tracy, director general, border programs, and the subject was "Export Program Examination Priorities". I will read the quote, which is very worrisome.

Given the significant role the CBSA plays in the GC export community and the limited number of resources available for export examinations; other commodities, including outbound smuggling of narcotics, unless there is an intelligence lookout, should not be undertaken.

That is a directive to not look for narcotics coming from an agency that the minister is responsible for. There can be no more serious an issue related to the minister's file than that of ensuring our borders are secured and that illegal narcotics are intercepted.

When I asked the minister on March 27 if he accepted responsibility for this directive, which instructs CBSA officers not to take proactive action with respect to the interception of narcotics, the minister stated that he would get back to me.

I repeated the question on March 31, and on that occasion the minister again failed to respond as to whether he was aware of the instructions given, and if so, what action, if any, did he take to have that order rescinded.

When I asked at the public safety committee on May 1 to respond to the memo circulated within CBSA, the minister again failed to respond as to whether he was familiar with the memo, had in fact approved it, and if the contents of the memo with respect to ordering CBSA officers not to take proactive initiatives related to narcotic smuggling remained in effect.

On that occasion, the minister responded by pointing to the efforts of CBSA in intercepting contraband tobacco. The memo did not say "tobacco". The memo talked about narcotics.

Does the minister know what is going on in his department? He has had three opportunities to respond now. I would hope tonight that the parliamentary secretary on his behalf responds, and responds directly.

The memo is out there asking that narcotics not be looked for in a serious manner unless there is almost an emergency. Does it remain in effect? Is CBSA doing its job?

• (1850)

Ms. Roxanne James (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, CPC): Mr. Speaker, first, contrary to the suggestions of the member for Malpeque, I can assure the House and all Canadians that CBSA did not make any cuts to front-line officers. In fact, it is quite the contrary. We have increased front-line border officers by 26% since being elected in 2006. This government, our government, has been and continues to be steadfast in its protection of Canadians and ensuring the laws are upheld.

Let us look at some of these facts. The original directive did not instruct front-line officers to stop doing their job. What it did was outline the top priorities of the agency and introduce an intelligence-led approach.

Criminals do not follow rules. Border-related criminality often starts inland and requires the CBSA to work with its domestic and international law enforcement and intelligence partners to identify and interdict illicit drugs and take the necessary actions against those who seek to break the laws.

As a matter of fact, the CBSA plays a key role in the national anti-drug strategy's enforcement action plan, in partnership with the RCMP, Health Canada, and the Public Prosecution Service of Canada. The action plan increases the capacity of law enforcement agencies to proactively target organized crime involved in illicit drug production and distribution operations.

CBSA is doing great work to keep our borders safe and secure, without impacting legitimate trade and travel. The numbers speak for themselves. Let us talk about some of these numbers.

Canada Border Services Agency has a proven record of intercepting illicit drugs, having made more than 9,000 seizures since April 1, 2013. This is valued at nearly \$300 million. In fact, this is even a 4% increase over the previous year.

Adjournment Proceedings

Our government will take no lessons from the Liberal Party. In fact, this is the party, the Liberal Party, that had a previous member refer to our front-line border security officers as “a bunch of wimps”. Who said that? Derek Lee said it in 2006.

It also had a member who said the border officers are “glorified bank tellers”. That was said by former minister Elinor Caplan.

Again, we will take no lessons from the Liberal Party on this particular issue.

• (1855)

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Speaker, now that the parliamentary secretary has had her little rant against Liberals who have not been here for about six years, let us get to the facts.

The question was not about cuts to front-line officers. That was not the question.

She said they introduced an intelligence-led approach. That is fine. Nobody is arguing with that.

However, we have a memo on the record that she has not refuted, and she has not said whether it remains in effect or not. That memo says, and again I quote:

...other commodities, including outbound smuggling of narcotics, unless there is an intelligence lookout, should not be undertaken.

Is that still the policy of CBSA? Are the minister and CBSA upholding the laws of Canada or not? Does that memo remain in effect?

Ms. Roxanne James: Mr. Speaker, again, we will not apologize for taking an intelligence-based approach to border security.

CBSA carries out its responsibilities with a workforce of approximately 13,000 employees, including more than 7,200 uniformed officers. CBSA provides services at approximately 1,200 points across Canada and at 39 international locations.

The magnitude of modern border management is vast. Border officers cannot open every suitcase or container, nor should they. Appropriate application of smart risk management is key.

I would, however, like to point out to the member for Malpeque an article, which was highlighted today and which I read, about the good work of CBSA officers. With the help of a canine used to detect drugs, officers searched a truck and found 105 packages of cocaine in the side panels, weighing roughly 123 kilos.

Therefore, when we talk about a mandate to continue doing this type of work, I hardly think that this story equates to a directive to stop doing their job.

The member opposite from Malpeque should stop his smear of front-line officers, should support CBSA, and should work with our Conservative government to keep our borders safe and effective.

EMPLOYMENT

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise this evening and pose a question for the minister. I note it is not often in adjournment proceedings that a minister is in the House to respond to a question. This is an important question on the important issue of temporary foreign workers. The minister's presence this evening deserves merit.

The international exchange program is part of the issue surrounding temporary foreign workers. This issue has really taken off. We have been ringing alarm bells for four years with respect to the temporary foreign worker program.

In 2009, a lot of the checks and balances that were in place in that program were cast aside when the current Minister of Public Works declared that she was accelerating the LMO process. Businesses would be allowed to pay their temporary foreign workers 15% less than Canadian workers. The minister was quite proud of the fact that she was speeding up access to temporary foreign workers. Since that time, the program has ballooned.

The international exchange program was initiated by a Liberal government in 1967. The whole purpose of the program was to give Canadians an opportunity to go to other countries and learn all that could be learned about those countries and peoples. The program allowed youth from other countries to come here and learn about Canada and Canadian culture.

The program was intended to be positive, constructive and reciprocal. The program was supposed to benefit visiting students and Canadians going abroad. It was supposed to be workplace neutral and a program with balance. It was clearly identified as a reciprocal program.

In its rush to take in temporary foreign workers, the Conservative government removed some of the checks and balances in this program and that really opened it up. We are not sure of the impact as a result of that.

There are 375,000 unemployed youth in our country. The last job figures show that there are 27,000 more unemployed young people in Canada. When there is a disproportionate number of young people from other countries working in Canada compared to Canadians working offshore, Canadians deserve to be told what is going on with this program.

In light of what has transpired recently with respect to this program and considering there are 60,000 visiting youth in Canada now and less than 18,000 Canadians offshore, could the minister explain to me the reciprocal aspect of that?

• (1900)

Hon. Chris Alexander (Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for Cape Breton—Canso for his continuing interest in this topic. I would first like to pay tribute to my parliamentary secretary, who is usually here at this time answering all manner of questions far better than I will be able to tonight. However, because this conversation began between the member opposite and me in question period, I am here to carry it on. It is an important one.

To give the short answer to the question, the reciprocity is there. In principle, we have opportunities, up to 60,000 places for young Canadians, in the 32 countries that are part of this international experience Canada program.

Adjournment Proceedings

There have been times when we have achieved reciprocity, or virtually reciprocity, across the entire program. Those were times, to be very blunt, and the member well knows this, when the economic prospects, or the economic reality, in those countries in the job market was as strong as it was in Canada. Right now, it is not as strong in those countries as it is in Canada.

There is a disproportionately larger attraction for foreign students to come here than perhaps for Canadian students to go to some places.

We are looking at this program with a long-term perspective. I appeal to the member opposite to think of his own party's record in starting this program in 1951 and expanding it in 2003, for reasons that we all recognize are important.

Let us remind ourselves of the objectives of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act: to permit Canada to pursue the maximum social, cultural, and economic benefits of immigration, not just the economic but the social and cultural benefits as well; to enrich and strengthen the social and cultural fabric of Canada; to reinforce minority language communities; and to promote visitors, students, and temporary workers for the purposes of trade, commerce, tourism, and international understanding.

These are among the goals of our act. I would submit that the international experience Canada program is among those components of our overall immigration program that does the most to achieve those objectives.

These are really not temporary foreign workers. These are students, young people, often with high skills, with an interest in Canada. Of those who self-identify and tell us about the employment they receive, 87% have high skills. They come on exchange. They create opportunities for Canadians to go abroad. As other economies recover, we are convinced that Canadians will seize those opportunities.

They also perform some very important additional purposes for immigration in Canada. Let us keep in mind that 44,000 of our new permanent residents in 2013 were people who were already here as temporary foreign workers, including as members of the international experience Canada program. They were people who proved themselves here, studied here, worked here, and chose to stay here.

Second, we are looking to reinforce francophone immigration outside of Quebec in this country. This is one of the objectives we have as a government. It is no surprise that France is the biggest player in international experience Canada, and France is also the biggest source of francophone immigrants outside of Canada. In 2013, over 600 stayed as immigrants in provinces and territories outside of Quebec.

Finally, there is the question of good will and building trade relationships. We are being told on all sides that we need to do more to ensure that companies, sectors, and governments have people with international experience and international connections to help us seize the opportunities afforded by CETA in Europe, free trade with Korea, the continuing opportunities of NAFTA, and new opportunities in Latin America.

That is why we have these agreements to bring young people precisely from those countries, for the most part, to Canada in large numbers, to keep them here as immigrants, and to maintain connections with them over their lifetimes for the benefit of our country and the reciprocal benefit of those countries as well.

● (1905)

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: Mr. Speaker, I am sure that all the member in the House tonight recall when the minister stood the other day and tried to dismiss the issue around this particular program, saying that it was only a couple of Aussies pouring beer in Whistler.

I am sure the members would remember as well the minister's trip to Ireland, where he was saying "Come on over, use the program, come to Canada". They do not need a labour market opinion to come over on this program.

When we left government, there were 30,000 visitors to Canada and 22,000 Canadians visiting other countries. That is fairly close. Now it is about 60,000, to 18,000 Canadians who are working offshore.

In the meantime, since the recession started we have lost a quarter of a million jobs for young people in this country.

My question for the minister, with all due respect, is this: Is it not time to take some time to review this program and to try to build back in some semblance of reciprocity and some sense of marketplace neutrality?

Hon. Chris Alexander: Mr. Speaker, we will continue to review this program, as we review all of our immigration programs. We will continue to encourage and, in some cases, oblige our partners to do more publicity here in Canada in front of the audience that is Canadian youth, to tell them about the opportunities that exist in Asia, Europe, and Latin America for Canadians. Those opportunities are there, and sometimes they are not seized because of a lack of understanding and a lack of knowledge.

However, let us be very clear why so many foreign students are coming here under this program and relatively fewer Canadians are going abroad, for now; we think many more will go, over the long-term. It is because youth unemployment in this country is 1% lower than it was when the Liberals left office. Moreover, that is even after the worst global crisis in our lifetime. Youth unemployment is much higher in many of our partner countries than it is here, certainly in Europe, certainly in the United States. That is an advantage for Canada.

We are not going to apologize for the relative success of the Canadian economy, but we are doing everything in our power through the Canada jobs grant, through apprenticeships, through our planning for an immigration program, which is on target, to ensure young Canadians get first crack at today's opportunities and help us to build the sectors and the exciting regional opportunities of the future that are happening across this country.

Adjournment Proceedings

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): 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(1).

(The House adjourned at 7:09 p.m.)

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