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Chair

The Honourable Larry Bagnell

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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.)): Good morning. I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to the 156th meeting of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. This meeting is being televised.

Our first order of business today is consideration of the main estimates under the Leaders' Debates Commission.

We are pleased to have with us the Honourable Karina Gould, Minister of Democratic Institutions.

She is joined by officials from the Privy Council Office. They are Allen Sutherland, Assistant Secretary to the Cabinet, Machinery of Government and Democratic Institutions; and Matthew Shea, Assistant Deputy Minister of Corporate Services.

Thank you for being here. I'll now turn the floor over to the minister for her opening statement.

Hon. Karina Gould (Minister of Democratic Institutions): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the committee for inviting me back here today. I am pleased to be here to discuss the main estimates of 2019-20 for the independent Leaders' Debates Commission.

I am grateful to be joined by Mr. Al Sutherland, Assistant Secretary to the Cabinet, Machinery of Government and Democratic Institutions, as well as Mr. Matthew Shea, Assistant Deputy Minister for Corporate Services.

[Translation]

During my February 19 appearance before this committee, I reiterated the essential role that leaders' debates play in Canada's democracy, and I emphasized that such debates should be organized in a manner that puts the public interest first.

[English]

The commission is exercising its independence and impartiality in executing its primary mandate, which is to organize two leaders debates, one in each official language, in advance of the 2019 general election, and in related spending. Through these estimates, the commission is requesting \$4.6 million to organize these debates.

[Translation]

The commission, led by the Right Honourable David Johnston, has established a small secretariat made up of Michel Cormier,

Executive Director, Stephen Wallace, Senior Advisor, and four other staff members.

[English]

On March 22, 2019, the members of its advisory board were announced, and on March 25 it held its first in-person meeting with the commissioner and the executive director. The board will provide advice to the commissioner on how to carry out its mandate. It is composed of seven individuals who reflect gender balance, Canada's diversity, and a broad swath of political affiliations and expertise.

The commission has established a web presence, and on April 4 it launched a request for interest related to debates production, which informed a full request for proposals that was issued earlier this week.

[Translation]

Additional costs are expected for the contracting of a production entity to produce and broadcast the debates, the ongoing operation of the advisory board, awareness raising and engagement of Canadians, and administrative costs.

As the members around the table will know, the commission has the independence to determine how best to spend the operating funds it has been allocated while remaining within the funding envelope.

[English]

In his recent appearance before this committee on May 2, 2019, the debates commissioner, the Right Honourable David Johnston, reiterated his intention and duty to use funding in a responsible manner. Furthermore, he emphasized that the funding being sought is an "up to" amount and that the commission will ensure it operates cost-effectively in all of its work.

[Translation]

Finally, the Order in Council setting the mandate of the commission is clear: the Leaders' Debates Commission is to be guided by the pursuit of the public interest and by the principles of independence, impartiality and cost-effectiveness.

The commission provides a unique opportunity for Canadians to hear from those looking to lead the country, from reliable, impartial sources.

[English]

As we know, online disinformation is something we will all contend with leading up to the next election.

[*Translation*]

The leaders' debates become even more important this year as they provide a venue to communicate clear and reliable information that is accessible to everyone at the same time.

I am pleased to answer any questions members may have on this topic.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister. Thanks for coming. You come here a lot.

I'd like to welcome Bob Bratina to the committee.

Mr. Bob Bratina (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.): Thank you.

The Chair: We'll open the questioning with Madam Lapointe.

[*Translation*]

Thank you.

Ms. Linda Lapointe (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'm trying to start up my computer. Yesterday, I visited the commission's website. We have been told that the commission is on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. I was looking at the financial aspect in particular. I don't know if you have checked out the commission's site, but there is no link to Instagram. The site only indicates which platforms the commission is using.

Are you aware of this?

• (1110)

Hon. Karina Gould: No.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: You didn't check it out? Yesterday, I checked it out.

That was my first question. I am trying to start up my computer but it is not co-operating.

Hon. Karina Gould: I know that my staff looked everywhere today and found the link to Instagram. It may be easier to access from the app than from the computer.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: No. I tried it.

Hon. Karina Gould: We could show you how to do it.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: Okay.

Both you and Debates Commissioner David L. Johnston have already appeared before the committee on this matter. How is he making out with his preparations? There is a process to be followed. The website gives the timeline. For example, it shows what is to be accomplished by March and by May. Has he completed what he had to do within the timeframe?

[*English*]

Mr. Matthew Shea (Assistant Deputy Minister, Corporate Services, Privy Council Office): Similar to the last time we appeared, I'd underscore the fact that they're arm's length. We provide support to the debates commissioner as needed, from a corporate perspective.

As far as them getting along, we're helping them to get contracts in place. They have an RFP out right now, and we're working with them on that. They have space set up. If they have IT requirements, we help them.

As far as tracking their progress, that's not our role. In fact, for most questions you'll have that are really detailed about the work they're doing, we're not involved. That's a very purposeful decision we've taken to ensure that we are at arm's length here. It's no different from what we do with the commission of inquiry for MMIWG or for the new special adviser to the Prime Minister. We absolutely make sure that there's an arm's-length relationship and independence.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Linda Lapointe: It is an entity unto itself. These people report to the commissioner. Ultimately, the minister is supervising this. Is that correct?

Hon. Karina Gould: It is not a supervisory relationship. We—

Ms. Linda Lapointe: You are accountable to the government.

Hon. Karina Gould: Yes, as the independent commissioner, Mr. Johnston is required to report to Parliament. During the process, we ensured that the commission would have the independence required to make its own decisions and that there would be no political or government influence. As stated in the Order in Council, after the election the commission is to table a report in Parliament providing its advice on this matter.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: You spoke about cost-effectiveness. There will be a leaders' debate in French and one in English. As we know, the leaders will be asked to participate. Do you know if all television networks purchase the rights? I am thinking in particular of Radio-Canada, TVA and CPAC.

Hon. Karina Gould: No. The Order in Council states the following.

[*English*]

The feed has to be free. It has to be made available to any organization free of charge. That was done specifically and purposefully. One of the things we heard through the consultations is that these debates should be accessible to any Canadian who is interested in them, and they should be made easily available. Making the feed free of charge will accomplish that goal.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Linda Lapointe: The commission's main mandate is to make the debate accessible to everyone, including members of minority language communities and members of the linguistic majority, whether English or French. Not all people will necessarily have access to electronic tools. I imagine they will ensure that the debate will be on the radio.

Hon. Karina Gould: That is the objective.

[*English*]

The dissemination of the debates themselves will be available. The only requirement, as listed in the order in council, is to ensure the integrity of the debates. Otherwise, the feed will be made available.

That's really up to Canadian entities, organizations and broadcasters as to how they choose to use that.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Linda Lapointe: All right.

You said that there will be a report at the end. Have you at least specified what kind of report you want and what you want it to cover? For example, will the commission determine if it managed to reach young people as expected? We know that it is more difficult to reach young voters. Is that one of the issues that you want to see in the report that will be tabled after the election?

• (1115)

Hon. Karina Gould: We have yet to work out all those details, but you can see in section 10 of the order what we hope to get from this report.

Of course, next time you see the commissioner I think it would be a good idea to ask him those very questions if you want to know what happened after the election. I encourage parliamentarians to do that.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: I started by talking about social media because I tried to connect to each platform last night.

We need to raise awareness. I know that it's part of the commissioner's mandate to raise awareness and to reach as many electors as possible to inform them of upcoming debates and encourage them to get out and vote. Is that something you would like the commissioner to do?

Hon. Karina Gould: The mandate includes a component on public awareness of the debates. The goal is not necessarily to encourage people to go out and vote. At the very least we have to ensure that all Canadians are aware of the leaders' debates and know how to view them.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: Okay, thank you very much.

My computer is still not working.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mrs. Kusie has the floor.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie (Calgary Midnapore, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

Hello, Minister. It's lovely to see you, and you did a great job again last night at Politics and the Pen. You did just a lovely job.

Hon. Karina Gould: Thank you.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Minister Gould, you referred to the independence of the debates commission. I would say that it is not truly independent, because if it were, you wouldn't be here today for the estimates. Our committee has already heard from the Chief Electoral Officer and from the administration of the House of Commons on the main estimates. Both of them, I will point out, did not have a minister appearing on their behalf, so evidently you're here today.

Why did you not create a debates commission that was entirely independent, instead of one within your own department, where the

government in power could have both political and financial control over the commission?

Hon. Karina Gould: Just for clarification with regard to the Chief Electoral Officer, the Chief Electoral Officer is, of course, an independent officer of Parliament, but they do report their main estimates through me as a minister as well. I would strongly argue that they are very independent in their actions and activities. I think that's an important clarification to make.

With regard to the debates commission, the way it has been set up is really to ensure that they have the resources necessary to fulfill their mandate, but without any direction or conversation between the commissioner and the government once they've been established.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: From your appearance here today for the main estimates, it seems evident to me that your department does in fact have the ultimate authority over the budget of the debates commissioner. Is that true?

Hon. Karina Gould: In fact, one of the things that I did as minister was sign authority so that the commission can make all of those decisions—

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Okay, but you did provide that signed authority.

Hon. Karina Gould: —because anything that is going through government spending has to have ministerial accountability, but all of those decisions are taken by themselves.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Sure, but even if you claim that you're not interfering in the budgetary decisions of the commission, ultimately you as the minister and the government of the day do have that authority. Is that not true?

Mr. Matthew Shea: Can I just jump in?

You talk about Minister Gould's department, but we are here as PCO. It's important to note that unlike a commission of inquiry, for example, which is supported by PCO, although at arm's length, this is actually a separate entity, with its own estimates and with its own deputy head, and it has the ability to make all of those decisions.

With regard to finances, I am the arm's-length service provider for them. They chose that, although they had every opportunity to go to other options and they looked at other options.

In my role, my team supports them in HR, IT, finance and all those areas. They don't brief me on that. I don't brief the minister and I don't brief Mr. Sutherland, so there is no interference whatsoever in the process. There is no interference in any of their spending whatsoever.

Our only goal as a service provider will be to make sure that they do things that follow policy and that are legal, which I think is in everyone's best interest.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: I am kind of concerned about the term "arm's length". It's still very clear to me that the minister and the government do control the budget, so I'm wondering why you would place something so critical to our democratic institutions as a leaders debate under your department, thus compromising the commission's independent integrity by controlling the budget, rather than making it an entirely independent organization like Elections Canada.

•(1120)

Hon. Karina Gould: I am so delighted to hear from the Conservatives how important you think leaders debates are. That is really a wonderful change of tone, and I'm glad, because I hope it means that there will be full participation in this election within them.

One of the reasons we created the leaders debates and the independence of this process was to ensure that all Canadians would be able to access these debates and know that this is done in the public interest, not in backroom deals whereby previous prime ministers try to dictate the terms and conditions of how these debates take place.

I am just absolutely thrilled to hear the Conservative position on this.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: That's kind of disappointing commentary to me. It's starting to sound a little more marginal than an actual response. I feel that if you genuinely thought that something like this was so important for Canadians and was so democratic, Minister, then at least you would have provided the opportunity to have the creation of the debates commission discussed in the House of Commons. You didn't even extend that courtesy, not to mention turning down many of the recommendations that this committee gave to you in regard to the debates commission. The House of Commons didn't have an opportunity to feed into this conversation about the debates commission.

I would certainly say that we support democratic processes, but to me this serves as an example of one case in which your ministry did not.

Hon. Karina Gould: I think all the members of Parliament here would agree with me that this committee, as a committee of the House of Commons, in fact did a very robust study on leaders debates and fed into this process, along with the public consultations and the round tables that we held with stakeholders.

One of the outcomes of this process is that following this upcoming election, the current commissioner will report back to Parliament, and specifically to this committee, within six months of the election to talk about the process, to talk about what can be improved, and to talk about whether this should be established in statute or not.

I am really quite grateful for the input and the involvement of the House of Commons, and notably the members of this committee.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: You're making that statement even though the debates commission wasn't even debated in the House of Commons.

These reflect the recommendations that you did not take that were made by the house procedure committee. The office of the debates commissioner is under the ministry of democratic institutions and not under Elections Canada; the government chose the participation criteria, rather than the debates commissioner in consultation with the advisory panel; and the Liberal government unilaterally chose the debates commissioner, as I've gone over several times with you and with the debates commissioner himself, without any consultation with the other political parties or a fair process as set out in the recommendations.

It just sounds to me that for someone who purports to hold this as a key component and institution of the democratic process, so far it has not been installed and implemented very democratically, Minister.

Thank you.

Hon. Karina Gould: Do I have a chance to respond?

The Chair: You have 15 seconds.

Hon. Karina Gould: As I've said many times—and I believe this is the fourth time I've appeared, in fact, on this very topic—we've had lots of engagement on this issue, and I've very much appreciated all the feedback, all the advice given, and all the challenges from this committee. I think that that has led to the appointment of a very illustrious, trusted Canadian to take on this mandate, someone who I think will be able to deliver for Canadians a debate that's in the public interest and that all Canadians will have access to.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we'll go to Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister. It's good to see you again.

You're right that we've been around this a few times. I have to tell you that I even leaned over to Tyler and said, "I'm running out of questions," because we have gone around a lot of times.

I will reiterate, because it needs to be said, that the only thing on which I agree with my colleagues from the Conservative caucus is that the process was ham-fisted. There wasn't as much respect paid to this committee and the work we did as was promised in the election, and the name was chosen unilaterally. Those are all legitimate criticisms that the government has to wear.

However, I am in full alignment with the desire to make this so credible that the price to be paid by any political leader for not attending the leaders debate would be greater than any benefit from hiding and not having to be accountable and not facing scrutiny. I'm going to draw a very distinct line at criticizing the government on some of the missteps on the way to getting here. Those criticisms are not, in my opinion, enough to delegitimize the existence of the commission, particularly in the choice of Mr. Johnston. You had to go a long way to find a Canadian that no one could lay a glove on politically in any way, but you found him, and it matters.

I have to tell you that the inquisition-style questioning that was put upon Mr. Johnston from the official opposition was almost becoming a little embarrassing. He finally turned and said, in my paraphrased words, "You want assurances that this position is going to be filled with integrity? My name is on the line and my reputation is on the line. That's where the credibility is going to come from."

You know what? For me, and I think for the overwhelming majority of Canadians, given Mr. Johnston's track record as a servant of Canada and as a servant of the public interest, that's good enough for me, as long as it's linked with public accountability at the end.

I did ask him about that, drilling down to make sure that the review was going to be as vigorous as it needs to be, and again I was satisfied. If I were returning to the next Parliament, which I am not, I would feel satisfied that I was going to have in front of me the analysis that I need to go back and determine whether we achieved the objectives in the way that we wanted, particularly in terms of accountability.

I could take more time asking questions, but I don't want to take away from joining with you in being surprised and pleased that we now have on record that the Conservatives believe that this is important and that it matters. Now what we need to do is make sure that there's so much credibility around this process that never again does a leader from any party dodge national debates when he or she wants to be the prime minister of this country.

If I have any time left, Minister, you're welcome to it to reinforce something, or we can just move on, but that was the most important thing. I don't have any questions now. I think the really important questions are going to come after the fact, when we review how well it worked and where we can make improvements.

Quite frankly, as a last thought, the proof of the pudding is going to be on the night of the debates. Are all the seats full? If they are, then we collectively, in the majority, were successful. If there's even one empty seat, then we failed. We've failed to create the political climate where you couldn't afford to pay that price. History is going to tell us the tale.

Thanks very much, Chair.

Thank you again, Minister.

• (1125)

Hon. Karina Gould: I will just say thank you, Mr. Christopherson, for those comments. I take the whole of them, both the critique and the support.

I think that's where going through this process will be important. Having that review at the end and having that accountability for what worked, what didn't, what we can do better, and how we can make this a long-term proposal are vitally and critically important.

I know that we both share a deep passion for public service and accountability, as well as for the importance of leaders debates as Canadians make up their minds as to who they want to be led by in the future.

Thank you for your comments.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you.

The Chair: Just to reiterate, the minister is here because the committee asked her to be here. She didn't necessarily have to be here.

We'll go to Mr. Bittle.

Mr. Chris Bittle (St. Catharines, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Again, picking up on that point, I don't think we've ever put up a fight in terms of asking a minister to come. I think we work well as a committee, and when these requests have been made, I know Minister Gould has been here four times on this issue and many

other times on many other issues. I don't understand the criticism at the beginning of Ms. Kusie's statement, but that said, I would like to build a little on what Mr. Christopherson said.

This is about what has happened over the last couple of months on this committee. Again, we work very well together, and there tends to be a very respectful tone in this committee, but when we had a series of witnesses, starting with the Clerk of the House, we saw the whip from the official opposition come down and question his integrity.

Then when we had the Chief Electoral Officer, who has been before this committee many times and has worked very well with this committee, Mr. Poilievre questioned his integrity, going so far as to suggest, in the absence of any evidence, that Elections Canada is a Liberal lapdog. He had no qualms about doing it and took delight in doing it, even correcting me when I got the quote wrong on his statement.

Then it went one step further.

Mr. Christopherson's comments described the integrity of David Johnston very well. Within Canada there are few individuals who have such unassailable credibility, and you would think they would be able to come before this committee. I agree with Mr. Christopherson that we can disagree on the process by which individuals were selected and how this commission came to be, and those are fair comments. The opposition is well within its rights in questioning the government on its role and its decisions and the difference between the recommendations of this committee and what actually happened, and it should be asking those questions. That's the type of debate I'm used to in this committee.

However, to then hear the opposition question the personal credibility of David Johnston to the extent that he had to stand up and defend himself by pointing to his own body of work is shocking.

Can you comment on that and your impression of...I would call him "Your Excellency", but there's a rule that you have to put five dollars in the pot towards his charity. Can you comment on the credibility of David Johnston and your conversations that you have had so far?

• (1130)

Hon. Karina Gould: Certainly.

First of all, I think it's a challenge when the credibility of very credible people is challenged, particularly when they are making it very clear that they are acting independently and that there has been no opportunity for interference or pressure. I believe we should take them at their word, particularly in the case of someone like Mr. Johnston, who has served Canadians for decades. He has made a career and a life of serving Canadians and has not been partisan in any way whatsoever.

This was someone who was appointed by Prime Minister Harper to be Governor General, and then we appointed him as the debates commissioner. He has been tremendous in being above partisanship and always thinking about the Canadian spirit.

That's a characteristic we were looking for when we were looking for the person who could manage what is a very political and very partisan issue. Really, since leaders debates have begun, they have been decided in back rooms. There has been political manoeuvring. Whoever was the leader of the day often had more say and authority in terms of when and where these debates would be held. We saw that in clear abundance in 2015, when the former prime minister basically dictated where, when, how and who would be participating in the debates.

That's why we were specifically looking for someone who could rise above all of that, someone Canadians could trust because they would know there would not be any inkling of partisanship, that this would not be political and would be purely about public service and serving the Canadian interest.

Mr. Chris Bittle: Thank you.

Maybe I will ask more directly about the attack on the credibility of Elections Canada and the Chief Electoral Officer.

I guess I look perhaps to our friends to the south and at attempts by politicians to score political points against institutions, especially independent institutions, that are involved in the democratic process. For me, it's troubling to see that happen here, to see it happen with delight from the opposition, and it worries me going into an election that in the absence of any evidence there is a gleeful willingness to attack the Chief Electoral Officer and Elections Canada, which is one of the most respected electoral bodies in the world.

Can you comment on that as well?

• (1135)

Hon. Karina Gould: Elections are based on two things in my opinion: trust in the process and trust in the outcome. In order to have those, you need to have trust in the impartial independent administrator of those elections. I believe that Elections Canada since its inception has been a shining example around the world of that impartiality and that independence.

It has administered the elections legislation created by this Parliament, and numerous parliaments before it, effectively and in a way that Canadians can have confidence and trust in. I think it is a particularly dangerous path to go down to flirt with questioning the independence, the integrity and the impartiality of our independent officers of Parliament.

Although on many sides we may not always agree with its findings or directions, the fact is that we have granted it that authority as Parliament and we need to respect it. We can disagree with it, but we should not question the motives behind it.

Mr. Chris Bittle: I want to congratulate you on last night and your amazing ability to play the cowbell. That's a wonderful talent. Congratulations on that.

Hon. Karina Gould: That's one of my few talents, playing the cowbell.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bittle.

Now to Ms. Kusie.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The irony of this is that you've mentioned over and over again the character and integrity of the individual who was chosen, Mr. David Johnston. The sadness and the irony of this is that, if you had submitted to a fair and transparent process in an effort to choose him, you wouldn't have had the opportunity to question, not him, but the procedure of how he was chosen. I think that's truly a disservice to him. I find what we're discussing incredibly ironic. There's no doubt as to the integrity and the experience and the resumé of Mr. Johnston. It's the process, and that was your process. Really, it's your process that has created this unfortunate conversation.

I want to turn to the producer. It will be a producer organizing the debates rather than the commission, and it's likely to be a media consortium. Your government essentially created the debates commission and funded it with \$5.5 million in a year where we have a fourth consecutive deficit, a year when the budget was supposed to be balanced, according to the Prime Minister. Yet how can we be sure that it will not be significantly different from previous debates that have been held, if there is in fact this consortium?

I see media in the room here today. I'm going to ask if you think it should be the role of the commission and thus the government, your government, to participate in your organization and broadcasting.

Hon. Karina Gould: On your first question with regard to the \$5.5 million, it's important to note that this is a ceiling amount. That is an up-to amount. One of the important things we wanted to ensure was that the commission had sufficient resources to produce a debate that was of high quality, that reached journalistic standards, and that was available and accessible to Canadians.

Something we heard throughout the consultation process was that it was necessary to ensure that sufficient resources were made available. Additionally, it's also to ensure that the feed can also be public and free to anyone who wants to use it.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Was this because you didn't trust the media? Was it because you didn't think they were capable of doing something they've done for years?

Hon. Karina Gould: No, that is absolutely not the case. In fact, I have reiterated on numerous occasions the very important role that media play in our democracy, particularly our traditional mainstream medium. We would not have this wonderful democracy we have without the incredible journalists across the country who hold governments to account.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Yet it would seem that you're trying to control them through the use of this commission.

Hon. Karina Gould: That is not the case at all. That may be your take on things, but this commission is created to ensure that these debates are widely available. The primary purpose of this, Ms. Kusie, as I have reiterated on countless occasions, is to ensure that the public interest is the primary driver behind all of this. It's to ensure that it is as widely disseminated as possible.

We saw in 2015 how one political leader was able to change, for political advantage, the nature of the debates, where they were disseminated, and where they were broadcast.

The fact of the matter is that Canadians have come to rely on leaders debates as an important political moment where they make decisions, where they look at their political leaders in spontaneous moments, where they get to see how they interact. They get to make decisions as to who they want to lead them.

● (1140)

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: But if it's a producer and ultimately a consortium, aren't you concerned that smaller media organizations are likely to be left out?

There are so many smaller media organizations, platforms, and there is very much the possibility of them not being a part of this democratic process as a result of this motion.

Hon. Karina Gould: I would point you to the RFP that was released, and I would note that this was created by the commission.

The point, and what's in the order in council, is specifically to bring as many diverse participants in as possible. They're going to make that decision. The commissioner will make that decision, based on advice from the advisory council that he has put in place. It is specifically to ensure that this as accessible and inclusive a process as possible.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: By controlling the process? That's ridiculous. That's completely unreasonable that you would allow for freedom of the media in developing a commission under the ministry—

Hon. Karina Gould: Ms. Kusie, one thing that I would point to—

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: —which decides the producer, which decides the members of the consortium to implement the debates commission. It's completely contrary to—

Hon. Karina Gould: If you'll allow me, in the order in council, it specifically encourages the debates commission and commissioner to work with partners across the country if they wish to hold other debates as well.

The commissioner is mandated to ensure that there is one debate in English and one debate in French. It is not by any means to limit the number of debates that are going on, but to support others who wish to engage in this process and to create some innovations in this process.

Going to the heart of your question, it is about accessibility, about inclusivity and it is about reaching those markets that have been underserved in the past.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

And thanks for welcoming the media, Althia Raj, etc.

Now we'll go to Ms. Sahota.

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My first question is around the amount of funding that has been allocated.

What led you to decide that this amount—the ceiling amount or the actual amount that is now identified—would be appropriate, considering there are so many unknown variables to how these debates are going to occur?

Hon. Karina Gould: We wanted to ensure that we had sufficient resources to produce two high-quality debates in both official languages. It was also to ensure that there was sufficient remuneration for both the commissioner and also the technical secretariat that would be put in place. This would be an 18-month process, and it was to ensure that it was going to have sufficient resources. It's not only about producing the debates, but it's also about informing Canadians that these debates will be taking place as well. So it's to ensure that they have the resources to actually fulfill their mandate.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: What makes you think that this is enough?

Mr. Matthew Shea: We did our best analysis at the time that we did the funding proposal. We did err on the side of putting in more money. We put money in for professional services, knowing that they would want to have some type of contract in place to run the debates. They would need communication services. They would need personnel. They'd need back-office support.

We've done this before, as far as setting up independent organizations is concerned. We have recent experience with things like commissions of inquiry, so it gave us some sense of the types of costs. When you start a new organization, there are always start-up costs. That's one of the challenges with having a short-term organization.

I can't go into the spending from last year because the books aren't officially closed and public accounts are not released, but I feel comfortable saying that they will spend, and we will spend, less in the last fiscal year than was anticipated. In particular, the support from PCO in setting them up was much less than what we anticipated.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Oh, really.

Mr. Matthew Shea: The main reason is that the debates commissioner, from day one, made clear to me that he wanted to spend as little money as possible, to be as efficient as possible. We looked at existing space, existing material. He asked for very few changes to the office to try to make it as cost effective as possible. I know that for our spending, it's been much less than anticipated.

I have no reason to believe that they won't be able to live within the amount they have here.

I can't get into certain things for privacy reasons, but some of the members of the advisory committee, even though they're entitled to collect per diems, have chosen not to do that. The debates commissioner himself has already indicated that he will donate the money he receives to charity.

Ultimately, there are many ways they are trying to reduce costs, so we have no reason to believe that this will not be enough. In fact, it's likely overstated.

● (1145)

Ms. Ruby Sahota: That's good to hear.

The commissioner, the secretariat and the advisers were offered salaries comparable to what other commissioners would have.

Mr. Matthew Shea: Absolutely. There is a cost for personnel; please don't misunderstand. I'll make it clear that the debates commissioner himself is being paid but is donating that money to charity. There was no way for him to just not be paid, because of the type of position he's in. There are other staff. They have about five FTEs this fiscal year. We do anticipate that they will be spending on salary. These people are entitled to salary for the hard work they're doing. I'm more saying that the debates commissioner has gone out of his way to try to minimize those costs.

One of the reasons they outsourced their administrative support to us was that they didn't want to create their own corporate services shop when we do this for independent organizations all the time. We gave him a menu of the type of stuff we can do. We're doing almost all of that back-office support for him. My anticipation is that we will spend much less than we anticipated at PCO as well.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I just want to switch gears a little bit. We've gone through the debates commissioner quite a bit, we had him before us recently, and there's not so much that you can say because of the arm's-length relationship.

Madame Lapointe pointed out a question about Facebook. Earlier this week, Facebook put up a new edition to their user agreement about making sure that those who boost posts or have job posts don't discriminate by gender or by any other ways as to who their advertising targets are. Do you have any similar thoughts as to what can be done through Facebook and other social media platforms when it comes to political advertising or the micro-targeting that has been occurring in campaigns, local or national, so that the electorate isn't excluded from what parties are putting out in their platforms and other communications?

Hon. Karina Gould: I think the ad registry that this committee brought forward in Bill C-76 will play a very important role in that. Facebook has stated that it will have an ad registry for the pre-write and writ period. I think that's a really important measure, because Canadians will be able to see all of the advertisements that political actors are putting forward during that period. I think that is very important.

I also think you raise an interesting point with regard to micro-targeting. It's an ongoing conversation we're having. It's one that I imagine will also come up during the grand committee event that will happen in a couple of weeks about what that means in terms of different political actors using that and not having a full picture. One of the interesting things I always think about is that if you're advertising through more traditional means, whether it's on the radio, on TV or in newspapers, you are going to see all of the different political ads, because that's the one venue you have to look at it. On social media, you may see only one party's ads, for example, because maybe you're not part of the target demographic. That's certainly something that I think we need to reflect on further in terms of whether or not that fits within the spirit of our elections legislation.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we'll go to Mr. Nater.

Mr. John Nater (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister and guests, for joining us this afternoon.

I want to follow up very briefly on a response that was given to Ms. Sahota. It was mentioned that five FTEs are part of the commission. Are these indeterminate employees of the Government of Canada or are they on contract?

Mr. Matthew Shea: Just to clarify, it's a separate organization within the government, so they're all technically government employees from that perspective. The majority of them are there on short-term contracts or term employment arrangements. I believe that one they've hired is on secondment from a government department. It's a mix. There are some part-time employees who are part of that as well.

Mr. John Nater: Generally when will that employment cease?

Mr. Matthew Shea: I don't have the exact date, but it will be post-election, obviously.

A voice: March 20, 2020.

Mr. Matthew Shea: Okay: March 20.

• (1150)

Mr. John Nater: Great. Thank you for that clarification.

I was reviewing the request for proposal that was submitted earlier this week. Paragraph 4.1(c) states: "An evaluation team composed of representatives of Canada will evaluate the bids." Who will be those representatives?

Mr. Matthew Shea: That is the debates commission entirely. I'll maybe comment really quickly on the RFP. Beyond that would be inappropriate, given that there's an active RFP.

The debates commission did an information request to potential applicants for this procurement before actually posting it. Part of the reason...and I wanted it to round back when there was some talk that it would be a media consortium that wins it. Part of the goal was actually to give an opportunity for potential bidders to ask questions to try to clarify the contract to make it so that it was as accessible as possible.

The request for proposal is currently out. It doesn't close until May 30, and that's why I think it's inappropriate for me to comment further, other than to say that I know the goal is to have multiple bidders. That's always the goal when we do these types of things, because it gives us the most choices and it is the most efficient way of doing it. The actual choice, to go back to the question that's come up a few times, is entirely delegated to the debates commissioner and his team. If they ask us for advice on process, we're happy to do that, but even in the case of this contract, they have worked directly with Public Works, and not through us, for some of these steps.

Mr. John Nater: So, PCO had no input on the RFP that went out early this week.

Mr. Matthew Shea: Absolutely not.

Mr. John Nater: This was entirely through Public Works.

Section M.2, which lists some of the requirements for the media consortium or whatever we want to call it—

Hon. Karina Gould: The bidder.

Mr. John Nater: —for the proposed bidder, is rather extensive and does tend to appear, at least, to skew towards the three large media companies: CTV, CBC and Global.

I'm looking for an opinion, Minister. Would you be concerned if the only successful bidder was the consortium of CBC, CTV and Global?

Hon. Karina Gould: I don't think that it would be appropriate for me to comment on the bidding process at this time.

Mr. John Nater: Okay.

Would you have concerns if newer media or smaller media entities like APTN, print journalists, HuffPost Canada, CPAC and Maclean's were not part of the process?

Hon. Karina Gould: Again, I don't think it would be appropriate to comment, as there is an ongoing and existing RFP, but the intent, as I have stated before, is to make this as inclusive and successful as possible.

Mr. John Nater: I'm going to rephrase this. Would you be disappointed if this actually just became a media consortium debate as we've seen in previous elections?

Hon. Karina Gould: Because there's an ongoing RFP at the moment and because this is an independent process, I wouldn't want to make a comment that would prejudice either decision.

Mr. John Nater: I see that I have about a minute left. I'm just going to make a brief comment and then provide Ms. Kusie with a chance to ask a final question.

I would be concerned if we were in a situation where we spent a significant amount of money creating this commission and then saw a diversity of media opinions being left out of the actual debate process. Right or wrong, there were five debates last time—a variety of groups. There was some controversy—I'm not going to deny that—but there was a variety of debates, and I'd be exceptionally disappointed if newer media and diversity of media were not part of this process.

I have 34 seconds left, so I'll throw it to Ms. Kusie.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Sure.

With regard to litigation for the debates commission, if the debates commission is involved in litigation, will it be you instructing the lawyers or the debates commissioner himself?

Mr. Matthew Shea: We'd want to confirm the exact legalities. Normally it's the department, which would be the debates commissioner, but I think we can confirm that. I think that what we could say with confidence would be the fact that we would respect the independence of the organization and that every step would be done at arm's length as much as possible.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Okay.

Would they have the opportunity to seek outside counsel if they wished, or would they need to use lawyers who answer to the Attorney General?

Mr. Matthew Shea: I would need to get back to you on the ins and outs of that. I apologize.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Okay.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Matthew Shea: Do you know, Allen?

Mr. Allen Sutherland (Assistant Secretary to the Cabinet, Machinery of Government and Democratic Institutions, Privy Council Office): Presumably, it would depend on the nature of the litigation.

The Chair: We have several minutes left, so I'll give Mr. Graham and Mr. Christopherson, if they want, some very short time.

Mr. Graham.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham (Laurentides—Labelle, Lib.): That's fine. I don't need a lot. I just want to build on one of John Nater's points.

Would you be disappointed if a party leader declined to send a leader to a debate organized by the commission?

Hon. Karina Gould: Again, at this point in time, I think it's very clear why we put the debates commission in place, and it is specifically to address some of the unfortunate circumstances that arose in 2015. However, while 2015 was a moment where it became very clear why the process wasn't working, it's still clear that there were issues with how leaders debates came about previously. This is trying to address some of those challenges and to really state, as I've said on numerous occasions, that this is about the public interest.

I would hope that no leaders would feel like they didn't have to present themselves to Canadians if they were truly seeking to become the prime minister. I think it's a really important piece of how our democracy works and how Canadians engage with political leaders.

• (1155)

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Is there anything preventing a future government that says that this whole debates thing is just entirely too democratic from coming along and killing it?

Hon. Karina Gould: We did put in place a first step here so that we could evaluate how this process works. The idea is that the commissioner will report back on how it works, how it can be improved and how to make it a more permanent process.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you, Chair.

I'm going to take a moment to again be absolutely as crystal clear as I can possibly be on my behalf and on behalf of my caucus and party. The process left a bit to be desired. I have held the government to account as best I can—repeatedly, forcefully and legitimately, I believe. As concurred by Mr. Bittle, it's at least a point of legitimate debate.

We are where we are. The commissioner is acceptable to us and the rules of engagement are acceptable to us. We had no more input as the NDP than the Conservatives did, but we believe this is an important element of our democracy. We were not, as a country, well-served by the processes and antics, and I'm not suggesting that my party is without blame, either.

It behooves all of us to do everything we can to respect and support the debates commission, because it's an important part of our democracy. We've got the example from the U.S. where for the longest time now, it has had an independent commission that conducts its debates. The Americans fight about everything, but I haven't heard anybody suggest that there's unfairness or partisan advantage in their system and process.

My hope is that the commission be successful, that all the party leaders turn out, that Canadians get what they need from the process. I have every confidence that the next Parliament will do its due diligence in terms of holding the government and the commissioner to account for the money they spend, the decisions they make and the procedures they follow.

It would be very disheartening for me—and I'll end on this statement while watching the election unfold that I won't be involved in, at least as a candidate—as one of the debates is whether there's legitimacy around the commission as it provides an exit strategy for one of the party leaders or any of them who don't want to be held to account and be held to the kind of scrutiny that those debates will offer.

We wish the commission well. We look forward to its success. Notwithstanding and subject to some details that could arise, we have every intention of being supportive and participating. This committee's done a good job.

I have one last point. I hope there's a good analysis between what this committee proposed.... We spent a lot of time, we worked hard on our report, and it was disappointing to see the way a lot of that work was set aside by the government after it promised to do things differently.

Being where we are now, it behooves all of us to see this be successful, in my view, and I say that as a small “d” democrat, not just a large “D” democrat. There's nothing more precious than our democracy, and this is an important part of strengthening that democracy.

● (1200)

The Chair: Thank you, David. That was very eloquent, as usual.

Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): I felt the problem with previous debates was not that leaders did not want to participate, but on the contrary, leaders who did want to participate were excluded. That seems not to have come up today. Will it be the case that the leader of the Green Party will be included in the debates that are under the purview of the debates commission in the 2019 election?

Hon. Karina Gould: Ultimately, all the decisions will be made by the debates commissioner himself. However, given the criteria that was established, a party leader would have to meet two of the three.

First, being elected to the House under the party that he or she is leading, or having a member there; second, running candidates in 90% of all electoral districts; and third, having a sufficient chance to have a member elected to the House, given ongoing polling and public context.

Mr. Scott Reid: The third one is obviously the most difficult to determine, so it does raise the question, have any criteria been provided to us that will cause us to know in advance of the writ period as opposed to discovering partway through what is going to determine who gets in or who gets out?

Hon. Karina Gould: That will be a decision for the commissioner.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you.

Mr. Chair, I would request that the committee write to the debates commissioner to ask him the answer to this question. I did raise it with him when he was here in person and he seemed conscientiously seized with the thought that he ought to provide us with the response. It might be time to write to him and make that request, so we can know how he's going to interpret that criterion.

The Chair: You want to write to the debates commissioner.

Mr. David Christopherson: Write to him to ask a question.

Mr. Scott Reid: I want to ask about what he takes that third criterion to mean.

The Chair: Sure. I'll do that.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you.

The Chair: Shall vote 1, under “Leaders' Debates Commission”, carry?

LEADERS' DEBATES COMMISSION

Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$4,520,775

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

The Chair: Now that we've done the debates commission, the House of Commons, PPS and the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer, shall I report the votes in the main estimates to the House?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you very much and thank you for coming. It's great to have you again.

Hon. Karina Gould: It's always a pleasure.

The Chair: We will suspend for a few minutes while we get ready for committee business.

● (1200)

_____ (Pause) _____

● (1215)

The Chair: Welcome back to the 156th meeting of the committee. I would like to remind members we're still being televised.

There are just a couple of things on the agenda. We have Mr. Christopherson's proposed motion for a study on the Standing Orders, and also, potentially, Mr. Reid's motion. Now that we've done a study, hopefully we can finalize his motion sometime soon.

There is another committee coming in here, so we will end exactly at 1:00. I'd like to go in camera for a very minor thing right at the end, at five minutes to 1:00.

Mr. Christopherson, your motion is on the floor. You've already introduced it. I see you've submitted two documents to the committee, though, that help clarify and simplify it. It's a very large package, so this is a good summary. The floor is yours.

Mr. David Christopherson: Very good. Thank you, Chair. I appreciate that.

Just to pick up on where Ms. Sahota left off, we could be done in 10 minutes. My sense of this is it could go either of two ways. One is we're going to be done in 10 minutes, and everybody will say yes, we'll study it and give some respect to the people who did all this work. We could decide how much of a study that is and so on, once we make that decision.

If we're not going to say that, then there's a distinct possibility this discussion will go on for a period of time. It seems unreasonable for us not to give this group of colleagues the opportunity to at least be heard.

This is running parallel to another motion in the House that has similar effects. We just have to let those two paths unfold as they will. The issue for us is whether we want to study it right now. Whether we'll be done or not and how extensive our study will be are details we can deal with after the fact.

Chair, I think I ended my brief remarks last time almost on the same note, in that I'm looking to get a sense of where colleagues are. Either this is going to be real quick, and we'll decide we're going to do it and just need to talk details, or we're into a different world where.... Well, I'll be optimistic and hope we don't enter that world. There's no need to describe a world that I'm optimistic we won't enter.

Again, I would just plead—literally plead—with colleagues. There's frustration on the part of a lot of backbenchers about the continued sense of backbench involvement in decision-making being watered down. More and more power over the decades has accrued in the PMO. There have been presidents in the United States who have said publicly they would give anything to have the amount of direct power that a majority prime minister has in our system. It's understandable. I'm speaking to the leadership of all the caucuses in the House when I say that at the very least, if this safety valve is not triggered, these frustrations aren't going away. They're only going to get stronger.

I've described publicly a couple of times what I think is going to happen going forward. As the public demands democratic reform because they don't see it responding to their current needs, they're going to elect people who have a mandate to go and fix things. This is not going anywhere. It has to be dealt with. Either it's going to be dealt with by the majority of members opening their arms to change and being fair-minded, or we're going to be facing blockages and thwarted attempts to be heard. That's just going to lead to greater and more extreme actions on the part of future MPs. I don't see how it could not result in that.

Again, I want to remain optimistic. I haven't had any indication from colleagues on where we're going on this motion, either privately or publicly.

I would ask that my name be put back on the list as I relinquish the floor. I would be very interested to hear from colleagues. Again, in my view we could be out of here in a few minutes, or we're going to be wrestling with this for far more time than we ever thought.

• (1220)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Kusie, then Mr. Graham, then Madame Lapointe.

Did you have your hand up, too, Ms. Sahota?

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I did, but don't put it down yet. We'll see what everyone says. It might not be needed.

The Chair: Madam Kusie.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: I have to be very sincere and say that certainly some of my colleagues even here contributed to this study. As well, some of my Conservative caucus members who have been members of the Conservative caucus for many years and even ran for the leadership are in support of the consideration of changes such as these.

I think it would be inaccurate for me to say that there is not an interest for some of these ideas within my caucus. That would not be true. There is an interest because certainly our membership, as is clearly indicated for the membership of the NDP and the Liberals, also have an appetite for the reconsideration of—for lack of a better term—powers.

I do feel there is an interest and an appetite in the consideration of the proposed ideas within this motion, but perhaps I'll just move a friendly amendment that the motion be amended by adding the following:

provided that the Committee shall not report any recommendation to the House without the unanimous agreement of this Committee.

I know that there has been the indication previously of the importance of some of the members, if not all the members—well, some of the members, better I leave it at that—of this committee to have unanimous agreement of items such as this, so I think that this amendment is in keeping with the spirit and the genre of that desire of other members of this committee. As I mentioned, it would be inaccurate for me to say that there's not an interest within our caucus in the discussion and the exploration of these ideas.

I will move this friendly amendment.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: I'm going to go to Mr. Graham, but just before I do, could I get a one-word answer from Mr. Christopherson as to whether he accepts that as a friendly amendment?

Mr. David Christopherson: Could I hear that again, please?

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: We'll distribute them, Chair, and pardon me for not doing that previously. My apologies; that was my fault.

Mr. David Christopherson: That's okay. It's not a requirement.

The Chair: Okay, we'll go to Mr. Graham, and then we'll get back to you.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: This is just a quick comment. Ms. Kusie, I don't oppose your amendment at all. My one concern, my one request—and I say this very sincerely—is that no member obstruct any recommendation for the purpose of obstructing a recommendation, so that they're considered honestly and in good faith, so we don't have a situation where we say, yes, we're going to go on the consensus model, and then one person sits there and says, “No, no, no”, because that would be really unfortunate.

I want to make sure that we have an assurance from you on the record saying that will not be the case, that the consensus model will be sincere, and that everything will be considered. If that's the case, I'm very happy to support that amendment.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Would you like me to respond?

Perhaps I don't understand exactly what you.... I would say that, if you are making reference to the.... I guess the only word I can think of is the “spite” of an individual member to withhold something. Obviously this would require assurance from all members of the committee, not just from me.

I see no reason to spite any of these proposed changes specifically. I don't think it's a secret or unknown that I will have to stay in communication with my caucus in regard to the items discussed and the direction of the study, but as I said, there is a sincere interest that I have seen in the exploration of these ideas. If my caucus is committed to the consideration of this, as their shadow minister for democratic institutions, so am I.

•(1225)

The Chair: Okay.

On the amendment, Madame Lapointe.

[Translation]

Ms. Linda Lapointe: Do I have to talk about the amendment or can I make the comments I wanted to make?

The Chair: We are talking about the amendment.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: Very good.

I would be okay with unanimous recommendations.

[English]

The Chair: Okay.

On the amendment, Mr. Bittle.

Mr. Chris Bittle: I was in favour of it until I heard Ms. Kusie's explanation, which could have been an easy “yes, we will genuinely consider all of these proposals”, but we then got a pretzel answer.

I guess I'd like to hear from Mr. Christopherson before I make my decision on the amendment.

The Chair: Before that, though, we have Mr. Nater.

Mr. John Nater: I'll be very brief.

I think we could genuinely work on a consensus model.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Yes, I agree.

Mr. John Nater: I've spoken with Mr. Baylis on this. His suggestion in our conversation—I'm not telling tales out of school—was that we work on a consensus basis on this.

From our official opposition standpoint as a party, there's a lot of information in here that we would genuinely like to study. There are going to be elements that we may not agree with on the overall direction. Mr. Christopherson may not agree with it, the Liberals may not agree. There may be hills that we may be willing to die on and we may not be.

However, regarding the approach, I'm genuinely interested in this.

I would go one step further. I hope we can also, in parallel, finalize our second chamber study as well. I would like to see that hopefully reported to the House. There is some overlap here, but I don't want to see that study not go forward, because I think we've done some good work and research on that one as well.

The Chair: Right now, reviewing the second chamber draft report that the researcher has done is on the first Tuesday that we get back.

Ruby Sahota, did you want to speak on the amendment? You were originally on the list.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: No.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thanks, Chair.

I have two things.

One, it's always been our preference that any changes to the Standing Orders, just like election laws, would have agreement of all the parties. That's the first point. That is sort of our default position.

Two, this is new, and it potentially changes the power structure. It's not going to go easy, and it's not going to be straightforward. At this point, I would take just about anything that is not wildly unacceptable as an amendment, if we can get a unanimous consent to have this heard. To me, that's the key thing.

Those are the two points: one, the preference that any changes like this, or election laws, where we're talking about the referee's rules, should have, in an ideal situation, the support of all the parties involved, including the independents for that matter, given that they're affected by these things too.

Two, it's really important that this be heard, that it be given the light of day. As much as possible, I think we should be bending over backwards to accommodate that. Quite frankly, if that's the only amendment that it takes for us to get unanimity in sending the message that we want this to be heard and we want to provide a venue for our colleagues to express their concerns and recommendations, then by all means, I accept the friendly amendment and appreciate the sincerity with which I believe it was put forward.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you, Chair.

Mr. Christopherson, to your point, I'd like to apologize to Mr. Bittle. With regard to the spirit that my response to Mr. Graham was in, I would have felt it to be more insincere for me just to say yes. My intention was greater sincerity, if you will, in qualifying that.

Mr. Christopherson, you're right. I believe in completing the study. I believe this is how information is largely disseminated to the media and to social media. These ideas are heard, and this study will allow them to be heard. There is the possibility for these ideas to go into the public and into Canadian society, just in being heard here.

Thank you for your recognition of that.

● (1230)

The Chair: Is there any further discussion on the amendment?

(Amendment agreed to)

The Chair: Now we'll go back to the main motion.

Mr. Graham.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I obviously support this motion very strongly. I think it's very important that we go through this.

Nobody is asking us to take the entire text of the changes and approve it in bulk. It's very important for all of us to look at each item one at a time and ask whether it make sense. It's having those proper discussions without wasting time, but really considering each one properly and trying to get this thing back on time to have it adopted by the House, so that when we come back next year—hoping that most of us do—we are able to have those rules in place.

The Chair: Ms. Lapointe.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Linda Lapointe: There is a very wide range of things being proposed. As far as establishing a parallel debating chamber is concerned, we conducted a study on that. I believe we are reporting on it and that will address that aspect.

People need to come talk to us about it. For example, we are talking about the power of the Speaker and I would like to hear from witnesses on that topic. We are talking about committees. I would like to hear from people who have experienced this and might be able to relay the advantages and disadvantages.

It is one thing to do a clause-by-clause study of the motion. Personally, I need to hear people talk about different topics.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: I think we're all singing from the same page. I'm not going to say anything that might derail that. I think we're in a good place, and I hope it carries.

Thanks.

The Chair: Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid: This is a meaty motion, to put it mildly, at 19 pages. I think we have to assume that we are committing ourselves to saying that most of the remainder of the time we have before this Parliament comes to an end will be devoted to this subject. In order to make sure we don't waste any of that time, I wonder if it's possible for representatives of the various parties to chat with each other and with you, Mr. Chair, about how we're going to structure that time to make sure we use it effectively.

The Chair: I would never commit our future time. So many things come up in this committee—questions of privilege, etc. Obviously, right now it's in the forefront. Any discussions that happen would be great.

Mr. Scott Reid: It would be nice to be off and running as soon as we get back from the break week.

The Chair: Any further discussion on the motion to study this?

(Motion agreed to [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

Mr. David Christopherson: Was that unanimous?

The Chair: Yes.

We'll put that on the agenda as soon as we can.

Now we go to Mr. Reid's motion. We had a study. There are three ways we can proceed. First of all, we approved his motion, so we could just send it to the House. Second, we had some great witnesses and a lot of information. We could ask our researcher to do a report, to which we would attach the motion as a recommendation. Third, we could modify the motion. I'll just mention one small concern I had with it, and there may be more. It's a very technical motion. I think we all agree with the concept that PROC should study this and continue to study it. That's the idea of the motion.

It seemed to me that the way it was written we would have to get consent every year to have that part of PROC's mandate. It's hard enough to get consent from the House in procedures and get things done on our committee, because we're so busy. If we're going to agree it's in the committee, I would suggest that we just put it in the committee if the House agrees to that.

I'll go to Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid: Mr. Chair, if you want to remove that particular provision...the purpose of that is just to make sure that part of the standing order comes to an end when the Centre Block renovations are complete. That's the logic. In all fairness, maybe that's far in the future, and we shouldn't worry about it.

It would be a simple matter to have that removed from the Standing Orders. I think that particular provision could be excised with these. I know as chair you're not supposed to propose amendments, but if someone else wanted to suggest that amendment, I would certainly be completely open to it. We could then go and see

• (1235)

The Chair: We've already passed your motion so we can't amend it.

Mr. David Christopherson: Why not?

The Chair: We can do another one.

Mr. David Christopherson: We can move another motion.

The Chair: To follow up, I'm not sure it's good to end that mandate, because the West Block is finished but we're still commenting on things that could be changed here. They're then going to do the Confederation Building and all these other buildings. Centre Block is only the beginning. I think we should leave it to later PROCs to decide whether to get it out of their mandate. I think it's good that we're looking at the parliamentary precinct.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: You're correct in that the LTVP is a very long-term plan, and it started many years ago. West Block wasn't the first, and Centre Block won't be the last. When we finally finish going through all the buildings, it will probably be time to do the first one again.

This is an ongoing and permanent mandate to oversee the structure and function of the Hill.

Mr. Scott Reid: I take your point. I think I've already relayed the story of how, when I was a teenager, I was involved in working at an engineering firm—Clemann Large Patterson consulting engineers—when they were involved in the final stages of the renovations to the East Block, which is now due for renovations, so there you are.

The Chair: The clerk said that, if the committee is willing, he could come back next meeting with some wording.

Mr. Scott Reid: That would make sense to me.

The Chair: Okay, we'll do that.

We'll come back with an improved motion. Do you want that to be part of a report, so we get on the record everything we heard from those witnesses for future discussions, or do you just want to approve a motion and send that to the House?

Mr. Scott Reid: My inclination would be to just send the.... You know what, I'm not sure of the answer to that, because there are two things to think about here. One is that we're making a motion that would be a change to the Standing Orders. Presumably that should be kind of a stand-alone. It'd be odd to have anything else in there.

On the other hand.... Thank you for passing out the latest Hill Times. I think Rob Wright summed up really well the thing I had been struggling to say. I think it would be helpful for our committee to say this—I don't know if it would be in the same report or in a

separate report—in a way in which the House can concur in it prior to September, when they block off half the front lawn for an indefinite period of time.

What I have here is the headline “‘Appetite suppressant’ needed for Centre Block wish lists, says PSPC”. Truer words have never been spoken. I kept asking in earlier meetings who the parliamentary partners were. Well, now I know what they meant. The Senate as a whole, the House of Commons as a whole and the Library of Parliament as a whole have submitted the following items on their wish lists. Everybody says, “We would like to have these things”, and everybody says, “It would be really nice if our thing could be right there in Centre Block.” As a former Centre Block office resident, I fully understand why people would like that. However, we now know that accommodating all those things involves digging a hole in the front lawn big enough that you can literally take Centre Block and drop it in. Have a look at the map—it's actually true.

We've given them.... Even a snake that can unhinge its jaws can only eat so much. We've given them too much, and we need to get back the message, “Hey, we all need to start paring down our asks of PSPC, because they are impracticable.”

• (1240)

The Chair: What about this? We do your motion separately, hopefully very shortly in an upcoming meeting, so that your motion doesn't get derailed, and then we ask the researcher to do a report based on the witnesses we may or may not get to. That way we'd get your motion done, and it's up to the committee whether we get to the report.

Mr. Scott Reid: Yes. Because you were looking at me, you weren't in a position to see the expression on our analyst's face as we assign him that task, but—

The Chair: Could you do it again?

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Scott Reid: Maybe I could just ask our analyst.

Andre, what challenges would be involved in doing that?

Mr. Andre Barnes (Committee Researcher): The Library is here to serve the committee. There's no doubt about that.

We are in the midst of trying to fry several fish for the committee. We could find someone to write a witness summary, if that's what the committee would like. I would like to be involved in it, but I probably wouldn't have the time.

I would have some concerns, but we could get it done. If that's the will of the committee, we certainly would get it done.

Mr. Scott Reid: I don't know how to respond to that.

The Chair: That's up to you, Mr. Reid.

An hon. member: What's the downside of not including it?

Mr. Scott Reid: Everybody now knows what the problem is. That is now out in the public domain. I'm hoping our friends, the media, will take some of that material, which some of them are collecting, and say, "Here's the practical problem we face."

Mr. David Christopherson: I hear your quandary. I just looked at it and thought, "Well, what's the downside of not having the report?"

The efficient thing is to let the motion go alone. Is there anything lost? I'm not sure there is. As long as we maintain that information within our considerations, that's where it needs to be right now. It seems to me that speed is of the essence. In terms of anything anybody wants from the House, you had better get your dibs in early.

Those are just some thoughts, Scott.

Mr. Scott Reid: If the committee is agreeable, maybe the pared-down approach is the better one.

The Chair: Okay. Can you come back next meeting with some wording we can discuss?

Mr. Scott Reid: That sounds good to me.

The Chair: We'll try to get that done. As David said, anything.... This is a doable thing in the time remaining.

At our next meeting, we're looking at the parallel chambers report, and then at Mr. Christopherson's motion.

Mr. David Christopherson: Chair, if I may, do we want to start the study before we even begin the process, or anything else, and invite the delegation in to give us their presentation, so that we can understand exactly how big the project is? From there, we can make a plan of attack. Normally, we do it the other way around, but in this case, given that it's being driven by MPs, it seems to me to make sense to give them a chance to come in, be heard and make their case. Then we can decide what the process is. We are going to break it down. I can imagine some of the long discussions we're going to have. It'll be interesting, but we'll break that down piece by piece, and go through it.

We could do it ahead of time, but, again, anything that delays it.... Time is our enemy right now, so I'm constantly thinking that if we have options that allow us to get things done and moving, that is really the prime consideration.

I'm not married to that, colleagues. I just throw that out as a thought, in terms of how we might begin.

The Chair: What names were you thinking of? Mr. Baylis, obviously....

Mr. David Christopherson: I would maybe ask Mr. Baylis if he wants to bring a representative delegation of the people involved, and let him decide who that is, how many, their presentation.... Give them their day in court. Let them take as long as they want, because it's a complex report, and then outline what they hope to get from us. Then we are equipped to make some decisions: What's our time frame? How are we going to bite this off? What information do we need? Is there any research we're going to do? Can we get that under way early, so that it's ready for us?

I'm open to better ideas, Chair.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I was going to suggest that perhaps the idea would be to advise Mr. Baylis, and everyone involved with writing that motion, of the fact that we're getting the study under way, and say that they are always welcome to come to our committee and be part of the discussion. They're all part of writing it. That becomes an ongoing involvement, instead of a one-off involvement.

I think that would ensure that anybody involved in the creation of this has their opportunity all the way throughout to do it.

Mr. David Christopherson: I think that is an excellent idea, but I, for one, would probably.... As I've said, I'm one of those who contributed, but I'm not a major contributor. There are others—

● (1245)

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I did one paragraph.

Mr. David Christopherson: Yes. It was more because I'm on this committee, and I was willing to provide the vehicle.

I hear what you're saying. That could flow from what we hear. Then we can decide not only what we're going to do, but who's going to be involved in doing it.

It's such a disparate subject, and so vast. You've got multiple parties, and we have unanimity—we're actually there. If we can just hold that together, and give them a chance to come in and make their pitch as to what they hope to see, and what they realistically hope we can do in the remainder of this Parliament, we can be seized of that. If one of the things we want to talk about is who is part of this, the way we did with some other files we've had, I'd be open to that, at that time.

I still think that, right now, it makes sense to bring them in as early as possible. There is some media interest. This is what they want more than anything—a chance to get these ideas out there. If they did have hope that we were going to conclude it in this Parliament, let's hear that. Some of them are veterans who understand what's entailed in the process of trying to get it done. They may offer us some ideas that we otherwise wouldn't think of, as we set about our work plan.

Again, with the greatest of respect—and I'm not married to the idea—it still seems to make sense to me that our first step, right now, would be to invite them to come in, and give them as much time as they need to make their pitch. From there, we're well equipped to set out our work plan, and the objectives we think we can achieve, in the time available.

The Chair: To make this a little more concrete, I'll say that on the 30th we could ask Mr. Baylis and whoever he'd like to bring with him to come to committee. Do you have thoughts on that?

Mr. David Christopherson: The only thing different from our usual rules, Chair, is that I would suggest we give them the courtesy of as much time as they want to make a fulsome and complete presentation, respecting the amount of work that they've put into it.

The Chair: Yes, it's a bit longer than 10 minutes would cover. As Mr. Reid said, this is very complex. There are all sorts of issues, and I'm sure not everyone is going to agree on everything, so we'll do that.

The meeting is suspended.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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