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Monday, September 18, 2006

—

Speaker: The Honourable Peter Milliken

CONTENTS

(Table of Contents appears at back of this issue.)

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Monday, September 18, 2006

The House met at 11:05 a.m.

Prayers

• (1105)

[*Translation*]

VACANCY

REPENTIGNY

The Speaker: It is my duty to inform this House that a vacancy has occurred in the House of Commons for the electoral district of Repentigny, in the province of Quebec, by reason of the death of our hon. colleague, Mr. Benoît Sauvageau.

[*English*]

Pursuant to subsection 28(1) of the Parliament of Canada Act I have addressed on Tuesday, September 5, 2006, a warrant to the Chief Electoral Officer for the issue of a writ for the election of a member to fill the vacancy.

* * *

[*Translation*]

MESSAGE FROM THE SENATE

The Speaker: I have the honour to inform the House that a message has been received from the Senate informing this House that the Senate has passed the following public bill to which the concurrence of this House is desired:

[*English*]

Bill S-202, an act to repeal legislation that has not come into force within ten years of receiving royal assent.

It being 11:05 a.m., the House will now proceed to the consideration of private members' business as listed on today's Order Paper.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

[*English*]

FOOD AND DRUGS ACT

Mr. Tom Wappel (Scarborough Southwest, Lib.) moved that Bill C-283, An Act to amend the Food and Drugs Act (food labelling), be read the second time and referred to a committee.

He said: Mr. Speaker, since 1989, I have been working to provide consumers with information from which they can make more informed food choices. Today I will go to bat again for Canadian consumers by proposing modest but sorely needed measures to ensure they have important health-related information about many of the processed and restaurant foods we eat every day in this country.

Diet-related disease is steadily straining our health care services and, if unchecked, will create staggering demands on our future capacity to fund public health care and become an unnecessary drag on our economic growth which also limits our capacity to finance health care.

The need to better address preventable chronic, non-communicable diseases has been acknowledged in three consecutive Liberal speeches from the throne. The Liberal, Conservative and NDP provincial governments all agreed with the federal government on the need to tackle diet-related and other chronic diseases in the communiqué of the September 2004 first ministers conference on health care and four recent communiqués of the federal-provincial-territorial ministers of health.

Diet-related disease is an urgent public health problem in this country. Heart disease, stroke, certain forms of cancer, diabetes, osteoporosis and dental health all have links to diet that are well recognized by scientists. For instance, the diet-related cases of cardiovascular disease, diabetes and certain forms of cancer costs the Canadian economy \$6.6 billion annually due to health care costs and lost productivity.

Diet-related risk factors for disease shorten the average Canadian's healthy life expectancy by nearly five years and prematurely ends the lives of tens of thousands of Canadians every year, to say nothing of the pain and suffering these preventable diseases inflict upon victims and their families.

These days, precious few Canadians grow, prepare or even cook their own food any more. It is unthinkable that we should be eating food without knowing its contents. When the Liberal Party formed government we promulgated mandatory nutrition labelling regulations for most prepackaged foods, which the media dubbed the gold standard, globally. However when it comes to ingredient information on processed food and nutrition information on labels of fresh cut meat and restaurant menus, Canadian law and industry practices are little better than any other country and much worse than many.

Private Members' Business

Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada estimates that those new labels that were passed will reap \$5 billion in benefits to the economy as a whole from reduced health care costs and increased productivity over the next two decades. These benefits are 20 times the cost to the industry of modifying food labels. Canadians should not pass up an opportunity to save the health care system more than \$2 billion over the next two decades.

Bill C-238 can be implemented even less expensively than the new nutrition labelling regulations because it only requires nutrition information for a small number of national chain restaurants that typically have standardized menus. Many chains have already done the analysis. Plus, my bill permits meat packers to use common, government-approved nutrition databases and it only requires readily available ingredient composition data on processed food labels.

Nearly 30 groups, collectively representing over two million Canadians, support the measures in the bill. In the past two years, support for one or more of the three components of Bill C-283 has been articulated in expert reports published by the Canadian population health initiative of the Canadian Institute for Health Information; two reports of the U.S. Institute of Medicine, an expert body upon which Health Canada often relies for scientific advice; the chief medical officer of health for Ontario; a call for action by the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada; an editorial in the *Canadian Journal of Public Health* of the Canadian Public Health Association; an advocacy statement of the British Columbia Healthy Living Alliance; and a report commissioned by the British Columbia Cancer Agency and the Canadian Cancer Society of British Columbia and Yukon.

• (1110)

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency initiated consultations on a proposal to establish a watered down form of my proposal requiring percentage ingredient disclosures on products that, for instance, promote blueberry pancakes which, in fact, contain little or no blueberries. The fact that the CFIA abruptly discontinued consultations on even that modest proposal illustrates the need for Parliament to step in.

By introducing Bill C-283 I am seeking to achieve three objectives: first, to close a loophole in the new nutrition labelling regulations for packers of fresh meat, poultry and seafood; second, to extend a simplified nutrition disclosure requirement to large chain restaurant menus and menu boards; and third, add a requirement that multi-ingredient processed foods disclose the amount of key ingredients, especially for ingredients that are the subject of marketing claims or for ingredients that are known by the scientific community to have protective or causative effects on major disease risks. In short, it facilitates informed purchasing decisions, not uninformed or increasingly ill-informed food purchases.

Statistics Canada says that Canadians spend about 30% of their food budgets on restaurant meals. McDonald's restaurants alone claim to serve an average of three million Canadians every day. Plainly, it is no longer an occasional treat to eat at restaurants but rather a central feature of daily life in Canada and yet we rarely see any nutrition information on restaurant menus or menu boards.

It became clear to me and some of my colleagues that the costs of even chemical analysis would be less than a penny on the price of

enough food to feed a family of four in a typical faster food restaurants and cheaper by half to calculate such information from existing databases.

Some industry efforts, though encouraging, are not really effective, whether by accident or design. For instance, McDonald's restaurants now provide nutrition information on the back or the underside of tray liners. Imagine, on the back or the underside, for heaven's sake, instead of on the menu boards where the information could actually be used by consumers before they make their purchases, or even on the front of the liner so they could read about what they are eating to help them make more informed choices for their next meal.

Some restaurant owners made the outlandish argument that menus would have to be modified to accommodate every conceivable special order that a consumer could make, such as extra sauce, pickles on the side, with or without cheese, shared orders, et cetera. However, menus at Subway, White Spot and Extreme Pizza, companies that emphasize made to order foods, found a way to report at least some useful nutritional information to consumers, despite the alleged difficulties. Without such information, even trained nutritionists consistently err in estimating calorie counts from physical appearance only.

My bill also proposes to mandate that manufacturers of processed foods show on labels the percentage by weight of key ingredients. This information will help consumers choose more nutritious products, say, products with more fruits or less added sugars. Requiring this information will also help protect consumers against deceptive ingredient claims by unscrupulous manufacturers that tout the presence of appealing ingredients, like vegetables or whole grains, but actually put very little of those ingredients in the product.

Percentage ingredient labelling rules are in effect in Thailand, the European Union, New Zealand and Australia. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency acknowledged the need to establish percentage ingredient labelling requirements. However the CFIA's now dormant proposal leaves open many avenues for consumer deception about ingredient composition and fails to require disclosures that would effectively aid consumers in selecting more nutritious products. My bill does not suffer from the same defects.

Private Members' Business

•(1115)

Health Canada and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada have already done a thorough job of demonstrating the need for nutrition labelling on prepackaged foods, in the regulatory impact analysis that accompanied the amendments to the food and drug regulations promulgated in January 2003. An exemption for fresh meat, poultry and seafood appears to have been granted in response to claims by several industry associations in 2000 that it would take four to five years to generate nationally representative nutrition data tables for various cuts of meat and species of seafood.

For years, Health Canada and various Canadian industry associations have published such data. Six years have passed. Bill C-283 would provide all parties yet another two years to refine their data in any ways necessary. Without such nutrition information, how many Canadians would know that a three ounce serving of trimmed, broiled top round beef steak has only about one gram of saturated fat while a three ounce serving of trimmed, broiled shoulder blade pork steak has four grams of saturated fat, a full four ounce difference in saturated fat content between two cuts of meat the same size, a difference that is not evident from visual inspection or even taste?

The House may recall that in a previous Parliament, a Conservative member who is now a minister of the Crown, the Minister of Veterans Affairs, spoke very favourably about an earlier version of this bill. He said:

What the member is attempting to do would be very difficult to argue against...We are concerned with the health of Canadians. They have a right to know what they are eating. It would serve the purposes of a lot of people in Canada if we could find a way to adopt this legislation. Details have to be fleshed out in committee. We support moving Bill C-398 on to the next logical step.

I hope all members of the Conservative government will demonstrate the same good sense as that hon. member. I hope members will not prevent Canadians from getting the vital nutrition information they sorely need to make healthy food choices for their families and themselves.

The scientific basis for requiring that this information be provided to consumers is tried and true. The scientific consensus is that Canadians should consume more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes and beans, and less sodium, added sugar, saturated and trans fat and, for most of us, fewer calories.

By now, I think and hope, the food industry has seen the writing on the wall. I urge my friends on both sides of the House to ensure that this writing ends up where it should be and where it can do the most good: on the food labels and the menu boards. I urge them to support this bill by sending it to the health committee for in depth study with a view to improving the bill for the benefit of all Canadians.

•(1120)

Mr. Steven Fletcher (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Health, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I wonder if the member could explain how a bill of this nature could be enforced. There are jurisdictional issues and inspection issues and there is a very large cost associated with that type of enforcement. I wonder if the member could comment on this aspect of the bill.

Mr. Tom Wappel: Mr. Speaker, the Canadian government is charged with the responsibility of ensuring the health of Canadians.

There are many ways in which the health of Canadians is monitored and services are delivered to Canadians. Many of them of course involve regulations that need to be enforced. There are already labels for prepackaged foods and there are serious penalties for breaching these labels. However, clearly what occurs many times is that consumers themselves will notify the appropriate government agency if they happen to notice that something is not properly labelled or if information is missing. Inspectors will then take a look at that. As with the Income Tax Act, where we do not have enough people to examine everybody's income tax return, there are spot checks, spot audits and spot examinations. This is how it works.

As for the claim that this would be terribly, terribly expensive, that is simply not true. Already we have menu boards, so instead of a large picture of a "big mac" there could be a smaller picture of a big mac, and right beside the price we could put "700 calories as shown". That is all that needs to be done. This does not involve a lot of costs, particularly for chain restaurants that do not have a lot of changeover in their menus. There is some nuance in the bill to allow for those restaurants that do have some changeover.

Any of these problems can also be examined in depth in committee by bringing expert witnesses before committee to answer these questions.

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to congratulate the member for raising this issue that is near and dear to my heart as well.

There are some elements of the right to know, to make informed decisions. There is the obligation to inform. There is also the obligation to be correct in that disclosure, which apparently is not the case.

Could the member advise the House if he is aware of exactly who is against this legislation and why?

Mr. Tom Wappel: Mr. Speaker, there are two ways of looking at it. It is almost impossible to be against giving consumers more information. That is like being against motherhood. I guess the objection would be to the method by which I am attempting to deliver that information. As I said in my speech, the objection from the restaurant industry is that restaurants cannot possibly think of all the permutations and combinations that a customer might order on a pizza, for example, or on a Harvey's hamburger, as it is touted that we can have our hamburger the way we like it.

The answer is that the idea is not to make it difficult for people to sell food to consumers or difficult for consumers to eat it. We would simply say that a standard hamburger is 400 calories and add-ons are extra. Then it should be obvious to consumers that if they buy a hamburger with a bun it is 400 calories, and if the consumer wants to put a slice of cheese on it, there are going to be more calories. At least the consumer would have some idea. For supersized fries, it would be 700 or 800 calories, with three or four grams of fat or whatever the case may be.

Private Members' Business

This would be just enough to give consumers the information they need. The two main arguments are that it is impossible to do, which is nonsense, and second, that it is too costly. All of the studies have shown that it is not too costly. Clearly, the prepackaged nutritional labelling regulations that came into force in 2003 are in effect and have not bankrupted the industry or led to skyrocketing food costs.

• (1125)

Mr. Steven Fletcher (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Health, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are here today to discuss a private member's bill, Bill C-283. Bill C-283 proposes amendments to the Food and Drugs Act that would make nutrition labelling mandatory on raw single ingredient meat, meat byproducts, poultry meat, poultry meat byproducts, and marine and freshwater animal products. Products would be exempted if the sales are below a certain amount, provided the label contains no nutrition or health claims. For simplicity, let me refer to these products as raw single ingredient animal products.

Bill C-283 would also require that for foods sold for immediate consumption, information on calories, the amounts of sodium and the sum of saturated and trans fats per serving be provided on the printed menu. If the menu options are set out only on a menu board, only the number of calories would have to be indicated on the board, and the sodium and fat nutrition information would have to be provided to customers upon request. When food is sold in two or more flavours or in bulk or buffet formats, the nutrition information would be required to appear beside the name of the food on the receptacle from which the product is sold in bulk or buffet format, beside the name of each flavour or beside the general name of the food as appropriate.

I note that Bill C-283 proposes to require the same nutrition information for raw single ingredient animal products that is required for prepackaged foods under the regulations published by Health Canada in January 2003, which came into effect in December of 2005. These regulations exempt raw single ingredient unground meats, meat byproducts, poultry meats, poultry meat byproducts, and marine and freshwater animal products from carrying a nutrition facts table unless nutrition or health claims are made for them.

These exemptions were included because of the lack of representative data on the nutrition composition for these products that takes into account the sources of variability, such as season, species, feed or trim level. Lack of such data presents a risk of mandating the provision of inaccurate information to consumers.

Since nutrition labelling is mandated on comparable products that are prepared in processing plants, such as raw seasoned meats, it is expected that major cuts of raw single ingredient meat and poultry meat that are packaged in plants will be voluntarily labelled if satisfactory data is available.

In regard to the proposal in Bill C-283 to require certain nutrition information on printed menus, menu boards and adjacent to food for immediate consumption sold in bulk or buffet formats, I note that the Canadian Restaurant and Foodservices Association recently developed voluntary guidelines for providing nutrition information to consumers. This voluntary program will provide consumers with nutrient values that are consistent with the core nutritional label

information required for packaged foods and will include calories, fats, such as saturated and trans fats and so on, cholesterol, sodium, carbohydrates, including fibres and sugars, and protein content of standard menu items.

Since the February 2005 launch of the nutrition information program, more than 25 of the major restaurant chains, representing about 40% of all chain establishments, have committed to implementing these guidelines. Many of these chains have already completed this process and are already providing nutritional information to their customers. The guidelines state that nutrition information be made readily available to restaurant consumers through in-store brochures or pamphlets and that the availability of the nutrition brochure will be predominantly displayed on menus, menu boards and such vehicles as takeout and home delivery packages.

• (1130)

In general, the chains that are making progress in implementing the voluntary guidelines are the larger firms who have some access to the expertise required to do so and these appear to be the target of Bill C-283.

The voluntary program has the potential to provide consumers with the important nutritional information without the need for new legislation which would be expensive and burdensome to implement. The voluntary guidelines may provide consumers with information that goes beyond the requirements of Bill C-283 while avoiding the need for complex and costly governmental regulatory and enforcement programs. It would therefore seem prudent to allow the voluntary program time to work and to assess its effectiveness.

Bill C-283 proposes to exempt persons whose establishments or vending machine business has a total revenue of less than \$10 million from the sale of food including income from all subsidiaries and franchises. The intention may be that the bill would only apply to those chains with standardized menus and highly controlled production facilities, since these are the minimal conditions for providing reliable nutritional information. However, the bill would also apply to hotel chains, many of which have independent restaurants with their own menus and with more variable conditions of production.

A further concern is the fact that at present restaurants and food service establishments typically fall under provincial jurisdiction and inspection is the responsibility of the provinces. Consequently, there would be a need for consultation with the provinces and territories. Bill C-283 would create heavy additional inspection requirements either for the provinces, if they agree to undertake the work, or for the federal inspectors and laboratories if they do not. No federal inspection system currently exists at the restaurant level which represents thousands of establishments across Canada.

Finally, Bill C-283 contains exemptions based on the dollar volume of sales. It proposes exempting from its requirements for raw single ingredient meat, poultry, or marine and freshwater animal products, persons with gross annual revenue of less than \$500,000 from the sale of the same food, provided no nutrition or health claims are made for the product. It also proposes to exempt from its requirements food sold for immediate consumption by persons whose establishment or vending machine business has a total annual revenue of less than \$10 million from the sale of food including income from all subsidiaries and franchises. This introduces an economic aspect totally absent from the Food and Drugs Act which would need to be assessed.

The government recognizes the importance of nutritional labelling in assisting Canadians to make healthy and informed choices about the foods they eat. This is why Health Canada introduced improved nutritional labelling regulations which became mandatory on most prepackaged foods in December 2005.

Health Canada is also currently working with industry and other stakeholders to find practical ways to develop reliable nutritional information for consumers about specific meat cuts and to determine the best means to assist consumers in making informed choices when eating away from home.

The government remains committed to helping Canadians continue to maintain and improve their health. I commend the intent of Bill C-283 in this regard; however, a number of initiatives are already underway which address the intent of Bill C-283 as I have already described. These initiatives should be allowed to bear fruit without the need of potentially costly and burdensome legislated requirements. Those are my remarks and I look forward to continue this very interesting debate.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christiane Gagnon (Québec, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I rise today as the Bloc Québécois health critic to address this important issue .

The hon. member for Scarborough Southwest is introducing Bill C-283, An Act to amend the Food and Drugs Act (food labelling). The health of Canadians is important to him. He has been working on this for 10 years now. His efforts have been fruitful since Health Canada announced the recommendations on nutritional labelling in 2000. A number of these recommendations were based on his studies and bills he introduced in this House.

Since December 12, 2005, we have been able to read nutritional information to make more informed decisions about the food we eat. There are now tables that list 13 nutrients. This informs the consumer on the amount of calories, fat, saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol, sodium, carbohydrates, fibre, sugar, protein, vitamin A, vitamin C, calcium and iron in their food. This additional

Private Members' Business

information can now be found on every product we buy. *Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating*, gives us supplemental information on the best nutritional value available.

This bill raises a number of questions. We support the principle behind it, which is to better inform consumers about what they are eating and to go beyond that.

However, the bill before us contains measures that raise some questions. It seeks to subject meats, poultry and raw seafood to current labelling standards. It requires restaurants and food services to post selected nutritional information. It also makes it mandatory to list the percentage of each ingredient in a food, particularly any fruits, vegetables or grains emphasized on the packaging. We know that food consumption habits change: people are eating in restaurants and buying variety packs more often.

This bill is not new; this is the third time it has been introduced. In March 2004, it was referred to committee, and my colleague from Hochelaga—who was then the health critic—led the adoption of a motion to hold a round table on the bill so that industry and health experts could discuss it and offer some recommendations. However, the 2004 election prevented the consultation from taking place, so we got no recommendations and no report. This is why we support the bill. It would enable us to get a lot more information to help clarify the elements targeted by this bill.

As you know, the Bloc Québécois has always demanded greater transparency in food labelling. On the basis of the principle that consumers have the right to know what they are buying, I cannot oppose a bill that would enable them to better manage their food choices.

I would like to point out, however, that certain questions remain regarding some of the details and provisions of this bill. This remains an important issue, nonetheless, which is why I hope this bill will pass the second reading stage and be referred to the Standing Committee on Health. That committee will then be in a position to examine the provisions of the bill more carefully and recommend the appropriate amendments.

Given the federal government's constitutional responsibilities, the committee must give this bill priority, in order to ensure that we have all the necessary information about the issues in question.

The committee also looks at the whole issue of obesity and therefore nutrition. Accordingly, this bill could play a role in this desire to provide the public with better nourishment and more information about the quality of the food we eat.

Private Members' Business

● (1135)

I will now review each of the provisions contained in this bill and express some reservations about them. These issues could, of course, be examined more closely in committee.

First, as for the general intent of the bill, I would remind the House how important it is to fight against unhealthy eating. Food labeling cannot change everything and the fight against unhealthy eating must be part of a more comprehensive approach focussing on education. As we all know, however, nutrition education is a matter of provincial and territorial jurisdiction.

Giving consumers more information certainly could not hurt, but it is difficult to gauge the exact impact of such a measure. Furthermore, the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada believes firmly in the effectiveness of such a measure, as demonstrated by its "Health Check" campaign, through which foods that meet certain criteria are identified with a special symbol.

Questions remain regarding the application of proposed regulations on meat, poultry and raw seafood. I wonder whether it is possible to measure the nutritional value of each piece. Many factors are at play, such as how the animal is fed, the cut, and fat content, among others.

Yes, it would be hard to ask every butcher to calculate the nutritional value of every cut of meat being prepared. However, the statistics already exist and certainly it would be possible to find a happy medium without requiring the butcher to conduct in-depth analyses.

The purpose of all this is to give the consumer more information and I am convinced that is possible. This will certainly be discussed in committee.

The provision in this bill requiring that the percentage of ingredients used in food products be indicated does not seem an insurmountable problem. However, at the round table meeting, industry representatives said they are worried that such a measure will only open the door to violating intellectual property. Further consideration must be given to see what provisions could be implemented to respond to their concerns. Other countries have already passed such legislation, namely Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Thailand and the nations of the European Union. We could look at their legislation and see how it could apply here and how their industry sectors have dealt with the new legislation in effect there.

Finally, perhaps the most controversial measure in this bill is requiring restaurants and food services to post nutritional information on their menus.

In this regard, I would like to point out that voluntary disclosure measures have never worked very well. The case of tobacco shows us that industry is always capable of adapting to such measures even if they opposed them at the outset.

However, we must also question whether or not certain restaurants will be able to comply with such regulations. Can the corner snack bar or the trendy restaurant that changes its menu every day implement these measures?

In this regard, we must not ignore the interests of restaurant owners. Once again, I am anxious to find out how our committee can make some improvements.

We know that poor nutrition is a far-reaching problem that exerts tremendous pressure on the Quebec and Canadian health care systems. Thus, it is important to determine how more comprehensive labelling rules could help fight the problem of poor nutrition.

Before closing, and given the member's knowledge of nutritional labelling, I would also like to point out that it would have been important for this member to take one more issue into account in this bill. That is the issue of mandatory labelling for GMOs, a policy not yet adopted by Canada. The committee should also study what could be done about GMO labelling.

Along the same lines, consumers are not always able to identify products containing real milk products. The committee should examine this aspect as well.

● (1140)

[English]

Ms. Penny Priddy (Surrey North, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise to support Bill C-283 passing at second reading and moving to committee, and I have five points that I would like to make about it.

First, in today's environment many people are more concerned about what they put into their bodies. In many ways it is a more educated consumer group, although not in large numbers perhaps. However, a growing consumer group is concerned about the food it eats. More important, this group is concerned about what its children and families eat. For that reason we have to move in this direction. Although there has been some progress, the public is asking for more.

My second point is about health. As a result of the uncontrolled environment in which we live, we see more illnesses, some of which are triggered by food. In this case I think it truly can be a matter of life and death. We have seen the kinds of allergies that have developed. Everybody knows about peanuts. Does everybody think to ask whether foods are cooked in peanut oil? We are seeing food allergies that we would not have seen 10 years ago because our environment is changing.

As others have said, we spend about 30% of our food dollars on meals outside of our homes. We do not know what is in that food, but we need to have that opportunity. We need to be very conscious of it, as we are with the foods we bring into our homes. The bill may raise awareness about that.

For instance, my colleague from Winnipeg Centre has spoken very articulately about the effect of trans fats on health. We see a little more voluntary disclosure of trans fats on packages. However, when people eat out, they want to know if there are trans fats in the food. For health reasons, for personal reasons or for preventative reasons, they may choose not to eat that particular food.

It is the same thing with sodium. I will not repeat all the diseases that my colleague from Scarborough Southwest raised. With the increasing number of young people with high blood pressure, they need to know the amount of sodium in the products they eat both at home and outside it.

The third point is we have a right to know what food we are putting in our bodies and what we are feeding our families. It is not a privilege; it is a right. While there may be parts of the bill we need to debate and while there may be things that need to be changed, I am more than happy to move it to committee in order to help us have an exchange of ideas. Those diseases, particularly diabetes and high blood pressure of which we see more and more in younger people, reflect the need to be very conscious of what we eat when we are out. We know that children and teenagers are eating out a lot. Just the other day a physician told me that a 12-year-old had been diagnosed a type 2 diabetes. We know the effect of some of those foods.

The fourth point is education. We need more consumer education about this. We need to find clear, easy ways to do that, bearing in mind that not everybody has the same literacy rate. We need to have good consumer education.

My last point is poverty. The legislation will not affect many people because they cannot afford to make the healthy choices of fruits and grains, choices that other people can make. These people will continue to go to fast food restaurants because the food is less expensive. These foods are high in carbohydrates and other ingredients, but that is all they can afford. This will not address that in the same way.

• (1145)

In review, the issues are the current environment, health, rights, education and poverty. I am happy to pass this on to the health committee. We can review the legislation from other countries and look at how it has been implemented. I agree that voluntary agreement on almost any issue does not always have a success rate as high as we might like it to be. All these concerns can be addressed by the panel.

• (1150)

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I again want to congratulate the hon. member for yet again raising the bill. He has championed the bill for number of years. He has done it in a way in which he presents to the House an important national priority, a health priority.

I would like to quote the member from his speech. He says, "Diet-related disease is an urgent public health problem in this country. Heart disease, stroke, certain forms of cancer, diabetes, osteoporosis and dental health all have links to diet that are well recognized by scientists. For instance, the diet-related cases of cardiovascular disease, diabetes and certain forms of cancer cost the Canadian economy \$6.6 billion annually, due to health care costs and lost productivity. Diet-related risk factors for disease shorten the average Canadian's healthy life expectancy by nearly five years, and prematurely ends the lives of tens of thousands of Canadians every year—to say nothing of the pain, and suffering these preventable diseases inflict on victims and their families".

Private Members' Business

This is an important health issue and I believe it is a national priority.

I want to quote from the *American Journal of Public Health*, September 2006. The article is entitled "Attacking the obesity epidemic". The first paragraph states:

Sixty-four percent of American adults are either overweight or obese, and the obesity epidemic shows few signs of weakening. Although the precise number of deaths attributable to obesity is difficult to estimate, obesity is clearly a major cause of preventable death. Not surprisingly, improving the healthfulness of American diet has become a national health priority.

It is a national priority in the United States. Apparently it is not a national priority in Canada.

I listened intently to the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Health. He spent most of his time reading to us some of the elements of the bill. I was hoping there would be some cognitive words about the health value.

I have often thought that the measure of success of a country is not an economic measure. It is a measure of the health and the well-being of its people.

How is it that we do not recognize this as a national priority? We have ample evidence that producers of the products, which would require such labelling, have not been fully truthful with consumers or have not provided any information, have not recognized their obligation to fully inform.

Canadians have a right to know what they are consuming. I believe it should relate to all products which are consumed. As a matter of fact, right now I think beverage alcohol is the only consumer product that can harm one if misused, but does not warn one of that fact. I hope we will have an opportunity to debate that bill later on in this Parliament.

However, this is along the same lines. I know what the producers will say, that it is too expensive to do this or that they cannot do it because a pizza could have two servings of pepperoni and how would they calculate these things.

I thought the member was very cogent to suggest that even if we deal with something as basic as a hamburger, we know what the base product is. It is a hamburger and here are the number of calories in it.

Today Canadians are becoming more cognitive about their nutrition. However, when we look at the figures, it is very clear that Canadians do not know how much they can hurt themselves even if they are generally aware. There has to be a caution. We are talking about the health and the well-being of Canadians.

Let me go back to the report in the *American Journal of Public Health* on attacking the obesity epidemic. I thought the conclusions that were reached were very relevant to this debate as well.

• (1155)

It says:

As a response to the increased prevalence of overweight and obesity, which has been linked with the greater consumption of foods prepared outside the home, legislation has been proposed at both federal and state levels that would require the provision of nutritional information for restaurant food items.

Private Members' Business

The study shows that for a number of items consumers vastly underestimated the calorie levels, fat, saturated fat and sodium levels. On average, less helpful items were underestimated by more than 600 calories. With just one restaurant meal per week, an extra 30,000 calories a year would be added to a person's diet. These unaccounted calories could cause weight gain of approximately nine pounds annually. Holding all other factors constant, over several years the degree of underestimation could cause significant weight gain. Given substantial differences between expected and objective values, these findings indicate that inclusion of nutritional information on menus offers information that would be beneficial to consumers.

In this research study just this month the United States has clearly shown that this is a health issue. It is a health issue which does touch on the health and well-being of Canadians, on their personal health, our health care costs and Canadians' productivity, as the member laid out so eloquently in this speech.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Health, for some odd reason, seems to think that we have a voluntary program and that it is working. It is not working. This issue has been on the table before Parliament for years. Why is it that the parliamentary secretary has to talk on a partisan basis as to how we keep items off the agenda which are not our own items when he should be representing the wisdom of Health Canada? What is Health Canada saying about this? I did not hear references to how Health Canada responded to the suggestion that there should be nutritional labelling.

If it is not a matter of protecting and promoting the health and well-being of Canadians, then the bill should not be here, but that is clearly not the case. It is about time that Parliament looked objectively at the facts with regard to issues like this which affect the health and well-being of Canadians. Now is the time for action. This bill should pass at second reading. I hope it will go to committee in order that informed witnesses can make their arguments on all sides. It is important.

It is not just enough that the parliamentary secretary should thank us for bringing it up and that he will keep it in mind. The parliamentary secretary should have said, "Let us have a look at this. There is some good evidence here. There is also some good argument on the other side. We are prepared to send it to committee, to debate it and to hear from witnesses so that Parliament can make informed decisions on the health and well-being of Canadians".

Mr. Rob Merrifield (Yellowhead, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is a privilege for me to speak to the bill from my colleague from Scarborough Southwest, the member who has brought the bill before the House. He has actually had the bill in committee before and it has been discussed many times. I do not think anyone in the chamber would argue with the intent of the bill, that individuals in Canada should be able to have the information they need.

Before I get into my deliberations, I must take exception to my hon. colleague who just spoke. The member said that the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Health made partisan comments in his speech. I do not believe the parliamentary secretary's comments were partisan at all. I would suggest that if my hon. colleague really intended to do something about this issue, he was in a majority government for 13 years and could have

actually dealt with the issue of labelling far sooner than by way of a private member's bill. I find it rich that we got those comments from my hon. colleague across the way.

Let us talk about the actual private member's bill that is before us as it flows into what the health committee is doing at the present time. The committee is involved in a study on childhood obesity. We understand from StatsCanada that 26% of the children across this country are obese or overweight. This is reflected not only in our children but also in our adults. We have a very serious problem in this country. It is an epidemic that we have to address.

The argument is not with the intent of the bill. The argument might be whether this is the right vehicle. Is the problem in society that Canadians do not know what they are eating, or is the problem that they are choosing to eat the wrong things? Canadians know that they should move away from their computers and television sets and be more physically active and eat healthier diets. Is the issue a matter of knowledge or a matter of choice and making the wrong choices?

I like the idea of this private member's bill for the aspect that it certainly allows members the opportunity to raise awareness of the issue. That is a very positive thing. We are going to continue that in the health committee as we address childhood obesity. The committee will be hearing witnesses from across the country and discerning some of the blocks that can be moved with respect to what we can do at the federal level to address the obesity problem.

Many of us in the chamber are very concerned about the health care system. The baby boomers are getting into their older years and they are starting to consume a tremendous number of health care dollars. We realize the pressure they will put on our health care system will be significant over the next 30 years. The pressure really has not started yet. It will start within the next decade and will intensify toward 2040-41. Then the pressure will not be relieved, but only will slow down.

If obese children start having heart and stroke disease, cancer and diabetic problems they will be hitting the health care system at the same time. Even from a demographic perspective we have to address obesity in our country as aggressively as we possibly can. We need to raise awareness and let the population understand the battle that we are in so that Canadians can discern for themselves and as a nation what can be done collectively to address our health care problems.

Many lives can be saved by addressing the problem. Canadians can live healthier lives. The health care system can be saved a tremendous amount of money as the population takes responsibility.

We are arguing whether this bill is the right way to proceed. Do we have to legislate every part of our society so that people understand that they are eating the right foods? One of the problems I have with this bill is the labelling aspect. If a label is not accurate, then it is a misleading label.

This comes from my agricultural side. A food item has a certain molecular composition of fats. For example, if a french fry is fried in palm oil, it is 50% saturated fat. If a french fry is fried in soybean oil, it is 20% saturated fat. If it is fried in canola oil, it is 7% saturated fat. These are the kinds of things that change the molecular composition of the fat content of a french fry.

The genetics of an animal will also change the amount of fat that is in a certain ingredient. A good example would be certain cuts of beef. The amount of feed or the type of feed that the animal was fed and the age of the animal impact on the amount of calories in the product that an individual consumes.

• (1200)

We have to give accurate information. If we do not give accurate information, then we would be providing misleading information. I suggest that many things in this bill would lead to misleading and clumsy information. If the bill goes to committee, we will address it as aggressively as possible. At the present time, I believe that legislating this sort of thing is not the direction in which we need to go. We need to inform the population about how to address obesity. This is the direction I applaud and I will push for this as aggressively as I possibly can. I do not believe this is the vehicle we should be using at the present time.

The Deputy Speaker: The time provided for the consideration of private members' business has now expired and the order is dropped to the bottom of the order of precedence on the order paper.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

• (1205)

[*English*]

CANADA ELECTIONS ACT

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC) moved that Bill C-16, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

He said: Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak to Bill C-16, fixed date elections. I am also pleased to be standing here in my capacity as Minister for Democratic Reform. It is something that very much interests me and I am delighted to hold this particular portfolio.

I am absolutely convinced, since going back to my days at Queen's University where I studied the parliamentary system and the different legislatures around the world, that the British parliamentary system as adapted by Canada is the best system in the world. It has a tradition that goes back centuries. Some legislatures can point to a history of years and in some cases even decades. We can go back centuries of the British parliamentary system having provided effective, secure and stable government for people around the world. I believe we are very lucky to have it. However we have adapted it to ourselves and that is what is important. It is important to realize that no system, not even the best system in the world, is static; it must change.

Government Orders

In Britain alone, from the times of the Magna Carta, there were huge changes over the years to the system, all adapting and making the system a better one. The Constitution of 1688 is a good example of a break from the past but nonetheless an important change.

We too in Canada have made huge improvements to the parliamentary system in our short history. I think back to the 1800s when various Canadian provinces developed the concept of responsible government. Responsible government meant that the governor was taking his direction from the legislature. This was a huge step forward. Everyone recognizes that made government fairer, more democratic and improved the system that we had. Some of the changes are large and some are incremental but they are all moving in the right direction. We only have to look back to the last century to some of the changes that were made in Canada, such as the extension of the voting franchise.

If we were to go back a little over 100 years ago we would see that voting in our system of government was confined. It used to be confined just to property owners. It was extended to adult males and into the 20th century that changed. I remember this point being brought home to me during the election of 1984. I visited a senior citizens home operated by the region of Niagara where I met an elderly woman. I, like all new candidates, shook hands and said hello to everyone. This woman stopped me and said that she wanted me to know that she had voted Conservative in every single election since the Conservatives gave her the right to vote. It took me aback. I said to her that it must give her a good feeling to know that she has always been right, as indeed she has been.

Another Conservative prime minister, John George Diefenbaker, continued to extend that franchise to Canadians when he extended the voting rights to aboriginal Canadians. I think everyone at that time and since has realized that these are the steps we must take to make our system more democratic and more fair.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to talk about another change in our electoral system, one that I think will improve it, Bill C-16, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act, which would provide fixed date elections.

I will begin with a description of the current process for calling elections and discuss some of the difficulties associated with it. This will be followed by a discussion of the many advantages that we will have when we adopt this legislation, as I hope this House does.

• (1210)

Currently it is the prerogative of the prime minister, whose government has not lost the confidence of the House of Commons, to determine what he or she regards as a propitious time for an election to renew the government's mandate. It could be three years into a majority government, which is what we saw in the year 2000 when the government felt it was to its advantage to call a snap election to get another mandate. I also could go back to the early nineties when another government, with which I am very familiar, decided not to go in 1992 but waited until 1993. That particular Parliament lasted almost five years. There is quite a bit of leeway.

Government Orders

When the prime minister, under the current system, requests the dissolution of the House, the governor general, unless there are unusual circumstances, agrees and the country finds itself in an election. What we have is a situation where the prime minister is able to choose the date of the election, not based necessarily on the best interests of the country but on the best interests of his or her political party. I believe Bill C-16 would address those concerns.

Before going into the details of the bill I would like to discuss the key advantages of a fixed date election. Fixed date elections would provide for greater fairness in election campaigns, greater transparency and predictability.

An hon. member: Greater fairness, yes.

Hon. Rob Nicholson: Transparency and accountability. The President of the Treasury Board knows all about that and how important that is. This is what we want.

There would be improved governance, I believe higher voter turnout rates and it would assist in attracting qualified candidates to public life.

Let me discuss the issue of fairness. Fixed date elections would help to level the playing field for general elections. The timing of the general election would be known to everyone. Since the date of the next election would be known to all political parties, they would have equal opportunities to make preparations for the upcoming election campaign. Instead of the governing party having the advantage of determining when the next election will take place and being the single party that may know for up to several months when it will occur, all parties would be on an equal footing.

That has to be of particular interest to opposition parties that have not had the opportunity to call an election. Every party would know when the election will take place and would be able to make the appropriate plans.

Another key advantage of fixed date elections is that this measure would provide transparency as to when general elections would be held. Rather than decisions about general elections being made behind closed doors, general elections would be public knowledge. Instead of the prime minister and a small group of advisers being the only ones who know when the country will move into the next general election, once this bill is passed, all Canadians will have that knowledge, which makes it fair.

I said that it would improve governance and I think it would. For example, fixed date elections would provide for improved administration of the electoral machinery by Elections Canada. The Chief Electoral Officer, in a majority situation, would know with certainty when the next election would occur and would be able to plan accordingly. This would certainly give greater efficiency to the work of Elections Canada and, quite frankly, would save money. All of us know the situation where Elections Canada is trying to make a reasonable guess as to when the election will be called, scrambling to rent space and come up with locations for voting. All these things cost money. It seems to me that this would save money if we knew with certainty when the election would be called.

Another good reason for this bill is that I believe we would have higher voter turnouts. We are suggesting that the elections be held on

the third Monday in October, except when the government loses the confidence of the House. That is a time when the weather in most parts of the country is generally the most favourable. Indeed, in my riding of Niagara Falls it is pretty well still summer. I appreciate that it is at the southern end of the country and it is not quite the same for others, but nonetheless the weather is still pretty reasonable in October.

Canadians would be able to plan in advance. Those who are thinking of taking a vacation or who might be outside of their constituencies can make plans to get their votes in when they know with some certainty. That is not the case if they are out of the country or visiting somewhere and the election gets called. Those things pose some difficulty. For those individuals who know well in advance when the election is coming, this is a step in the right direction.

● (1215)

This is not just important to the people who are voting. How about candidates? All of us know people who want to or are prepared to get into public life but who want to know when the election is. Right now we do not have a particularly good idea. It could be three years, as it was in the year 2000, or it could be five years, as it was in 1993. This can be very difficult for candidates. People have other lives and they want to know with some certainty when they will be called upon to put their name forward. It would help to attract candidates to the next election.

Let me give some of the details of the bill. Legislation providing for fixed date elections has to be structured to meet certain constitutional realities of responsible government. They include the requirement that the government have the confidence of the House of Commons and we respect the Queen and the Governor General's constitutional power to dissolve Parliament. The bill before us was drafted carefully to ensure that these constitutional requirements continue to be respected. The bill does not in any way change the requirement that the government must maintain the confidence of the House of Commons. Moreover, all the conventions regarding the loss of confidence remain intact.

In particular, the prime minister's prerogative to advise the Governor General on the dissolution of Parliament is retained to allow him or her to advise dissolution in the event of a loss of confidence. Moreover, the bill states explicitly that the powers of the Governor General remain unchanged, including the power to dissolve Parliament at the Governor General's discretion.

We looked at other legislation across Canada when we were putting this together and the bill is very similar to legislation that is in British Columbia, Ontario and Newfoundland and Labrador. It should be noted that the legislation in those provinces is working.

Hon. John Baird: Passed very quickly too.

Hon. Rob Nicholson: That's right. The President of the Treasury Board knows all about this having served, with distinction I might add, in the Ontario legislature. It works.

Government Orders

For those who think this is too much or have some problems with this, all they have to do is look at the experience. For instance, British Columbia had its first fixed day election on May 17, 2005, and it went well. The election in Ontario will be on October 4, 2007 and in Newfoundland and Labrador it will be on October 9, 2007. In British Columbia there was no suggestion that it had a lame duck government, as that expression is sometimes used. It worked well and people were able to plan with certainty.

I will now talk about the mechanics of the bill. The bill provides that the date for the next general election would be on Monday, October 19, 2009. Of course this would be the date only if the government is able to retain the confidence of the House of Commons until that time. For example, if on tomorrow's ways and means motion on softwood lumber the government were to be defeated, a general election would be held according to normal practice. However a subsequent election would be scheduled for the third Monday in October in the fourth calendar year after the next election. It moves depending on when the election takes place and that is the normal model that would be established by the bill.

General elections would occur on the third Monday in October in the fourth calendar year following the previous general election. However, in brief, we chose that date because it was the date that was most likely to maximize voter turnout and to be the least likely to conflict with cultural or religious holidays or with elections in other jurisdictions. We looked at it very carefully to ensure this was a date that could work.

This raises an additional feature of the bill that I want to bring to the House's attention which provides for an alternate election date in the event of a conflict with a date of religious or cultural significance or an election in another jurisdiction. In the current system the date of the general election is chosen by the government so it is rare that a polling date comes into conflict with either a cultural or religious holiday.

• (1220)

However, with the introduction of this, there is some possibility in the future that the stipulated election date will occasionally be the same day as a day of cultural or religious significance or of an election in another jurisdiction. The Ontario act, that we had a look at along with the others, allows some variation and some slight movement to accommodate that.

We are proposing the same thing. The bill would empower the Chief Electoral Officer to recommend an alternate polling day to the governor in council should he or she find that a polling day is not suitable for that purpose. The alternate day would be either the Tuesday or the Monday following the Monday that would otherwise be the polling day. Allowing alternate polling days to be held on the following Tuesday or Monday is consistent with the current practice of course of holding elections on a Monday or a Tuesday.

Some opposition members have indicated that this bill is illusory in that the Prime Minister can call an election at any point up until the fixed date for the election, but that is not how our system of responsible government actually works. The Prime Minister has to retain his prerogative to advise dissolution to allow for situations when the government loses the confidence of the House. That has to

be there. This is a fundamental principle of our system of responsible government.

Moreover, if the bill were to indicate that the Prime Minister could only advise dissolution in the event of a loss of confidence, it would have to then define confidence and the dissolution of the House of Commons would then be justiciable in the courts, something that we do not want. We do not want the courts to decide what is a confidence measure and what is not.

In conclusion, this bill providing for fixed election dates is an idea whose time has come. I remember recently, I believe in June, there was a poll taken and 78% of Canadians supported this particular idea. It is good to note that the third week in October is already citizenship week in Canada. It is a time when we celebrate what it means to be a Canadian. That is another reason for putting it at that particular time. Of course, fundamental to being a Canadian citizen is our civic responsibility and duty to vote.

This legislation provides greater fairness, increased transparency and predictability, improved policy planning, increased voter turnout, and will help to attract the best qualified Canadians to public life. I hope that my colleagues will join with us in the House to pass this important piece of legislation.

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I listened intently to the government House leader in regard to this bill. I was a little disappointed that he did not address some of the arguments that would tend to indicate that this is not all win-win. There are some risk elements. For instance, there is simply the aspect that, as is the case in the United States with its fixed election dates, the year before the election is spent electioneering and in fact governance does not occur during that last year. It is very likely that the Government of Canada would not be productive and, therefore, responsible government would not be present during a very long period of time. I am not sure that Canadians are ready for this.

The member indicated that a poll had been taken of Canadians. I am not sure that Canadians were given all the information they needed to make an informed decision and I think that is also important.

My question to the government House leader really has to do with the fundamentals. He referred to the Prime Minister being able to go to the Governor General and recommend an election. He gave some examples from the 1990s. The government House leader should, and I hope he will, confirm to the House and to Canadians that in fact that royal prerogative for the Prime Minister to recommend to the Governor General to dissolve Parliament without the condition of having lost confidence of the House will still exist under this legislation.

Therefore, a fixed election date is only providing a recommended date in the absence of a loss of confidence in the House or at the discretion of the Prime Minister to go to the Governor General, as has been the tradition in the past, to recommend the dissolution of Parliament. I think that has occurred in all of history except in one case where someone else was asked to form a government and an election in fact was called.

Government Orders

To be open and transparent with Canadians, will the government House leader clearly state that the royal prerogative, which entails the Prime Minister going to the Governor General to call an election even if a confidence vote is not lost, will stay in place and there will still be an election when the Prime Minister chooses it?

• (1225)

Hon. Rob Nicholson: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member covered a number of different areas and one of them I believe was disadvantages. I hope this means he is not going to oppose this bill. It is fair enough to have some questions, but I really hope this bill will receive his support.

He said there would be electioneering in the last year before the election and nothing would get done. It seems to me it would be the contrary. If a committee were trying to make a report and plan its time, those members would know exactly when that report would need to be done. It is very challenging with our present system because an election could be held after three years, four years or five years. A committee could be doing good work, but its members do not know whether to undertake a new study or whether they should make plans for the fall because they are in the dark. They do not know when an election will be called. It seems to me this would be a huge improvement in terms of organizing time.

I looked at what happened in British Columbia. My colleague the chief government whip is nodding his head. Things unfolded as they should have. There was a normal campaign as we might expect. We are in public life. We are always ready for elections. We are always keeping an eye on that sort of thing. It seems to me that knowing an election will be held in four years would allow more things to get done.

My colleague asked about the polling. The poll was taken in June. The hon. member could probably take this up with Ipsos-Reid because this was their poll. This is a well-known national polling organization, and I have every reason to believe this was a fair poll. I have no evidence to the contrary. The hon. member might want to take this up with them. They found over three-quarters of Canadians liked the idea of taking some discretion away.

The hon. member mentioned the Prime Minister. I do not know who he is talking about. I can tell him about this Prime Minister. This Prime Minister will live by the law and spirit of this particular piece of legislation. He and this government are driving this democratic reform.

This legislation does not involve just fixed dates for elections. The Senate tenure bill is an important piece of legislation. These are all steps in the right direction, but again, they do not remove the royal prerogative. I was asked this question by one of the members of the opposition quite some time ago. I assured him that the royal prerogative with respect to dissolution remains. This bill is an expression of how the House intends to conduct itself.

I hope the hon. member will do the right thing and give his support, and help move this legislation to committee.

Mr. Joe Comartin (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have always wanted to acknowledge the fact that my friend is a graduate of the law school that I went to. However, I am not sure it

really helped him a lot in his political career in terms of where he has ended up.

The NDP are in support of this bill and I think he is aware of that. We do have reservations around the minority government situation and the ongoing reservation of the royal prerogative in those circumstances. In particular, our concern is that a prime minister or a cabinet of the day could manipulate, if I can put it that way, the political agenda by way of designating any number of votes as being confidence votes, knowing that at some point they will provoke the combined opposition to vote against a bill.

I wonder if my colleague's government has given any thought to limiting that government power to specified areas, that is, only certain types of bills. I would suggest, because of historical precedence, that these should be money bills and that only money bills should be designated as confidence motions. All others would simply be regular votes and therefore would not provoke or justify the calling of an election if the vote failed against the government.

• (1230)

Hon. Rob Nicholson: Mr. Speaker, it seems to me that I pointed out the problem. If we started defining what constitutes confidence in our parliamentary system, we would be open to this then being challenged in the courts. I presume that all hon. members do not want to have the courts determining something like the confidence measure that is a part of our parliamentary system. It has been around for hundreds of years. It has changed slightly over the years, but everyone understands it to be one of those things that are important for a government to do its job.

The hon. member says it might be just limited to money bills. I could not disagree with him more. If this country put before Parliament measures to confirm that Canada will be at war, would that not be an awful lot more important than some spending in a particular government department? To my mind it would be, and of course that would be a confidence measure.

We should look at the softwood lumber agreement. It is an agreement between two countries involving the three largest provinces in Canada. It is vital to the lumber industry. When it first came to a vote in Parliament, I said that it was not an agreement; it was a miracle what the minister was able to put together. Nonetheless, it is extremely important and yes, that is a confidence measure.

The member should not always think that what is important is in terms of dollars and cents. It goes far beyond that. That is why we worded the bill the way we have.

Hon. Stephen Owen (Vancouver Quadra, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is a delight to be back in the House of Commons after the summer recess and to see you, Sir, looking so well.

Government Orders

I am pleased to rise to speak to the bill today. As the official opposition House leader mentioned when the bill was first tabled in the House, the official opposition supports the bill in general but we do have some concerns in regard to ensuring that the objectives of the bill are properly met within the proper constitutional framework of the House of Commons and our relationship with the Crown, and also in regard to taking full advantage of some of the opportunities that the government House leader has mentioned to ensure that the efficiency, the cost containment, the decline in cynicism, and the representativeness of candidates and such, which are potentially the promise of this bill, are actually fulfilled.

Let us start with the first section of the bill, which would amend section 56.1 of the Canada Elections Act. It states, as has been noted:

(1) Nothing in this section affects the powers of the Governor General, including the power to dissolve Parliament at the Governor General's discretion.

We have had a question from a colleague of mine and an answer from the government House leader with respect to what defines a vote of confidence and therefore a lack of confidence, a vote of non-confidence, and he has responded very broadly that it is not just money, that it might be war or some other thing that the government thinks is very important. That is the very type of looseness that can create uncertainty and can, I think, create instability in the House, uncertainty in the public mind and a frustration of the objective of the legislation, which is otherwise quite appropriate. We are not voting against the bill, but we will be looking in committee to get some constitutional definition around what we are talking about.

People looked at the election in Germany in 2005. Many people reported at the time that it was their opinion that then Chancellor Schroeder manipulated the defeat of his own government to cause an election at a time that he thought was advantageous, so I think we are going to want to look at what role the courts may well have on this, what role the Governor General has, how much discretion is actually there, and what has happened to that royal prerogative over time, through disuse or whatever. It is an important thing for our constitutional democracy. In committee we will have to get a firm grip on it and in a way which I think does the basic work that has not yet been done to interpret the impact of the bill.

Looking more generally at the bill, I think the government House leader is correct in saying that we have a building practice in this country, an experience, of fixed election dates. Not only has my province of British Columbia had fixed date legislation, but it has had an election with a fixed date. I must agree that this has worked out as well or better than anyone who had some misgivings about it could have thought. It did bring predictability.

It has actually demonstrated to many other provincial jurisdictions in the country that this is something that should be part of their democratic reform package. We have heard that Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick and Quebec are looking at this as a way to go. It may well be that this is just a trend, that as with medicare in Saskatchewan, it has been tested in the provinces and its time has come federally, but of course we must always look to those examples for their experience and what we might do better with this legislation as it goes forward.

In December 2005, the Institute for Research on Public Policy did an exhaustive study of parliamentary democracies and democracies

similar to Canada's and what sort of election timing legislation and rules they followed. It found that only 11 out of the 40 democracies similar to Canada's have unfix dates such as Canada does.

● (1235)

Globally, the trend is certainly toward that. I think we should be taking it very seriously. Certainly, therefore, we should not put up any blinders to suggest that we have always done it a certain way and therefore we simply cannot change it. Others have changed it and it is working well. There are lessons we can learn from that. That will be very much a part of this debate and the committee work.

Certainly the efficiency argument has some real merit if this is really used responsibly. In the planning of committee work, public policy development, legislative approval and bureaucratic implementation, if we take advantage of this certainty, not to simply become lame ducks during the last year but to in fact plan efficiently right up to the date the election campaign starts, then there is real potential for efficiency to be achieved from that predictability.

We know that certainly in law and legal principles, and in criminal law in particular, certainty is absolutely critical as a basic tenet of the criminal law of Canada. We know that in business certainty and predictability are often even more important than the particular taxation rule or regulatory rule. Business has to know what is coming to properly prepare. I think the work of the House of Commons and the Government of Canada can benefit from that as well if it is properly planned.

The fairness issue is a good one. The government House leader raised it. In our discussions of how we develop public policy, we must always, in the House and, frankly, in government, look to the fairness, not just from our own subjective point of view but also from the view of the public. I think we have had experiences in Canadian parliamentary democracy, if not federally then provincially, in which the public has decided that the early calling of an election is unfair and inappropriate. We saw that in Ontario some 15 years ago, when the government that called for an early race paid for it through the public's feeling that it was unfair.

That transparency, that level playing field, that coming to a place like Ottawa to the House of Commons with a firm mandate and a majority government to work to a certain schedule and to fulfill that obligation to the public, all of that, I think, is something that should be emphasized.

That fairness will help erode cynicism. I think we in this House are all too painfully aware that the public is cynical. We are constantly under pressure, and an appropriate pressure, from the public, our constituents, to deal with the cynicism that perhaps the best interests of individual Canadians are not always looked after in the House. We have to do everything we can to break down that cynicism. If this is properly implemented, I think this can help do that.

Government Orders

Of course, if we increase fairness, transparency and planning and if we reduce cynicism, that should lead to greater voter turnout. That is one of the most important indicia of the health of our democracy, which slipped a bit in 2004. It went up again in 2006, but we are still far below what I would see as a healthy voter participation in our democratic process. I think that is important.

Of course the date that has been suggested, that of the third Monday in October, helps with voter turnout with respect to the seasons. At that time we do not have a lot of perhaps retired and senior citizens holidaying in the southern United States to avoid the cold weather, and we do not have students out of university or people who are away during the summer and are not available to vote or take part in the whole civic engagement. That could all be very positive.

I understand and appreciate that voting in February or January in Vancouver is no problem at all. In fact, we had a very great time with the weather in the lower mainland during the last election, but I do appreciate that other parts of the country, including Niagara, that wonderful temperate area during certain months of the year, could benefit in voter turnout from not having to face harsh winter weather conditions.

● (1240)

The early fall date I think is an interesting one. Ontario has picked something similar. B.C. went for a late spring date and there is some consideration in British Columbia of moving it to the fall. I think there is some real purpose behind that. For one thing, the lead-up, the period of the campaign, would be at the end of the summer. Rather than suspending the parliamentary session in mid-session, that is helpful. It is also helpful with the predictability of planning courses in high schools and universities around civics for seniors, community groups and new immigrants, courses around electoral responsibility and the democratic process. The predictability in putting those types of civil exercises into a predictable annual rotation is probably helpful with turnout as well.

The question of representativeness of candidates is an important one. We know that we struggle in this country, and certainly in the House, to have the appropriate representation of women, for instance, which is of course far below the pro rata size of the population. I believe it is 21% in the House and I know that all of our parties struggle with it. I think we have to struggle together as a House of Commons and look to the legislation to ensure that as it is finalized and implemented—and it may be amended—it takes advantage of whatever opportunity a fixed date can provide for forward planning, for organizing someone's professional or family life, for fundraising, and for the whole nomination process of candidates to ensure that this increases the representativeness of the House by gender and as well as to properly reflect the indigenous, the multicultural and the linguistic duality and the multiplicity of this country. That could be an important thing.

One of the problems that we all must be aware of and has been spoken of often is the further Americanization of the Canadian political situation. I think what we have to do is look to this legislation to ensure that this does not happen—the fixed date may actually help if we do it properly—and that there is a shorter campaign period.

The government House leader mentioned, and I think correctly, that electoral officials can plan better with a fixed date. A lot of the work they might have to do during an election could actually be done before the campaign starts, so the campaign could be shorter. With appropriate campaign and political financing laws, I think that could be very helpful. It is something we want to pay very careful attention to: ensuring that the campaign period is limited and that the political financing laws are aligned with that to stop the great expense and lame duck or never-ending practice of the American political process.

There is another issue that I think we should look at just briefly and then perhaps in more detail in debate in committee. We should look at how federal election fixed dates, if we are indeed going ahead in that direction, fit in with other levels of government and their electoral dates. There is a possibility there, if we can align through intergovernmental discussion. For instance, Ontario will have municipal elections this fall and then provincial elections in 2007. As well, Lord knows, we are going to have the American presidential election in the fall of 2008, and then, as set out in this legislation, a federal election in the fall of 2009.

Is there some way we can annualize our civics courses, our public education, so that we are both avoiding overlapping elections, which frankly can exhaust the public, and also taking advantage of every year having a swing through, a reminder, a refresher or mock elections and such in our schools, universities, colleges and communities to really heighten people's awareness of the issues and of the importance of their democratic participation?

● (1245)

Finally, I would put the aspect of democratic reform in a broader context. We have political financing reform that was brought in by the former Liberal government. The accountability act takes further steps in political finance legislation. It has not been completed yet but it is certainly in play, and political financing is a big part of the electoral framework.

Another aspect is election timing, and we are addressing that today. Another aspect is the voting procedure and looking at different systems, or combined systems, than simply the first past the post system. We know that many democratic parliaments in the world operate on different voter systems. We know the Law Commission of Canada has come out with a very detailed report recommending a mixed proportional system.

British Columbia had a very engaged citizens' assembly process to look at a potential change. It got almost 68% of the vote on a plebiscite issue, but not the 60% needed. There are numerous jurisdictions across the country, I believe six in all, looking at different voter processes. That is another piece of it.

Government Orders

Finally is the public engagement part of representative democracy, and that is absolutely critical. Democracy is always on a spectrum between participation and direct representativeness. We have to get that balance right, but it is only healthy if our representative democracy is responsive to the participatory engagement of our population. As a fourth level of electoral reform, this is something that, as a House, I hope we will consider very carefully.

Hon. Jay Hill (Prince George—Peace River, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciated the comments made by my colleague for Vancouver Quadra on this important legislation.

Already in the debate this morning, there has been some discussion and questions from opposition in regard to the legislation. I thought the government House leader did an excellent job of explaining the rationale for the legislation and why we believe, in the Conservative Party of Canada, that all members of Parliament would want to support it as our Parliament and parliamentary institutions continue to evolve. It is an important step forward.

My question deals with the prime minister's prerogative to note that he and his government perhaps have lost confidence of the House, therefore precipitating an election. There were some questions about why we would still need that and what would constitute loss of confidence in this place. I believe the government House leader did a pretty good job of explaining why that is necessary.

We certainly do not want the courts to muck about and define what is or is not a confidence motion for our Parliament. However, I would suggest to my hon. colleague for Vancouver Quadra that if we get this legislation in place, there will be public pressure, both on the opposition in a minority situation and on the prime minister and the government, to very clearly explain to Canadians why an election would be necessary.

Once there is a fixed election date in front of Canadians and they are anticipating and planning for an election, in this particular case on Monday, October 19, 2009, if confidence is lost in this chamber and the Prime Minister is required, under our system of government, to go to the Governor General and have her call an election, I think there will be increased pressure to explain to Canadians why we could not wait until that fixed election date. That is a good thing, because it would provide, at least I hope, for much greater stability in Parliament and in the nation.

• (1250)

Hon. Stephen Owen: Mr. Speaker, there are a number of ways of looking at this question. I quite agree that during a minority parliament if a vote were lost by the government in the House, there would be a very rigorous public and political debate over whether that constituted confidence or not. This would happen probably before the vote as well as after the vote, if the government lost.

It will be a political context. The Governor General will of course be thinking very carefully about this legislation, what the spirit of it is, what her constitutional responsibilities are, what historical practice has been and what the public debate and political debate has been. I do not have any doubt about that.

We have another situation and there is an uncertainty there. I think one of the useful things that the committee can do is to look at

whether there are some defining points. Are there some, not rigid formula that the courts will interpret and must be followed, objective criteria that can give some direction to the political and public debate and the Governor General's consideration?

An additional problem is not where there is a minority government, but where there is a majority government, as was the case in Germany last year. Despite there being no issue of confidence and the government having a majority, the prime minister still has the prerogative. The Governor General, under this legislation, would still have the prerogative to dissolve parliament and call an election. That is another challenge for members to think through to ensure we get it right so we do not hobble or cement an advantage now, which many people see as being an unfairness.

Let us make sure that the objective that is before us is properly met in the most effective way.

• (1255)

Hon. Jay Hill: Mr. Speaker, my colleague from Vancouver Quadra raised the issue in his answer about the prime minister still having the prerogative under a majority situation to call an election before the fixed election date, if the bill becomes law and were to be in place.

Yes, under the legislation the prime minister of the day would still have that freedom to go to the Governor General and ask her to dissolve parliament and call an election. I suggest it would be very difficult for any prime minister to sell that to Canadians if they were expecting, especially under a majority situation, that parliament was going to last for a period of time. I cannot imagine why a particular prime minister would feel that he or she could not continue to govern, despite the fact of having a majority and having an election date some time into the future. I believe it would have to be an extraordinary situation for a prime minister to do that. If a prime minister went against the spirit of this legislation and purely called an election because he or she felt the opportunity was ripe, that the situation for his or her particular political party was very advantageous to go to the polls, I suspect that person would quite likely be punished by the Canadian people in the subsequent election campaign.

Hon. Stephen Owen: Mr. Speaker, the chief government whip is probably right that there would be tremendous political pressure against a crass move that was not in emergency circumstances or in some very important circumstance. However, we have an obligation in the House, to the fullest extent that we can, to simply not rely on political dynamics to ensure that something untoward does not happen. I invite government members on the committee and all members in further debate to think very carefully about this prerogative because it leaves an uncertainty.

Government Orders

Let me mention a type of situation which could occur. There could be a change in leadership of the government party by reason of death or incapacity, or whatever, shortly after an election. There has been a practice in our parliamentary democracy, it is not inviolate but it is quite frequent, that a new leader seeks to get his or her own mandate at a fairly early date. Maybe we can look at this opportunity to break that expectation or trend. To me it has always seemed a bit like putting a presidential aura around a prime minister who is not directly elected, but is only the leader of a party with the most elected members. If a new prime minister used that reason for asking for a dissolution, I would like to see that rejected. Maybe the legislation could make that clear in some way.

All I am suggesting is that we tighten this up to the full extent possible to ensure the certainty that we are seeking.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Michel Gauthier (Roberval—Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the legislation before us is certainly worthwhile. Everyone will benefit a great deal from having elections held on a fixed date in the Canadian parliamentary system.

I would like to tell the government that the Bloc Québécois members will definitely support this legislation because, in our view, it represents a step forward. People need to understand that we again have a minority government. In recent years, we have had several elections in a short space of time. Canadians need to know that since I became a member of Parliament in 1993, no majority government has completed its full mandate, which should run between four and five years. Choosing an election date has become a political plaything for a prime minister, who tries not to find the best way of accommodating voters, but to find a time when public opinion may give him popular support. It has become a guessing game, with absolutely disastrous consequences.

First, people get fed up with having hundreds of millions of dollars of their tax money spent to hold an election four, six or eight months before it is required. Holding elections on a fixed date is sound fiscal policy. It is wonderful. A normal mandate runs for four years. This gives the government time to do things, and no one has to deal with the stress of an unexpected election campaign.

There is a serious shortage of women in politics. But let us look at what is required of candidates who want to join us here in the House of Commons or serve in the provincial legislatures. We are talking about professionals, business people, people who have some responsibility in society. They are expected to announce six, seven or eight months in advance that they intend to run for office. Imagine a wife and mother or a career woman who also has family obligations. She has to tell her husband and children that she plans to run as a political candidate in the next election, with all that involves.

This is fine if the election is called a month later: people announce their intention to run, then they start campaigning. We know how it works on the ground: we campaign daily, selling memberships leading up to a convention and convincing the organizers. That is how we work. However, the election might not happen until seven months later because the Prime Minister decided to put it off since the polls were not looking very good. Then people find themselves in a pseudo-campaign situation for six or seven months while they

prepare and wait for the big day. Obviously, they have to keep working at it because everyone knows they intend to run.

This kind of cat-and-mouse game is detrimental to recruiting candidates. If we know that the election is to take place on such and such a Monday in October of such and such a year, people can plan for it, at a time that suits them, and then announce their candidacy.

● (1300)

I sincerely believe that one of the major advantages of this bill is that it would simplify life for people who want to enter public service, but who are not prepared to play around with their careers for five, six, seven months, or maybe even a year while they wait for a general election to be called. This is an extremely important part of planning the transition from private life to political life for people who decide to take the leap. This is an important element.

The second very important element is that democracy works best when everyone, even the men and women in politics, knows that there are fixed elections. Fixed elections enable us to take more coherent, organized action rather than playing the will-he-or-won't-he game with the Prime Minister.

I believe that there is nothing worse for democracy than letting the Prime Minister decide when to hold an election based on when public opinion tells him he is at his best, and then surprising everyone with the election announcement.

In my opinion, an election is not a game. An election must be taken seriously, approached honestly and not be a surprise. It must take place in its own time in order to allow citizens to express their opinions. This is another extremely important consideration.

Past prime ministers toyed a great deal with election dates. Oddly enough, this card has almost always been played in the month following the arrival of a new leader of the opposition. That indicates that the prime minister would take stock of the situation. If the Bloc Québécois was holding a leadership convention, the time was right to call an election two months later. How considerate. There is no time to organize as everyone is caught off guard.

A leadership race is currently underway in the Liberal party. It would be tempting for a prime minister, in these circumstances, to call an election perhaps two, three or four months after the new leader is chosen so as to not give this individual the time to organize.

Government Orders

I must say that the Prime Minister is being reasonable and sensible when he tells citizens that he is setting aside this prerogative, which is his to exercise, and doing so deliberately. He says that he will not play games with the opposition parties or public opinion. He will simply respect the mandate given. Obviously this bill does not and cannot change the constitutional powers of the Prime Minister and the Governor General, particularly those of the Governor General.

A responsible government assumes that the Prime Minister could, at any time, if defeated in the House, go to the Governor General and advise him or her that he no longer has the confidence of the House. That goes without saying.

The Constitution has not been amended. However, the Prime Minister, by putting forward this legislative measure, and even if he does retain the authority to act otherwise, places considerable political pressure on himself and on those who will follow.

People would not understand, for example, if the Prime Minister, after tabling this Bill providing for elections in October of 2009, should decide to call an election in 2008, with three months notice—because the polls were favourable or because of some other circumstances—perhaps because he was hoping to achieve a majority government. That would not be well received. The voters would say he was two-faced, saying one thing when talking about principles but acting in an entirely different way when it is time for action.

It is no secret that in tabling this bill, the Prime Minister is creating a framework that he will have to respect in all situations and that he must accept. In addition, what he is doing will have consequences for others. He is agreeing, for himself, to give up that prerogative of playing with election dates. As a result, it won't be done any more.

Once he has taken this step, the path will be marked out for subsequent prime ministers, who will have to respect this legislation which is a very clear expression of the will of the House of Commons.

● (1305)

Moreover, the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer has very complex work to do to prepare for an election. At present, the possibility that there might be an election at any time during the government's mandate requires Elections Canada officials to be in a state of constant readiness. Some rather large expenditures are linked to that state of affairs. I am not just talking about the mandate of a minority government. It is true even in the context of a very strong majority government, as we have seen in the past.

It seems to me that with a fixed election date, in the context of a majority government, Elections Canada could better plan its work and its schedules and be better prepared, more adequately prepared, when the situation required it. That is also an absolutely remarkable benefit.

In addition, elected members have many other matters to be concerned with than the need to be re-elected, perhaps in a year-and-a-half, two years, or three-and-a-half years. They have a great deal of parliamentary work to do and lots of work in their ridings. Having a certain, predetermined room for manoeuvre will allow members, through agreement with all parties, to plan the work of parliamentary committees and the legislative agenda to be accomplished. The

government and the opposition will be able to plan better and work more effectively. It avoids unpleasant surprises and enables parliamentary committees to schedule their work so that within one mandate a number of problems could be dealt with. Parliamentary committees will be able to plan their work and establish a schedule that respects dates known to everyone.

A clear democratic advantage ensues, for this leads to improved democracy. As for the practical organization of elections, this will also allow for a better electoral process. It also has the advantage of making it possible to better organize the work of Parliament. It also allows very worthy candidates to better plan the announcement of their candidacy, which is not currently the case. This could draw more women to political office, and certainly more senior level professionals who cannot risk putting their careers on hold for months at a time.

Furthermore, researchers looked at approximately 40 parliamentary democracies from around the world and found that only 12, including Canada, do not have fixed election dates, or at least an electoral period established within a couple of months. In short, only 12 out of 40 do not have elections on a certain day or during a certain period. This means that accepting fixed election dates would be a step towards progress. It would mean joining the 28 other parliamentary democracies that have established this rule. This also prevents overlapping with unsuitable periods for an election, such as during holidays or during periods that could interfere with elections being held in other areas of our public life. This allows us to simply declare late September and October, every four years, as the election period for the House of Commons, as we would all know that the election is held the third Monday in October. Everyone could then plan their schedules based on this information.

We therefore support this bill. It does not change our democratic habits in any drastic way; it merely specifies the importance of fulfilling four-year mandates.

● (1310)

I have served several terms in this House since 1993, and I have never seen a government complete its mandate. When a minority government was elected, reporters asked me whether I was disappointed that we had another minority government, because that could mean an election in the relatively near future. I told them that whether we have a minority or a majority government, it never completes its mandate. The legislation before us will allow governments to complete their mandates. That is what we hope and want. For a minority government to complete its mandate, it needs to do one very simple thing: respect the members of this House.

Government Orders

Any government that decides to respect the will of the House of Commons will easily be able to complete its four-year mandate. From now on, the Prime Minister and the cabinet—the executive—will have to agree to govern by consensus. The opposition has the power to allow the minority government to continue or to defeat it. Of course, our goal is to allow the government to govern. But the government has the responsibility to develop the tools it needs in order to govern. With a minority government, an election might be held in October 2009. This government would have to try to govern more openly to rally the forces of the NDP, the Bloc Québécois, the opposition as a whole or the Liberal opposition. This is possible. It has happened in the past, and it generally means more responsible governance.

Fixed election dates can benefit both majority and minority governments. We all try to the best of our ability to ensure that the government governs properly, over the course of a full mandate. Canadians do not like having too many elections and want us to act responsibly. The bill will make that possible.

Again, without eliminating the Governor General's prerogative to dissolve Parliament, the Prime Minister has set an extremely rigid set of parameters for himself, and he will have to abide by those parameters or else lose all credibility. When he has followed those parameters once, his successors will be morally obliged to do the same. This is a step forward. I salute this initiative. The Bloc will support it on its merits, as it approaches every piece of legislation tabled in this House.

• (1315)

Ms. Diane Bourgeois (Terrebonne—Blainville, BQ): Mr. Speaker, we just heard a very fine speech. It is always a pleasure to listen to the hon. member for Roberval—Lac-Saint-Jean who is very eloquent and has a quiet, subtle way of advancing ideas that are real food for thought.

He mentioned one point that I would like him to explore further. That is the need of ordinary citizens for fixed election dates. Why? As he explained, they are a great help to the hon. members and the parties. However, for a community that is waiting for a bill, for example, what is the effect of fixed election dates?

Mr. Michel Gauthier: Mr. Speaker, I mentioned this briefly, but for the benefit of my hon. colleague and everyone else, I will add the following. The parliamentarians in this House and the government could do a better job of preparing; they could draw up their schedule better and would have a better idea of how much parliamentary time they have to critique a bill and consult Canadians. If necessary, they could consult a little longer and do further research.

When we know the election date and how long we have for our work, the quality improves. We know where we are at.

I am the House leader. I have been in the House of Commons for 13 years and have been House leader for 12.

For all 12 years, at the end of every session ministers in the various governments come to see me, because I am the House leader, and beg me to allow their bill or legislation to pass. They tell me that a certain bill is absolutely essential and ask if I would be willing to consent to this legislation being speeded up so that it can pass.

I am saying this for the people listening to us and for the hon. members who have not yet had a chance to experience a few ends of session. I find this game at the end of parliamentary sessions unseemly and unfortunate. However, I can understand it.

A minister who has an important piece of legislation—on the environment or industry or in any given area—is very eager to see it pass. He has worked on it for seven, eight or ten months and sometimes more than a whole year, and there have been consultations and much effort. When the minister sees the end of the session looming, he definitely does not want to all this work to go down the drain. He does not want to have to start all over again a few months later, or even after an election, because there is nothing left that matters any more.

Fixed election dates would eliminate surprises. How many prime ministers have thrown their own ministers for a loop by calling early elections? It is amazing. I think that Canadians—whom we are supposed to be serving here by introducing and passing legislation—would be happy to know that the hon. members work in a planned, orderly fashion and that the results will arrive as expected.

This would therefore be a great improvement for everyone: for both the people and ministers. They voted for legislation and did well. It will be easier for them and easier as well for opposition members to work on legislation that they want to help along. That is another good reason to support this bill.

• (1320)

Hon. John Baird (President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I wish to thank my colleague from Quebec for giving a good speech.

Obviously it is always the third party's fault when a government that had a majority for close to 10 years did not have an opportunity to put its own bill to the vote. That is what happened with the previous government. I find these stories really funny.

I agree completely with the member from Roberval: this new bill would let us know ahead of time when the next election would take place. The ministers would have lots of possibilities and would know how many years, months and days they had left to work on their bills.

Something else that is very important is the way things operate, particularly a minority government. But it is exactly the same way of operating in a majority government: the ministers work with the opposition critics.

I had a very enjoyable experience working with the former Bloc Québécois critic, Benoît Sauvageau, who passed away. He was an extraordinary man, a very honest man, with great abilities and a lot of experience. It was a great pleasure for me to work with him. All our thoughts go out to his family and his colleagues on both sides of the House.

Government Orders

Mr. Michel Gauthier (Roberval—Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased that the President of the Treasury Board liked what I had to say about the ministers. I can tell you that this is so for all ministers of all governments. It is natural and it is also to their credit.

I have always had respect for a minister who goes to the trouble of crossing the House, of coming to see me, going to see the leader of the official opposition or the leader of the NDP to try and get a bill passed. I have always found that it was a mark of trust and commitment on the part of such people.

So I sincerely feel that holding elections on set dates will get rid of this element of surprise. It will give rise to fewer surprises for these people, and more work will get done with better planning.

It has happened that, in wishing to support bills, we have agreed to go a little faster, and sometimes we have made mistakes from going too fast, because the legislative process requires us to act seriously. This is another reason in support of holding elections at set times. We will have more time to do our job properly, we will not need to fast-track, there will be less need for us to rush and there will be less risk of typos slipping into bills. So it is a good measure.

• (1325)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): Questions and comments. Two minutes remain for the question and answer.

Resuming debate, the hon. member for Windsor—Tecumseh has the floor

[*English*]

Mr. Joe Comartin (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise to speak to Bill C-16 and to signal, as I did earlier this afternoon, that the NDP would be supporting this legislation. We are looking forward to getting it into committee for further discussion and perhaps amendments. In essence, the proposition being put before this House right now is one that we have supported for a good number of years. In the 2004-06 Parliament our former member, Ed Broadbent, was a strong proponent of this and encouraged the government of the day to press forward with it, to no avail. We are pleased to see that the government has in fact moved on the issue.

To a great extent this bill is about combating the cynicism that is in the electorate. We can say it makes sense for our electorate to know that there would be a fixed date for an election every four years and prepare for it knowing in advance when voting would take place. However, what is more important, and I do not want to downplay the significance of that certainty of a fixed date, is that if this bill passes it would be an opportunity for this House, for Parliament, to say to the citizens of Canada right across the country that we are no longer going to have their decision making process manipulated by the government in power. That has been very much the history of parliaments of all stripes in this House.

A parliament, a government of the day, will say this is to its advantage to go now even though it is nowhere near the generally accepted four, four and a half year mandate that we should stay and work and do what is our responsibility to the country. The government says, no, this is to our advantage right now, because of this issue, it is popular in the country, it is our issue and so we are going to go to the electorate.

We saw that, as we heard from some of the other speakers today, in the last number of years happening repeatedly, where we had elections at three and three and a half year intervals, and that suffers. If nothing else, if we want to look at it from a non-democratic standpoint and simply from a financial standpoint, it means we have more elections, and those cost money, in the range of \$200 million, each time we go to the electorate. More importantly, the essential issue is that we say to the people of Canada that we are no longer going to manipulate the electoral date in order for it to be of advantage to the government in power of the day.

One of the side effects of that, because of the certainty of the date which would allow people to know in advance when the vote would be and to prepare for it, is that it would increase, I believe, the number of people who would vote because they would not feel this negative cynicism toward all parties and all politicians from this perspective. They would say that they knew this election was coming at this point, it is part of our law, they are ready for it, they are going to participate in it, they are prepared for it, and they have not been forced to go to the polls only because of an opportune time for the government in power. For that reason the bill is important. It is one that we should all be supporting. I think we have heard today from the various parties that they all intend to in fact support this approach.

I suppose the comment one has to make is that it is too late. We should have done this a long time ago, but in fact we are now finally now getting to it.

One of the concerns that we do have of this legislation is with regard to the situation in a minority government because of course this law would have no effect if the past practice continues. The past practice is, as often as not in a minority government situation, that the government comes down not so much because of a lack of confidence generally in the government but on a specific issue.

• (1330)

We are proposing for consideration in this minority government situation, and we will be raising it at committee when it gets there, to constrain the ability of the government to intentionally bring itself down by creating a false issue, by setting up an issue that all three of the opposition parties with the majority of seats in the House would vote against. That has happened and there certainly has been speculation that the government may be planning on doing that some time in the spring of this session.

In order to avoid that kind of cynicism, there are alternatives. I put this to the government House leader today. He, of course, was dismissive of it in the sense that it would usurp the power of Parliament and cross over into conflict with our courts. What I suggested to him was that we limit the number of issues that can be confidence motions, so that a government cannot unilaterally, as it can now, say an item is a confidence motion and if we do not vote with it the government, it goes down and we have an election.

That again is a manipulative tool that governments in the past have used. From a democracy standpoint there is no reason to have that in our system. We could, I believe, with some discussions, debate and negotiations come to a conclusion and incorporate that into legislation as to what is a permissible motion of confidence and exclude all others.

Government Orders

One of the answers I received from the government House leader was that we cannot do it because we would end up being challenged in the courts. That is not necessarily the consequence. The decision as to whether a motion is one of confidence or not, once we have set the criteria, could be determined, first by your Chair, Mr. Speaker. That is one alternative, or it could be by a vote in the House. There are other alternatives.

Albeit, and I am not going to advocate it, another alternative is to allow the Governor General to make that decision. Being an unelected position and being a strong democrat, I am not prepared to turn the power over to that office, but I do believe it would fall within the perspective, control and authority, and jurisdiction of either the House or of the Speaker of the House at the time, and so there are alternatives.

Going back again to why we are supporting the bill, both from a democratic standpoint but more to deal with cynicism within the electorate, it would be another way of saying to the electorate, even in the minority government situation, that they would not be forced to go to the polls, that we would be able to continue the government and continue on the issues that are confronting the country without going to the electorate. We would not allow the government of the day to simply say something is a confidence motion, that if we do not vote with it we would have an election.

There are alternatives. It is an alternative that I believe would deal very much with the other part of the cynicism when elections are called in this country.

I want to say that there are clear reasons why this will be effective and I want to address one of the negatives at the same time as seeing it as a positive. I believe that by allowing for fixed election dates we actually would reduce the amount of partisan electioneering that goes on between elections. We would reduce it to that latter period of time, to the last six months.

What happens now, and I think we are being less than honest with the electorate when we stand in the House and say that we are going to be in a constant election mode with the implication being that we are not right now and we are not even in a majority government situation. I have been in both. Anybody who has been here knows whether one is in a majority government situation or a minority government situation, as it stands right now, electioneering goes on because we do not know, and I was very glad to hear my colleague from the Bloc making this point, when the plug will be pulled. Right now we are into that situation and in fact we do partisan electioneering on a constant basis.

●(1335)

Having fixed dates, I believe and would argue strongly, would reduce the amount of partisanship that goes on between elections and restrict it to the latter period of time of, as I say, six months to a year before the campaign starts. The argument is that it is somehow going to increase the amount of politicking that goes on, being meant in a negative tone, the result of which will in fact be just the opposite.

With regard to the other positives here, again it is a situation where because one knows what one is confronted with in terms of a date, the recruitment of candidates by all parties and the recruitment

of volunteers by all parties will be enhanced when we know the dates that we are working toward as far as the election date itself.

The bottom line is, and I will conclude with this, if we proceed with the legislation as proposed, it is definitely a step forward but it is not enough. I believe we should strongly look extensively at the issue of how we trigger elections in a minority government situation around confidence votes and amend this legislation to include criteria as to how the situation would be dealt with then. That would go to finalizing that cynicism that the electorate feels toward all politicians about the way we manipulate election dates in this country.

Mr. Dean Del Mastro (Peterborough, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened with great interest to what the hon. member had to say. I am encouraged to hear that it sounds as though he is supporting election reform in this manner. I was, however, disturbed by some of the amendments that the member was proposing with respect to confidence motions in the House.

It seems to me that governments are elected on a mandate and are expected to deliver on the promises they have made. Certainly, this government is making a case for the fact that it will deliver on what it has promised. If bills are going to be constantly debated, and no one has to express confidence in a government, I do not think any government could really go to the people and express that it would deliver on its promises. I would like to hear what the member has to say about that.

Mr. Joe Comartin: Mr. Speaker, perhaps the member should study some of the other governments. I am going to use England as the example. England's legislature has been going through an extensive reduction in the votes that are considered to be confidence motions. It does not in any way demean the democracy in that country. I believe it is just the opposite.

Governments there, both conservative and labour, have suffered defeats on issues they ran on and saw as part of their mandates in their elections. Their governments did not collapse. Democracy continued in that country. It can in fact work.

The other point that one would have to make, if one goes back and studies the history of successive governments in this country, is that all too often matters that were not part of the mandate are brought forward as confidence motions. They tend not to be the major issues of the day on which the political parties ran for government or ran for office, but more mundane ones that are oftentimes manufactured as causes for confidence motions knowing that the opposition parties collectively will vote against it and bring the government down.

●(1340)

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thought the member raised a couple of interesting points. I think there is general support in the House for the legislation but subject to some discussion and maybe some witnesses at committee on a couple of points, many of them are around the issue of the concept of the royal prerogative.

Government Orders

As the member will know, Eugene Forsey has opined that to set fixed terms for government or fixed election dates would in fact require a constitutional amendment. He also indicated that a constitutional amendment would eliminate the royal prerogative because then the Governor General would not be in a position to go against the laws of the land. In fact, even if a prime minister were to go to the Governor General because he or she would like to refresh the mandate, the Governor General would probably have to say no simply because of the issue that the royal prerogative in fact would have been muted by the override of Parliament.

I am wondering if the member has done any reading in this area and whether there is any concern with regard to the need for a constitutional amendment in this regard.

Mr. Joe Comartin: Mr. Speaker, I have looked at it to some degree. I certainly do not claim to be a constitutional law expert, which is what we are into here. I would not challenge Mr. Forsey's opinion but it is only one opinion. There are strong opinions on the other side within the constitutional law, both academics and practitioners, that this proposed amendment by the government to the elections act would withstand a constitutional challenge.

I would make one additional point and that is that our Constitution is not just a written one. The Supreme Court has made it clear that we can create constitutional conventions and that may very well occur here. It is certainly what I believe would occur if we moved along the lines I am arguing for which is a restriction on what a vote of confidence is. If over a period of years the Governor General were advised by the government of the day to have an election on a certain date and abided by that, over a period of several elections that would then become a convention within this country. The same would be true in a minority government situation along the lines that I previously mentioned.

Ms. Libby Davies (Vancouver East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, being a former municipal councillor I have always supported fixed election dates. It has never been an issue. People know when an election will be held. It is no big deal. B.C. has fixed election dates. I think it is about the only thing Gordon Campbell has done in B.C. that I agree with.

One group of voters that are ready and waiting for the next set election date are the voters of Vancouver Kingsway. They were denied the opportunity to send a message to their member of Parliament who betrayed them in the last election by switching parties. While I support set election dates, it is very unfortunate that the Conservative government has chosen to sweep under the carpet and ignore one of the most basic forms of voter accountability and democracy in our country and that is to ban floor crossing.

I would like to ask the member for Windsor—Tecumseh if he could comment on that. It seems to me that we cannot cherry-pick these issues. This is about democracy, accountability to voters and making our system work. The fact that the floor crossing bill never happened under the government is a crying shame and really betrays the voters of Vancouver Kingsway who have a right to say something about what took place there.

Mr. Joe Comartin: Mr. Speaker, I could not have said that better myself.

What we are doing here with regard to fixed election dates is a very small part of the electoral reform this country needs. Floor crossing is one of the issues that badly needs to be addressed given how the electorate has been so abused by both the Liberals and the Conservatives in the last two Parliaments.

A number of other amendments and changes to our laws are needed. Some are extensive while others are fundamental. In the last Parliament, Mr. Broadbent led the way at committee by proposing a number of necessary amendments to our laws and to our system. I was just reading one of the reports from the committee before I came over here today. The Conservative government supported a number of those amendments and yet we have seen no sign of them. We see things like the push for an elected Senate being sidetracked to a significant degree by the appointment of unelected senators by the government and by simply moving to change the time they will be in office.

A number of things rapidly need to be done and the government is just sitting on its hands with regard to them. We really have to question its intent and its sincerity in this regard.

• (1345)

Mr. Pat Martin (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will just take this opportunity to briefly ask my colleague about the need to reform the elections act. In terms of election financing, one of the most glaring things facing us today that we believe could have been addressed by the government is the fact that the current Liberal leadership race is relying on massive election loans that are more like donations which would clearly be in violation of the election financing act were they viewed in their real context.

Perhaps my colleague from Windsor could comment on the lack of real election reform and the need for raising these other important issues in the same—

Mr. Paul Szabo: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. I know it is in the rules of this place that no one is to be accused of breaking any laws. Indeed, the laws are being followed in accordance totally with electoral laws. I think the premise of the member's question and the insinuation is an embarrassment to Parliament.

Mr. Joe Comartin: Mr. Speaker, I did not get any implication from the member that he was accusing the Liberals of illegalities but more of moral bankruptcy, and he is right. The issue of those types of loans was raised in 2003 at committee by one of our members who is no longer in the House that this was a glaring loophole. We are seeing that loophole being exploited at this point.

What are they thinking Canadians will think about that? It clearly is a loophole and it is a wonder that the government did not plug it. Some more work for its members to do.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in case there is any confusion among those people who are viewing this debate, I want to say that we are not talking about fixing elections because that would be a bad thing. Bill C-16 is a very good thing. This is part of our overall democratic reform package. I think it will be well received within this place because it is one of the more positive steps in democratic reform that any government can bring forward.

Government Orders

We currently have a system where at the will of the government it can call an election. That obviously leads to many things along the lines of manipulating voters and manipulating dates to get the most beneficial time to the governing party to call an election. Obviously, as many speakers before me have indicated, this would bring an element of fairness to the whole equation.

I should also say at the outset that I am very pleased to hear the majority of my colleagues in this place stating unequivocally that they plan to support this important legislation. I say the majority but I cannot say all because as usual my colleagues on the official opposition side of the House, the Liberal Party of Canada, seems to be all over the map in terms of whether they want to support this or not. I heard today my hon. colleague from Vancouver Quadra state that he wishes to support this legislation, although he offered a few pieces of advice that we perhaps could tweak the legislation and make it stronger.

I have also heard in previous interviews the member for York South—Weston state without reservation that he will support the legislation but I also hear my colleague from Wascana say without reservation that he will oppose the legislation. I suppose it is not unusual to hear my colleagues on the Liberal side of the House once again failing to come to any unanimity on a very important issue. In fact, I find it distressing and troubling that members of the Liberal Party of Canada would oppose, in any way, shape or form, a sense of accountability that would bring transparency and fairness to this place.

Let me once again try to point out some of the elements of this legislation and why it makes sense to me and to most Canadians. In fact, I should say that a recent polling has observed that over 77% of Canadians polled think that fixed election dates would be a good thing and a necessary change. I agree with that for all of the right reasons.

First, of course, it would ensure fairness. It would ensure that no party, regardless of political affiliation, while in power would be able to manipulate a date for a federal election to its particular advantage. I must say that this has happened time and time again over the last 100 years and not only by Liberal governments. It has happened with Progressive Conservative governments in the past. In fact, my research indicates that since 1867 with majority governments, the vast majority of governments ignored the four year traditional and conventional timeframe for federal elections.

Not once over the course of 12 years did the previous Liberal government adhere to the four year convention. Former Prime Minister Chrétien was in the habit of calling elections every three to three and a half years. That allows the governing party to have a political advantage over its opponents. Only the governing party knows the dates of the next election. If the polls happen to be favourable and it looks like the governing party might be returned in either a majority government or at least a strong minority, the governing party can call an election at its whim.

Conversely, if it appears that the polls indicate that the governing party may not win an election at that four year cycle, it can delay that election up to five years and beyond. Quite frankly, that should not be allowed to happen.

This legislation would take care of that. It would make it incumbent upon the present government and governments in the future to adhere to a fixed date for federal elections. The manipulations of governments trying to buy voters with their own money would come to an end. This is a very important step in our package of democratic reform.

• (1350)

It is more than simply fairness. It is the transparency that I think most Canadians are looking for in their elected officials. Canadians do not want to think that the timing of a federal election will be held behind closed doors where a bunch of party hacks and pollsters get together and say that this would be their best chance to win the next election and that they should call the next election on a particular date. That should have no bearing on the timing of a federal election.

The bill, if adopted by this place and the upper chamber, will prevent that type of action from happening again. All Canadians will have the luxury of knowing that their governments, now and in the future, will have to adhere to a certain timeframe, the third Monday in October every four years. If that is not enough, it will also improve the ability of each successive government to provide the type of legislation and governance that Canadians expect and, frankly, deserve.

Too often we find a sense of gridlock within the public service because public servants are unaware of when the next election might be called. They are somewhat fearful of bringing forward initiatives or improvements within their particular government department or agency for fear that legislation or that initiative will be quashed by the government with the call of a federal election. Without question, if all parliamentarians and public servants knew that there were specific and fixed dates for elections, governance would vastly improve.

One of the more important elements of the legislation, of which very few people have spoken today, is that with fixed election dates I believe voter turnout would probably increase. Right now we all know and I think admit that there is a high level of voter cynicism for a number of reasons. One of them is that elections can be called at the whim of the government in a majority situation. I believe if the general public knew when the election would be held, they would have more confidence in coming forward to vote on election day, notwithstanding that if we had fixed elections dates, over time there would come a sense of knowledge and reality within the electorate that every four years, the third Monday in October, there would be a federal election. It would become almost routine and more and more voters would come out to the polls because they would know and expect an election on that appointed date.

One of the real tragedies we have is the fact that over the last 10 years or so we have seen a steady decline in voter turnout to the point now where slightly over 60% of Canadians exercise their franchise on election day. That is a tragedy. Decades ago we had 75% and in some provinces at least 80% voter turnout. People took pride in the fact that their vote counted. They had an opportunity to change the course of the country or at least elect a government that seemed to agree with their particular point of view.

Now, particularly among young people, we find a situation where people just do not feel they have an opportunity to truly influence democratic institutions. This is one small step in rectifying that.

Finally, I encourage all members in the House, particularly my friends opposite, to vote in favour of the legislation. Without their support, without the support of all opposition parties, the legislation will fail. That would be to the detriment of all Canadian people.

The government is convinced and committed to ongoing democratic reform. This is the first step and we will take other initiatives as we come through this fall session. With the support and help of all my hon. colleagues, we can all engage in true democratic reform for the benefit of all Canadians.

• (1355)

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, during his speech, the member referred to party hacks and other backroom people setting election dates.

Would he care to comment on the story in today's press from the Conservative Party hacks and backroom boys that the next election is next spring, right after the budget comes down?

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, my hon. colleague has again got it completely wrong. It is idle media speculation.

Let me just assure my colleague that the longer we have a chance to stay in power, with the legislation that is being so overwhelmingly approved and appreciated by Canadians, the better we will be. We do not want an election after the next budget. We want an election after four successive budgets. That would ensure that we stay in power for an awfully long time.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): When we resume discussion on the legislation, there will be four minutes left for questions and comments.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

• (1400)

[*English*]

FORT MCMURRAY

Mr. Brian Jean (Fort McMurray—Athabasca, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to take you on trip to northern Alberta, to Canada's future, to the year 2016 and to a community where the local population has more than doubled to over 160,000.

Seventy-five billion dollars has been invested in the local economy. Three million barrels of oil are produced every day from this community, resulting in 6% of Canada's gross domestic product and 50% of Canada's oil production.

Today, unfortunately, the average home price is over \$438,000. The rental price for a two bedroom apartment is \$2,000, if one can be found. The municipality has a \$1.2 billion infrastructure deficit and the lowest doctor to patient ratio in the country: 2.1 doctors to every 6,500 people.

Mr. Speaker, if you want to take one of the over 400,000 new jobs that will be created in Alberta over the next 10 years, come on up to

Statements by Members

Fort McMurray. Just ensure you have a place to sleep first because you will not find a bed once you get there.

* * *

ANTHONY BONECA

Hon. Joe Comuzzi (Thunder Bay—Superior North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, on February 13, 1985, Shirley Boneca gave birth to a boy, whom his parents called Anthony.

Anthony, or T-Bone as he was known, lived all his life in Thunder Bay. He attended St. Ignatius High School. He was a good student and an outstanding athlete. He was a fine young man and he was honoured by the Lieutenant Governor of Ontario in 2003.

After high school, Anthony joined the Lake Superior Scottish Regiment as a reservist. His first tour of duty was in Afghanistan and he returned to Thunder Bay safely. He then volunteered for another tour and arrived back in Afghanistan in February of 2006. Anthony never saw Thunder Bay or his parents again. He was killed in action on July 9, 2006.

Our sincere sympathy to his parents, who have honoured us with their presence today. Anthony was their only child. All Canadians should feel proud of this fine young man from Thunder Bay who made the supreme sacrifice for his country.

* * *

[*Translation*]

ANASTASIA DE SOUSA

Mr. Serge Ménard (Marc-Aurèle-Fortin, BQ): Mr. Speaker a family in the Ste-Rose neighbourhood of my riding has been struck by tragedy.

A mad gunman killed the oldest daughter with nine bullets.

He did it because she was beautiful and she seemed happy and he detested happiness and beauty.

Like millions of people, my eyes fill with tears and my heart breaks at the sight of the lovely graduation picture of this young woman and upon reading and hearing the testimonials of her friends and teachers.

It is at times like these that the true meaning of the word "sympathy" is apparent. The term comes from the Greek and means to suffer with. It is very little, too little, but it is the best we can do to help one another bear the unbearable.

Thus, I wish to express my heartfelt and most sincere condolences for the loss of the beautiful and, above all, the beloved Anastasia.

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[*English*]

STORMONT—DUNDAS—SOUTH GLENGARRY

Mr. Guy Lauzon (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I stand in the House today as a member of Parliament representing the most patriotic riding in this great country called Canada.

Statements by Members

On Canada's 139th birthday, celebrated this past July 1, the riding of Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry had 15,084 homes displaying the Canadian flag. More than one in every three homes located in my riding very proudly displayed our most treasured national emblem on Canada Day. Virtually every one of these 15,084 flags was hand-delivered by over 300 volunteers during our “Proud to be Canadian” campaign.

That is why I declare to the House and to every member of Parliament that the riding of Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry is the most patriotic riding in Canada, and I challenge all 307 of my colleagues to surpass our achievement in their respective ridings.

* * *

● (1405)

2015 WORLD EXPO

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to express my strong support for Toronto's bid to host the 2015 World Expo.

Hosting the world fair will mean large scale infrastructure investment, cultural legacies and growth in tourism, tax revenues and jobs for Toronto. The World Expo is also a tremendous opportunity to accelerate the revitalization of the waterfront and expand transit.

Toronto city council, Mayor David Miller and the people of Toronto are overwhelmingly behind this bid. So what is missing? Canada's federal government.

As a national endeavour, only the federal government can officially bid on the fair on behalf of Toronto. November 3 is the deadline and time is running out.

I call on the Prime Minister to formally back Toronto's Expo bid. The world fair will showcase our incredible diversity as a city and as a country. With the support of the federal government, we can make a 2015 World Expo bid a reality.

* * *

MYANMAR

Mr. Lui Temelkovski (Oak Ridges—Markham, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, a number of my constituents, particularly an Amnesty International group in my riding, are concerned about the human rights situation in Myanmar, previously Burma.

Human rights abuses, violence against women, the holding of political prisoners and military rule are only a few of the main concerns.

Just this spring, the opposition leader's house arrest was extended by a year. The military regime is so desperate to hang on to power that it is even now cracking down on stand-up comics who poke fun at it.

I know Parliament has expressed its concern in the past. I call on the Minister of Foreign Affairs to keep Canada active on this file.

I have added my name to a letter from the Canadian Friends of Burma to Kofi Annan calling on him to seek a resolution to the crisis. We must do what we can to promote the establishment of an

open and transparent democracy that respects and enshrines human rights.

* * *

JUSTICE

Mr. Art Hanger (Calgary Northeast, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise today on an issue that should concern all of us: the growing acts of violence that take place in communities and neighbourhoods across the country.

On the morning of July 22, 2006 a vicious unprovoked attack took place in my constituency. A young man was brutally stabbed while walking from his home to a convenience store because he refused to buy drugs from a group of thugs trying to intimidate him. As a result, Tarek Williams quickly became another victim of the increasing gang problem.

Tarek was determined to attend the Canada Bible College, but the assault left him unable to work and save for his tuition. Almost immediately the community and its volunteers came forward and set a goal to raise the required funds to pay for his tuition in hopes that this young man would not have to put his academic ambitions on hold because of this terrible offence. I am pleased to say that thanks to great volunteers and the staff of my Calgary office we are only \$440 away from reaching our goal.

On behalf of Tarek and his family, I thank Calgary for its generosity.

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[*Translation*]

BENOÎT SAUVAGEAU

Mr. Louis Plamondon (Bas-Richelieu—Nicolet—Bécancour, BQ): Mr. Speaker, we cannot start off this session of Parliament without paying tribute to our colleague Benoît Sauvageau. Benoît left us so suddenly that we are still in shock. This brave man made a huge contribution to parliamentary life here in Ottawa and to his riding of Repentigny.

Benoît was elected for the first time in 1993. He was critic for sport, international trade, Treasury Board, infrastructure and public accounts as well as the Francophonie and Official Languages. His extensive parliamentary experience together with his integrity, work ethic and jovial nature made him popular among all his Bloc Québécois colleagues as well as with all those who worked with him on the Hill.

Benoît was also a great friend. His sunny disposition and his laughter were contagious. We must now say goodbye to our dear friend, Benoît.

* * *

● (1410)

[*English*]

TERRY FOX RUN

Hon. Jay Hill (Prince George—Peace River, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this past weekend thousands of Canadians from coast to coast participated in Terry Fox runs to raise funds for cancer research.

In the 26 years since Terry ended his run on September 1, 1980, \$400 million has been raised to fight cancer through Terry Fox runs. His Marathon of Hope captured the hearts of Canadians when a young man with an artificial leg ran with a double step and a hop for 42 kilometres a day for several months.

Terry may have never reached the Pacific but his Marathon of Hope continues on. Across the street from Parliament Hill is a statue of Terry running westward. It reminds people of the difference that just one Canadian can make in this world.

On behalf of all British Columbians I proudly call Terry Fox a British Columbian and a Canadian hero.

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ROBIN CAMERON AND MARC BOURDAGES

Mr. Gary Merasty (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in July a terrible tragedy occurred when RCMP Constables Robin Cameron and Marc Bourdages were killed in the line of duty in their service to Canada.

Robin and Marc were truly inspirational people and touched the lives of many. Robin was a dedicated officer and in doing so became a leader of her first nations community, a hero to her family including her daughter Shayne. Marc was a proud father and husband who reached out to the communities he served, including my hometown of Pelican Narrows.

It was with great sadness that we said goodbye to these brave officers but we can still find inspiration despite this tragedy. We can find it in the resolve of the Cameron and Bourdages families who touched Canadians with their heartfelt tributes. We can find it in Spiritwood, a town that overcame fear and joined together in an emotional and spiritual healing ceremony. We can find it in the RCMP whose officers selflessly and courageously serve and protect Canadians every day.

I ask everyone to join me in applauding the families, the community of Spiritwood, and the RCMP for their strength and resolve.

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SOFTWOOD LUMBER

Mr. Bill Casey (Cumberland—Colchester—Musquodoboit Valley, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is unfortunate that Liberal opposition MPs from Atlantic Canada are playing politics with the softwood lumber agreement by refusing to support the deal.

The agreement reached by our government will result in the return of almost \$5 billion to the lumber industry and will finally bring an end to this ongoing dispute.

By far, most of the lumber industry supports the agreement. The Maritime Lumber Bureau surely strongly supports the softwood deal. New Brunswick Liberal leader Shawn Graham supports it and even the Liberal member for Beauséjour has recently praised the deal by stating, “so as an Atlantic Canadian, I’m certainly pleased that this agreement protects the rights we have fought hard to ensure are protected”.

Statements by Members

Canada's new government has supported Atlantic Canada 100% and has ensured that our interests are protected. Why are the Liberals choosing to ignore the industry, the provinces, and even their own MPs when they call for support for the deal? How can the Liberals not support an agreement that is obviously in the best interests of Atlantic Canada?

* * *

SOKOL POLISH FOLK ENSEMBLE

Ms. Judy Wasylcia-Leis (Winnipeg North, NDP): Mr. Speaker, who among us has not come back to this place steeped in the diverse heritage of our country, more aware than ever of our rich multicultural mosaic, and perhaps a few pounds heavier from a summer of folklorama, pavilions and ethnocultural feasts?

Just this weekend we celebrated something extraordinary. We celebrated the 100th anniversary of Sokol Winnipeg, a cornerstone of the Polish community in Manitoba and Canada since 1906. Its origins date back to 1862 when it was set up to promote fitness, protect the language, and preserve the culture of Polish youth.

I wish to congratulate the past and present members of the Polish Gymnastic Association and the Polish Folk Ensemble and in particular, the work of Marian Jaworski under whose leadership this centennial celebration took place and who epitomizes the courage, commitment and compassion of Polish pioneers.

Above all, I want to salute the important contribution of Polish Canadians everywhere, the hundreds of thousands of Polish immigrants and their descendants whose numbers are now fast approaching a million.

I thank them. Congratulations and *Sto Lat*.

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IRAN

Hon. Anita Neville (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to turn the attention of the House to Iran's refusal to cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency in connection with its nuclear program.

On July 31, the UN Security Council adopted resolution 1696 that:

Demands, in this context, that Iran shall suspend all enrichment-related and reprocessing activities, including research and development, to be verified by the IAEA.

It gave it one month to do so or face the possibility of economic and diplomatic sanctions. Instead of allaying fears that it seeks to develop nuclear weapons, Tehran responded with sabre-rattling and on August 19 launched extensive military exercises to intimidate the international community.

On September 14, IAEA issued a report stating that Iran had not suspended its enrichment related activities. In accordance with Security Council resolution 1696, the time has come to consider serious economic sanctions to show Tehran that the world will not be intimidated by its intransigence.

Oral Questions

●(1415)

[Translation]

AFGHANISTAN

Mr. Robert Bouchard (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the Bloc Québécois deplores the deaths of four soldiers killed this morning in a suicide bombing that hit a NATO patrol in Kandahar province.

This tragedy reminds us yet again of the danger and the difficult conditions to which soldiers and diplomats working to establish peace, social justice and democracy in Afghanistan are exposed. I hope that their sacrifices will not have been in vain.

On behalf of myself and the Bloc Québécois, I wish to offer my condolences to their families, friends and colleagues in the Armed Forces.

* * *

DAWSON COLLEGE

Hon. Lucienne Robillard (Westmount—Ville-Marie, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, last Wednesday, we were all saddened by the tragedy that hit Dawson College in my riding, Westmount—Ville-Marie.

On behalf of the Liberal Party caucus, I would like to offer my sincere condolences to the family of the young woman who was killed. I also hope for a speedy recovery for all of the people who were hospitalized because of this unjustifiable and incomprehensible act.

[English]

I would also like to pay tribute to all involved in saving lives and helping those affected. The police officers, ambulance technicians on the scene, hospital staff, faculty, students, the student union of Dawson College, and the people of Concordia University lent a hand to the people of Dawson College in their time of need.

[Translation]

We hope and pray that those affected by the tragedy, as well as the Dawson community, will be able to find peace and harmony in the wake of this difficult event.

* * *

[English]

CONSERVATIVE GOVERNMENT

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Mr. Speaker, while it seems the opposition was sleeping over the summer, Canada's new government was hard at work getting things done and delivering on promises.

Canada's new government delivered on child care. Starting in July parents have been receiving a monthly universal child care cheque of \$100 per child under six.

Canada's new government delivers on hepatitis C victims. Our government recently announced a \$1 billion settlement fund to provide compensation to all hepatitis C victims.

Canada's new government delivers on border security. The public safety minister announced that the government is keeping its

promise to strengthen Canada's borders by hiring more border officers and arming them with side arms.

Finally, last week Canada's new government delivered on softwood lumber. The trade minister signed an agreement which will see the return of almost \$5 billion to Canada's lumber industry.

These are just a few examples of how Canada's new government is delivering on its promises and getting things done for Canadians.

* * *

DAWSON COLLEGE

The Speaker: Following discussions among representatives of all parties in the House, I understand that there is an agreement to observe a moment of silence for the victims of the tragic events at Dawson College in Montreal last week.

[Translation]

I ask all hon. members to rise to observe a moment of silence.

[A moment of silence observed]

* * *

●(1420)

[English]

SERGEANT-AT-ARMS

The Speaker: I wish to invite all hon. members to join me in welcoming our new Sergeant-at-Arms, Mr. Kevin Vickers, who is with us in the chamber today for the first time.

[Translation]

I know that all hon. members wish him much success in his new role.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Speaker: We will now move on to oral question period. The hon. leader of the official opposition.

ORAL QUESTIONS

[Translation]

FIREARMS REGISTRY

Hon. Bill Graham (Leader of the Official Opposition, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the moment of silence we have just observed illustrates that today is a day of mourning for us all.

As the hon. member for Westmount—Ville-Marie said, our thoughts go out to the families and victims of the tragedy at Dawson College. Sadly, this tragedy has shown us that our country cannot tolerate complacency toward firearms in Canada.

The Prime Minister is getting ready to abolish our gun control system, but he says now is not the time to talk about it. Today the Prime Minister must talk about it. He must explain to us how his proposal to weaken our gun laws will better protect Canadians.

Oral Questions

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, first I want to express my condolences and those of the government to the victims and families of the event that occurred in Montreal. Our thoughts and prayers are with those who are still in hospital. Our thoughts go out to all the victims and the entire student body shaken by these events.

This government is determined to have more effective legislation that will prevent such a tragedy and such an act from occurring in the future. I call on the opposition to support our bill in order to implement mandatory sentences for crimes committed with firearms.

[*English*]

Hon. Bill Graham (Leader of the Official Opposition, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is all very well to talk about having more effective laws, but 5,000 times every day law enforcement officers in Canada use the very system that the Conservatives want to destroy. The police themselves tell us they need that system to protect lives and increase public safety.

Does the tragedy of Dawson College not prove to the Prime Minister and his colleagues the need to strengthen and improve our gun laws rather than abolish them in the name of a false efficiency?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the events at Dawson College tell us precisely that, that today's laws did not protect us. We take no pleasure on this side of the House from having warned the previous government repeatedly over the past decade that the gun registry would not prevent this kind of occurrence.

I spoke to the acting commissioner and the deputy commissioner of the RCMP today. I asked them to accumulate all the facts and to bring them to the Minister of Public Safety, so that the government can strengthen its future actions to ensure that we reduce all possibility of obviously unstable individuals such as this getting a hold of firearms.

Hon. Bill Graham (Leader of the Official Opposition, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we on this side of the House are all in favour of strengthening that what we can do to control arms, but we need to be using every last tool available to save lives. We should be strengthening rules. We should not be tossing some of them out.

The Prime Minister's right to bear arms constituency is blinding him to a very important tool that protects our kids from being shot.

Will the Prime Minister finally listen to Premier Charest and the millions of other Canadians who want him to revise his position on gun control, bring in other laws if he wishes, but keep an important tool that has been proven by the police that it works and can help the public safety of Canadians?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am sorry that the Leader of the Opposition feels the necessity of justifying a decade of wrong approaches and wasted effort in terms of a gun control policy that does not work.

The government will not repeat those mistakes. We will pursue new policies that will reduce the possibility of crime and these types of actions.

• (1425)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Lucienne Robillard (Westmount—Ville-Marie, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Quebecers, through their premier, Jean Charest, the Fédération des policiers municipaux du Québec and women's groups such as the Fédération des femmes du Québec are calling for the gun registry to be maintained intact.

Why is this Prime Minister, who heads a minority government, turning a deaf ear to Quebecers' legitimate requests?

Hon. Stockwell Day (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I can assure the Premier of Quebec, Mr. Charest, and everyone who is concerned by this situation that we are going to maintain the registry system. A police officer will be able to check whether a person owns a gun. As well, this information will remain available in the information system, for use by police. People who want to keep and buy guns will still have to register them. We are going to keep the system's strengths.

Hon. Lucienne Robillard (Westmount—Ville-Marie, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we all know that it is very difficult to predict an act of insanity and that the gun registry is not a cure-all that will prevent violence in our society. But the public health association, the suicide prevention centre and the police all recognize that there has been a marked reduction in thefts, suicides and homicides involving firearms.

Why does the minority government not recognize that this registry is valuable, even if it saves just one life?

Hon. Stockwell Day (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Auditor General said that there was a great deal of waste in the system: nearly a billion dollars. We will have a more efficient system. We will have more officers on the street in our communities, across the country. And we will have programs that can prevent tragedies such as these.

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FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister has decided to address the United Nations General Assembly instead of the House of Commons to present his vision for Canadian foreign policy. And yet, he heavily criticized his predecessor, who also announced his decisions outside the House of Commons.

Does the Prime Minister not have a duty to present his foreign policy to the House of Commons and the public first, including his view on the Afghanistan mission, the Darfur crisis, the WTO negotiations, UN reform and multilateralism?

Oral Questions

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I do not know where the leader of the Bloc Québécois was when I addressed a number of these issues in the spring. This week is the annual week at the UN when government leaders arrive to talk about their concerns on matters of foreign policy. I plan to be there to defend the values of this government and of Canadians, including such values as democracy, freedom, human rights and the rule of law.

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, we have time to hold an emergency debate on this issue before Thursday.

The Prime Minister presented an overview of his foreign policy for the first time, not here but in London, England, on July 14, and those aspects of Canadian foreign policy for the most part fall into line with the foreign policies of the United States, Australia and Great Britain.

Is the Prime Minister not just moving away from the United Nations multilateral framework and into an alliance of countries that have broken from this framework, in particular on Iraq?

• (1430)

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the leader of the Bloc should wait for my speech at the United Nations on Thursday to hear what I have to say.

Nonetheless, this summer I heard the leader of the Bloc say that our foreign policy is my policy and that of George Bush. But now that we have a very important foreign policy agreement on softwood lumber: it is mine, that of George Bush and of Gilles Duceppe.

The Speaker: I am sure the Prime Minister meant to say the hon. leader of the Bloc Québécois or the hon. member for Laurier—Sainte-Marie. I believe that was the very name.

The hon. member for Saint-Jean.

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AFGHANISTAN

Mr. Claude Bachand (Saint-Jean, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the Canadian government recently announced that it will deploy another 200 soldiers to join the troops already in Afghanistan.

Since the government has already authorized extending the mission in Afghanistan without giving us any information, we would like to know, today, if this new contingent is a one-time addition or if it is the first of what may turn out to be many.

[*English*]

Hon. Gordon O'Connor (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, first of all, I want to offer my condolences to the military families and their friends relating to the four casualties we had last night. It is a very sad event for the military.

In response to the question, the military made an assessment that it needed additional infantry and armour and engineers to fulfill its requirements in the area to provide better security for both our reconstruction effort and for our security forces. We have provided the military with what it needed.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Bachand (Saint-Jean, BQ): Mr. Speaker, over the past two weeks, the Minister of National Defence and the Minister of Foreign Affairs declared that Canada was doing more than its share in Afghanistan. Now, all of a sudden, the government has decided to increase its commitment.

Can the Prime Minister explain why he is sending 200 more soldiers when the Minister of National Defence and the Minister of Foreign Affairs have said that Canada is already doing its part? What changed for this to happen so suddenly?

[*English*]

Hon. Gordon O'Connor (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, these are two separate issues. One is that our troops on the ground said that they needed some improvements to improve their security, and we have done that. Quite separately, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and I are approaching NATO to encourage NATO countries to provide more resources to Afghanistan.

Hon. Jack Layton (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is becoming increasingly clear to Canadians that the government simply does not know what it is doing in Afghanistan.

First we were told that it would be a two year commitment, maximum; now we are being told it is a five year commitment, minimum. First we were told we had sent enough troops; now we are sending hundreds more. First we were told no tanks would be needed; now we are sending tanks. We were told that there would be no discussion with the combatants and now we learn that senior military officials were in discussions with the Taliban already.

Do our troops not deserve better than to have policy made up on the fly, copycat of U.S. foreign policy?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the House will know that today in Afghanistan four Canadian servicemen were killed. Obviously, whenever we lose one of the fine men and women of our Canadian Forces, members on all sides of the House feel a great deal of sadness and also respect and honour for the sacrifice that the forces are willing to make for their country and for their fellow human beings. The circumstances of today's deaths, where our servicemen were in the process of distributing some candy to some children in a village and were killed by a suicide bomber when doing this, nothing more than this incident illustrates the evil that they are fighting and the goodwill and the nobleness of the cause that they are taking to the Afghan people.

Hon. Jack Layton (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the greatest respect that we can show for our soldiers serving abroad, and they are brave and they are courageous because they are doing what our country asked them to do, is to consider very carefully what we are asking them to do. Let me draw the House's attention to what Captain Leo Docherty, former aide-de-camp to the commander of British forces in Helmand province said on Monday. He said that the NATO-led mission is "a textbook case of how to screw up a counter-insurgency....We've been grotesquely clumsy...and sucked into a problem unsolvable by military means".

Oral Questions

Does the Prime Minister agree with his Minister of National Defence when he said that this mission cannot be won by military means?

• (1435)

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it has been clear from the beginning that the United Nations effort in Afghanistan requires a multifaceted approach, not just security operations to end the remnants of the Taliban regime and its presence in the country, but also development work and diplomatic work, a whole range of skills of governance building to ensure that country moves forward as a peaceful and democratic society that does not ever again present a threat of terror either to the world or even to its own citizens.

What the men and women in uniform require is a Parliament of all parties that believes in what they are doing and sticks behind their actions.

* * *

[Translation]

FIREARMS REGISTRY

Ms. Raymonde Folco (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the incident at Dawson College is a tragic reminder that we must exercise constant vigilance to prevent violent acts committed with firearms. Canadians, and especially Quebecers, are keenly aware of this.

[English]

Will the Prime Minister tell this House why he is listening to the gun lobbyists who backed him, lock, stock and barrel, instead of listening to Canadian moms and dads who just want strong gun laws?

Hon. Stockwell Day (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, among the people whom we have listened to is the Auditor General. The Auditor General pointed to a great waste of dollars in terms of a failed plan by the former regime to try to have a system that worked when it came to a firearms registry. We are listening to her.

We listened to her comments when she said that when police officers drive up to a house, for instance, the data they have available to them is not reliable. We want reliable data for police officers. We want more officers on the street from coast to coast. We want programs directed to youth at risk. We will accomplish that, I hope with the help of the opposition.

[Translation]

Ms. Raymonde Folco (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister is clearly ideologically incapable of maintaining effective control over firearms in Canada. It is not in his nature.

[English]

Who is the Prime Minister listening to on this issue? Not the chiefs of police. They want Canada's gun laws kept intact.

[Translation]

Nor is he listening to average Canadians: they want much stricter control of firearms.

[English]

Hon. Stockwell Day (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are listening to millions across the country who want effective gun control. We are also listening with interest and appreciation to leadership candidates in the Liberal Party who say that it was a wrong idea to embrace the plan of the former Liberals, to see a \$1 billion wasted. We listened to the police chief out of Toronto, who said that the approach the Liberals were taking does not reduce the possibility that a young person is going to get a firearm into his or her hands.

We want programs that will work. We are committed to seeing gun crime reduced, safety rise and our communities safer than they have ever been.

[Translation]

Hon. Marlene Jennings (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, if we follow their logic, we would have to remove the Criminal Code clause that makes it illegal to drive under the influence.

Elections Canada just told us that during the 2006 election, the gun lobby spent more than \$133,000 to support the Conservative campaign aimed at reducing firearms control. Does the Prime Minister intend to reduce firearms control because he owes it to the gun lobby?

Hon. Stockwell Day (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we do not know if the figures given by the hon. member are accurate. I believe they are, since she quoted them. The fact remains that Canadian taxpayers have spent more than a billion dollars, yet we still do not have an effective system. But that is exactly what we want: an effective system that will work for all Canadians.

• (1440)

[English]

Hon. Marlene Jennings (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is typical of the Conservative government not to tell everything. The Auditor General actually said that for the last two years the gun registry has been working very well.

There has been no shift in the attitudes of Canadians toward Canadian gun control. If anything, the resolve of Canadians is stronger than ever. The majority of Canadians and the majority of members of Parliament in this House want strong gun control.

The Prime Minister has no mandate to weaken our gun control laws, yet he is intent on pushing ahead. Is he aware that he does not answer to the gun lobby? He answers to Canadians, and Canadians will—

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Public Safety.

Hon. Stockwell Day (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canadians responded last January 23. One of the areas in which they responded was our commitment to see increased safety on the streets of our communities. That is why we acknowledge that the Auditor General said that certain administrative systems have improved and we are keeping those.

Oral Questions

Besides that, we have made a commitment to see over 1,000 more RCMP officers on our streets and in our communities. We are about to embark on a project with provinces and municipalities on a cost-sharing formula to see 2,500 more officers at the municipal level.

Also, anybody in the country who acquires or possesses a firearm for any purpose is still required to be registered. That person will be registered. Anybody wanting a firearm is going to have to follow all the usual laws that are in place.

* * *

[Translation]

AFGHANISTAN

Mrs. Vivian Barbot (Papineau, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the Canadian mission in Afghanistan should not be just a military mission, but also a humanitarian mission that allows for the establishment of a more democratic system. But from the information we get it seems that international aid is not reliably getting to those who need it, that poppy crops are flourishing, and the Taliban are getting increased support from the people.

Could the Minister of Foreign Affairs clarify what is happening with regard to the humanitarian and democratic aspect of the Canadian mission in Afghanistan?

Hon. Josée Verner (Minister of International Cooperation and Minister for la Francophonie and Official Languages, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to say to the member for the Bloc Québécois that CIDA has been praised by a senior official of the World Bank for the efficiency of its aid and its follow-up procedures for ensuring that the money actually gets to the people.

Along with CIDA, we have put measures in place. We also increased our budget last spring so that alternatives can be offered to Afghan farmers, so that children can go to school, so that clinics and other infrastructure can be built in order to help the Afghan people take charge of themselves.

Mrs. Vivian Barbot (Papineau, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Defence mentioned the possibility of Canadian soldiers being stationed in Pakistan. In addition, we have learned that the USA was pursuing members of al Qaeda as far as Pakistan and that Canada would like to have a similar agreement with that country.

Can the Minister of Foreign Affairs tell us whether the Canadian government is getting ready to alter the nature of the mission in Afghanistan so that soldiers can go as far as Pakistan, as a NATO source suggests? Is this something the government is considering?

[English]

Hon. Gordon O'Connor (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the report that came out in the press which said that we were sending troops to Pakistan is totally false. What we were discussing was exchanging one liaison officer with the Pakistan army. We have no intention of changing the tasks or the activity within Afghanistan.

[Translation]

FIREARMS REGISTRY

Mr. Serge Ménard (Marc-Aurèle-Fortin, BQ): Mr. Speaker, like the Premier of Quebec, most Quebecers want to keep the gun registry, but the federal government has already announced its intention to abolish it.

In light of the last week's tragic events in Montreal, will the government listen to reason and adopt the common-sense approach by keeping the gun registry?

In the fight against crime, prevention is at least as important as severe penalties—penalties that would have done nothing to prevent the tragedy we all deplore today.

• (1445)

Hon. Stockwell Day (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have said it before and I will say it again: we will keep the firearms registry for people who want to own firearms. We will also maintain a registry for people who want to own prohibited firearms, and we will maintain all laws pertaining to firearms security.

It must also be said that we want a more efficient system.

Mr. Serge Ménard (Marc-Aurèle-Fortin, BQ): Mr. Speaker, registering firearms owners is not enough.

According to the Prime Minister, from now on, hunting rifles will no longer be registered, and psychologically unstable individuals will be able to acquire them.

Does the Prime Minister realize that if he allows hunting rifles to circulate unrestricted, there is no guarantee that unstable individuals will not get their hands on them and use them to repeat what happened at Dawson College?

Hon. Stockwell Day (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is not easy to get a long gun. It is also important to note what others have said about this recently.

[English]

There was a recent statement by the Liberal member for Ottawa South that “it is important for all of us just to remember that no long gun registry system, no weapon registry system, can stop unfortunate acts like the one that happened in Montreal last week, so let's just get that on the record”.

We want to get on the record a safer, more secure system and that is what we intend to do.

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AFGHANISTAN

Hon. Keith Martin (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of National Defence said that it is impossible to defeat the Taliban “militarily”. The chief of the defence staff confirmed this by saying that the winning strategy will be based on reconstruction, but the government has dropped the ball on the development package.

My question for the Minister of International Cooperation is very simple. How many CIDA personnel does she have on the ground working in Afghanistan generally and in Kandahar specifically?

[Translation]

Hon. Josée Verner (Minister of International Cooperation and Minister for la Francophonie and Official Languages, CPC): Mr. Speaker, each reconstruction team is made up of 40 to 200 people, including civilian and military personnel. In Kandahar specifically, the number varies from 90 to 113 people. There are three people from CIDA specifically.

[English]

Hon. Keith Martin (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, most of those are members of our honourable and brave defence forces. They are the ones who are putting their backs into this. The reality is that the government has failed on its development package. It has failed on telling the Canadian public how it is training Afghan security forces. It has failed in dealing with the insurgency coming from Pakistan.

Again my question is simple. Since we are in charge of the reconstruction teams in Kandahar, how many clinics and how many schools have our PRT personnel built in Afghanistan specifically and in Kandahar also?

[Translation]

Hon. Josée Verner (Minister of International Cooperation and Minister for la Francophonie and Official Languages, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member knows full well that Kandahar is a fragile province where progress is very gradual. We are able to achieve results there by working collaboratively and because the Department of National Defence ensures the safety of our humanitarian workers.

I would like to know when the member opposite last met with soldiers who served there and listened to their success stories.

Mr. Bernard Patry (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of National Defence recently stated that we cannot defeat the Taliban. This is a shocking statement, considering that last May, this same minister stated that the Taliban were losing the battle. The government previously said that it was focussing on the military aspect of the mission, at the expense of diplomacy and development assistance.

Was the Minister of National Defence misleading the House last May by concealing the fact that he felt victory was impossible, or has the situation in the field altered so drastically since May that he has changed his mind?

• (1450)

[English]

Hon. Gordon O'Connor (Minister of National Defence, CPC): No, Mr. Speaker, the minister was not wrong. The minister was explaining the concept that we have to tackle the Taliban from the point of view of military security, improving governance and development. The Taliban can only be defeated when all three operations are in synchronization, and that is what we are doing.

[Translation]

Mr. Bernard Patry (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, according to the Prime Minister's office, the problem is that the Minister of National Defence forgot his text that day.

Oral Questions

The real problem is that the government has to completely rewrite its text. The government promised that the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of National Defence and the Minister of International Cooperation would report regularly to this House. Where are these updates? We are waiting. If we do not have these reports, is it because the ministers in question do not know what is happening or is it because the Prime Minister is afraid his ministers will contradict each other?

[English]

Hon. Gordon O'Connor (Minister of National Defence, CPC): No, Mr. Speaker, this minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs are not making a mistake and we are not conflicting with each other. As was promised in the earlier debate on Afghanistan, at an appropriate time we will return to the House and give an update on Afghanistan.

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AGRICULTURE

Mr. Rick Casson (Lethbridge, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as all Canadians know, the government is fully committed to the success of our farmers and those in the agricultural industry.

Could the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food inform the House of his efforts over the summer and the accomplishments he has made for our producers?

Hon. Chuck Strahl (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and Minister for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, just last week I met with the American Secretary of Agriculture, Mike Johanns. We discussed and made good progress on things like nematodes, BSE and border issues.

I appointed a new Canadian Wheat Board director. We have made good progress on marketing choice for prairie farmers.

We invested \$10 million to get farmers started in biofuels. That is a good start.

The money is starting to flow from our cover crop programs.

We have extended compensation to the farmers affected by anthrax.

We accelerated the grains and oilseeds payment of \$755 million and, more importantly, \$2 billion will come into farmers' hands between now and the end of the year.

*Oral Questions***AFGHANISTAN**

Ms. Dawn Black (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Canadian women and men are being sent to Afghanistan to wage a war with no foreseeable end. Tanks and heavy armour have been ordered up even though the commander of the army said they would not be sent. The Minister of Foreign Affairs said we will be there until the Taliban is destroyed, yet the Minister of National Defence admitted there was no military solution to the insurgency.

When will the government refocus the mission and make strides toward peace and diplomacy, not war?

Hon. Gordon O'Connor (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I find that really strange coming from the NDP, who want us out of Afghanistan. Only they and the Taliban want us out of Afghanistan. We will stay the course. We are committed in Afghanistan till the end of February 2009 and we will stay the course.

Ms. Dawn Black (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Mr. Speaker, international pressure is mounting around the world to end this unwinnable war. The minister is only going to be able to ignore our questions for a very short time.

The government should start listening to people like Captain Leo Docherty, a former aide-de-camp to the British, who said that “we’ve lost the hearts and minds before we’ve even begun” or to Greg Mills, a former adviser to ISAF, who argued last week that no amount of firepower will defeat the Taliban and their allies. It is time to support our troops by bringing them home. The only question is, when?

Hon. Gordon O'Connor (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the absolute worst thing we could do is pull our troops, bring them back home and leave the Taliban to have Afghanistan. It is only a little while since the Taliban were there and they were carrying out a murderous regime of punishments on women, with no children going to school.

I find it hypocritical for the NDP to be asking us to pull our military out and replace them with the Taliban.

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• (1455)

LOBBYISTS

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Wascana, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, there are reports that former Conservative insiders are now profiting from their political connections as private sector lobbyists: at least 30 well-connected Conservatives, at least 327 contracts to influence public policy, the Prime Minister’s director of communications, his director of strategic communications, his senior policy adviser and more.

The Conservatives promised to prohibit former staffers from using their previous positions as stepping stones to private lobbying. Why has that promise been broken?

Hon. John Baird (President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in fact, not a single former assistant to the Prime Minister or any minister has accepted a job with respect to being a lobbyist. That is specifically something that is banned in the federal accountability act. We are raising the bar.

Let us look at an internal Liberal Party report that said, “Many estimate that, on just about every issue, the Liberal Party has absolutely no credibility in the eyes of the public”. Will the member for Wascana stand in his place and call on the Liberal Senate to finally pass the federal accountability act and clean up the mess?

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Wascana, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Canadians can do without the smokescreen and all that false bravado. This is not about any previous government. This is all about that Conservative government. It all happened in the last six or seven months. The Prime Minister’s former public affairs officer, his director of internal communications, his spokesperson on economic issues, and the list goes on: private profit from Conservative connections. Specifically what sections in the accountability act will henceforth prohibit that practice and will that be retroactive to January?

Hon. John Baird (President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, if the member for Wascana has a specific example of any law that has been broken or under our new federal accountability that would have been broken, I would encourage him to go the committee in the Senate and ask for an amendment. If the member opposite would like to show his true bravado, he should stand up and say that no Liberal ministerial staffer will be allowed to lobby, let the Senate make that amendment, let it be retroactive and then we will find out if he puts his money where his mouth is.

[Translation]

Mr. Marcel Proulx (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today we have further evidence that the Conservatives boost the oil companies at the expense of the Kyoto protocol. We have now learned that Kristin Anderson, Geoff Norquay, and Ken Boessenkool, all former employees of the Prime Minister, have received 65 contracts as lobbyists to persuade the government to give preference to oil producers at the expense of the environment.

Was the Prime Minister’s statement that “positions of public trust cannot be used as stepping stones to private lobbying” nothing more than window dressing?

Hon. John Baird (President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I stated very clearly that no person who worked for this government is working as a lobbyist. There is a new administration in Ottawa. If you work in a minister’s office or the office of the Prime Minister, you must follow the new rules.

[English]

If the member opposite would like to raise the bar and ban former Liberal staffers, dozens, if not hundreds, who are peddling as lobbyists today, then he should get his friends in the Senate to make an amendment and send it back here to vote on it.

[Translation]

Mr. Marcel Proulx (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister repeatedly told us that the objectives of the Kyoto protocol were unattainable. Now we understand better. It was his friends who were telling him what to say.

How can the prime minister explain that his former director of public affairs, his former director of communications, as well as his former senior policy advisor have all obtained lobbying contracts in the private sector, despite his pious words in the last election campaign? Once again, here is the proof that the Prime Minister says one thing and does exactly the opposite.

• (1500)

Hon. John Baird (President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have made it clear that all of these people worked for persons who were not in the government but in the opposition. If hon. members think of all the people who work for members of the official opposition, it may be necessary to ask for changes to the bill. This has been going on since January 23.

Mr. Jean-Yves Laforest (Saint-Maurice—Champlain, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the Conservative government fought the last election campaign on a promise to change the way contracts were awarded. Now, we learn that 30 Conservative lobbyists, including former advisers to the Prime Minister, have obtained 327 contracts in just seven months of Conservative government.

How can the Prime Minister explain these revelations when he promised to clean things up?

[English]

Hon. John Baird (President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will say very clearly that not a single person who worked for any member of this government is operating as a lobbyist. We made the laws very clear and very specific. We are raising the ethical bar because of the gross ethical abuses perpetrated by the previous Liberal government.

What we need the Bloc Québécois to do is join the Conservatives and the New Democrats and encourage the Liberal Senate to finally pass the federal accountability act so we can clean up this mess once and for all.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Yves Laforest (Saint-Maurice—Champlain, BQ): Mr. Speaker, Liberals or Conservatives, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

How can the Prime Minister explain this situation when he is playing the virtue card with his bill on accountability while at the same time he tolerates behaviour by his former advisers that is contrary to that very legislation?

[English]

Hon. John Baird (President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the federal accountability act seeks to raise the ethical standards of the government. No people who have access to cabinet documents, cabinet confidence and the type of information that pervades government should work for a lobbyist for five years, which is why we are challenging the Liberal Senate.

This House of Commons passed the federal accountability act in 71 days. The Liberal Senate has had that bill for more than 85 days. It should get to work and pass the federal accountability act. We could finally bring real accountability to an accountability regime that was sorely absent in the previous regime.

Oral Questions

GOVERNMENT CONTRACTS

Hon. Navdeep Bains (Mississauga—Brampton South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, so much for the Prime Minister's promise that politics will no longer be a stepping stone to a lucrative career in lobbying government. Thirty friends and former key advisers of the Prime Minister have cashed in on 327 contracts with big name oil companies in order to get the government to kill the Kyoto protocol.

My question is very simple. Will the Prime Minister side with the large oil companies or will the Prime Minister side with Canadians?

Hon. John Baird (President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the practice of this government is to raise the ethical bar that was sorely lacking in the Liberal regime.

Let us look at what a report of the Liberal Party said about this. An internal Liberal Party report made public on September 10 stated, "on just about every issue the Liberal Party has absolutely no credibility in the eyes of the public".

Let us get the Liberal Senate to pass the federal accountability act now.

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SPONSORSHIP PROGRAM

Mr. Ken Epp (Edmonton—Sherwood Park, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Liberal sponsorship scandal was a disgraceful period in our history where millions of taxpayer dollars were stolen and diverted to the coffers of the Liberal Party of Canada.

My question is for the President of the Treasury Board. How many dollars have been recovered to date from the Liberal Party over the sponsorship scandal?

Hon. John Baird (President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the easy answer to the question from the member for Edmonton—Sherwood Park is not enough of the money. Not all of the money that was stolen by the Liberal Party has been returned to the coffers. Justice Gomery in his report talks about the envelopes of cash that were funnelled to ridings in the western and eastern townships and to ridings in western Quebec.

The Canadian taxpayer expects the Liberal Party to refund all of the money that was stolen from hard-working taxpayers and they also expect the Liberal Senate to pass the federal accountability act immediately.

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• (1505)

SOFTWOOD LUMBER

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Incredibly, Mr. Speaker, the government is now intervening in court to stop Canadians from winning once and for all on softwood lumber. Winning means that the illegal tariffs come off and every penny has to be repaid. There are no more appeals. We are months away from winning.

This means that the minister botched the discussions. It means that the \$1 billion proceeds of trade crime did not have to be thrown away and it means that we did not need to give up four years of legal victories.

Tributes

Why is the government blocking Canada's two final victories? Is it because Canadians will see how badly it screwed up?

Hon. David Emerson (Minister of International Trade and Minister for the Pacific Gateway and the Vancouver-Whistler Olympics, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is spreading more of his intellectual dishonesty on the softwood lumber agreement. He knows the softwood lumber agreement has massive support from the industry. Over 90% of the softwood lumber companies support this softwood lumber agreement.

It is dishonest to spread the notion that there would be no more legal cases and no more appeals. There would be nothing but economic calamity if we did not have this softwood lumber agreement.

* * *

[*Translation*]

AFGHANISTAN

The Speaker: Following discussions with the representatives of all parties of the House, I invite the honourable members to rise and observe a moment of silence to commemorate the Canadian soldiers who have lost their lives in Afghanistan and the four soldiers who lost their lives yesterday.

[*A moment of silence observed*]

* * *

BENOÎT SAUVAGEAU

The Speaker: We will now proceed to statements about the death of our dear colleague, Benoît Sauvageau.

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, dear colleagues, I am speaking to you and to all members and friends of Benoît Sauvageau's family who are here with us today.

I would like to mention the sadness, but also the great pride, I feel in paying tribute to a man who was one of our own. I refer to Benoît Sauvageau as one of our own; however, first and foremost he was a husband, father, son and friend.

I would like once again to express my condolences to them and tell them how proud they can be. They can be proud of him as the elected representative of the people of Repentigny. They can be proud of him for his work in the House of Commons, in the committees, in the Bloc Québécois caucus and in all the activities that are part of the daily life of a member of Parliament.

As such, he served on three standing committees, and some pretty important ones at that. Until very recently, he was on the Standing Committee on Public Accounts where, through his conscientious work, he defended the bond of trust between Canadians and their institutions. He was also on the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, a crucial area if ever there was one, because it deals with our relations with the world. He was also a member of the Standing Committee on Official Languages, a key issue for the nation of Quebec as well as Canadian francophones and Acadians.

He worked tirelessly on all these committees, with great fervour and conviction but always with the natural elegance for which he was known. He carried the ball on a host of files for the Bloc Québécois, ranging from international trade to public accounts and

Treasury Board, not to forget amateur sport and the Francophonie. He was also the deputy whip on our team. In all these duties, he earned the respect of everyone here.

He did all this and I am grateful to him for it, I thank him, but he did much more than his job as a member of Parliament. He embodied in his discreet, cheerful way all the humanity we need in our line of work.

The debates we hold in this place are often very intense. Benoît had the ability to engage in vigorous debate while always being scrupulously respectful of others. He was known less for his brilliant achievements or cutting rejoinders than for his great humanity. The numerous tributes we have heard from all the other parties are proof of that.

I had the feeling that these tributes were very sincere. We in the Bloc were deeply moved by them and I thank everyone.

Disagreements with political foes are normal and even desirable in a democracy. Despite these differences, though, Benoît managed the great feat of making himself respected and even loved by all the political foes who got to know him well without ever compromising his convictions and principles.

Like all of us, Benoît was not perfect. For example, his eldest daughter revealed just a little while ago that he never did master the agreement of past participles in French. He was not perfect, but he had remarkable humanity, and it is this memory of Benoît, a man of great humanity, that will remain etched in our memories. We will all miss him very much. We already do.

● (1510)

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, unfortunately, this seems to be a time of tragedy.

On August 28, 2006, we were very saddened to learn that the hon. member for Repentigny, Benoît Sauvageau, was the victim of a traffic accident. This tragic accident cost him his life, leaving his wife, Jacinthe, and four daughters, Laurence, Catherine, Élisabeth and Alice, to mourn their loss, along with the rest of his family and his many friends. At this time, I would like to again offer our sincere condolences.

I had the privilege of working with Benoît on many occasions, when we both sat on the opposition benches over 10 years ago when we were both still very young members. He was the type of man whose honour and integrity were matched only by his generosity and sparkling wit.

Even though we did not share the same vision regarding the relationship that should exist between Quebec and the rest of Canada, he was always gracious when defending his principles and ideals.

I was very impressed by his many qualities: his willingness to always give his all in the service of his constituents; his passion for his work as an MP; his genuine love for the French language and culture; his profound faith in democratic institutions; and, above all, his tremendous respect for others.

Tributes

Whether on the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, the Standing Committee on Official Languages, on other committees, or here in this House, Benoît always demonstrated the utmost respect towards those with whom he engaged in lively debate.

There is no doubt that his death came far too early, but it should be of some consolation that his short life was characterized by tremendous dignity and rare fervour.

The Bloc Québécois caucus lost a colleague in the prime of his life who had so much to offer. I am certain that we will all miss Benoît's enlightened and significant contribution.

• (1515)

Hon. Bill Graham (Leader of the Opposition, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, like all the members here today in the House, I was terribly saddened to learn about the tragic death of our colleague and friend, the member for Repentigny. This news left no one untouched. Benoît Sauvageau was a good man loved by all. I hope that the great compassion expressed for him by Canadians has helped all those affected by his premature death to get through this difficult time.

On behalf of all the members of the official opposition and the Liberal Party of Canada, I wish first of all to offer our most sincere condolences to his wife and four daughters, as well as to his entire family and each of his loved ones. To all those who knew Benoît well, to the people of Quebec and everyone from Repentigny and the North Shore, we humbly extend our most sincere condolences and all our sympathy in these most difficult circumstances.

I also wish to say to all our colleagues of the Bloc Québécois that we are thinking of them and that we know how hard today and the coming weeks will be without the presence of someone so well respected and loved. May they accept our expression of solidarity in these circumstances so difficult for them and their party.

All the members understand that beyond our partisan differences we all feel the mutual respect due to all those who are committed to the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the sound exercise of our parliamentary democracy.

Each of my colleagues in the official opposition and I felt this respect for Benoît, who always earned it fully in each of his interventions in this House, in committee and in each of his parliamentary initiatives.

He was a good member. The people of Repentigny have lost a hard-working, intelligent representative who knew how to convey the points of view of his riding effectively in this House.

Unanimously, the members who have spoken about Benoît have underscored the honesty with which he performed his duties as a parliamentarian. Many have spoken of the fact that, while his interventions were sometimes blunt, Benoît never indulged in empty rhetoric. He had deep respect for his colleagues.

I myself had the opportunity to work closely with the member for Repentigny, when he was on the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade. I always appreciated his interventions; they were always thoughtful and appropriate. As the member for Laurier—Sainte-Marie said, he made an important contribution—I had the privilege to be a member of the committee—with great

talent, sincerity and the will to work with everyone for the wellbeing of his province, of his fellow citizens and our country.

[*English*]

For these reasons, Benoît rightly earned the respect of his colleagues in the House. As I said earlier, for those who had the opportunity of working closely with him in committee, there was a universal admiration and friendship that is difficult to achieve in the inevitably adversarial nature of our operations.

• (1520)

[*Translation*]

Let me conclude by reiterating once again, on my behalf and on behalf of the whole Liberal family, that we share the sadness of Benoît's family and loved ones and that they hold a very special place in our thoughts.

Let me also recall the memory of Benoît Sauvageau. I hope that his memory will remain in the history of our country as that of a man of integrity, a devoted man worthy of the respect of each and every one of his fellow citizens.

Finally let me express the wish, on behalf of all my colleagues and myself, that Benoît's soul will rest in peace for eternity. We will all miss him.

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I was very sad to learn of the sudden death of my parliamentary colleague, Bloc Québécois member Benoît Sauvageau, especially since I was out of the country and unable to attend his funeral.

It is therefore my privilege today to pay tribute to him, even though I do so with a heavy heart.

I worked with Mr. Sauvageau in the course of my parliamentary duties. In 2002 I was assigned to the Standing Committee on Official Languages, of which Mr. Sauvageau was a member. I got to know the member for Repentigny, but also the man.

It was always a pleasure to sit with him. Courteous, smiling and friendly, he always greeted me with, "Salut Yvon". All the members of the committee will agree that he greeted everyone in a simple and familiar fashion.

He was always well prepared for every session and had a thorough grasp of files and issues. He took a special interest in Air Canada. I am certain that Air Canada senior management trembled with fear at the mention of Benoît Sauvageau's name. Even worse, when Air Canada representatives had to testify before the committee, they knew they were in for a rough ride, because Benoît was waiting for them. I would not have wanted to be in their shoes. I preferred to have him sitting next to me rather than across the table. We have Benoît to thank for the little card for official languages complaints that Air Canada places in seat pockets on its aircraft.

I would like to tell a short anecdote. Air Canada said that the complaint cards cost too much, so Benoît had one made. He told them exactly how much it had cost, which was not much.

Routine Proceedings

To Benoît, every issue was important. He understood his role as a parliamentarian, but also as a member of the committee. He was a good ambassador not only for francophones in Quebec, but also for the francophone communities in Canada and Acadia. His efforts to promote the French language and culture were recognized when the Assemblée parlementaire de la Francophonie made him a Chevalier de l'Ordre de la Pléiade, Ordre de la Francophonie et du dialogue des cultures.

Unfortunately, he was assigned to other committees, and I never had the chance to work with him again. Nevertheless, I am sure he worked just as enthusiastically on his new files.

He was a good member of Parliament who worked tirelessly for his community and the people in it. His five terms as a member of Parliament are a testament to his integrity and his devotion to his community.

Over the past few weeks, I have heard his Bloc colleagues, others who worked with him, and people everywhere say good things about him. Everything they said about him was true.

It almost seemed like people had sent the word around, but that was not the case. Benoît was always true to himself; he was a good man and true. He was a real gentleman and an example to us all.

Many people would have liked to pay tribute to him today. I hope that I have adequately expressed what we all feel.

Today, he leaves behind not only his grieving family, but also his family here in Parliament. There is no doubt he will be missed.

On behalf of the NDP and its leader, I would like to express our sincere condolences to his wife, children and family.

My dear Benoît, you left without giving us a chance to say goodbye, so I would like to take this opportunity to say farewell, my friend.

• (1525)

Mr. Bernard Bigras (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, on August 28 a colleague, and for many of us a friend first and foremost, was taken from us. Benoît sat in the House of Commons for 13 years and we all remember a moment, a conversation, a meeting that bears witness to the wonderful qualities of this man who was gentle, generous and had a great sense of humour.

As a history teacher, Benoît understood better than anyone the challenges faced by francophones living in North America. He decided to defend francophones living outside Quebec and made this part of his political commitment. Nothing could turn him away from this undertaking, which was included in every parliamentary responsibility and which he defended with tact, dedication and determination. As a result of his perseverance, he was bestowed with the title of Chevalier de l'Ordre de la Pléiade in 2003.

Although he defended his causes with his customary determination, we also remember that Benoît went about his business with an air of calm, refinement and civility. This level approach earned him the respect of everyone, including his adversaries, and is what made him a real gentleman.

Benoît demonstrated tremendous respect for others and their ideas because he understood that, beyond being members of Parliament, we are all human beings first and foremost, and consequently felt that abuse, pettiness and insults had no place here.

Benoît was a sensitive, considerate man and enjoyable to be around. I still recall having dinner with colleagues after a long day of work when Benoît would manage to pull us out of the parliamentary whirlwind that sometimes kept us long after normal working hours.

He would tell us about his life, about happy times spent with his wife Jacinthe and their children, whom he adored, and about his parents and brother, whom he admired and loved. We now share in their pain and offer them our sincere condolences.

The members newly elected for this 39th Parliament will recall his coming here to this House last winter, accompanied by his oldest daughter, in order to give us a one day training session on the challenges we face in balancing work and family.

We saw a teenager's pride in her father and a father who was proud of his daughters, made obvious by what they each had to say.

Benoît, it is now our turn to show you our pride. We are proud of the work you accomplished and proud that you were part of our team.

Your seat remains empty today, but know that your memory will always be etched in my heart and in the hearts of all your colleagues.

Farewell, Benoît.

• (1530)

The Speaker: I want to thank all hon. members who expressed their regrets regarding the death of our dear colleague, Mr. Sauvageau. I now ask hon. members to rise to observe a moment of silence in honour of the late Benoît Sauvageau.

[A moment of silence observed]

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

[English]

CERTIFICATES OF NOMINATION

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have the privilege to table, in both official languages, the certificate of nomination for the position of Commissioner of Official Languages.

* * *

WAYS AND MEANS

NOTICE OF MOTION

Hon. David Emerson (Minister of International Trade and Minister for the Pacific Gateway and the Vancouver-Whistler Olympics, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 83(1), I wish to table a notice of ways and means motion respecting an act to implement the softwood lumber agreement with the United States.

Routine Proceedings

I ask that an order of the day be designated for consideration of this motion.

* * *

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO PETITIONS

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 36(8), I have the honour to table, in both official languages, the government's responses to 19 petitions.

* * *

CANADA GRAIN ACT

Mr. David Anderson (Parliamentary Secretary (for the Canadian Wheat Board) to the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and Minister for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 32(2), I am pleased to table, in both official languages, the review of the Canada Grain Act and the Canadian Grain Commission. This review is required pursuant to the Canada Grain Act.

* * *

MAHER ARAR INQUIRY

Hon. Stockwell Day (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to table, in both official languages, the report of the events relating to Maher Arar, issued under part I of the Inquiries Act. The inquiry was established to investigate and report on the actions of Canadian officials in relation to Mr. Maher Arar.

Although the government has only received the report today, I want to highlight that the inquiry has determined, and I quote Judge O'Connor, "there is no evidence that Canadian officials participated or acquiesced in the American authority's decision to detain Mr. Arar and move him to Syria".

[Translation]

On behalf of the Government of Canada, I want to sincerely thank the commissioner of inquiry, Associate Chief Justice of Ontario, Dennis O'Connor, for his work over the past two and a half years.

We will carefully review the report and recommendations.

* * *

• (1535)

[English]

COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE**HEALTH**

Mr. Rob Merrifield (Yellowhead, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the second report of the Standing Committee on Health, entitled "Even one is too many: A call for a comprehensive action plan for Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder".

Pursuant to Standing Order 109, the committee requests that the government table a comprehensive response to the report.

I also have the honour to present, in both official languages, the third report of the Standing Committee on Health, entitled "Silicone Gel-Filled Implants: Areas of Concern".

Pursuant to Standing Order 109, the committee requests that the government table a comprehensive response to the report.

* * *

CRIMINAL CODE

Mr. Myron Thompson (Wild Rose, CPC) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-350, An Act to amend the Criminal Code (bail for persons charged with violent offences), the Extradition Act and the Youth Criminal Justice Act.

He said: Mr. Speaker, it gives me great pleasure to table this private member's bill today on behalf of a number of victims across the country who have been asking for this judgment for some time.

This enactment would repeal section 522 of the Criminal Code to remove the power of a judge of a superior court of criminal jurisdiction to grant interim release to a person accused of one of the very serious offences listed in section 469. That list is quite extensive, everything from treason to murder, serious sexual assaults, and many other very violent and very serious charges.

This would eliminate bailing these people out once they were arrested and charged, and thus would provide better safety to our communities.

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

* * *

CRIMINAL CODE

Mr. Myron Thompson (Wild Rose, CPC) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-351, An Act to amend the Criminal Code (review of parole ineligibility) and to amend other Acts in consequence.

He said: Mr. Speaker, once again it gives me pleasure to reintroduce a bill that was brought forward in the House in the 1990s by a former member of the Liberal Party, John Nunziata. I would like to bring the bill forward today. In the 1990s the bill passed through the House, but unfortunately died on the order paper before it became law.

This enactment would amend the Criminal Code to repeal section 745.6 of the code, often referred to as the faint hope clause, which allows a person sentenced to life imprisonment for high treason or murder to apply after 15 years for a reduction in the period of parole eligibility. This bill would eliminate that from the Criminal Code and thus bring a little more truth to sentencing.

Points of Order

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

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, there have been consultations and I believe you will find the unanimous consent of the House to adopt, without debate, items 19 and 20 listed on today's order paper. Item 19 deals with the address of the President of Afghanistan. Item 20 transfers the review of the Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act from the Standing Committee on Industry to the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics.

The Speaker: May I dispense with putting the two motions to the House?

● (1540)

Hon. Ralph Goodale: Mr. Speaker, I believe we are in agreement. I would just like to hear the motions read. I think we are fine with the substance. I just want to make sure we are dealing with exactly the same subject matter. Once the motions are read, I think we will be able to give our agreement.

* * *

ADDRESS OF THE PRESIDENT OF AFGHANISTAN

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (for the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform) moved:

Motion No. 19

That, notwithstanding any Standing Order or usual practices of the House, on Friday, September 22, 2006, the House shall meet at 11:00 a.m. when Members may make statements pursuant to Standing Order 31; not later than 11:15 a.m. oral questions shall be taken up; at noon, the House shall proceed to the ordinary daily routine of business, followed by Government Orders; at 1:30 p.m. the House shall proceed to Private Members' Business; at the conclusion of Private Members' Business the House shall stand adjourned to the next sitting day;

that, the Address of the President of Afghanistan, to be delivered in the Chamber of the House of Commons at 9:00 a.m. on Friday, September 22, 2006 before Members of the Senate and the House of Commons, together with all introductory and related remarks, be printed as an appendix to the House of Commons Debates for that day and form part of the records of this House; and

that the media recording and transmission of such address, introductory and related remarks be authorized pursuant to established guidelines for such occasions.

The Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to)

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PERSONAL INFORMATION PROTECTION AND ELECTRONIC DOCUMENTS ACT

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (for the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform) moved:

Motion No. 20

That, notwithstanding the Special Order of Tuesday, April 25, 2006, the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics be the committee for the purposes of section 29 of the Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act.

The Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to)

PETITIONS**CHILD CARE**

Hon. Anita Neville (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have two petitions to present to the House.

The first petition calls on the Government of Canada to honour the funding agreement between the Government of Canada and the Government of Manitoba as signed on November 18, 2005. This agreement deals with a child care agreement called "Moving Forward on Early Learning and Child Care". It addresses a very concrete plan in the province of Manitoba to provide child care spaces in Winnipeg, rural Manitoba and northern Manitoba. These will not be put into place and this has a significant consequence on my community.

AGE OF CONSENT

Hon. Anita Neville (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the second petition calls on the government assembled in Parliament to take all measures necessary to immediately raise the age of consent from 14 to 16 years of age.

AGE OF CONSENT

Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am proud to present a petition today by constituents from across my riding who support an increase in the age of consent from 14 to 16 years of age.

The petitioners feel that children under 16 years of age are those who are most vulnerable to sexual exploitation and need our protection. They call upon all members of parliament to support the government in its effort to bring forward legislation.

LABELLING OF ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis (Winnipeg North, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have yet another petition on labels warning people about the dangers of fetal alcohol syndrome.

The petition has another couple of hundred names of people who have called upon the government repeatedly over the last five years to honour a motion that was passed by Parliament, to put the motion into effect, to get the labels on the bottles warning women that when they drink during pregnancy it could cause problems in terms of the baby. It is a simple request. The petitioners just want it to happen.

Through these petitioners, I implore the government to finally act on this sensible motion.

* * *

POINTS OF ORDER**ORAL QUESTIONS**

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in question period today, the Minister of International Trade called me dishonest for raising facts that came out this summer in the international trade committee hearings on softwood lumber. He said it twice. It is unparliamentary and inappropriate language for the House of Commons. The minister may disagree with me, but his comments were completely inappropriate.

I would like to ask you, Mr. Speaker, to ask him to withdraw the comments as soon as possible.

Routine Proceedings

●(1545)

The Speaker: I thank the hon. member for raising the matter. I must say I think I may have heard the word, but I did not realize, from what I could hear, that it was directed to the hon. member. I certainly will look at the blues. If some intervention by the Chair is required, I assure the hon. member that I will take the necessary steps. I will look at the matter first and determine what transpired.

I thank him for drawing that to the Chair's attention.

* * *

QUESTIONS ON THE ORDER PAPER

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the following questions will be answered today: Nos. 31, 36, 44, 45, 56, 57, 59, 63, 65, 68, 69, 72, 73, 78, 79, 82, 83, 84, 85 and 86.

[Text]

Question No. 31—**Mr. Lloyd St. Amand:**

With respect to the money required to clean the Greenwich-Mohawk brownfield site located in the riding of Brant (Ontario): (a) has the government approved the allocation of any government funds for the clean-up of the site; (b) has the government taken any steps to stop or reduce the previous allocation of any government funds for the clean-up of the site; (c) what steps have been taken by the government to determine whether to fund the clean-up of the site; (d) are there any funds available in either the estimates tabled by the government in April 2006, or the budget tabled by the government in May 2006 to fund the clean-up of the site; (e) has the government received any advice from the public service on whether it would be appropriate to provide funding to clean up the site; and (f) are there any proposals to fund the clean-up of the site currently being studied by cabinet, a cabinet committee, or any department and, if so, at what stage are each of the proposals, and what steps need to be taken before a final decision is made?

Hon. Maxime Bernier (Minister of Industry, CPC): The budget presented to the House of Commons on May 2, 2006 included an amount of \$12 million for Industry Canada to support the City of Brantford's economic development priorities. Industry Canada officials are working with the municipality to finalize the necessary details. An announcement will be made in due course.

Question No. 36—**Mr. Wayne Marston:**

With regard to the agreement with the government of the United States of America concerning the handling of detainees in Afghanistan: (a) is there a Canada-USA detainee transfer agreement and, if so, (i) does that agreement remain in force notwithstanding the existence of the Canada-Afghanistan agreement and (ii) how do the two agreements relate to each other, especially in a situation where an individual detainee is specifically requested by the USA; and (b) have any detainees been transferred to USA custody since the Canada-Afghanistan arrangement was signed

Hon. Gordon O'Connor (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in response to (a), prior to the signing of the arrangement between the Canadian Forces, on behalf of the Government of Canada, with the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan on 18 December 2005, Canadian Forces transferred detainees to U.S. authorities. There is no written arrangement on transfer of detainees between Canada and the United States of America. The United States has provided public assurances that the detainees in its custody are being treated humanely and in a manner consistent with the principles of the Geneva Conventions, and Canada was satisfied with such assurances and is confident that the detainees who have been transferred to U.S. authorities have been, and will be, treated in accordance with international law. These assurances have been reinforced by the

comments made by United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice that the United States complies with its treaty obligations in the treatment of detainees and neither permits nor condones torture under any circumstances. The United States Detainee Treatment Act of 2005 is another positive development which confirms the public assurances by the United States government that detainees in the custody of the United States will be treated humanely. This act establishes uniform standards for the interrogation of people detained by United States military personnel and also prohibits "cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment" of persons in custody or under the physical control of the United States Government.

Item (i) is not applicable.

Item (ii) is not applicable.

In response to (b), no. Individuals detained by the Canadian Forces in Afghanistan have been transferred to Afghan authorities since the signing of the arrangement on 18 December 2005.

Question No. 44—**Mr. Paul Dewar:**

With regard to the lease-purchase agreement between Public Works and Government Services Canada (PWGSC) and Minto Developments for the property at 3000 Merivale Road: (a) what financial details have gone to Treasury Board to support this agreement in principle; (b) was the search for a lease agreement publicly tendered; (c) what are the details of the tendering process for the relocation of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police headquarters from 1200 Vanier Parkway; (d) what are the details of the analysis for all of the options considered by PWGSC prior to the agreement in principle with Minto Developments; and (e) was the City of Ottawa's 2001 policy of stimulating growth by encouraging the location of "future federal workplaces near Transitway Stations and give particular consideration to the east-end part of the City" considered in this decision and, if so, how?

Mr. James Moore (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Works and Government Services and Minister for the Pacific Gateway and the Vancouver-Whistler Olympics, CPC):

Mr. Speaker, in response to (a), all of the financial details required to obtain Treasury Board approval, including a detailed business case, were submitted. The financial details submitted to Treasury Board cannot be disclosed.

In response to (b), 3000 Merivale Road, the former headquarters of JDS Uniphase, became available and was offered to the Government as a result of the downturn in the high tech business. Minto purchased the complex from JDS and offered this unique facility to the government at rental rates substantially less than those reflecting its replacement cost. PWGSC posted an Advance Contract Award Notice, ACAN, to provide an opportunity for other potential suppliers to submit bids. No suppliers came forward. The results demonstrate that the proposal from Minto Development Inc. to lease-purchase 3000 Merivale Road was the best accommodation option, since it provides the least disruptive, most cost-effective solution to meet the long term needs of the RCMP.

In response to (c), as in (b) above, there was no tender process, but the lease-purchase was subject to an Advance Contract Aware Notice.

Routine Proceedings

In response to (d), before issuing the Advance Contract Award Notice, the government did a comprehensive 25-year present value cost analysis of different options, ranging from partial renovation of the current buildings, demolition and development of new buildings on the 1200 Vanier site, to complete replacement with a new building on an undeveloped site. After analysis, all these other options proved to be more costly by at least \$70 million.

In response to (e), the proposed acquisition arose from an unsolicited proposal for an existing building, not for future development. Municipal growth strategies will be considered in situations involving new development. 3000 Merivale is near an existing transit node, and has a bus stop on the site. It is in close proximity to the proposed future light rail route. Both the RCMP and PWGSC have committed to work with OC Transpo to enhance public transit service to suit the increased population. This is consistent with the city's goal to intensify development and thus limit urban sprawl. In addition, the backfill of the 1200 Vanier campus with regional RCMP functions will help to maintain the RCMP's strong presence in the eastern part of the city, as well as provide opportunities for other federal government clients.

Question No. 45—Ms. Olivia Chow:

With respect to the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) has the CMHC had a budget surplus during the last five years and, if so, what was the surplus for each year; and how has the government spent these surpluses?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation is involved in a variety of activities, ranging from housing programs aimed at Canadians in need to insurance and securitization which facilitate access to more affordable housing through the Canadian housing finance system. The activities relating to the housing programs are funded through government appropriations and are operated on a break-even basis.

Activities aimed at the efficiency of the housing finance markets are operated, as required by our mandate, in a commercially viable manner. Accordingly, none of CMHC's net income is derived from activities funded through budgetary appropriations.

CMHC's annual net income is derived solely from its activities that are not funded by annual parliamentary appropriations.

To answer the question, we have assumed that "budget surplus" meant CMHC's net income, including profits from lending activity, over the last five calendar years as set out below (\$ million).

2001	\$345
2002	\$544
2003	\$667
2004	\$950
2005	\$1,002

How has the government spent these surpluses? As a federal Crown corporation, CMHC's net financial results are accounted for on a fiscal year basis and consolidated with the government's financial statements, which means that CMHC's net income has been recognized in the government's revenues dollar for dollar.

Question No. 56—Mr. Mark Holland:

With regard to the comprehensive due diligence review of the role of airports in southern Ontario and future air traffic growth, which was announced by the Minister of Transport on September 9, 2005, in the context of the future of the Pickering Lands: (a) what are the terms of reference of this review; (b) when and by whom were these terms established; (c) which officials or outside organizations will be conducting this review; (d) which airport planning studies have been or will be reviewed as part of this process; (e) what criteria will be used to assess these studies; (f) when will this process be completed; and (g) when will the results of this process made public?

Hon. Lawrence Cannon (Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, CPC): In response to (a), the terms of reference have not yet been finalized.

In response to (b), the terms of reference are being developed by Transport Canada officials, and will be finalized after discussion with the Due Diligence Review Committee.

In response to (c), the due diligence review will be led by senior Transport Canada officials, using departmental and external technical experts. This will include representatives from the public who have technical expertise in the study areas. The list of members has not been finalized.

In response to (d), the review will look at all planning studies including aviation demand, airport capacity and ground transportation access that were completed as part of a potential future airport on the Pickering lands.

In response to (e), the criteria to assess the studies have not yet been finalized, and will be completed after discussion with the Due Diligence Review Committee.

In response to (f), the due diligence review will take several months to complete once it is fully initiated. As there is further study taking place at this time, it is difficult to speculate on a date.

In response to (g), once the due diligence review is completed, the department will brief stakeholders and the interested public, and Transport Canada will make its findings public.

Question No. 57—Mr. Todd Russell:

With regard to employment at 5 Wing Goose Bay, Labrador, how many uniformed military personnel, civilian employees of the Department of National Defence and employees of Serco were stationed or employed there, as the case may be, as of November 1, 2005, and June 1, 2006?

Hon. Gordon O'Connor (Minister of National Defence, CPC): On November 1, 2005, there were 25 civilian employees of the Department of National Defence, 68 regular force and 11 reserve members of the Canadian Forces stationed or employed in Goose Bay. As well, 102 other individuals were employed on the base including five with Defence Construction Canada, 28 members of the 5 Canadian Ranger Patrol Group, 34 Canex employees, 20 with the personal services program, seven funded through non-public funds, and eight working in the Military Family Resource Centre.

Routine Proceedings

On June 1, 2006, there were 26 civilian employees of the Department of National Defence, 68 regular force and 11 reserve members of the Canadian Forces stationed or employed in Goose Bay. As well, 101 other individuals were employed on the base including five with Defence Construction Canada, 28 members of the 5 Canadian Ranger Patrol Group, 33 Canex employees, 20 with the personal services program, seven funded through non-public funds, and eight working in the Military Family Resource Centre.

Serco is a private company with whom the Department of National Defence has a contract for specific services. The number of personnel that Serco chooses to utilize to deliver these services is a business decision internal to the company. Accordingly, the Department of National Defence cannot report on the number of Serco employees stationed or employed at Goose Bay.

Question No. 59—Mr. Richard Nadeau

With regard to leases signed by the government in the National Capital Region, what is: (a) the number of such leases expiring in 2006 in the Ottawa region and in the Outaouais region; (b) the number of such leases expiring in 2007 in the Ottawa region and in the Outaouais region; (c) the number of vacant premises in the Ottawa region and in the Outaouais region in 2006?

Mr. James Moore (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Works and Government Services and Minister for the Pacific Gateway and the Vancouver-Whistler Olympics, CPC):

Mr. Speaker, the response is as follows:

OFFICE SPACE (space acquired from private sector landlords)

Expiring leases in calendar year 2006: 72 (61 NCA Ontario and 11 NCA Quebec)

Expiring leases in calendar year 2007: 56 (51 NCA Ontario and 5 NCA Quebec)

Vacant premises in NCA for 2006: 51 (43 NCA Ontario and 8 NCA Quebec)

COMMERCIAL SPACE (Crown owned space leased to private sector tenants)

Expiring leases in calendar year 2006 : 168 (125 NCA Ontario and 43 NCA Quebec)

Expiring leases in calendar year 2007: 130 (115 NCA Ontario and 15 NCA Quebec)

Vacant premises in NCA for 2006: 24 (18 NCA Ontario and 6 NCA Quebec)

Question No. 63—Hon. Andy Scott:

With regard to the Canada Strategic Infrastructure Fund and the Prime Minister's announcement in March 2006 of \$200 million in support for highway upgrades in New Brunswick: (a) what is the status of the \$7 million approved by Infrastructure Canada in November of 2004 for Phase 1 of the Nashwaak/Marysville bypass; (b) did the government receive any revised proposals or designs in 2006 from the government of New Brunswick for this project enabling Treasury Board to forward this \$7 million; (c) which program will be used to deliver the \$200 million that has been committed by the Prime Minister; (d) when will these monies start flowing to the province; (e) what is the order of precedence in which individual highway projects will be funded under the \$200 million commitment; and (f) has the government of New Brunswick submitted a design for the Route 8 Marysville bypass to South Portage?

Hon. Lawrence Cannon (Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, CPC): In response to (a), the Marysville bypass project was the subject of a joint \$14 million commitment by Canada and New Brunswick under the Canada Strategic Infrastructure Fund, CSIF. The federal funds were allocated to the project, but the seven million in expenditure remains to be negotiated since the project was pulled by the proponent from the package. We are awaiting an official request by the provincial government to renew discussions for this project.

In response to (b), Infrastructure Canada has not yet received any revised proposals or designs from the Government of New Brunswick.

In response to (c), the program to expend the \$200 million has not yet been determined.

In response to (d), the federal government is consulting now with provincial and territorial governments and others to determine the next generation of infrastructure programs. Once the consultations are complete the federal government will seek approval of the program terms and conditions from the federal Treasury Board. Following Treasury Board approval, new projects will proceed under the program guidelines in place at that time.

In response to (e), it is premature to speculate until the new program is designed, approved and operational.

In response to (f), no. The Government of New Brunswick has indicated publicly that it favours a modified 36 km bypass project to supersede the original project that was announced for federal funding in November 2004.

Question No. 65—Ms. Jean Crowder:

With regard to the decision to discontinue or cancel funding of the Métis National Council of Women (MNCW): (a) for which Canadian Heritage programs and initiatives was funding cancelled or not renewed; (b) what current statistical or empirical data, rationale and evidence supports the discontinuation or cancellation of the funding of MNCW programs and initiatives; (c) what cost-benefit analysis or financial estimates compiled for or by Canadian Heritage exist relating to these decisions; (d) what information was provided to the Minister of Canadian Heritage or her staff by way of analysis prior to these decisions; (e) what recommendations, pertinent to these decisions, were made by the Department of Canadian Heritage to the Minister; (f) what recommendations, pertinent to these decisions, were provided to or by the Corporate Review Branch of the Department concerning the internal review and decision-making procedures used in arriving at such funding decisions; and (g) what information, pertinent to these decisions, was provided to or by other departments or the Privy Council Office to the Minister?

Hon. Bev Oda (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Status of Women, CPC): Description of the research made: Program files and correspondence related to the Métis National Council of Women were reviewed.

In response to (a), the national women's organizations, NWO, programming element of the aboriginal peoples program provides operational funding to national aboriginal women's organizations to represent the interest of aboriginal women. An eligible organization is required to submit a proposal which meets program requirements. The proposal is assessed using the same criteria for all organizations. On March 24, 2003, Canadian Heritage terminated funding to the Métis National Council of Women, MNCW, under the national women's organization programming element because it did not meet the reporting requirements of the contribution agreement;

Routine Proceedings

In response to (b), since 2003, funding proposals from the MNCW have not been recommended for approval because they have not met the program requirements. The proposals submitted have not provided sufficient evidence that the organization effectively represents Métis women, nor have they demonstrated their intention to reach further into the communities. The proposals also have not demonstrated that this organization has the capacity, whether through the provision of funds or human resources, to undertake and successfully deliver the proposed activities.

In response to (c), there was no cost-benefit analysis done nor were financial estimates compiled. Funding was not provided to the MNCW because their proposal did not meet the program requirements;

In response to (d), the Minister of Canadian Heritage was not apprised prior to the decision to discontinue funding to the MNCW. The review and assessment of information provided by applicants and the subsequent recommendation to approve or not to approve is the responsibility of the departmental officials. The Minister of Canadian Heritage approves funding applications that meet the program requirements based on the assessment and recommendations by the departmental officials;

In response to (e), the Minister of Canadian Heritage only approves funding applications that meet the program requirements based on the assessment and recommendations by departmental officials.

In response to (f), corporate Review Branch is not responsible for the assessment of funding applications. The review of information provided by applicants as part of the project submission or reporting on funding is the responsibility of the officials in the aboriginal peoples program. These procedures are part of Treasury Board authorities including the basis for which funding is approved;

In response to (g), officials in the department have provided information on the status of funding to the MNCW to other federal departments, such as Status of Women Canada and Indian Affairs Canada, and the Minister of Canadian Heritage, when requested.

Question No. 68—Mrs. Irene Mathysen:

With regard to government affordable housing programs, is it the intention of the government to: (a) cease funding for the programs after March 31, 2007; (b) renew all programs that are due to expire after March 31, 2007; and (c) renew funding after March 31, 2007, for the following programs, (i) Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI), (ii) Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program (RRAP), (iii) Home Adaptations for Seniors' Independence (HASI), (iv) Emergency Repair Program (ERP)?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): The member for London-Fanshawe asked, on June 13, 2006, what are the government's intentions regarding funding for the housing programs that are due to expire on March 31, 2007. Those programs are the national homelessness initiative, NHI, and the federal suite of renovation programs that is, residential rehabilitation assistance program, RRAP, the home adaptations for seniors independence, HASI, the emergency repair program, ERP, and the shelter enhancement program, SEP.

Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation is responsible for the federal suite of renovation programs.

These federal housing programs were extended for a year, effective April 1, 2006.

During the fall of 2006, the government will examine whether to extend and enhance the suite of renovation programs that are due to expire on March 31 2007.

The national homelessness initiative and its cornerstone program, the supporting communities partnership initiative, were extended in November 2005 for a further year to March 31, 2007. This extension will ensure that essential services for homeless are maintained in urban and rural communities across Canada. Human Resources and Social Development Canada officials are developing options and considerations for a Government of Canada role in addressing homelessness beyond March 2007.

A total of \$175 million in program funding is available for 2006-07. Included in this total is \$109 million in standard program funding for 2006-07, \$29 million in reprofiled funds, or unspent program funds, from 2004-05, and \$37 million in reprofiled funds from 2005-06.

Question No. 69—Mr. Lloyd St. Amand:

With regard to the wind power production incentive program and its allocation in the 2005 Budget of \$920 million over 15 years, which has been frozen: (a) when will these funds be released; and (b) what additional plans does the government have to support the development of the wind energy industry in Canada?

Hon. Gary Lunn (Minister of Natural Resources, CPC): In response to (a), the government is pursuing new directions in the area of climate change policy through the development of a made in Canada plan that is focused on ensuring future generations enjoy clean air, clean water, clean land, and clean energy here in Canada.

The government recognizes the important contributions that renewable energy sources, such as wind, can provide to a diversified energy supply mix for Canada. We recognize the role that the wind power production incentive, WPPI, has played in leveraging provincial and industry support for wind energy.

The 2006 federal budget committed \$2 billion over the next five years to the environment, energy efficiency and clean energy technologies. This funding will be allocated to measures that are effective in achieving real results for Canada. Some of the measures funded may be those previously supported; others will be new. Decisions will be made as part of the made in Canada plan.

In response to (b), government support for wind energy development consists of a variety of measures including investment tax credits, support for innovative research, technology development and demonstration. Below are some of the initiatives supported by the Government of Canada related to wind energy.

Routine Proceedings

Under class 43.1 of the federal Income Tax Act, energy investors have access to an accelerated capital cost allowance, CCA, rate of 30% on a declining basis to encourage investments in certain equipment used to either produce heat for an industrial process or to generate electricity. The equipment must use a designated renewable energy source, such as wind, or burn fossil fuel efficiently. The new class 43.2 will provide a 50% CCA writeoff for certain high efficiency co-generation equipment and the full range of renewable energy generation equipment currently included in class 43.1, such as wind generators. This increased rate will apply to equipment purchased between February 23, 2005 and December 31, 2012.

Another tax measure providing support for wind energy development is the Canadian renewable and conservation expense, CRCE, category, which allows certain wind exploration expenses to be deducted immediately or transferred to investors using flow through shares. Natural Resources Canada provides technical advice to investors and developers on the applicability of class 43.1, class 43.2 and CRCE on eligible energy projects.

Natural Resources Canada, through its renewable energy technology group, RET, part of the CANMET Energy Technology Centre, CETC, provides support to the Canadian renewable energy industry in its research and development efforts to develop and deploy renewable energy technologies, such as wind, biomass and micro-hydro. The RET helps industry to generate competitive and environmentally responsible alternatives to conventional energy generation through cost sharing and technical assistance in support of technology development and field trials. Examples of this work include the Canadian wind energy atlas, the development of Canadian wind turbine standards, and research into cold climate operation of wind turbines.

The government, in partnership with the Government of Prince Edward Island, P.E.I., provides funding for the Wind Energy Institute of Canada, WEICan, located at the Atlantic Wind Test Site in P.E.I. WEICan supports the development of wind power generation in Canada and wind energy related products and services for Canadian and export markets. The institute's activities are focused on four key areas of work: testing and certification; research and innovation; industry training and public education; and technical consultation and assistance.

Question No. 72—Hon. Roy Cullen:

With regard to the proposal by the government to give public transit riders a tax credit to cover the cost of monthly transit passes: (a) what data, in either summary or raw form, or analysis relating to the cost for each tonne of carbon dioxide saved (not emitted) has been provided to the Minister of Natural Resources by (i) the Department of Natural Resources, (ii) the Department of Finance, (iii) Environment Canada; and (b) what analysis was provided to the Minister of Natural Resources comparing a tax credit, to cover the cost of monthly transit passes, with the benefits of providing capital investments, to be shared with provinces and municipalities, in public transit infrastructure?

Ms. Diane Ablonczy (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, CPC): No documents were provided to the Minister of Natural Resources since the tax credit for public transit is a tax measure which is the responsibility of the Minister of Finance, and due to the normal secrecy considerations associated with tax measures announced in the budget.

Question No. 73—Hon. Roy Cullen:

With respect to the proposed liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals in Robbinston, Maine: (a) would the constant intense light canopies at the proposed LNG terminals influence fisheries and aquaculture experiments involving photo-period or other light related research being conducted now or in the future; (b) would vibration and noise from the regassification plant, the ships, or the tugs have any impact on the areas currently used by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, the Huntsman Marine Science Centre or universities for research and education, or on the St. Andrews Biological Station itself; (c) what will these impacts be; (d) if seawater is used in the regassification process, would the resultant temperature change (reputed to be 10 degrees Celsius) and the resultant reduction of plankton populations influence the fish and invertebrate populations currently being studied in Passamaquoddy Bay or the anadromous fish runs using the St. Croix watershed; and (e) will physiological barriers be established that will interfere with the migration of important migratory species such as smelt, alewives and salmon?

Hon. Peter MacKay (Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, CPC): The government of Canada does not currently possess the information needed to answer these questions. The specific issues raised in parts (a) to (e) of this question deal with issues related directly to the physical properties of the proposed liquefied natural gas, LNG, terminals on the U.S. coast and therefore will most likely be dealt with during the U.S. Federal Energy Commission, FERC, regulatory review process. The Canadian government has brought to the attention of the U.S. FERC the concerns expressed by local Canadian communities about the potential environmental, navigational and safety risks of the proposed projects.

The Government of Canada considers the Bay of Fundy and Head Harbour Passage sovereign waters and will take every legal and diplomatic means to prevent LNG tankers from using this passage. A study 30 years ago confirmed that there would be an unacceptable level of risk to people and aquatic life in and around Head Harbour Passage and Passamaquoddy Bay associated with the use of this body of water and passage by large tankers carrying marine pollutants.

Question No. 78—Ms. Chris Charlton:

With regard to the changes in the Solvency Funding Relief Regulations of the Pension Benefits Standards Act, 1985, what is the mechanism that will be used to determine when less than one third of the members object to a move to ten-year solvency funding (6.2(a)) under the new ten-year funding rules?

Routine Proceedings

Hon. Jim Flaherty (Minister of Finance, CPC): The proposed solvency funding relief regulations, the regulations, provide four options for temporary solvency funding relief, including extending the payment period for making solvency payments to 10 years from five where buy-in is achieved. Where an administrator of a plan seeks the buy-in of its members and retirees, the regulations require plain language disclosure to ensure that all interested parties have the necessary information to be fully informed of the decision they have to make. The disclosure would include, for example, the solvency funding status of the plan, that plan improvements would be restricted for the first five years of the 10 year funding period unless pre-funded, and an explanation of the potential implications of paying off a solvency deficiency over a longer period of time. The disclosure would also include an explanation that buy-in would be achieved where less than one-third of members and one-third of other beneficiaries object to the proposal, and that in order to register a disagreement, an objection would need to be sent to the administrator at a particular address and by a particular date. In the case where a beneficiary has a representative, such as a union that represents its members, the administrator must provide the information to the beneficiary representative, who could act on behalf of its members. Where the buy-in had been achieved, the administrator of the plan would be required to file a written statement with the Superintendent of Financial Institutions that the disclosure had been provided to all parties as required under the regulations and that the buy-in requirements had been met.

Question No. 79—**Ms. Peggy Nash:**

With respect to eligibility for Canada Access Grants and Canada Learning Bonds in 2005 or the most recent year for which information is available: (a) how many households were eligible to receive the National Child Benefit Supplement for a child between the ages of 0 and 15 years of age; (b) how many households, with one or more dependent children between the ages of 17 and 25, which filed federal income tax returns, had net incomes low enough that they would be eligible to receive the National Child Benefit Supplement for that child or those children, if that child or those children were below the age of 18; (c) how many households, with one or more dependent children between the ages of 17 and 25, which filed federal income tax returns, had net incomes below \$36,000; and (d) how many total children are included in sections (a), (b), and (c)?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): The department receives information from the Canada Revenue Agency, CRA, to determine eligibility for Canada access grants and Canada learning bonds based on eligibility for the national child benefit supplement, NCBS. However, the information received is limited to what is required to deliver these programs, and is insufficient to answer the member's question.

Human Resources and Social Development Canada has policy responsibility for the national child benefit supplement; however, Canada Revenue Agency delivers and administers the benefit. The member's inquiry relates to information that would be found in CRA's tax filer database.

CRA has provided to the Canada education savings program the number of children and families who benefited from the NCBS in June 2006. Based on this information, 1,408,889 families and 2,472,726 children aged 0 to 18 benefited from the national child benefit supplement. Of these, there were 268,048 children from birth to age two who were eligible for the Canada learning bond. Note that only those children born after 2003 are eligible for the Canada learning bond. In respect of the Canada student loans program, from

August 1, 2005 to May 31, 2006, the program granted Canada access grants to 22,007 students.

Question No. 82—**Mr. Lloyd St. Amand:**

With respect to the \$11.9 million allocated by the government to the Integrated Grain Processor's Co-operative (IGPC) under the Ethanol Expansion Program, which has been frozen while the climate change envelope is under review: (a) when will the review on the climate change envelope be completed; (b) when the review is completed, will the \$11.9 million previously allocated to the IGPC be released and, if so, when; and (c) how much money has already been released to the IGPC?

Hon. Gary Lunn (Minister of Natural Resources, CPC):

With respect to the \$11.9 million contribution allocated to the Integrated Grain Processor's Co-operative, IGPC, project in July 2005 under the ethanol expansion program, in response to

(a), a short term extension of climate change programs including the ethanol expansion program has now been approved. This will serve as an interim measure until the government's new policy directions have been finalized. The Government of Canada is providing substantial resources, close to \$380 million this year, which is comparable to spending last year. Programs, including the ethanol expansion program, belonging to four groups—mitigation, international, policy, and public education and outreach—will have their program authority extended by one year until March 31, 2007.

In response to (b), Natural Resources Canada is now working with the IGPC towards the finalization of a contribution agreement for the allocated funding. Upon successful completion of this agreement, the funding will be released to the IGPC as the project incurs eligible costs in accordance with program terms and conditions.

In response to (c), no funds have been released to IGPC to date.

Question No. 83—**Mr. Roger Valley:**

With regard to the gas tax rebates announced in 2005, will the government uphold the commitment to provide rebates to unincorporated areas?

Hon. Lawrence Cannon (Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, CPC): The government fully intends to uphold its commitment to provide funding to unincorporated areas of Ontario under the transfer of federal gas tax revenues program.

Question No. 84—**Mr. Christian Ouellet:**

Regarding the Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI) ending March 31, 2007: (a) will the program be renewed past that date and, if so, for how long; (b) or will it be made permanent; (c) will the amounts allocated be increased; (d) will the recommendations of the United Nations Committee on May 16, 2006, be taken into account; and (e) will a strategic plan on homelessness and housing be developed?

Routine Proceedings

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): The national homelessness initiative, including its cornerstone program the supporting communities partnership initiative, has been extended by one year, to March 2007. This extension will ensure that essential shelters and related support services for homeless people are maintained in urban and rural communities across Canada. Human Resources and Social Development Canada officials will take into account the recommendations made by the United Nations committee on May 16, 2006, as they develop options for the Government of Canada's role in addressing homelessness beyond March 2007.

Question No. 85—**Mr. David Christopherson:**

With regard to the 1% reduction in the Goods and Services Tax (GST): (a) what measures have the government put in place to ensure that the vendors of products with GST included in the price pass the GST cut along to consumers; and (b) how will the government ensure that vendors do not take advantage of the GST decrease to implement a price increase and pocket the savings that were intended for consumers?

Hon. Jim Flaherty (Minister of Finance, CPC): The Government of Canada does not regulate the pricing of goods and services in the Canadian marketplace. Canadian suppliers and consumers are well informed that the rate of the GST changed to 6% from 7% on July 1, 2006. The competitive aspects of the marketplace determine the pricing of goods and services, including the price of products with GST included.

Canadian consumers are aware that the rate of the GST changed to 6% from 7% on July 1, 2006. Given the competitive aspects of the marketplace, consumers should realize real savings from the tax rate cut. For consumers, savings from the GST reduction will amount to approximately \$8.7 billion over the next two years.

Question No. 86—**Mr. David Christopherson:**

With regard to Natural Resources Canada's biofuels incentive program: (a) does the government provide financial incentives for testing biofuels; (b) will the government provide those incentives for tests carried out by any qualified Canadian testing facility; (c) does the government have a preferred supplier for biofuels testing and, if so, how was the decision made to use that preferred supplier; and (d) if there is a preferred supplier, does it carry out tests at the same, lower or higher price than other qualified testing facilities in Canada?

Hon. Gary Lunn (Minister of Natural Resources, CPC): The biodiesel targeted measures, BTM, program under Natural Resources Canada, NRCan, selected the fuels and lubricants group at the Alberta Research Council, ARC, to assist them in providing technical support in developing a biodiesel industry in Canada. The ARC was chosen based on its qualifications and recommendations provided by a steering committee consisting of representatives from Environment Canada, Natural Resources Canada and the Canadian General Standards Board.

The objective of the biodiesel work conducted at the ARC, supported by NRCan, was to establish a centre of excellence for biodiesel testing whereby two major program components would include a biofuels quality registry and an international quality assurance exchange program. The overall goal was to promote increased biodiesel use by conducting fuel quality testing of biodiesel samples establishing an accessible database tracking fuel quality metrics for biodiesel fuels and to develop an industry protocol and standard for fuel analysis.

The biofuels quality registry was established to be a national online database and website with analysis results of candidate biofuels being entered into the registry. The information collected is used by Natural Resources Canada and Environment Canada to support research and policy activities. Fuels used in demonstration programs, fuels that are commercially available, and in some cases, fuels from process development are eligible for inclusion in the registry. As part of this program, the Government of Canada reserves the right to use this data to compile an annual trends report that will be available on this website. It is important to stress that only certain fuels will be accepted for analysis under the registry. A biofuels technical steering committee, BTSC, consisting of representatives from NRCan and Environment Canada approves all applications for incentives. As part of the biofuels quality registry, an incentive program was established to encourage biodiesel fuel quality testing. The results of the testing will facilitate in the generation of a national database.

Under this program, analytical services are partially subsidized by the biofuels quality registry based on a sliding scale: 70%, first application; 50%, second application; and 30%, subsequent applications.

This quality registry program was only intended to operate for two years ending March 31, 2007. The rates provided for the testing of samples were in accordance with standard industry practices.

The international quality assurance exchange program, IQAEP, is an interlaboratory proficiency testing program. It consists of a series of petroleum related tests, frequent exchanges of a wide range of products, and rapid report turnaround times. It enables customers to monitor their laboratory equipment, test methodology, personnel, and reporting procedures to ensure they are in compliance with international quality standards.

Proficiency testing through an interlaboratory exchange program is an invaluable tool to allow organizations to evaluate their performance in physical testing of petroleum products.

The fuels and lubricants group at ARC was chosen to manage this program because it has coordinated petroleum exchanges for more than 30 years and has no vested interest in the results. Through the administration of the proficiency testing program, we are working to ensure that there are more qualified laboratories with biodiesel testing capabilities.

To summarize the response, in response to (a), yes, the government provides financial incentives for testing of biofuels. These incentives are provided for sample submissions and are based on a sliding scale of 70% first application, 50%, second application, and 30% subsequent applications.

In response to (b), no, these incentives are only provided to the programs delivered under the Alberta Research Council.

In response to (c), the government selected the ARC to carry out fuel quality testing because of its qualifications and the recommendations provided to it by a steering committee consisting of representatives from Environment Canada, NRCan and the Canadian General Standards Board.

Routine Proceedings

In response to (d), the rates provided by the ARC are in accordance with standard industry practices.

* * *

[English]

QUESTIONS PASSED AS ORDERS FOR RETURNS

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, if the answers to Questions Nos. 33, 40, 41, 46, 48, 49, 52, 53, 54, 55, 58, 60, 61, 62, 66, 67, 74, 75, 76, 77, 80, 81 and 87 could be made orders for returns, these returns would also be tabled immediately.

The Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

[Text]

Question No. 33—**Ms. Dawn Black:**

With regard to the Arrangement for the Transfer of Detainees with the Afghan government: (a) the Arrangement states that it applies “in the event of a transfer”, does the government intend to transfer all detainees to the Afghan authorities, or would Canada retain custody of some detainees or transfer them to recipients other than the Afghan authorities; (b) what is the scope of application of this Arrangement and does it apply to all Canadian troops operating in Afghanistan, particularly to embedded staff officers at Combined Joint Task Force 76 (CJTF-76) in Bagram; (c) do the embedded staff officers at CJTF-76 in Bagram in any way participate in the detention or interrogation of detainees by the United States; (d) how will the Arrangement operate when Canadian soldiers are engaged in a joint operation with Afghan soldiers or police, particularly Afghan Forces; (e) if an Afghan soldier or police officer physically apprehends a detainee or prisoner during joint operations, would it be considered a transfer and would the Arrangement apply; (f) does the government consider that the armed conflict, in which Canadian Forces (CF) are engaged in Afghanistan, is or is not an “armed conflict not of an international character”, as that phrase is used in Article 3 of the Third Geneva Convention; (g) does the government consider that persons detained by CF under the Arrangement could be “prisoners of war”, as that phrase is used in Article 4 of the Third Geneva Convention; (h) does the government consider that persons detained by CF under the Arrangement are entitled to have their status “determined by a competent tribunal” as that phrase is used in Article 5 of the Third Geneva Convention; (i) if other articles of the Third Geneva Convention or its Additional Protocols apply to CF deployed to Afghanistan, whether by legal obligation or by Canada’s agreement, what are each of them, accurately enumerated; (j) upon detaining a person, will the CF always offer that detained person access to legal counsel; (k) does the government believe that CF detaining non-Canadian persons in Afghanistan must respect section 7 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in so doing; (l) what is the government’s position as to the possible criminal culpability of a Canadian soldier if he or she transfers a detainee into Afghan custody and that detainee does indeed experience torture as defined in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, the Torture Convention, Criminal Code or Canadian military law; (m) does the government consider that this Arrangement guarantees that there will be no further transfers of detainees by the Afghan authorities into the custody of any other government without Canada’s consent; (n) why does the Arrangement not provide a right for the Canadian government or for the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission to monitor and inspect detainees after they are transferred to the Afghan authorities, as the government of the Netherlands sought and obtained; (o) why has Canada chosen not to develop and maintain its own detention facility in Afghanistan, or a detention facility operated jointly with either the Afghan government or other NATO states; (p) does the government consider the terming of the document as an “Arrangement” as affecting the document’s legal weight; (q) how many detainees have CF transferred to the Afghan authorities since the Arrangement was signed; (r) has the Canadian government requested access from the Afghan authorities to any of the transferred detainees, to verify their well-being, and did Afghanistan agree to the request; (s) does the government consider that this Arrangement is a treaty, consistent with statements made by the Prime Minister as reported on May 13, 2006; (t) what are the personal details regarding the detainees that can be discussed publicly, consistent with the Geneva Conventions and other human rights obligations; (u) given that the Arrangement provides for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to inspect and monitor the treatment of detainees after CF transfer them to the Afghan

authorities, does the government now consent to the ICRC sharing the results of these inspections on a routine basis with Parliament and the public; (v) when Canadian operations in southern Afghanistan are transferred to NATO control later this year, will a NATO-Afghanistan detainee transfer agreement supercede the Canada-Afghanistan Arrangement; (w) will the NATO agreement contain all of the rights of visit and notice found in the Netherlands-Afghanistan agreement, and, if not, why; (x) will the government make the NATO agreement available to Parliament as soon as possible, and, if not, why; (y) what additional procedures or safeguards do the CF apply when transferring a detainee who is, or appears to be, under the age of 18 to the Afghan military under the Arrangement; (z) has Canada detained anyone in Afghanistan under the age of 18; (aa) what additional procedures or safeguards do the CF apply when transferring a female detainee to the Afghan military; (bb) whether owing to ICRC inspections or any other source of information, is the Canadian government aware of any instances where a detainee transferred to the Afghan military was subsequently tortured or abused, and if so, what were the circumstances in each case; and (cc) did any government or representatives of any foreign government other than that of Canada and Afghanistan review the text of this agreement before its signature?

(Return tabled)

Question No. 40—**Mr. Charlie Angus:**

With respect to the distribution of promotional Canadian materials by the government, including, but not limited to, flags, pins and posters: (a) what was the total value of the materials distributed in each of the last 5 years and the percentage in each year of material that was produced in Canada; (b) what is the breakdown of countries that produced these materials and the value of the materials that were produced; (c) what companies were responsible for shipping the portion of the materials that were foreign-made; (d) what was the value of the portion of these materials that each company shipped to Canada; (e) in which countries are these companies based; (f) what was the overall weight of the portion of the goods shipped from overseas; (g) what protocol is associated with the awarding of contracts for the production and shipment of these goods; (h) what assurances does the government have that any of the materials produced overseas were not produced in sweat-shop-style conditions; and (i) what initiatives have been undertaken to increase the amount of domestic production of these goods since June 2004?

(Return tabled)

Question No. 41—**Mrs. Irene Mathysen:**

With regard to House committee reports on the subject of status of women, how has the government provided action on: (a) the 1991 report titled “The war against women : report of the Standing Committee on Health and Welfare, Social Affairs, Seniors and the Status of Women”; (b) the 1991 government response “Living without Fear Everyone’s Goal, Every Women’s Right”; (c) the 2005 report titled “Increasing Funding to Equality-Seeking Organizations”; (d) the 2005 government response titled “First Report of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women (study on the concerns of women’s organizations and equality-seeking organizations)”; (e) the 2005 report titled “Gender-Based Analysis: Building Blocks for Success”; (f) the 2005 government response titled “Second Report of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women: Gender-Based Analysis: Building Blocks for Success”; (g) the 2005 report titled “Gender-Based Analysis: Building Blocks for Success”; (h) the 2005 government response titled “Funding through the women’s program: Women’s groups speak out”; (i) the 2005 report titled “Pay Equity”; (j) the 2005 government response titled “Fourth Report of the Committee on the Status of Women, Moving Forward on the Pay Equity Task Force Recommendations”; and (k) the 2005 report titled “Interim Report on the Maternity and Parental Benefits Under Employment Insurance: The Exclusion of Self-Employed Workers”?

(Return tabled)

Question No. 46—**Ms. Olivia Chow:**

With respect to the \$474 million that has not been spent of the \$1 billion allocated to federal housing programs in November 2001, what does the government plan to do to speed the flow of federal dollars allocated to housing?

(Return tabled)

*Routine Proceedings***Question No. 48—Ms. Denise Savoie:**

With respect to government spending on post-secondary education: (a) is the figure cited by the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development in the House on May 3, 2006, specifically “the \$16 billion for education that is included in the Canada social transfer,” a precise figure; (b) if so, what is the breakdown of that spending, if available, allocated to (i) direct student financial assistance in the form of loans, (ii) direct student financial assistance in the form of non-repayable grants, (iii) indirect student financial assistance, (iv) post-secondary institutions for operating expenses, (v) post-secondary institutions for research expenses and (vi) post-secondary institutions for capital expenses; (c) if the response to (a) is not yes, what is the precise proportion, in dollars and in percentage, of the Canada Social Transfer dedicated to post-secondary education; (d) what mechanism exists to guarantee that the funding for post-secondary education included in the Canada Social Transfer ensures high-quality, accessible education for all Canadians; (e) what is the precise amount of federal spending on post-secondary education outside of the Canada Social Transfer; (f) what is the breakdown of that spending, if available, allocated to (i) direct student financial assistance in the form of loans, (ii) direct student financial assistance in the form of non-repayable grants, (iii) indirect student financial assistance, (iv) post-secondary institutions for operating expenses, (v) post-secondary institutions for research expenses and (vi) post-secondary institutions for capital expenses; and (g) what mechanism exists to guarantee that the funding for post-secondary education outside of the Canada Social Transfer ensures high-quality, accessible education for all Canadians?

(Return tabled)

Question No. 49—Ms. Denise Savoie:

With respect to federal government funding for literacy initiatives, programs, and organizations; and to the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS): (a) what is the current status of the National Literacy Secretariat; (b) what is the status of the departmental reorganization in reference to the NLS; (c) what details can the government provide about the new national literacy program or secretariat that will emerge, or has emerged, in response to the mandated Treasury Board review and departmental reorganization; (d) how will the transition affect the level of literacy funding transferred to literacy projects and organizations; (e) what is the status of the 3-year, \$30 million funding allocated specifically to the NLS in Budget 2005; (f) what is the status of the former NLS’ annual call for proposals for the literacy community; (g) how many grants or contributions agreements related to literacy have been distributed by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) since January 24, 2006; (h) how many proposals for funding for literacy initiatives, programs and organizations have been submitted to the NLS, or to any new national literacy program or secretariat under the department, or to the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development since November 1, 2005; (i) of those submissions, how many have not yet been processed; (j) how much money will the government allocate to funding literacy initiatives, programs, and organizations between May 18, 2006 and the release of the next budget; (k) does the government have an official or unofficial strategy for raising the level of literacy in Canada; (l) does the government have an official or unofficial strategy for maintaining and raising the level of literacy in the French language in Canada; (m) does the government have an official or unofficial strategy for maintaining and raising the level of literacy in the French language in Canada outside of Quebec; (n) what is the government’s official commitment to funding and supporting literacy initiatives, programs, and organizations across Canada; and (o) what specific plans does the government have to fund local literacy organizations and initiatives between May 18, 2006 and the release of the next budget?

(Return tabled)

Question No. 52—Ms. Raymonde Folco :

With regard to the Off-campus Work Program announced by the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration on April 27, 2006, what was the rationale for excluding: (a) Canadian International Development Agency-funded foreign visa students; (b) Canadian Commonwealth Scholarship Program students; (c) Government of Canada Awards Program students; and (d) exchange students, enrolled in English or French as a Second Language Programs?

(Return tabled)

Question No. 53—Ms. Raymonde Folco:

With regard to graduate students possessing Canadian International Development Agency-funded foreign student visas: (a) how many were studying at Canadian

universities during the academic years between September 1995 and April 2000 and how many completed graduate degrees during this period; and (b) how many were studying at Canadian universities during the academic years between September 2000 to April 2005 and how many completed graduate degrees during this period?

(Return tabled)

Question No. 54—Ms. Raymonde Folco:

With regard to students possessing Commonwealth Award Program Foreign Student Visas: (a) how many studied at Canadian universities during the academic years between September 1995 and April 2000; (b) how many studied at Canadian universities during the academic years between September 2000 and April 2005; (c) how many were undergraduate students; (d) how many were graduate students; (e) how many completed their studies during the prescribed periods; and (f) what were the countries of origin of these students?

(Return tabled)

Question No. 55—Ms. Raymonde Folco:

With regard to undergraduate students possessing Canadian International Development Agency-funded foreign student visas: (a) how many were studying at Canadian universities during the academic years between September 1995 and April 2000; (b) how many completed undergraduate degrees during this period; (c) how many were studying at Canadian universities during the academic years between September 2000 and April 2005; (d) how many completed their studies during this period; and (e) what were the countries of origin of these students?

(Return tabled)

Question No. 58—Mr. Richard Nadeau:

With regard to government jobs in the National Capital Region, what is: (a) the number of Public Service employees in the Ottawa region and in the Outaouais region; (b) the number of employees of government agencies, Crown corporations or any other government bodies in the Ottawa region and in the Outaouais region, from 1998 to 2006?

(Return tabled)

Question No. 60—Hon. Joe Fontana:

With respect to the budget plan for 2006 distributed by the Department of Finance, which states specifically on page 85, in Section 3: “Building a Better Canada” (subsection: “Opportunity”): “Over the coming year, the Minister of Industry will be developing a science and technology strategy, in collaboration with the Minister of Finance, that will encompass the broad range of government support for research, including knowledge infrastructure”: (a) has the development of this strategy begun; (b) when is it expected that this science and technology strategy will be completed; (c) who will be or who has been consulted in developing the strategy; (d) will the Minister of Industry, Minister of Finance or departmental officials travel outside of the Ottawa region while developing this strategy and, if so (i) what are the names and titles of the traveling participants, (ii) how much will the travel cost, (iii) what will be the duration of the travel, (iv) what will be the destinations of the travel; (e) will the general public be consulted and, if so, how should they direct their concerns; (f) will Industry Canada or the Department of Finance hold public meetings while developing this strategy and, if so (i) where will the meetings be held, (ii) what is the budget forecasted for these meetings, (iii) will the meetings be advertised and, if so, how; (g) what will be the focus of the strategy; and (h) what is the total expected cost of the development of the strategy?

(Return tabled)

Question No. 61—Hon. Andy Scott:

How much money has the government paid out through all programs from the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA) since 2000-2001, and, in each case: (a) how much was disbursed annually in each province; (b) which programs were used to finance the projects; (c) who received the funds; (d) what was the specific purpose of the disbursement; and (e) how long did the funding last?

(Return tabled)

Routine Proceedings

Question No. 62—Hon. Andy Scott:

With regard to the Innovative Communities Fund (ICF) operated by the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA) and the government's commitment to use funds from ACOA to support the construction of the Moncton Stadium and completion of the Fundy Trail: (a) which ACOA programs are being used to finance the Stadium and Trail projects; (b) precisely how much federal money will be provided for these two projects and over what time period; and (c) how many applications to the ICF have been received from each province in Atlantic Canada since the fund's creation, including (i) which projects have been approved and announced so far to receive funds from ICF, (ii) how much money has been disbursed from the ICF, (iii) who are the recipients of these disbursements, (iv) what is the breakdown of ICF disbursements by province?

(Return tabled)

Question No. 66—Ms. Jean Crowder:

With regard to the 2000 Auditor General report, "Chapter 30 Fisheries and Oceans — The Effects of Salmon Farming in British Columbia on the Management of Wild Salmon Stocks": (a) how many of the Auditor-General's recommendations have been implemented and what are the details of that implementation; and (b) how many of the Auditor-General's recommendations have not been implemented and why?

(Return tabled)

Question No. 67—Mr. Peter Julian:

What was the government's total contribution, monetary and non-monetary, to the 2005 World Police and Fire Games in Quebec City?

(Return tabled)

Question No. 74—Hon. Roy Cullen:

With respect to the proposed liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals in Robbinston, Maine: (a) what impact will increased passage of ships, tankers and tugs have on marine mammal populations, such as fin, minke, right whale and harbour porpoise, that depend on Head Harbour Passage, Friar's Bay and Western Passage; (b) what impact will the vibration and noise have on echolocation in listed species such as the northern right whale and harbour porpoise as well as species of concern like the finback whale; (c) what impact will the vibration and noise have on communications between mother harbour porpoise and their calves at the entrance to Head Harbour; (d) will increased ship traffic influence the summer population known to frequent the right whale sanctuary off Grand Manan; (e) what is the legal role of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) in protecting these species as it relates to the passage of foreign vessels; (f) what assurances can DFO give that the interests of Head Harbour Passage, Friar's Bay and Western Passage aquaculture operations and fishermen throughout the area; particularly handliners, weed gatherers, urchin fishermen, scallopers, longliners, dragners, herring fishermen, lobster fishermen, and others will be protected; (g) what laws will keep fishing activities such as lobster fishing from being banned if LNG terminals are built in the Passamaquoddy Bay region; (h) what assurances will fishermen and aquaculture operations on Grand Manan have that the ferry route between the island and the mainland will not be disrupted by the passage or layover of LNG tankers; (i) if LNG tankers lay over off Head Harbour Passage, in Friar's Bay or in Passamaquoddy Bay, what efforts will DFO make to insure that these waters are open to Canadian fishermen and citizens in pursuit of their livelihood and recreational interests; and (j) are these above-mentioned rights protected by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms?

(Return tabled)

Question No. 75—Ms. Dawn Black:

With regard to the use of weapons in Afghanistan: (a) do Canadian Forces (CF) in Afghanistan use depleted uranium (DU) in their weapons or armour; (b) do Taliban or Al-Qaeda forces in Afghanistan use DU weapons or armour; (c) do American or allied forces in Afghanistan use DU weapons or armour; (d) does Canada supply any other country with DU and, if so, what are the quantities; (e) does Canada supply any company, foreign or domestic, with DU and, if so, what are the quantities; (f) if Canada does supply DU to American companies who manufacture DU weapons, what proportion of DU weapons manufactured in the United States of America use Canadian-created DU; (g) does the government believe that DU is a weapon with indiscriminate effect; (h) does the government believe that DU poses

any long term health effects in areas where it is used; (i) if DU is being used, does the government think that there is any possibility of future liability against Canada; (j) do CF in Afghanistan use White Phosphorus (WP) as an antipersonnel weapon; (k) do Taliban or Al-Qaeda forces in Afghanistan use WP as an antipersonnel weapon; (l) do American or allied forces in Afghanistan use WP as an antipersonnel weapon; (m) have Canadian troops trained to use WP as an antipersonnel weapon in Afghanistan; (n) does the government consider WP to be a chemical weapon under the 1997 Chemical Weapons Convention; and (o) does the government consider that WP is banned under Protocol II of the 1980 Convention on Conventional Weapons?

(Return tabled)

Question No. 76—Ms. Dawn Black:

With regard to government spending in Afghanistan: (a) what are the total expenditures of Canada's engagement in Afghanistan from 2001 to present; (b) what are the expected expenditures from now until February 2009; (c) what are the top 20 contracts by value; (d) which United States-based companies are receiving contracts?

(Return tabled)

Question No. 77—Ms. Denise Savoie:

With respect to the Commercial Heritage Properties Incentive Fund for the whole of Canada and the Capital Regional District of British Columbia: (a) how many applications for projects have been received and are awaiting approval; (b) how many projects have been approved and are awaiting the first instalment of funding; (c) how many projects have been completed and are awaiting the final instalment of funding; (d) how many applications have been submitted and withdrawn, by fiscal year, since the inception of this Fund; (e) what is the shortest, longest, and average period of time between submission and withdrawal of applications in section (d), for each respective fiscal year; (f) does Parks Canada recognize any unusual or undue delays in the approval of projects or the release of funds to approved projects; (g) what explanation can Parks Canada give for any public perception of unusual or undue delays in the approval of projects or the release of funds to approved projects; (h) what is the average period of time between application and approval of projects; (i) what is the average period of time between approval and the first instalment of funding; (j) what is the average period of time between application and the first instalment of funding; (k) what is the average period of time between project completion and the final instalment of funding; (l) when was the last call for proposals or applications; (m) when will the next call for proposals or applications be; (n) what are the minimum, maximum, and average amounts awarded to projects from this Fund?

(Return tabled)

Question No. 80—Ms. Peggy Nash:

With respect to government spending on skills training outside the formal post-secondary education system, in the three most recent years for which information is available: (a) what is the total amount, broken down by federal department, allocated to skills training programs; (b) what is the total amount transferred to the provinces and territories for skills training programs; (c) what is the total amount, broken down by program, allocated to programs to encourage private employers to provide skills training to their employees; (d) what is the total amount, broken down by program, allocated to programs to provide mid-career skills upgrading for currently employed Canadians; (e) what is the total amount, broken down by program, allocated to programs to provide skills training for Canadians to transition to a new career; and (f) what is the total amount, broken down by program, allocated to programs not listed in sections (c), (d) or (e), to provide skills training to Canadians?

(Return tabled)

Standing Order 52

Question No. 81—Ms. Peggy Nash:

With respect to the government's financial support and incentives for post-secondary students and savings, in the most recent three years for which information is available: (a) how many students applied for the Canada Access Grant for Students from Low-Income Families and the Canada Access Grant for Students with Permanent Disabilities, respectively; (b) how many students were awarded the above two Canada Access Grants, respectively; (c) what was the average amount awarded to recipients of the above two Canada Access Grants, respectively; (d) what was the total amount awarded by the government for the above two Canada Access Grants, respectively; (e) how many students applied for (i) Millennium Bursaries, (ii) Millennium Access Bursaries, (iii) Millennium Excellence Entrance Awards, (iv) Millennium Excellence In-Course Awards, (v) World Petroleum Council Millennium Scholarships, respectively; (f) how many students were awarded the above five awards, respectively; (g) what was the average amount awarded to recipients of the above five awards, respectively; (h) what was the total amount awarded by the government for the above five awards, respectively; (i) how many persons received a Canada Education Savings Grant; (j) what was the average amount awarded to recipients of this grant; (k) what was the total amount awarded by the federal government for this grant; (l) how many persons received (i) an initial \$500 Canada Learning Bond, and (ii) a \$100 Canada Learning Bond; (m) what was the total amount awarded by the government for Canada Learning Bonds; (n) what other federal government programs exist to give direct financial support to students or families for post-secondary education that are not listed above; (o) how many individuals received assistance under these other programs; and (p) what was the total amount received by recipients of these programs?

(Return tabled)

Question No. 87—Mrs. Irene Mathysen:

With regard to government action in response to the fifth periodic report of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women: (a) is the government addressing the 23 recommendations contained in the report; (b) what action has the government taken in addressing these recommendations; and (c) will the government consult with women's non-governmental organisations in preparing the next report?

(Return tabled)

* * *

[English]

STARRED QUESTIONS

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, if Starred Question No. 50 could be made an order for return, the return would be tabled immediately.

The Speaker: Is that agreed?**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

[Text]

*Question No. 50—Ms. Tina Keeper:

With regard to First Nations Inuit Health Branch tuberculosis funding and outbreaks of tuberculosis (TB) in Canada: (a) since the program's inception in 1992 what has been the rate of TB in Canada; (b) what has been the rate in each province; (c) has the government assessed what reasons exist for different rates among the provinces and territories; (d) has the government undertaken or contracted for any audits, evaluation reports or analyses of its TB prevention and control activities, including the Tuberculosis Elimination Strategy (TES); (e) what have been the annual allocations and expenditures by the government for the TES since its inception; (f) what have been the annual expenditures and allocations for the TES in each province and territory; (g) what are the annual allocations and expenditures of the government on First Nations disease prevention and health promotion programs in the 2006-2007 main estimates and the budget tabled in May 2006; (h) has the government received any advice from the public service on whether it would be appropriate to provide further funding to prevent TB in First Nations; (i) has the government approved the allocation of any funds for community-wide screening at

the Garden Hill First Nations community in Manitoba; (j) what is the number of active cases in the community as of May 15, 2006; (k) has the government approved the allocation of any funds for additional nursing staff to support directly observed therapy in the community; (l) has the government allocated funding for an independent investigation into what led the TB source case in the community to remain undetected for so long; (m) has the government allocated funding for a full time doctor for the community; (n) are there any increased funds to support programs to eradicate TB in Canada in the estimates tabled in April 2006 or the budget tabled in May 2006; (o) are there any funds allocated in the estimates tabled in April 2006 or the budget tabled in May 2006 to fund activities to prevent and treat TB in countries outside of Canada; and (p) when will appropriate and adequate funding and services be provided to prevent and treat TB on First Nations lands?

(Return tabled)

[English]

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, I ask that the remaining questions be allowed to stand.

The Speaker: Is that agreed?**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

* * *

[Translation]

REQUEST FOR EMERGENCY DEBATE

CANADIAN FOREIGN POLICY

The Speaker: The Chair has received notice of a request for an emergency debate from the hon. member for Laurier—Sainte-Marie.

I now invite the hon. member to present his reasons to the House.

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister of Canada is to deliver his first speech to the United Nations General Assembly on September 21, which is this Thursday.

Observers expect him to provide details on his vision for Canada's role on the world stage in this speech. We noticed this summer that the Conservative government's position on foreign policy significantly departs from Canada's traditional position of mediation and balance. It is quite far from the deep-rooted values of Quebeckers and Canadians, who I believe are peace-loving people.

I also think it is essential for Canadian foreign policy to be subject to debate in the House of Commons before the Prime Minister shares it with the rest of the world. This is even more important considering that the current Prime Minister constantly criticized his predecessor for announcing Canada's major policies on various matters outside the House in order to avoid debate before the members elected by the public. That is why, pursuant to Standing Order 52(2), I am requesting that an emergency debate on Canada's foreign policy be held today.

This debate is an emergency given the very limited number of days left before the Prime Minister's speech, which is scheduled, as I was saying, for September 21, 2006.

Thank you for hearing this request. I hope we can have this debate.

Government Orders

The Speaker: I would like to thank the hon. member for Laurier—Sainte-Marie for having set out so clearly his request for an emergency debate, and I emphasize the words “emergency debate”. I can well understand that the honourable member, and other members of course, would like to discuss or debate the issue of foreign policy. There are undoubtedly a large number of members who would like to take part in such a debate.

That being said, I have some difficulty with the request in that I am not convinced such a debate is urgent, as required by the Standing Orders, because of a speech to be given by the Prime Minister at the United Nations.

It may still be possible for the parties to come to an agreement about such a debate on this or on other matters. Discussions can take place and the House can decide as it sees fit.

However, for my part, I must respect the provisions of the Standing Orders. For this reason, I am turning down this request for an emergency debate at this time.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

• (1550)
[English]

CANADA ELECTIONS ACT

The House resumed consideration of the motion that Bill C-16, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

The Speaker: When the House broke for question period, the hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform had the floor for questions and comments. There are four minutes remaining in the period of questions or comments in relation to his speech.

I therefore call for questions and comments. The hon. member for Mississauga South.

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I had the opportunity to very briefly pose the question to the member prior to question period. I now have the direct information that is in today's *National Post* in regard to the comments of the member with regard to the general cynicism of Canadians with regard to the calling of elections.

Would the parliamentary secretary comment on the veracity of the story in today's *National Post* under the headline “Tories looking to pick a fight Expect a spring election, Cabinet insiders say”?

The article specifically says:

The election campaign for spring 2007 begins in earnest today. The working assumption among senior ministers in the [Prime Minister's] Cabinet is that the country will go to the polls after a Conservative budget; the legislative schedule that will be rolled out from today is designed to cram as much as possible into the shop window between now and then.

It also refers to the Conservatives “will attempt to engineer their own defeat in order to achieve the Prime Minister's stated ambition”.

This appears to be very clear. Has the member seen the story? Would he care to comment on what this does with respect to the

sincerity of the government with regard to the bill which is presently before the House?

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, all I can say to my hon. colleague from Mississauga South is he has clearly been watching too many Oliver Stone movies. He sees a conspiracy behind every initiative of the government.

Let me assure the member opposite that the government plans on governing and governing well. Quite frankly, as I answered about two hours ago after my initial comments, I believe that Canadians not only appreciate the initiatives of the government, but will reward the initiatives of the government.

The longer we govern, the more public support we will have. I see no need to comment on a story that, although the member opposite says is real, is only a rumoured deal that some *National Post* reporter perhaps came up with.

I am firmly convinced that the longer Canadians see us in action, the more they will reward us. If that member and members of the combined opposition care to take us down, that is when we will have an election, not before. It will be the decision of the members in opposition, certainly not the decision of this government.

Hon. Marlene Jennings (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like the hon. member to comment on the views of some constitutional law experts who have said that the government's Bill C-16 would in fact change the powers of the Governor General. In order to do that, fixed election dates—

Mr. Scott Reid: Which experts? Why don't you cite them?

Hon. Marlene Jennings: Mr. Speaker, is it possible for me to speak in the House without interruption?

Mr. Scott Reid: There's irony for you, Marlene. You're always interrupting people.

Mr. Andrew Scheer (Assistant Deputy Chair of Committees of the Whole, CPC): Order, please. The member for Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine makes a valid point, that she should be able to finish her question in such a manner that the Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons can hear the question so he can give a good answer.

• (1555)
[Translation]

Hon. Marlene Jennings (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is always a pleasure to have the Standing Orders of this House applied in a reasonable and objective manner.

My question is as follows: does the government member have an opinion on the views expressed by constitutional law experts that true fixed election dates, without any flexibility, would require a constitutional amendment?

[English]

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, I would again comment on the fact that my hon. colleague opposite does not quote any constitutional law experts. She is just saying “some” experts.

Government Orders

I can assure members that there is no constitutional imperative that would require any change to the current conventions of the House. In fact, the current conventions would be either further entrenched by this bill, as opposed to the conviction held by the hon. member from Wascana. In his opinion we should be removing provisions of the act that allow the prime minister to go to the Governor General and ask the Governor General to dissolve Parliament. If that happened, in my opinion the end result would be the courts would then have to determine what would be and what would not be a confidence vote.

Right now Bill C-16 entrenches the conventions that we have held for over 100 years in this Parliament. We do not need a constitutional law expert to verify that.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to speak to Bill C-16, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act. I will go through the act by summarizing the legislation provisions. I will then describe to the House what problems the bill resolves and I will end by pointing out some of the benefits it will give to the Canadian democratic system.

I have seven points in summarizing what the law does. First, it ensures that elections will take place every four years on the third Monday in October.

Second, it ensures that the first of those Mondays will be October 19, 2009.

Third, it ensures that the date is chosen so as not to conflict with any religious or national holidays.

Fourth, it ensures that in the event of an unforeseen conflict with a religious or national holiday and perhaps with a provincial or municipal election the date can be adjusted.

Fifth, to prevent the abuse of this ability to adjust the date, it ensures that the date can only be moved to the Tuesday after the Monday or to the Monday that follows the third Monday. In other words, the fourth Monday in October.

Sixth, the law is carefully crafted to ensure that no limit is placed on Parliament's ability to indicate loss of confidence in the government or of the Governor's General's prerogative to dissolve Parliament. In this light, I will stop for a moment to address the question raised by the hon. member opposite just a moment ago. Section 56.1 of the act will now read or will be added to the current legislation:

Nothing in this section affects the powers of the Governor General, including the power to dissolve Parliament at the Governor General's discretion.

Were that not there, then the law would in fact be unconstitutional. It goes on to state:

Subject to subsection (1), each general election must be held on the third Monday of October in the fourth calendar year following polling day....

That is how we deal with that very important constitutional provision.

Seventh, in the event of an early election that occurs on a day other than the third Monday in October—presumably this would be an election in a minority government where the government was defeated by the opposition—the calendar for future elections would automatically reset to the third Monday in October in the fourth

calendar year following the year in which the election caused by that vote of non-confidence takes place.

I want to talk about what this resolves. It removes the power of the prime minister, nominally the Governor General but always the Governor General acting on the advice of the prime minister, to call an election when it is good for the government, when it suits the government and when it is damaging to the chances of the opposition, the main opposition party or some other opposition party, to contest that election. It would remove an inherent unfairness in the system. I have only been elected to this place three times, in 2000, 2004 and earlier this year, but in my short parliamentary career I have found the system to have been abused egregiously by the former prime minister, Jean Chrétien, in calling the election of 2000 and again in 2004.

In 2000, he called an election shortly after a new opposition leader had been elected. He called it at a time when nominations had not been completed in most of the country for the then opposition party, the Canadian Alliance. In doing that he unfairly advantaged the governing Liberals and hurt the opposition party, the Canadian Alliance. I saw this in action in 103 ridings in the province of Ontario, as there then were. Nominations that had been completed for the Canadian Alliance at the time that he called the snap election with no advance warning were called when 5 of those 103 ridings had completed their nomination process. In the other 98 ridings no nomination had been finished, including in my riding.

What happened at the conclusion of that election? The Liberals won 100 seats, the New Democrats won one seat and the Canadian Alliance won two seats. Due to the vagaries of our electoral system, that in no way reflected the actual vote total but it did give the results that Jean Chrétien wanted. It gave him another majority government that he did not deserve and would not have had, I would argue, had he had to follow a reasonable timetable that did not give him this unwarranted discretion.

● (1600)

Out of the 98 candidates who had not been nominated until the election was called, only one, myself, actually managed to win the election. Even that, frankly, was due to a three way vote split. Of the five candidates nominated, my colleague from Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke was elected, about a 20% success rate. That gives us an idea of what he was doing and the abuse of the system that he perpetrated. This could not happen under the law as written now.

Which government will be the first to face this restriction on its power? The current government will not have the kind of power to abuse our democratic system the way that Jean Chrétien and other prime ministers before him have abused it.

Government Orders

In 2004, something similar happened. The election was called before the main opposition party, the new Conservative Party of Canada, had a chance to hold its first policy convention. The Conservative Party had no way of planning its first policy convention and produce a platform prior to that election being called. What was the then prime minister doing during that election, hon. member for LaSalle—Émard? He was ranting about how we had no policies and inventing the most egregious and outlandish policies to fill the vacuum created by the fact that he was able to call an early election. That is the kind of thing that will not happen under the current legislative proposal.

I want to talk about the benefits. To some degree we can discern the benefits of the new legislation from the problems that I have raised but I wanted to break it down into four headings. The first of these benefits would be that all parties could now prepare for elections. They could plan their leadership races secure in the knowledge that a snap election would not be called at a time when they were in the process of electing a leader. That is a significant advantage. They could also plan their policy conventions as my party was unable to do in 2004.

It is an advantage for people who are considering becoming candidates. There is much talk in this place, especially when we think we would like to vote ourselves a pay raise, about the importance of getting the best candidates to come in here and contest elections. That is fine for those who are independently wealthy and those who have jobs, particularly lawyers, that permit them to have a great deal of flexibility, but if they come from a job where they cannot take off time to seek a nomination in quite the same way or to be a nominee for some unspecified period of time, the uncertainty associated with not knowing when an election will be called means that it is necessary to put their life on hold in a way that precludes many quality candidates from actually seeking nominations.

I can think of a couple of examples prior to the 2004 election which were cited in *The Hill Times*. All members have access to back issues if they care to look up the stories of how individuals had to withdraw from nominations. I know of a policeman in the Toronto area who wanted to run for my party but he had to withdraw because it was impossible to coordinate his job demands and the demands of an uncertain electoral timetable. Riding associations could now plan their nomination meetings to occur at a time relatively close to an election rather than trying to preclude the unforeseen future election that might come at some point.

Elections Canada could improve how it conducts elections. It would reduce costs and improve efficiency if it were certain that elections were going to occur on a predictable four year timetable. For example, the problems of finding and renting space on an uncertain schedule is very difficult, particularly in areas where there are low vacancies in rental properties.

In 2000, it was so hard to find rental space in my riding, the old riding of Lanark—Carleton, that the Elections Canada office wound up being placed literally across the street from the riding boundary. It was the least central location imaginable in the riding but it was the only way Elections Canada on short notice could secure rental space in that riding.

It was very difficult to deal with the boundaries redistribution issue when there was great uncertainty prior to the 2004 election as to whether the then prime minister would call the election when the old boundaries were in place or the new boundaries. This created immense chaos in my riding and many others across the country because there was a great lack of information about where the boundaries would be and therefore the administration was to pursue.

• (1605)

My last point is that voter participation would greatly increase.

Mr. Mario Silva (Davenport, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am very much in support of the legislation. I strongly believe that this country needs positive electoral reform and this is a very positive measure.

However I would like my colleague's comments on the vote tomorrow. As we know, the House will be voting on the issue of softwood lumber and the government has called that vote a vote of confidence. My fear is that even though we are moving with Bill C-16, and I think the House will be supportive of that proposal, calling these constant votes of confidence on legislation undermines in many ways the spirit of the proposals we are trying to put forward in Bill C-16.

If we have a fixed election date and then the government wishes to have it fall because it wishes to call an election in order to go to the polls, then in many ways we would be going against the very spirit and principles that we are trying to outline in Bill C-16.

Mr. Scott Reid: Mr. Speaker, I will comment on my hon. colleague's question but I first want to finish my last thought before I sat down.

When voters know when an election will occur and can be certain about it, then they are less likely to be caught off guard. They can make preparations to vote even if they are out of the country. They could contact the local returning officer with their addresses if they are overseas or out of the riding, which could improve participation rates.

I thank my colleague for his endorsement of the principle behind the bill. As he knows, the Ontario government has adopted similar legislation, as has Newfoundland and Labrador and British Columbia. To the best of my knowledge, none of those jurisdictions have done anything to restrict the ability of the premier to indicate that a particular vote will be a vote of non-confidence.

If a piece of legislation were to put such a provision in place, that would take a constitutional convention of very long standing in our House, in every province in this country, and in Britain, the mother of Parliaments, and deviate from that. It is the precedent that continues to exist in Australia, in New Zealand and in every country and subnational unit that has the Westminster system. We would abandon that convention and move to something else.

In particular, we would move in a way that ensures the courts would be able to get involved in determining whether a vote of confidence was valid or whether a call for an election was valid. I think that is a dangerous thing to do.

If the member feels strongly about this, there is a solution within the current conventions. Let us imagine, for the sake of argument, that the present government or a future government is defeated on some matter of confidence. The opposition parties could try to get a vote of confidence in the government separately. In practice, voting non-confidence in the government's main policies and then indicating that they actually have confidence in the government, they would have to think about whether they want to do that, but that is one way of doing it.

Incidentally, I do not think it would work that way if the opposition parties tried to defeat the government on a money bill. I think the convention there is even more powerful, that Parliament's fundamental role is to provide supply to the government.

The other thing opposition parties need to consider is that if they do defeat the government they always have the option of trying to form a government themselves in cooperation with other parties, if they think they can do that. The member should keep that in mind.

● (1610)

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the member spoke about the legislation encouraging the opportunity to get a better quality of candidate. I am not sure how many persons who wanted to become Conservative candidates are now suing the Conservative Party because they were summarily thrown out for eligibility by the Conservative Party. However it appears that the Conservatives have forgotten that candidates are elected by the membership of the party. That is a part of the democratic process that we are trying to promote.

Why does the member think that the riding associations and the membership of any political party cannot pick a well qualified candidate?

Mr. Scott Reid: Mr. Speaker, that is not germane to the substance of the bill, so I will take that more as a comment on political life in general rather than as something that requires a response from me.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Marlene Jennings (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is always a pleasure to participate in a debate when you are in the chair. I will read a clause from C-16.

Clause 1 is one of the most important:

1. The Canada Elections Act is amended by adding the following before the heading "WRITS OF ELECTION" before section 57:

Date of General Election

56.1 (1) Nothing in this section affects the powers of the Governor General, including the power to dissolve Parliament at the Governor General's discretion.

If this bill were to be passed and adopted, it would receive the royal assent of the Governor General, the Right Hon. Michaëlle Jean, at her discretion, during her term of office.

[*English*]

The most important section and the actual core of Bill C-16 is the section that states:

Nothing in this section affects the powers of the Governor General, including the power to dissolve Parliament at the Governor General's discretion.

For those who may be watching TV right now and may not understand what that actually means, under the British North

Government Orders

America Act and our Canadian Constitution, the Governor General has full authority, a royal prerogative, to dissolve Parliament at her or his discretion. Tradition calls for the Governor General to do so only at the recommendation of the sitting prime minister.

Therefore, one could pardon the Conservative Party prior to becoming the government, when it was in official opposition, for saying it was talking about fixed elections, but in fact not fixed elections. Now that it actually forms the government, one can no longer excuse that. The government has constitutional experts at its fingertips and knows very well that it cannot institute true fixed election dates without diminishing the discretionary power of the Governor General under our Constitution to dissolve Parliament upon recommendation of the prime minister. This would mean that the Governor General would have absolutely no royal prerogative at her discretion to dissolve Parliament. That requires a constitutional amendment, ladies and gentlemen.

So when the Conservative government, since tabling Bill C-16, has a campaign calling Bill C-16 a bill to create fixed election dates, I would say the government and the bill are clearly duplicitous, because that bill is not about fixed election dates. That bill, by precisely saying in that very paragraph that nothing in it affects the powers of the Governor General, "including the power to dissolve Parliament at the Governor General's discretion", shows that it is duplicitous.

It has absolutely nothing to do with fixed election dates, because in fact fixed election dates are fixed election dates. One cannot change the date at any time. In order for the Conservative government to bring in legislation with actual, factual and true fixed election dates, its bill would have to diminish the powers of the Governor General to dissolve Parliament at any time as per her or his discretion. In order to do that, the bill would have to amend our Constitution. This bill does not do that.

● (1615)

The Speaker of the House has said that I can say this, so if the government were honest—and that has been deemed parliamentary—the government would in fact say that this bill is not about fixed election dates and that this bill does not in any way diminish the power of the Governor General nor the authority of the Prime Minister at any time, even the day after. If the bill is adopted, goes through all three readings in the House, goes through all three readings in the Senate, becomes legislation and the Elections Canada Act is changed, the very next day the sitting Prime Minister could go to the Governor General and say, "I'm calling an election", and the Governor General would be able to dissolve Parliament.

Government Orders

So for the Conservative government to claim that Bill C-16 is about fixed election dates is not telling the whole story. The story is what under this we would be talking about for the Prime Minister between the date that Bill C-16 would become law and the third Monday of October in the fourth calendar year following the first general election after this section comes into force, which would be Monday, October 19, 2009. Between the date that this bill comes into effect and Monday, October 19, 2009, the Prime Minister could go to the Governor General at any time on any single day and say, "I am asking and recommend that you dissolve this Parliament". The Governor General would have the power and the authority under our Constitution to dissolve Parliament and launch a general election.

At the very least, the Conservative government should state in fact that Bill C-16 is not fulfilling its electoral promise to create fixed election dates. What it is doing is simply saying that if the Prime Minister, between the adoption of this bill and Monday, October 19, 2009, has not woken up at any time and decided that he wants an election, then the election will happen on October 19, 2009, but that at any time before that the Prime Minister could recommend to the Governor General to in fact dissolve Parliament. That is the first thing.

When one looks at what is the definition of "fixed election", I would recommend that my colleagues go to a major study that was done by Henry Milner, "Fixing Canada's Unfixed Election Dates: A Political Season to Reduce the Democratic Deficit", published by the Institute for Research in Public Policy on December 5, 2005, volume 6, number 6. He actually gives a definition. It is quite interesting. He states that a fixed election date is when there is no possibility of dissolving the assembly, whether it is a national assembly or a parliament, prior to the date that has been fixed by legislation.

In any other system, yes, the Constitution of the country may in fact establish, for instance, that the term of the assembly is three years or four years and actually may lay out the third Monday of the 10th month of the year. There is thus an election every three or four years, but it also allows a mechanism for early dissolution, either because of a non-confidence vote or because there is an issue that the government wishes to plebiscite on. So in fact, that is not a fixed election date. That would be called a fixed flexible date, because while there is supposedly a fixed date, the government or the assembly still has the power and the authority to dissolve prior to the expiry date of the fixed term, whether it is three years, four years or five years.

• (1620)

The very first thing, the very least thing the Conservative government and Prime Minister Harper and his cabinet should say is in fact—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Hon. Marlene Jennings: I apologize.

I should say that the right hon. Prime Minister and his cabinet should state that Bill C-16 is not about fixed election dates. Bill C-16 is about fixed flexible dates, which would still allow the prime minister all the authority to go to the Governor General at any time prior to the set date—

Hon. Maria Minna: Which is what we already have.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: —and recommend to the Governor General to dissolve Parliament. The Governor General would have all the authority to do so.

As my colleague from Beaches—East York just mentioned, if somebody actually read the BNA Act, our Constitution, they would see that this is actually what we already have. Under the Constitution, Parliament has to be dissolved no later than in the fifth year of the preceding election.

However, within that time, the prime minister can go to the Governor General and recommend that Parliament be dissolved at any time. In fact when one looks at it, historically it is usually toward the end of the fourth year following a general election that the prime minister of a government in Canada has actually done that. That is the first thing.

I ask that members please not say that Bill C-16 is about fixed election dates, because it is not, and I ask them not to claim that this would ensure that the Prime Minister of the sitting government, the Conservative government, will not, to use the terms that the members opposite have been using this very day, abuse his authority by calling an election at any time. In fact, if this bill were in effect right now, it would allow the sitting Prime Minister of the Conservative Party, who is also Prime Minister of Canada at this point, to go tomorrow to the Governor General. There is absolutely nothing in the bill that would stop that.

I ask members to please not call it a fixed election date and to please not attempt to portray it as being something fundamentally different from the system we have been governed by here in Canada since Confederation, because this does not change anything fundamentally. This is a game of smoke and mirrors on the part of the Conservative government.

Does that surprise me? I would like to say it does, but unfortunately it does not. It is no different from the tabling of the 2006 budget. The Conservative government heralded tax cuts. It said, "We are going to help the most poor, the most disadvantaged". What? Does increasing the lowest marginal tax rate from 15% to 15.5% lower taxes? No, of course not. It increases taxes.

I do not know about my colleagues on the opposite side, but I can speak for my colleagues on this side, the Liberal Party, the official opposition. After July 1 when that tax hike kicked in, most of us received a lot of letters from our constituents who happen to be seniors. They were saying, "I thought the Conservative government said it was lowering taxes. How come my taxes just got increased half a point?" They were not too pleased. The Conservatives may want to think about that.

On the other hand, the Conservatives talked about lowering the GST and how that was going to put a lot of money into people's pockets. Studies actually show that in order for somebody to make back \$100 on that one point reduction they would have to spend a heck of a lot more money. They would have to spend \$10,000 for that one point reduction to put \$100 in their pockets.

Government Orders

●(1625)

I do not know too many people in my riding who have that kind of disposable income that they can spend \$10,000, whether it be on clothes, restaurant meals or buying a new car. I do not know too many people who can spend \$10,000 of their disposable income in order to get back \$100. Most people would have preferred that the marginal tax rates remained where they were rather than increase them 5% in order to pay for luxury items for people who can afford to go out and spend \$10,000, \$20,000, \$30,000 or \$40,000 a pop.

Another example of the duplicitousness of this—

Mr. Randy Kamp: Duplicity.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: I know, but I also like saying duplicitousness. If I look in the dictionary next to Bill C-16, I see Conservative Party and duplicitous. That is what I see when I look in the dictionary: Bill C-16, Conservative Party, duplicitous.

Mr. Merv Tweed: Look under criminal. What do you see?

Hon. Marlene Jennings: One of the members just suggested that I look under criminal. I think that is Conservative too.

Let us look at the issue of making premature elections more difficult. If one in fact were to allow for premature elections, which Bill C-16 allows for, then the issue is whether Bill C-16 in any way, shape or form would make it difficult for a Canadian federal government to call a premature election. The answer is that nothing in this section affects the power of the Governor General, including the power to dissolve Parliament at the Governor General's discretion. That is the long answer. The short answer is that nothing in Bill C-16 would limit or restrict the authority of a Canadian government to call a premature election if Bill C-16 were in effect.

Second, is there anything that even makes it difficult, that would be dissuasive? No, because there is nothing in this section that affects the powers of the Governor General, including the power to dissolve Parliament at the Government General's discretion.

Why is the government wasting our time and the time of Canadians by trying to blow sand in our eyes, by claiming that Bill C-16 is about fixed elections, when it is about nothing of the kind?

It is a marketing tool by the Conservative Party to hoodwink Canadians into thinking that it really is about fixed elections and that the Conservative Party has kept yet another promise. In fact, the Conservative Party has yet again attempted to hoodwink Canadians, and second, this bill is duplicitous. This bill is deceptive. It has nothing to do with fixed elections.

For goodness' sake, if the Conservative government were honest, it would at least say that the bill has nothing to do with fixed elections, because even if the bill were to come into force, the Prime Minister would still be able to go to the Governor General at any time and ask the Governor General to dissolve Parliament. The Governor General's royal prerogative to do so would not be in any way diminished, limited, reduced, or any other word we can think, by this bill.

If the Conservative government were honest, it would at least admit that.

●(1630)

Mr. Randy Kamp (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, CPC): Mr. Speaker, there was not too much in that speech that I think bears comment. However, it is important that we correct the record in terms of the Henry Milner paper that the hon. member was quoting from. Let me quote a few other paragraphs and see what she thinks. He says:

As noted, the commonly held assumption that fixed-date legislative elections are compatible only with presidential systems and thus incompatible with parliamentary systems such as ours is inaccurate. Yet this misconception is understandable, since any knowledge that Canadians possess of such matters is likely confined to Canada,—

He goes on to say:

The definition of a fixed system as one in which (as in the United States) nothing can be done to alter the date of the next legislative election is too narrow; it excludes any parliamentary system that allows for premature elections—as do almost all of them.

Further, he says:

In sum, even if they are not pure fixed-date in the American sense, these countries do not belong in the same (unfixed) category as Canada. The reality is that unlike Canada, the majority of countries with parliamentary or mixed regimes set a fixed date for their legislative elections, which is known and, as a rule, respected.

I wonder and it seems to me that she is borrowing something from the paper that is really not there. He is clearly saying that there are other forms of fixed date elections that fit well in parliamentary systems like Canada's.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: Mr. Speaker, I find it quite interesting that the hon. member will read one quote from Henry Milner, but not mention the fact that Henry Milner clearly points out that there is first, a fixed election date, a true fixed election date, but there is no possibility for premature elections.

Second, there are flexible fixed dates, where one knows where the actual election will take place because in the constitution it says every three years on the third Monday of the third month, or every four years, et cetera. That allows for a mechanism for premature dissolution of the parliament or the national assembly. That is called flexible fixed. That was the point I made.

When the Conservative government tabled Bill C-16 and claimed to this House and to Canadians that it is about fixed election dates, it is about no such thing.

If the government wishes to say it is about flexible fixed or fixed flexible dates where premature elections can happen because the Governor General's power to dissolve parliament would not in any way be diminished by this bill, that is factual. Anything else is not factual.

●(1635)

Mr. Merv Tweed (Brandon—Souris, CPC): Mr. Speaker, does the member disagree with the two Liberal governments in B.C. and Ontario that have just introduced fixed election dates and the fact that B.C. just ran an election based on a fixed date?

Government Orders

Hon. Marlene Jennings: Mr. Speaker, B.C. has fixed flexible because while it stipulates that a general election will take place four years on such and such a date, it has mechanisms within its legislation to allow for premature dissolution. Therefore, it is not a fixed election date. It is fixed flexible.

If the hon. member cannot understand the distinction, then I would be more than happy to sit down with him when we have all the time in the world in the government lobby or in the opposition lobby, and spend 10 minutes, an hour, or two hours to explain to him the difference between fixed election date and fixed flexible.

Mr. Ed Fast (Abbotsford, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have spent the last 10 to 15 minutes here listening to the member try to make a distinction between flexible and fixed and flexible fixed election dates. She has referred to the legislation as being duplicitous. She has accused the government of not telling the whole story, of not being honest, about being criminal, which I consider unparliamentary language, and deceptive.

In all of the comments she has made she has never once stated whether she supports the legislation. She should be listening to some of her colleagues in her own party who as recently as a few minutes ago stated that they strongly support this legislation.

I would encourage the member to come out clearly and state whether or not she is in favour of this legislation or is she opposed to electoral reform? Tell the Canadian people.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: Mr. Speaker, it is interesting, talking about electoral reform, because Bill C-16 has absolutely nothing to do with electoral reform. If in fact it had something to do with electoral reform, it would then be proposing an amendment to our Constitution to limit the authority of the Governor General and therefore that of the Prime Minister to call an election at any time. Therefore, I have a real problem with this. I want to see the bill go to committee so that we can amend it.

If we are in fact for real fixed elections, and Bill C-16 is about real fixed elections, it would then mean going to all of the provinces for a constitutional amendment in order to limit the authority, the power and the royal prerogative of the Governor General to dissolve Parliament at any time at her or his discretion.

Mr. Mario Silva (Davenport, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I listened with great interest to my hon. colleague's comments and I certainly understand where she is coming from.

My concern, which is shared by her and she quite eloquently stated, is that sometimes the way we project things in the House reminds me of the time when I was a member of city council in Toronto. At that time we were getting bad news from Mike Harris' government at Queen's Park, many ministers of the Conservative government now sit in this House on the government side, and it tabled several pieces of legislation that were quite dangerous and even quite painful to the citizens of Toronto, but they were always sugar-coated with fancy words. I understand where my colleague is coming from. I support the direction and principle of the bill, but the fixed election date is, as my colleague says, a misnomer if it is not setting a fixed date.

I would like to have her comments on how she thinks we could correct the bill. Should it be called a bill to try to fix an election date?

• (1640)

Hon. Marlene Jennings: Mr. Speaker, there are several ways. One of the ways would be, while not limiting the Governor General's power and authority to dissolve Parliament at his or her discretion upon recommendation of a prime minister, to include clauses that would actually specify the reasons or the justification that a prime minister could legally have to recommend to the Governor General premature dissolution of Parliament.

We would need to actually specify the reasons with which a prime minister would be able to go to the Governor General prior to the date that has been fixed under the bill to recommend premature dissolution. It might be that it would not be a vote of confidence. Would that not be novel? It might be that it would not be a confidence vote because maybe the party that is in power has suddenly gone through the roof in the polls and knows that there is something bad coming down the pipe that maybe nobody else knows about, so maybe it should call an election now.

Nothing in Bill C-16 would stop that party, which is now the ruling party, from doing exactly what it accused and denounced the Liberal Party of doing when we were in power. We would want to look very carefully at including amendments that would limit the reasons that a prime minister could give to the Governor General to recommend an early dissolution of Parliament.

Mr. Randy Kamp (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to participate in the debate at second reading on Bill C-16, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act. I am splitting my time with the hon. member for South Shore—St. Margaret's.

During the election campaign I heard a lot from constituents, as I think most of us did, about cynicism and distrust of the political process. In my opinion, the measures contained in this bill are part of a package of electoral reforms that should go a long way toward addressing the democratic deficit that most Canadians are experiencing. I want to thank the Minister for Democratic Reform for bringing it forward.

I want to do just a couple of things in the short time that I have. I want to speak briefly about the benefits that I see in fixed election dates and then address some of the objections that have been raised, but first let me put the bill in some kind of context.

As a member of Parliament from British Columbia, I am particularly pleased to support this legislation because Bill C-16 was modelled after provincial fixed election dates legislation. In fact, on my anniversary, May 17, 2005, in British Columbia for the very first time in Canada a provincial election took place on a date set by law. It was not a date set by a premier or a prime minister to work to his or her advantage. That breakthrough was the result of Bill 7 which was passed in 2001 which amended the constitution act to provide for a fixed date for general elections every four years.

In its terms, the act provided that subject to the right of the lieutenant governor to prorogue or dissolve the legislative assembly as he or she sees fit, a general election had to occur on May 17, 2005 and subsequently on the second Tuesday in May in the fourth year following the most recently held general election. That means we know already that the next provincial election in B.C. will be held on May 12, 2009.

Government Orders

Although British Columbia was the first province to enact this kind of fixed election date legislation, other provinces have followed. Newfoundland and Labrador passed its election dates bill in 2004 and Ontario passed similar legislation in 2005. Other provincial governments are actively considering fixed election dates legislation. In fact, throughout the world this kind of legislation is quite common, in Chile, Costa Rica, South Korea, the Netherlands, the United States, Sweden, Switzerland and other countries.

Some argue that in the Westminster parliamentary system flexible election timing is a necessary element in case a government loses the confidence of Parliament and therefore a fixed election date system is incompatible. However, it is important to note that legislation that is similar to ours appears to be working well in New Zealand, Scotland, and Wales, all of which have the Westminster system of government. The legislation in British Columbia and Ontario allows for the possibility of early dissolution, and the legislation before us today is modelled on that provincial legislation.

Before discussing what I see as some of the benefits of this legislation, let me answer the question that I am sure members have been wanting to ask: How has British Columbia's fixed election dates worked and has it been a positive change? The answer in my opinion is an emphatic yes.

Let me mention a number of what I see as positive outcomes. First of all, as Henry Milner said in his study that we talked about just briefly here, "Why should the party in power have a special advantage in planning electoral strategy due to its inside knowledge of when the next election will take place? Why should its leaders be permitted to time an election to exploit conditions favourable to their re-election?"

It is commonly thought that governments can manipulate economic policy enough so that they face voters at the most advantageous time. With election dates known in advance, it becomes more obvious when governments go on a spending spree to bribe voters with their own money. Of course this government will not do that, but previous governments provided plenty of examples of this practice.

Second, it decentralizes power. Canadians know that in our system of government the prime minister has considerable power. Political power, according to Donald Savoie in his book, is without equal in the western democracies. Our Prime Minister wants to re-balance that power. This legislation which would limit his ability to call an election at his discretion is a step in that direction.

•(1645)

Third, this kind of legislation makes the process more efficient in at least a couple of ways. It allows those setting the government's legislative program in parliamentary committees to better plan their work agenda. It is always a frustration of parliamentarians and probably to those who observe our work, to see perfectly good legislation die in committee or on the order paper because of an election which was unexpectedly called. To some extent fixed election dates should improve this.

Also, election planning would be more efficient. It is expected that fixed dates for elections will reduce administrative costs because officials will be able to start their work well in advance. An elections

B.C. information officer is quoted as saying that the fixed election date "enabled us to plan and administer the election much better. Electoral district officers had the time to find facilities and train staff so that the election was very successful".

Fourth, another benefit is that it should reduce voter cynicism and increase voter turnout. In an Environics poll in 2004, 81% of Canadians preferred that elections be held at specific and fixed times instead of whenever the party in power wanted to call them. Anything that reduces cynicism and increases confidence in the political process is a good thing and it should increase voter turnout. Also, if voters know well in advance when an election will be, particularly seniors or students who have seasonal issues, it should allow them to participate.

Fifth, it should increase the quantity and quality of candidates and volunteers as well. If potential candidates can plan well in advance, as some of my colleagues have said, especially those with family or career obligations, fixed election dates should attract more and better candidates who are able to plan for what is coming perhaps a year or more in the future. It should also allow potential campaign volunteers to plan their schedules to be able to participate.

Let me address criticisms which have been raised to fixed election dates.

Some say that it will create a series of lame duck governments especially in the last year of the term. The government would know when the term was going to end and would wind down its agenda and not do anything. I do not understand that logic. I would have thought that if a government knew an election was coming it would beef up its political agenda and would make sure it was doing as much as it could do in preparation for that. In British Columbia there was absolutely no evidence that the government in power was in any way a lame duck. Similarly, there is no reason to believe that the Government of Canada would be any less effective with the establishment of fixed election dates.

Some have said that it is simply illusory legislation, in other words, that the prime minister would still be able to call an election at any time before the fixed date, so it is really not a fixed date. We recently had that discussion in this place.

It is important to point out that Bill C-16 was modelled on provincial legislation for what was called, and we are calling, fixed election dates. In British Columbia the premier retains the ability to advise dissolution before the stipulated date should it be necessary to a loss of confidence. This is required in order to maintain the fundamentals of responsible government within the Westminster system. Those who seem to be opposed—or maybe they are not opposed; we could not quite tell from the recent comments we heard here—I do not know if they want to do away with the Westminster system, but if we want to maintain it, this is the kind of mechanism we have to have.

Government Orders

I am fairly certain there are few here who would be prepared to champion the constitutional changes necessary to create a rigid system that did not permit in any circumstances a Parliament to be dissolved before the scheduled fixed date. As we saw with the May 17, 2005 election in British Columbia, the premier did not call an election before that date. I think he would have been punished if he had.

Some say it is going to result in an extended campaign. Some have suggested that if we know the year the campaign is coming the campaigning will start a year in advance. Perhaps this is something that does need to be addressed. The negative effect of this can be controlled somewhat with proper spending limits and legislated time restraints and so on, and also with the right election date. We are setting the date of October 19, 2009 as the date of the next general election, with the following election being held on the third Monday in October four calendar years hence.

● (1650)

In conclusion, I am proud as a British Columbian to support Bill C-16 because fixed election dates legislation has been shown to work well in B.C. I hope members from all parties will join me in supporting this bill so that Canadians can join the citizens of mature democracies around the world and vote in elections that have fixed dates in the future.

[*Translation*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): 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 Don Valley West, the Environment; the hon. member for London—Fanshawe, Housing.

[*English*]

Mr. Gerald Keddy (South Shore—St. Margaret's, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to rise in the House today, the first day that Parliament is back in session, to speak on fixed election dates. I have listened to some of the debate in the House, not all of it, with a bit of chagrin really at some of the misleading comments made by some of the Liberal members, in particular the member for Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine.

We all have an obligation in the House to look at the legislation that a government puts on the order paper, and to offer valid criticisms and amendments to that legislation if we feel the legislation is not doing what it set out to do, or if it is legislation we cannot support. Some of the comments that I am hearing amaze me. Members will say that they have no intention of supporting this piece of legislation, but when they are asked a direct question, they are not really certain what their positions are. They cannot have it both ways.

I was elected on June 2, 1997. Three years later, on November 27, 2000, there was another election. Barely three and a half years after that, on June 28, 2004, there was another election. Less than two years after that, on January 23, 2006, there was another election. There were four elections in barely nine years. If there had been fixed terms, we would have saved the people of Canada the full cost of one election, over a quarter of a billion dollars. That quarter of a billion dollars could have been spent on government programs across this country, on very seriously needed infrastructure, on

education, on health care, on a myriad of important issues that every man and woman in this chamber face in his or her riding.

To promote the idea that the system cannot be changed, as some of the Liberal members have, is fundamentally flawed. Of course we can change the system. We need to change the system. Before I was elected to the House, one of the first questions I was asked was about four year terms. Back in 1997 I supported four year terms. I have supported four year terms the entire nine years that I have been a parliamentarian. Fixed terms would be good for the people of Canada. Fixed terms would be a positive move to put more responsibility on government. It does not take responsibility away from government. It makes government much more responsible. It takes away one of the government's tools to manipulate the system.

It should be noted that when we started talking about fixed election dates, the Liberals said, "You talk about fixed election dates when you are in opposition. It is an election promise. If you ever become government, it will never happen". The Conservatives are the Government of Canada. We have introduced Bill C-16 and we will bring in fixed election dates unless Parliament sees fit not to. I would be shocked if any member, for purely partisan reasons, would vote against a bill of this quality.

This bill will deal with a number of issues that Canadian citizens face and will help make Parliament work better. There are some major advantages to this piece of legislation: number one is the issue of fairness; number two is transparency and predictability; number three is improved governance; and number four is higher rates of voter turnout. All those issues, issues that affect the governance of this place, will be assisted and improved under the bill. To say otherwise is misleading.

● (1655)

To listen to the argument that somehow this would change the powers of the Governor General is even further misleading. The power of the Governor General and the power of a confidence motion in the House are inextricably linked. The power to dissolve Parliament is the historical prerogative of the Crown and is considered essential to the principle of responsible government. It is expressly conferred on the Governor General in section 50 of the Constitution Act, 1867.

Section 50 of the Constitution Act, 1867, provides:

Every House of Commons shall continue for Five Years from the Day of the Return of the Writs for choosing the House (subject to be sooner dissolved by the Governor General), and no longer.

Because we are changing the length of the term, the proposed bill has to explicitly state that:

—nothing in this section affects the powers of the Governor General, including the power to dissolve Parliament at the Governor General's discretion.

The only reason that is in there is to enable a government, if it loses the confidence of the House, to go to the people of Canada. If the government were unable to do that, we would be in gridlock. We would be totally ineffective and unable to govern the country.

Government Orders

I listened to the Liberal members speak as though this was some kind of figment of our imagination, that the only other country in the world that had four year terms was the United States of America and that somehow there was the old argument that the Conservatives were somehow cozying up to the Americans. It is absolutely unfair and untrue.

The reality is that a number of other countries have fixed terms such as Chile, Costa Rica, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, South Korea, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Mexico, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland and last, but not least, the United States. Imagine that, all those countries have fixed elections dates and they still have democratic states.

There are countries that have a fixed term, but allow for more of a degree of flexibility. There is the fixed term of four years and the government has two months from the day to call its election.

It is a very similar system to the one proposed. Those countries include: Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Israel, Italy and Spain. This is not something new that is being thrust upon the Canadian public. It is an idea that has been around for a very long time. It should help to bring some credibility back to the Parliament of Canada. It should help to increase voter turnout.

We have had a great deal of discussion before the bill was tabled and we will continue to have discussion with the tabling and at committee. The whole point is of a fixed election date. The next one would be October 19, 2009.

This is an important issue and I hope every member in the chamber will find time to speak to it.

There is much more to say, but I will try to wrap up. We have an opportunity to take one of the primary tools that past prime ministers in the country have used like a club. They have gone to the people before their five years were up and every political party has suffered from that. I think the Parliament of Canada has suffered from it.

● (1700)

For the first we are having a democratic debate on four year terms. This is the first Prime Minister who is willing to give up that huge tool in his tool chest and yet we are debating that in the House. This is somehow up for discussion. This will level the playing field, it will give democracy more of an opportunity to work and it will be a good thing for the public of Canada.

[Translation]

Mr. Yvon Lévesque (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, BQ): Mr. Speaker, we have heard two government members, the hon. member for Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge—Mission and the hon. member for South Shore—St. Margaret's, talk to us about democratic deficit. The leader of the minority government in this House is about to go to the United Nations and speak for an entire country, specifically to announce Canada's foreign policy, but without having even consulted the opposition parties or trying to reach an agreement, a shared policy. If this is supposed to be democracy under a minority government, well then I've seen enough.

We are talking about fixed election dates, but by giving the opposition the power to bring down the government over a bill that

ignores public opinion, only to then be able to accuse the opposition of having forced an election, this is what I call a democratic deficit created by a minority government.

The hon. member for South Shore—St. Margaret's said that we need time to gain public trust. Would it not be a good idea for a minority government to gain public trust by listening to the other parties elected by Canadians and Quebeckers to represent them, to try to adapt their policies? This measure could arouse public trust. Thus, we would not need an imaginary fixed election date, one that would not be real.

Does it not seem more sensible and credible to try to create an atmosphere of trust within Parliament first, and then with the public?

● (1705)

[English]

Mr. Gerald Keddy: Mr. Speaker, I appreciated my hon. colleague's comments, but I am not quite certain that he truly understood what I was saying earlier.

My point was quite simple. I think we increase confidence in the House and increase support from all Canadians in the procedure and what goes on in the House when they can fully understand that they will have a greater opportunity to participate and that the governing party will have less opportunity to manipulate the most important part of our democratic state and our democratic process. Canadians have the ability to re-elect governments or to defeat governments and make them go back to the people to have a decision made. That is the most important part of our democracy. Canadians get to choose.

By having an election every four years on a fixed date at a period of time, more people will be able to go to the polls. Students will be at school where they will be able to vote. They will not be travelling or working at a summer job away from their home. By encouraging activism in our voting patterns, by getting above that 65% mark, by allowing people to have some respect and confidence in this chamber, by leading instead of following, we will win back the respect of this House.

Mr. Mario Silva (Davenport, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I listened with great interest to my hon. colleague's comments on this issue, which I consider to be quite an important one. I, like him, share the importance of having a fixed election date. I think it is the right move for Canada to be pursuing.

We in the House all follow the Westminster tradition, but there are times when we want to be more Westminster than Westminster itself and think nothing can ever be changed here without changing some fundamental part of the Constitution or creating a crisis within the country. Although it is not technically for a fixed date because the Governor General still has powers and if the prime minister wishes to mandate a call for a confidence vote, he or she can do so in the House and then we could have an election, the principle is the right one. If we talk about the amount of money that is spent on election dates, it is—

● (1710)

The Deputy Speaker: Order, please. We may not have fixed election dates yet but we have a fixed time for question and answer period, and it has expired.

Resuming debate, the hon. member for Rivière-du-Nord.

Government Orders

[Translation]

Ms. Monique Guay (Rivière-du-Nord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, at the outset, I would like to say that even though Bill C-16 is not perfect, the Bloc Québécois will support it because it is a big step in the right direction.

It is very important to have fixed election dates. I would like to give you some examples and talk about my own experience upon entering politics.

In 1993, we did not have fixed election dates. The Bloc Québécois was founded in 1990. We formed committees, and many people sought nominations to become Bloc Québécois candidates back then. In 1993, I was on several boards of directors, including my regional Chamber of Commerce. Such boards are apolitical. I organized a major event for the Chamber of Commerce, the Gala des Zénith, which was the biggest event of the year. We did not know when the election would happen, but we had to hold the nomination process, so I had to resign. My decision to enter politics made things difficult for the Chamber of Commerce because they had to replace me at the last minute.

Secondly, I was in business and had an eight-month contract. When the election was called, I had to break my contract, which was very costly and difficult for me. Not only is failing to fulfill our commitments costly and difficult, it can tarnish our reputations.

Fixed election dates would enable women and men to plan and prepare for elections. Knowing the date in advance, they can take leave from their jobs when they have to. They can seek the nomination when they choose, as close as possible to the election, so they do not find themselves in a difficult position. They will not have to make hasty decisions involving elections that will not even happen until eight or ten months later. That is what we have been dealing with since 1993.

This is an untenable situation that often prevents people from running: business executives, business people, and others who would like to be in politics.

A business owner does not close their doors overnight. It takes time. We do not want to be in conflict of interest with our role as member of Parliament. It is very complicated. This bill will encourage people from all backgrounds, women and men, to represent Quebec and Canada.

The third week of October is a good time. As you know, we had an election on June 28 with one of the lowest voter turnouts because people had already left on summer vacation. In Quebec we were celebrating our national holiday. That was an extremely difficult election. Then we had an election on January 23. Going door to door on January 23, in the middle of winter, when it is -30°C, is not so easy. How do you reach people and how do you motivate them? People do not go out in a snowstorm to vote.

I think this will allow for higher voter turnout because by knowing the election date in advance, people will be able to plan to go out and vote.

We currently have a minority government. This is a good initiative being presented to us, but it does not change anything for now in a minority government. If ever the government is defeated in a

confidence vote, this bill would not work. However, if the government decided to cooperate with the House, which it has done so far, it will have the honour of holding its first fixed-date election in 2009. I highly doubt that will happen.

• (1715)

When the next budget is tabled, we will see what the government has to offer our voters. The government has been in power for nine months now, and many things that were supposed to be settled by the fall have not been settled. We have no plan for the Kyoto protocol and no plan for the environment. It has been nine months, and we were promised a plan by the fall. The Minister of the Environment has not even appeared before the committee yet, even though it passed a motion calling on her to appear. A number of promises were made. The fiscal imbalance still has not been corrected.

We will see what the government has to offer us and will vote accordingly. However, it would be worthwhile to pass this bill for the future. In my opinion, it would also save the office of the chief electoral officer a considerable amount of money.

I was talking recently to the chief electoral officer for my riding, who told me that he was being kept on the alert. That means that he has to be ready for an election at any time, which means additional costs, because he has to hire people to keep a minimum number of offices open. If a snap election is called, without a fixed date, he has to hire additional staff. This represents nearly 20 house of work a day. It is crazy.

With a fixed date, this chief electoral officer could plan. In my opinion, this would save a substantial amount of money. A federal election costs \$250 million to \$300 million. I think that people would appreciate politicians more. I have to say that I have never completed four years here. This is my fifth term since 1993. I have never sat for four years. I have sat for three and a half years.

The election date is always based on polls, on which way Canadians are leaning or on the party's chances of being re-elected. It is extremely partisan and unfair. With fixed election dates, the government will have four years to prove itself. In any event, there will always be partisanship. On the eve of the election, whether or not it is on a fixed date, goodies will always be handed out, but this will allow our organizations to be ready.

Our volunteers who work during the elections are exhausted. There was an election in 2000, another one in 2004, and another one in 2006 and, who knows, there may be another one soon. Without a fixed date, these people cannot plan their schedule. People truly do take time off work to help with election campaigns and volunteer to help us. If they do not know in advance, they cannot plan to take a month or two of leave without pay. We are constantly keeping them on the edge.

Government Orders

There is also the whole issue of funding our political parties. It is very difficult to find funding in 10 or 17 months to conduct an entire election campaign, when we normally have four years to collect the money needed to do so. That means that those elected to this House in 2000, 2004 and 2006 may have astronomical debts because they did not have enough time to get the necessary funding for a good election campaign in their riding. A number of them had to go into debt. They will not even have time to pay that bill before they end up in the next campaign, when they will have to borrow more money. It is an unbelievably vicious circle.

Fixed-date elections will also allow our ridings to be in good financial health at election time. We could have truly good campaigns in our ridings and it would be more fair for everyone.

As I was saying earlier, in five elections I have not sat for more than three and a half years. During the two elections between 2000 and 2006, it was not easy for anyone, the new MPs or the older ones—those of us who have been here for a long time—to collect money and to get organized. It was not easy. Our people and our volunteers get exhausted. Then they no longer want to work on elections that are not planned in advance and they are not necessarily available every two years.

• (1720)

That is what happened in 2004. It was a very difficult election for me because my volunteers were leaving on vacation and I could not stop them. In Quebec, the national holiday is very important. People often go on holidays because it is a long weekend. Sometimes they leave for two or three weeks. We face that situation. Fortunately, you could vote any day; but not everyone is interested in going to vote in the office of the returning officer. For this reason, only 50% of the population voted. This is a very low percentage. I don't believe that election was justified. The government had decided to call an election at that time because the polls were in their favour. It appears that things change.

Quite frankly, this bill is a good thing. I know that it does not affect the Constitution. However, I do not see the government or the Prime Minister dissolving Parliament by arranging for us to vote against a motion and turning it into a vote of confidence. He would then see the Governor General to inform her that he no longer had the confidence of the House. He would be despised. The voters would not forgive him as they are fed up with repeated election campaigns. After this bill passes, the Prime Minister would need a major reason for asking the Governor General to dissolve Parliament because he had lost the confidence of the House. It would require something extremely important. People are not stupid. They follow politics and they would discern the government's ploy. Rest assured that the dissatisfaction would be expressed in the voting.

It is a good bill. Many other countries already have such legislation, as our colleagues mentioned earlier. Other countries have also adopted other measures. The National Assembly in Quebec is also considering holding elections on fixed dates in future. I support the idea. But I warn the government never to go to the Governor General and, without reasonable grounds, ask that Parliament be dissolved on the pretext that the government no longer has the confidence of the House. The government must act responsibly and

respect the opposition, because we are working here and have ideas to share.

I find it inconceivable that the Prime Minister would announce his foreign affairs program at the UN and not say a word about it here to us, the parliamentarians, who represent all the voters in Quebec and Canada. We are going to find out about it at the UN. It is unimaginable, but that is how he has decided to operate. I hope that there will be much more transparency so that parliamentarians can work together and benefit from each other's ideas.

All political parties have good ideas. The government could benefit from them and, at the same time, obviously, fulfil its mandate as it is supposed to do. It must respect the fact that we have a minority government. It must not shock the voters by calling an election on any old issue or because it is high in the polls.

That is what I have to say. We are modernizing with this bill, and that is important. I hope that, like us, the other parties will support this bill. I know that it will be studied in committee. Consequently, perhaps, some amendments could be made. Witnesses will be heard. It will be important to listen to them to try and craft the best possible legislation.

• (1725)

Mr. Robert Carrier (Alfred-Pellan, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate my colleague from Rivière-du-Nord on her excellent presentation. She helped us to understand clearly the parliamentary situation concerning the holding of elections.

Nevertheless, I wonder if it isn't rather wishful thinking for a minority government to present this bill. Indeed, it cannot really be applied in the case of a minority government. In the final analysis, is it not simply a sort of tactic for throwing the blame on the opposition for not supporting important bills, worthy of the confidence of the House and for putting all the pressure on the opposition parties who would not vote in favour of the government? In that way, the government could cause an early election, contrary to the provisions that we find in the bill.

Given the long parliamentary experience of my colleague, I would like to hear her speak about the situation of a minority government that could force the hand of the opposition parties to maintain the government in power.

Ms. Monique Guay (Rivière-du-Nord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague. Certainly there is a risk in this bill, and that risk will remain because we are dealing with a minority government. We have no choice. We must work with the current situation. The situation would be different if Bill C-16 were approved by a new parliament, unless, once again, a minority government had been elected.

I am sure that passing this bill would make the government look good, while the government knows very well that it is in a minority position. That would appear very positive. At the same time, this is a measure that will modernize our system and for that reason, I believe we should support the bill without being fooled. We are engaged in politics and the government is playing politics with this bill. That is one of its prerogatives. However, if it tries to make us bring down the government by introducing some measure calling for a vote of confidence, we will try to defeat it.

Government Orders

I have no doubt that people will answer the government when they go to the polls and give it a clear message. I do not think the voters will appreciate calling an election on just any subject. We know that votes of confidence deal with specific matters. We saw that the government called for a vote of confidence on the softwood lumber deal. A vote of confidence must deal with a very important issue. We will see how they act in the future. In the meantime, let us hope that we have time to adopt Bill C-16. Since it will be examined in committee, let us hope we will have time to review it and adopt it in the House, for the future, for a future government. We will see what happens.

[*English*]

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the hon. member's comments and she clearly understands politics. We all know what is at the base of all this.

I certainly think that four years would be a nice idea. In seven years I have had four election campaigns as well. I would like to go to a fixed date.

The member mentioned the financing issues and the pressure. Given the implications of previous legislation that financed the party, that should eliminate that part of the problem.

What other amendments would you like to see in the bill because clearly—

The Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I would just remind the member for York West, which has happened a couple of times today on the first day back, that we should not be addressing each other in the second person. The member should be asking me what the hon. member thinks, rather than asking her directly.

Hon. Judy Sgro: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I guess we have all been away for a nice summer.

If the loophole were to remain does the hon. member think that it would also be at the discretion of the government to call an election regardless of a term or not?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Monique Guay (Rivière-du-Nord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I think that this bill should be studied thoroughly. I have not done so yet but I will over the next few days. We should also hear from witnesses because they are the people who can tell us legislators exactly what should and should not be in the bill. Can it be improved? Should it be amended? I have confidence in these people.

We will be able to examine all parts of it in committee and make it a really serious bill. As the hon. member said a little while ago, there have been four election campaigns in seven years. It is very difficult, therefore, to find funds, volunteers, and so forth. Personally, I have been through five elections in 13 years. People can hardly believe it when I say that I have been through five elections. Fixed election dates would bring much greater stability to our organization and funding. We have to get back to that.

Let the committee do its work. I have confidence in the committee. There will be people from all the parties and that is where we can amend the bill.

• (1730)

Mr. Yvon Lévesque (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate my colleague on her presentation, on the hope she expressed that we will have fixed mandates or fixed election dates, and on the confidence she has in politicians as a whole.

Would it not be appropriate, therefore, to ask the government to define what a vote of confidence is so that it cannot fall back on any old excuse for requesting one? Maybe this would raise the profile of elections and Canadians would show more confidence in them.

Ms. Monique Guay: Mr. Speaker, that is a suggestion from my colleague. It is not written down anywhere, of course, but we generally know very well that there is a vote of confidence on the budget here in the House of Commons.

The government can obviously decide any time that there will be a vote of confidence on any given bill. That is happening now in the case of softwood lumber. It would certainly be possible to ensure that there cannot be a vote of confidence on any bill at any time. This should be studied by a committee, though, and we must ensure that the process is democratic. This question should therefore be examined. It is possible. It would enable Parliament to do its work instead of always preparing for elections in the middle of winter or summer.

All these factors will have to be studied when the bill is brought before the committee. I am pretty sure that there will be representations from various groups. These delegations will come and tell us how they see these things and we can make amendments. Then we will see what the government decides to do with it and we can debate it again in the House of Commons.

For the time being, I think that it is a good idea. It will also enable my two colleagues behind me to catch their breath because they have been through two elections one after the other and they are two new members. This is very difficult to go through when a person is first entering politics. In short, I think that we really should be able to have fixed dates and four years is a very reasonable period.

[*English*]

Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have a quick question. I agree totally with the member that three elections in seven years is very hard for a new member like me. I wonder, though, if she thinks that the last year might not become a lame duck year, as quite often happens in American politics. With the Americans' fixed dates, the last year is seen as a lame duck year, when the government does not really have any authority to act and not a lot gets done except politicking.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Monique Guay: Mr. Speaker, regardless of whether we have fixed election dates or not, we are still stuck with a lame duck three years into the mandate. This will change nothing, because everyone knows that elections will be held within six months, or the following year, or two years later, because a mandate can last up to five years. I do not think this will change much.

Government Orders

The four-year fixed term would change things: it would make it possible for us to develop better structure and get organized in the ridings. It would also give us the freedom to do our work as parliamentarians until the end. This would enable us to work together to decide what we think is important in this or that bill, and then to focus exclusively on the election when the time comes, which is not currently the case. We are always organizing, looking for an office just in case an election is called. We are forced to do two jobs at once, and we cannot focus on our parliamentary work.

We could get a lot more work done in Parliament if we had fixed election dates every four years. Things that move very slowly right now would progress much more rapidly. We could get our real work done here and concentrate on our campaigns for a short time when the election rolls around. That way, we could stop wearing everyone out, including ourselves. That way, we could get things done like we are supposed to and do a better job of legislating here in Ottawa.

• (1735)

[English]

Hon. Jay Hill (Prince George—Peace River, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure for me to rise and join this debate today. I will start by addressing the question that my hon. colleague from the Liberal Party, the member for Yukon, has just posed in regard to his concern that with fixed election dates the last year might result in a lame duck government. I will suggest to the member that we just went through an entire Parliament with a lame duck government. Thank goodness the people of Canada decided to act on that and get rid of that lame duck government last January. Fixed election dates do not affect the ability of Liberals to have lame duck governments.

At the outset, let me indicate that I will be splitting my time with my colleague from St. Catharines. It is a pleasure to do so.

Since this 39th Parliament commenced roughly six months ago, I have taken great pleasure in seeing so many pieces of outstanding legislation tabled in the House by Canada's new Conservative government. While I value the opportunity to participate in debate on any one of these bills, there is a handful upon which I place special value. Most often these are the bills that propose and enact changes I have advocated throughout my 13 years as a member of Parliament.

I cannot sufficiently articulate the satisfaction I experience in finally being able to stand in this House to speak to a piece of government legislation that encapsulates a concept or a belief that I have fought for in Ottawa for so many years on behalf of the constituents of Prince George—Peace River. Bill C-16 is one of those bills. I am very proud to speak in support of it here today.

Fixed election dates in Canada is a democratic reform I have unwaveringly and vocally supported since I entered political life some 18 years ago. To me and my constituents, the benefits of fixed election dates are patently obvious. The concept is simple and serves to enhance our nation's democracy at a time when confidence in our democratic and parliamentary institutions have been eroded by a decade of scandal.

This legislation serves to modernize our democracy, bringing it in line with the realities and demands of Canadian governance in this 21st century. Bill C-16 ensures that no government, not ours or any

future government, can manipulate election dates to its partisan advantage.

This legislation in no way serves the interests of the Conservative Party of Canada or any other political party. Our government introduced this reform to serve the best interests of Canadians and to ensure a healthy, vibrant and responsive democracy. Never again will this nation face the manipulation of the timing of elections that we saw throughout the 13 years the former Liberal government was in power.

In 1997, Jean Chrétien sent Canadians back to the polls early despite the flood crisis in Manitoba, which of course, Mr. Speaker, you are very well aware of. In 2000, for the second time, he called another early election to take advantage of favourable polls.

Three and a half years after that, in 2004, his successor, the member for LaSalle—Émard, called another early election when Parliament began to unearth Liberal scandal in its inquiry into the sponsorship issue. This is a perfect example of why Canada needs fixed election dates. This kind of manipulation unnecessarily derails important government and parliamentary business and gives rise to cynicism among voters.

As I said, the concept of fixed election dates is not new. In fact, we are not the first legislative body in Canada to pass the necessary legislation.

As my colleagues have pointed out, my home province of British Columbia was the first to enact fixed election dates. The B.C. legislative assembly passed this electoral reform legislation in 2001. We enjoyed our first fixed election on May 17, 2005. We already know that our next provincial election will be held on May 12, 2009, and on the second Tuesday of May four years after that unless a minority government falls through a vote of non-confidence.

Newfoundland and Labrador enacted fixed election dates in December 2004. Its residents know that their next general election will be held on October 9, 2007, and, in accordance with their legislation, afterward on the second Tuesday in October in the fourth calendar year following polling day of the most recently held general election.

• (1740)

Finally, last December, the Ontario legislature passed a law which deems that Ontario residents will go to the polls on October 4, 2007, and on the first Thursday in October every four years thereafter.

Under Bill C-16, Canadians could face the same certainty, fairness, predictability and transparency that the residents of B.C., Newfoundland and Labrador and Ontario now enjoy through fixed election dates.

Upon passage of this legislation, the next federal election would be held on October 19, 2009, unless the current government loses the confidence of the House before that date. Should that happen, the next election following that and others following majority election wins would be held on the third Monday in October in the fourth calendar year following the election arising from the fall of a minority government.

Government Orders

The third Monday in October is a good choice for Canada, I would submit. Optimum weather conditions, offering the best chance for Canadians to get to the polls, are between May and October. The summer months of July and August, vacation time, obviously are inappropriate for an election. The October date also minimizes conflict with provincial or municipal elections.

This legislation is supported by the Canadian Snowbird Association because it improves the odds that those Canadians who travel abroad during the winter can make it to the polls on election day. They would have that certainty of knowing when the election would be.

The legislation also enhances the opportunity for students to cast their ballots. This is especially important at a time when voter turnout, particularly among our younger generation, has plummeted.

While the proposed date does not appear at this time to conflict with religious or cultural occasions, Bill C-16 carefully ensures that the Chief Electoral Officer can recommend an alternate voting day, on the third Tuesday of October or the following Monday, in the event that such a conflict did arise.

The final benefit of this date, I would like to point out, is that the third week in October also happens to fall within citizenship week in Canada. I do not think there is a better way to highlight the privileges, rights and responsibilities of being a citizen in a democratic nation like ours than to have an election during that week.

Like much of the legislation tabled by this government, Bill C-16 is about moving forward with practical and substantive reforms that provide tangible results and benefit our nation for decades to come. It is about getting the job done. Our nation and this Parliament have many complex and controversial issues to address. Our government is taking immediate legislative action on those matters where we can or is working quickly in concert with Canadians to develop appropriate legislation.

What is refreshing is that we are managing the business of our nation so that when there are issues on which we can take simple, straightforward steps such as this one to enact fixed election dates, we move ahead and do it. That is leadership and, I would submit, it is something this nation has been without for far too many years.

At the end of my formal remarks, I would like to state I am very pleased that the Bloc Québécois is suggesting that it is going to support the legislation. It is a positive sign. I would urge the other opposition parties, the Liberals and the New Democratic Party, to likewise support this legislation.

Let us move it forward and get it into committee. If it needs to be amended or altered, let us discuss that there in a spirit of cooperation and a willingness on the part of all four political parties to move this important bill forward.

Hon. Marlene Jennings (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have one very simple question. Bill C-16 purports to be a bill about fixed elections and purports to provide the security that in the future there will be elections every fourth year in the month of October, starting in October 2009, and that the only time there would be a “pre-election” would be if the government lost confidence.

So on the one hand, in saying that, the party sitting opposite me, the government, the Conservative Party that forms the government, is admitting in fact that it is not quite fixed election dates, because the Prime Minister can go to the Governor General at any point and recommend that the Governor General dissolve Parliament. The Governor General has full authority to dissolve the government at her discretion.

My question, then, is this. Given that, and it is a fact, would the hon. member be in favour of amendments to Bill C-16 that would clearly describe on what kinds of votes of confidence a prime minister would be able to go to the Governor General and recommend premature dissolution of Parliament and limit those occasions?

Would the member opposite be in favour of such an amendment? It would state, for instance, that only votes of confidence on a budget would provide justification for a prime minister to go before the Governor General and ask for a premature dissolution of Parliament under Bill C-16? Would the member opposite be in favour of that?

• (1745)

Hon. Jay Hill: Mr. Speaker, first, to correct my hon. colleague's preamble when she said that the bill purports to be a bill about fixed elections, I would not want Canadians to think that we were fixing elections. I think that was a direct quote of what she said. We are talking about fixed election dates, not fixed elections as the Liberal member opposite stated. Perhaps that is something she would like to work on, fixing elections, but it is certainly nothing that the Conservative Party of Canada would support.

To the serious part of her question about defining what constitutes confidence, earlier today in kicking off this debate on Bill C-16 my colleague the hon. government House leader talked quite extensively about the problems inherent in trying to put a fence around the definition of confidence.

There are traditional confidence measures in the House of Commons. The hon. member quite correctly stated that the budget is one that over a period of years has been deemed to be a confidence measure in a government, whether it is a majority or a minority government. It would also include any bills dealing with taxation or money bills, whether they are ways and means motions or main estimates. Those types of bills are generally accepted as being confidence or if the government was defeated on them, a vote of non-confidence in the government and the government would fall.

Over and above that I would suggest to the hon. member that it would be very problematic for us to clearly define what constitutes confidence and what does not. My colleague the government House leader gave an example earlier today. What if there was a motion before Parliament of such importance and he used the example of Canada going to war. It is my belief we are in a war right now. But if there were a motion before the House, would the government not want that motion to be a motion of confidence, something so important where we would be sending young Canadians into harm's way? That would be a motion of confidence because if the government were purporting to participate as a nation in a war somewhere, it would only be right that if the government lost that vote that the government would fall.

There are things over and above money bills which the member mentioned that have to be confidence measures. We are going to deal with one tomorrow, the ways and means motion on the softwood lumber agreement. I agree it should be a confidence measure because it is of such importance to our nation.

• (1750)

Mr. Rick Dykstra (St. Catharines, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to speak to this important piece of legislation. I want to thank the member for Prince George—Peace River for giving me the opportunity to do so by sharing his time with me.

On May 30, 2006 the hon. member for Niagara Falls introduced in the House of Commons Bill C-16, an act to amend the Canada Elections Act, providing for fixed election dates every four years. I know how hard the member for Niagara Falls works as he is in the riding next to mine and how much his constituents appreciate and realize the hard work he does in his riding and the Niagara region.

The establishment of fixed elections is another key campaign commitment the Conservatives made. It is an important step in improving and modernizing Canada's democratic institution and practices. This bill is another step toward restoring Canadians' faith in the political process. First, we are making the timing of elections fair and more transparent; second, we are fixing election dates in October, which will maximize voter turnout; and third, the Canadian taxpayer will save money in two respects.

Currently, Elections Canada must maintain a high state of readiness at all times because there is always the potential for either a motion of confidence or a government to fall. Elections Canada never knows when that will be and basically that costs taxpayers money.

Second, it will prevent governments from calling unnecessary elections and wasting taxpayer dollars for their own political ends. It is tough to accept for the party opposite that called two early elections when it was in power, but that is the fact.

I would like to outline where we have come from as a country and the direction that we are now headed. From an historical perspective, our Constitution does not contain many provisions regarding elections. It is limited to section 50 of the Constitution Act, which in 1867 stated:

Every House of Commons shall continue for Five Years from the Day of the Return of the Writs for choosing the House...and no longer.

Section 4(1) of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which was preceded by the Bill of Rights introduced by Prime Minister Diefenbaker, provides as follows:

No House of Commons and no legislative assembly shall continue for longer than five years—

It also states:

—a House of Commons may be continued by Parliament and a legislative assembly may be continued by the legislature beyond five years if such continuation is not opposed by the votes of more than one-third of the members of the House of Commons...as the case may be.

A five year constitutional limit of the life of Parliament has only been exceeded once since Confederation, and that was in 1916. This bill provides for what we have all been talking about, and that is

Government Orders

fairness. It removes the advantage that the government possesses in being able to decide and determine the date for an election. Currently, the Prime Minister is able to select a date for a general election. This allows for a governing party to potentially manipulate the timing of a general election for its own advantage.

This bill would create a level playing field for all participants in the electoral process by removing two things: uncertainty and the perceived bias to the governing party. The fairness part of this bill also allows people who are considering running or working on a campaign to get prepared.

As I indicated, elections are expensive and according to Elections Canada the 2004 general election cost taxpayers \$277 million. It was an election that was called early.

There are so many examples of where fixed election dates are already in place. Municipalities across this country and provinces including British Columbia, Newfoundland and Labrador and Ontario have legislated fixed election dates, and other provincial governments have indicated that they are considering recommendations for similar legislation. Even Premier McGuinty in Ontario, who not only endorses the softwood lumber deal, endorses fixed elections. He stated, "And that's why today we're embracing the change that is central to our democracy by introducing legislation to fix the dates of elections in Ontario". That should be no different than here in our country.

• (1755)

This morning I spoke to a constituent of mine, Mr. Mel Chivers, who told me that it was time to straighten out these federal elections and help move the democratic process in this country forward. I agree with Mr. Chivers. It is time that the bill be moved forward and that we take that step forward to real democratic reform.

Canadians went to the polls in 2004 before learning all the details of the sponsorship scandal because it was better for the former government to do that. It was not better for Canadians. Canadians wanted to wait but that did not matter; however, it should have.

Bill C-16 will ensure that election timing serves the needs of Canadians and not politicians. It just makes sense.

For all those reasons I believe that fixed election dates are a change whose time has come. Fixed election dates show that the government is focused on a higher degree of accountability and governments are best held to account when people can vote them in or in some cases vote them out.

I did a little research in history and referred back to the Special Joint Committee on the Constitution of Canada which deliberated from 1970 to 1972. Interestingly enough the members travelled all over the country and found at that time, over 35 years ago, that it was indeed also a topic and suggested nine times over that the potential for fixed election dates should be in fact sought.

Government Orders

I smiled a little. When I think about 1970 to 1972, those discussions and those debates would have happened in smoked filled rooms not just the back rooms. During that time in every building, whether it was public or private, everyone could smoke if they wanted to in those rooms. Since that time municipal governments, provincial governments and indeed the federal government determined that the health of Canadians with respect to the issue of smoking was important enough to change.

Thirty-five years later democracy is also important to the health of Canadians. That democracy needs to be changed and needs to move forward. It can always get better. Sometimes it steps back in the opinion of Canadians and gets a little worse, but then we need to take two steps forward.

Bill C-16 takes two steps forward and says to the people of this country that indeed it is about accountability, indeed it is about election reform, and indeed it is about taking action in the House of Commons.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Christian Ouellet (Brome—Missisquoi, BQ): Mr. Speaker, we definitely cannot oppose virtue. It is very clear that holding elections on a set date, every four years, is an excellent and marvellous idea. We have been told about all the other countries with such a system. However, at present, is it realistic to think about having elections every four years when election results in Canada—and I might add throughout the world—are closer and closer and result more often than not in minority governments?

I would like to know if the honourable member who just spoke truly believes that, in a minority government situation, we could have elections every four years. How would he do that? If the government lasts three and a half years, two and a half years or one and a half years, would we go as long as four and a half years and change months? If elections are always held in October, then that means we will have elections in three and a half years or in four and a half years. I would like some clarification on this because I do not believe we will be able to have elections on set dates.

[*English*]

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Mr. Speaker, I think the member has made an important point. We have had in the history of our country a number of minority governments. I believe the average length of those minority governments has been 18 months.

Throughout the history of our country and Parliament we have never had fixed election dates. Therefore, to suggest that a minority government could not last four years is a bit premature. I think it is possible with the understanding that we would need to work together, as all parties in the House should do with a minority government. It would take that effort.

I would also point out that even with a majority government and no fixed election dates, we have not always lived true to that four year timeframe. In fact, the last two majority governments have not lasted throughout the four year period of time.

I think we could suggest on the one hand, with a minority government, that we need to work together obviously to reach that point. As my colleague mentioned earlier, there is rationale built in upon us as to why a motion of confidence may come forward, but I

would not like to rule out the fact that a minority government could work within the process of a four year mandate.

• (1800)

Mr. Mario Silva (Davenport, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I agree with the hon. member and some other hon. members who have spoken about the issues and the importance of fixed elections. This is a very important principle that I certainly support in terms of the cost savings effect and the importance of a day in October that would actually allow more people to vote because students are in school.

Although I support the legislation and the concept of fixed election dates, I am concerned about the fact that the Prime Minister has stated constantly in the House and before the public his willingness to have an election at any moment on any given issue. The Prime Minister seems to be almost going against the spirit of the legislation. I do not want to use the word bullying but he seems to be constantly threatening the House with an election. That goes against all the arguments we have been making in this House about cost savings and about making sure that an election is held at the right time of the year so all people can participate and not just students who are at school.

I would like to have a comment from my hon. colleague on how he feels the Prime Minister has been acting toward the legislation.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Mr. Speaker, I would extend my compliments to my colleague for his support of the legislation. He has done a very good job in the time that he has had to explain that the legislation is necessary and that it is something he supports. I think that suggests in a minority government that good legislation will be supported and should be supported by any member of the House.

In terms of responding to his question with respect to the Prime Minister's position, the Prime Minister has stated over and over again that he has no intentions of having this government brought down for any reason whatsoever. What he has indicated, if the opposition is prepared in a motion of confidence to not support the government, that he is prepared to call an election and go to the voters of this country again. However, let us be clear that his mission and our mission as a government has been stated very clearly and directly: We are here to govern, not to bring governments down. We are here to build governments up.

Mr. Lui Temelkovski (Oak Ridges—Markham, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak today to Bill C-16, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act. The bill would institute fixed election dates for Canadians. This is an item that has interested me for a long time and I am looking forward to sharing my thoughts on the bill with the House.

However, before I do that, I hope I will be allowed to mention a couple of other activities that I have been involved in that are worth sharing with the House.

First, I want to acknowledge my constituents in the riding of Oak Ridges—Markham. I attended a number of events during the summer in every corner of the riding and it is always a pleasure to meet and talk with my constituents.

Government Orders

On October 11 in Oak Ridges—Markham, Public Works and Government Services Canada will be giving a seminar presentation on how to do business with the Government of Canada. This seminar presentation—

The Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I beg to ask the hon. member to take relevance into account. We are talking about Bill C-16 which is about fixed election dates not about seminars on how to work with the Government of Canada in the hon. member's constituency. When he asked me for permission at the outset I did not know what he was talking about, but in my opinion he is clearly not speaking to the bill and I would ask you to do so.

• (1805)

Mr. Lui Temelkovski: Mr. Speaker, I will move on to the business at hand which is the second reading of Bill C-16.

I support the idea of fixed election dates but I am not happy with the way the government has gone about bringing in the legislation and certain parts of it concern me.

I am confident that with further study and amendments at committee fixed election dates can be achieved in a fashion that is sound and well thought out. After all, no reform should ever be taken lightly, especially when our system of government has worked so hard and well, all things considered, since before 1867.

The Westminster system of government that we inherited from the United Kingdom dates back hundreds of years. It is a remarkable system of government in that it has adapted itself to changing times. This system has also adapted itself to a number of countries, such as Singapore, Malta, India and Jamaica. We have a strong system of government that is innovative and flexible. Fixed election dates are yet another reform that is coming along and that, if implemented correctly, can only serve to make our system stronger.

I will speak to why I support the idea of fixed election dates and then I will raise my concerns with the government's course of action on this file.

Canadian history was made on May 17, 2005, when British Columbia had the first election date set in law.

In December 2005, the McGuinty government in Ontario passed a bill that set fixed election dates for Ontario. This means that the next election in Ontario will be on October 4, my birthday, 2007, and subsequent elections will be held on the first Thursday of October every four years.

Other provinces, such as Quebec, Manitoba and New Brunswick, have considered fixed dates as well.

This is not a novel move at all. We tend to take fixed election dates at the municipal level for granted. Why should things be any different at the provincial or federal level? There has been a movement toward reforming assemblies that use the Westminster system of government.

When the British Parliament created new assemblies in Scotland and Wales in 1998, the acts proclaimed that elections were to take place on the first Thursday in May every four years.

In 2005, the New Zealand prime minister, Helen Clark, voiced support for fixed election dates in that country. It is time that we consider such a move here in Canada.

On balance, the fairness and administrative efficiency of fixed elections outweighs the added cost due to potentially longer campaigns. With the financing laws and third party advertisement laws we have in Canada, the nightmare scenario of a four year election campaign should be avoided.

Fixed election dates can actually be more efficient in that since everyone knows when the election is coming there may be more cooperation to get bills passed in Parliament. Bills that enjoy the support of most parties in the House may be prioritized and there may be agreement to extend sitting hours to get bills of common interest passed. I think here of the animal cruelty legislation that has been constantly removed from the order papers for the past few Parliaments.

There have been examples in Canadian history when everyone thought there would be an election but one turned out not to be called at all. Party workers prepared signs, pamphlets and databases and then all of a sudden there was no election.

• (1810)

This would be a waste of resources in that all the campaign material would need to be updated at a later date. There has to be a leaner, more efficient way.

Moreover, the duration of the formal campaign could be shortened under the fixed election date system since the work of the electoral office could begin before the election was called. This could save money and result in better planning all around. Similarly, unnecessary byelections could be avoided.

There have been examples in Canadian politics where election campaigns have been underway when a writ was dropped for a national election. Also, there have been examples of byelections held just before the writ was dropped for a national vote. In both cases there was an inefficient use of resources, both financial and human. This sort of waste and inefficiency could be avoided if the date of the national election were known and a determination could be made on whether a byelection is necessary or it could wait until the national election.

There are examples in Canadian history of premiers and prime ministers trying to avoid the electorate by waiting five years before having an election called. The playing field must be level so all may participate fairly.

Another reason to consider a fixed election date is for convenience. I do not think anyone in the House wants to go through another winter campaign any time soon. With the fixed date, everyone is on the same page and, with an election date fixed at a convenient time of the year, headaches could be avoided.

While there were no serious glitches in the 2006 election other than the outcome, this does not mean that a winter date does not cause headaches and inconveniences for senior citizens, those with disabilities and the snowbirds.

Government Orders

A number of my constituents, both men and women, have raised concerns about the lack of representation of women in the House of Commons. In January's election, only 64 women were elected, which is actually one fewer than in the 2004 election. A number of ways exist to address this but one way is to ensure adequate child care spaces so that women are more able to pursue a career in a field such as politics. We all know the government's record on child care. Its child care initiative has proven to be a poorly thought out plan but I will discuss that a bit more in a few minutes.

Another way to improve the representation of women in the House might be through fixed election dates. If women were able to know ahead of time the date of the election they could better prepare, plan and make all necessary arrangements. It is certainly something worth considering. The same approach might also encourage more ethnic minorities and new Canadians to run for Parliament.

I have spent the last few minutes discussing why I support fixed election dates. As a result, I support sending the bill to committee where members will be able to analyze it, debate and discuss it.

The bill could be improved in a number of areas so that it could truly accomplish fixed election dates. First, I cannot help but think that the bill was introduced in a hasty and rushed fashion. We have Bill C-16 before us but the Prime Minister also has proposals for Senate reform.

The Prime Minister should know that the functioning of Canada's Parliament has not changed much since 1867.

● (1815)

Reform in this country can be slow and rather than take this sloppy, misguided and unfocused approach to parliamentary reform, he should better focus his proposals. I support reform. Fixed election dates is an example, but only if it is carried out in a responsible manner. This ensures that the reforms can be well implemented and bring forth results.

Bill C-16 was introduced on May 30, less than two months after the opening of Parliament. I wish the government would have truly considered fixed election dates, then we might have a better bill than we have here today.

In the bill, the prime minister still retains the ability to advise the Governor General to dissolve Parliament at any time he believes he has lost the confidence of the House. This is understandable if the vote he has lost is a true confidence one, but what if the bill is only one that the government deemed to be a vote of confidence? This sort of confidence out of convenience could defeat fears of fixed election. I am apprehensive that an over-zealous prime minister could purposefully lose a vote; deem it one of confidence, even if it is not, and then have an election called. This is one example of how the bill was introduced in a sloppy fashion.

I am confident that with the hard work of the official opposition, the bill can be made into a good one that will serve the purpose and bring Canadians fixed election dates. However, the way the government has proceeded with the bill is indicative of how it has handled most of its files since taking office.

The government has boasted that it has worked hard on a handful of priorities, but in reality it has only left a trail of disillusionment

and deception. The GST cut is a prime example. It came into effect as promised on July 1, but Canadians also noticed an increase in their income tax as of that date. The government gave with one hand and took even more with the other, especially for low and middle income Canadians. Cuts to sales taxes are not the best kinds of tax cuts to introduce as they do nothing to encourage people to enter the workforce or to invest more money from their paycheques. The GST cut only benefited wealthy Canadians to spend more money on consumer goods.

Of course, child care, as I mentioned before, is a file that the government has not handled well at all. It is with great glee that the Prime Minister cancelled signed child care agreements. The Conservatives have eliminated the national child care program and distributed monetary gifts. In so doing, it fails to build more social policies that will benefit Canadians for generations to come. Moreover, the payment to parents is taxable, so families are not even receiving the full amount they were promised. Again, bad policy was carried out in a hasty and sloppy fashion.

What about the health care guarantee? Where is that? How does the Prime Minister plan to accomplish his wait times guarantee? How will he improve health care for Canadians? Unfortunately, the government has once again introduced government policy on the fly, out of pure politics.

Bill C-16 is yet another hastily drawn piece of legislation. I support fixed election dates, but it needs to be worked at in committee to truly bring democratic change to this institution and to help us realize fixed election dates.

Some of the members across have mentioned that I had a different speech. Yes, I wanted to speak about my riding a bit more and talk about Oak Ridges—Markham, what we are doing there and what I am hearing from people on fixed election dates.

● (1820)

This was not something that was drawn up by the Conservative Party. This legislation has been in front of us a number of times in the House in private members' bills. I was also thinking of putting a bill forward at the beginning of the year, but I had other priorities in my riding such as rural mail delivery, which was ceased by the current government.

When I spoke with my constituents about a fixed date for elections, I was torn between the two bills. My constituents convinced me that rural mail delivery was more important. Since the current Prime Minister had put this forth as a private members' bill in the previous Parliament, I knew that it would come up one way or another. I wanted to ensure that I commented on that in my speech.

Government Orders

Mr. Fabian Manning (Avalon, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened intently to the hon. member across the way as he gave his speech and made his comments. Certainly, I am not surprised that he is supporting the bill that has been put forward in the House. This is a good bill and it is part of our strategy as a new government to fix some of the wrongs of the past. I look forward to more progressive legislation coming forward in the House.

I want to ask the member a question in relation to fixed election dates. The member talked about different issues in his constituency and the concerns he had. When the member talks with his constituents, does he feel that they would like to see fixed election dates and this legislation passed? What feedback is the member receiving from his constituents?

When I talk with my constituents, they want to see fixed election dates. Many of them think that having five elections in seven years is a waste of taxpayer dollars. People look at this as playing games.

What feedback is the member getting from his own riding? Is that the type of feedback he is getting? Is that why he is here today supporting the bill and hoping to see the bill pass in the House?

Mr. Lui Temelkovski: Mr. Speaker, I have spoken with my constituents and most of them want fixed term election dates.

The problem arises that there are many issues that could stop that. For example, I have been here two years and we have had two elections. Most of my constituents do not want to spend a billion dollars of Canadians' hard earned dollars within three years for elections that produce an ineffective minority such as that.

They are looking for a long term election date. When we talk about a fixed date, my comments were that we want to send the bill to committee to ensure that we have an opportunity and the government has an opportunity to have the good work of the opposition to improve the bill that has been put forth.

● (1825)

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague from Oak Ridges—Markham for a tremendously passionate speech. I wanted to hear more about what was upcoming in Oak Ridges—Markham and I might catch him in the lobby and find out about that event in October.

On this issue I agree with him. I am a fan of fixed election dates for many reasons. We all recall when we first get elected, when we first run for office. It is hard, particularly for people in business who do not know when the next election will be, to plan our life and our family's life around an election. Being a nominated candidate is not always easy. It is easier as a Liberal than as a Conservative, I suspect, but it is not always easy identifying one's colours in advance and it is hard planning.

The bill closes the gap between the incumbents and the challengers. I like it for that reason. In general it is democratic, but I do have a concern that has been expressed before that the bill has to be amended so we know what confidence means. If we have elections every four years because we believe that they should be, then what determines confidence? What matters determine confidence? Is it a money bill, a budget bill? Who determines what confidence is?

Could my colleague give us his thoughts about that. Would it make it a better bill if we knew exactly what would trigger an election from the government's point of view? A clear vote of confidence on a budget we understand. What other issues should be considered matters of confidence?

Mr. Lui Temelkovski: Mr. Speaker, as I said earlier, October 4 is a good day to have an election date. That is my birthday and I do not mind taking the day off to cast my ballot.

In terms of my hon. colleague's question, I believe that if there is a vote of confidence, it should not be hastily taken in the House at any time at the whim of the prime minister whether it be the current Prime Minister or any prime minister in the upcoming years, hopefully soon.

I consider budget bills as a vote of confidence as well as money bills, but there is more. When the prime minister goes to the Governor General and asks her to dissolve Parliament, it leaves a lot more than just us voting here and having the government overturned or not giving it the vote of confidence. We need to pay particular attention to that and defining it in committee. In all sincerity we need to have the wisdom of the opposition to make the bill a great one.

Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have three quick comments related to the month of October. In my riding we have fixed municipal elections in October and I know the objective of the bill is not to overlap, so I want to have that on the record.

Also, if it is the first week in October and go back to the beginning of the election, that would take away Labour Day. Summer is short enough in my riding and I do not want to lose another holiday. People would not want to lose the Labour Day holiday.

Finally, because summer is so important in our ridings, having the date in October at least does not take away the rest of the summer. Maybe the member could talk about some of the important things that happened in his riding this summer.

Mr. Lui Temelkovski: Mr. Speaker, in my riding we were working on rural mail delivery with Canada Post. Canadian business owners in my riding are interested in finding out how to do with business with the Canadian government. I have asked Public Works and Government Services to hold a seminar in my riding. We are trying to work with businesses interested in emerging economies. However, in terms of October, in some parts of the country October is a—

● (1830)

The Deputy Speaker: Order, please. The time for orders of the day has expired, but I congratulate the hon. member for working as a team with his members to try to do indirectly what I asked him not to do directly.

*Adjournment Proceedings***ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS**

A motion to adjourn the House under Standing Order 38 deemed to have been moved.

[*Translation*]

THE ENVIRONMENT

Hon. John Godfrey (Don Valley West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, this evening, we are revisiting a question from June of this year that still remains unanswered by the Minister of the Environment, although of utmost importance, regarding the relationship between this government and the provinces that believe in the Kyoto protocol and that are prepared to make an effort to reach its targets.

Let me briefly remind the House of the facts. Thanks to an access to information request, we learned that no one at the Prime Minister's Office, the Privy Council or the office of the Minister of the Environment had communicated in writing with the Quebec government regarding the implementation of Kyoto. However, on May 2, 2006, the Minister of the Environment stated right here, and I quote:

The provinces will be very much a part of our made in Canada solution; Canadians will come first, and Quebec is a part of that plan.

With that statement, the minister misled this House on June 15, 2006, because she never officially communicated in writing with the Quebec government on this issue. We have the proof.

Furthermore, the very day that I questioned the minister, the Quebec government tabled its own plan to reach the Kyoto targets. That plan, I would point out, was very well received by various environmental groups. While Quebec was taking responsibility to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions, this government did nothing and led the public to believe that the provinces were going to be part of its plan.

What is even more alarming is that the minister does not seem to take this seriously. Instead of explaining to the public the reasons for her inaction, she chose to say that all this was nothing but blah blah blah. As if Canadians did not have the right to know. As if, to her, relations with the Government of Quebec on the issue of the Kyoto protocol were not important. Is it because Quebecers believe in the Kyoto protocol and its objectives that the minister decided to ignore them? This type of response from the minister is disrespectful to the House of Commons and especially to Quebecers. This attitude is not worthy of a minister of the Crown, because a serious question deserves a serious answer. Since we have a bit more time today than in question period, I hope the government's response will be more substantive than the minister's response was in June.

I will repeat my questions: why did the minister mislead this House by saying that Quebec was part of her plan when we have written proof that this was not the case at the time? Furthermore, how could this government say that the provinces would be directly involved in their so-called "made in Canada" solution when they were not even consulted in the process?

You cannot just start listening and working with the provinces when there is a dip in the polls, which is currently the case for

Conservatives in Quebec. The environment and the future of our children demand a lot more respect.

• (1835)

[*English*]

Mr. Mark Warawa (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, clearly the hon. member is not aware of the extent of discussions this government is having with the provinces and territories on initiatives that address clean air, clean water, clean land and climate change. In fact, in the last few days the Minister of the Environment has called all of the provincial environmental ministers, including Mr. B  chard in the province of Quebec.

On the specific issue of the Government of Quebec, there have been discussions between the federal government and Quebec on a variety of issues, including climate change. The Minister of the Environment met her Quebec counterpart, Mr. B  chard, several months ago and climate change was the primary topic of discussion. Her office is in regular contact with Mr. B  chard's office. The new deputy minister of the environment met his provincial counterpart on May 29, less than one week after he was appointed, and discussions occur on a regular basis.

We were pleased when the Government of Quebec tabled its climate change plan a few months ago. This gives us a clear idea where the province sees opportunities for emissions reductions and provides us at the federal level with clearly identified areas where we are able to collaborate with it. There are already ways in which we are well aligned with Quebec in our priorities. We look forward to working together for the betterment of Canada's environment and the health of all Canadians.

Several announcements in the current budget will help Quebec in its efforts. These include a tax credit for transit passes, the largest investment in clean public transportation infrastructure in Canada's history, and a commitment to implement an average 5% renewable fuel content by 2010. We are not only talking to Quebec. We are in discussions with all provinces, territories and key stakeholders regarding opportunities for investment in transit infrastructure and the commitment to renewable content in fuels. These are all tangible measures.

Concrete measures which have real results will provide cleaner air for all Canadians and will reduce greenhouse gas emissions too. This is just the start. We will continue to build on these measures and create an environmental agenda focused on ensuring that future generations enjoy clean air, clean water, clean land and clean energy here in Canada, a plan which will reduce air contaminants and greenhouse gases and will improve the health of Canadians.

Hon. John Godfrey: Mr. Speaker, the question I raised in the House on June 15 was not about what happened last week. It was not about what happened recently. It was trying to reconcile a statement the minister made in the House on May 2 indicating that there were plans and documents in place which showed serious negotiation with the provinces.

The period covered by the access to information request was from January 23 to June 2. There is no trace of any written document with the Government of Quebec in any fashion, electronic, messengers, whatever. There is no document showing that there was any recorded discussion or negotiation between the province of Quebec and the Government of Canada.

I do not think the answer we just received refers to that period and that was the purpose of the question. That is why I repeat that the minister misled the House in giving the answer she did on May 2.

Mr. Mark Warawa: Mr. Speaker, it is unfortunate the hon. member was not listening to what I said.

This government is going to act with a clean air made in Canada environmental plan. We have a very clear objective and that is to provide cleaner air for the health of Canadians and to reduce greenhouse gases. We will put forward a realistic, achievable and affordable plan.

Canadians waited for 13 years while the previous Liberal government did almost nothing to clean up the environment. It took only four months for Canada's new government to get every single province and territory to the table and agree with the importance of moving forward with a biofuel strategy.

This government is not afraid to set targets. When we set targets, we meet them. When we make promises, we keep them. This government is committed to action for a clean environment because that is what Canadians want.

● (1840)

HOUSING

Mrs. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask the minister responsible for CMHC to clarify what the parliamentary secretary stated in question period on June 20. In her response to my question, the parliamentary secretary stated:

—the minister has confirmed that she has reached an agreement with the province of British Columbia to transfer the administration of federal resources for existing social housing from CMHC to the Government of British Columbia.

I would like the minister to clarify what the agreement made with British Columbia is, in particular, how the federal resources for social housing will be distributed by British Columbia.

I would also like the minister to clarify if she is in negotiations with other provinces to reach similar arrangements, and if so, what deals have been reached.

I am particularly concerned how the federal funding will be used for low income housing if the programs have been outsourced to the provinces. The best way to ensure that all Canadians have access to safe, affordable housing is to set federal guidelines that ensure that access through federal programs.

Finally, in my riding of London—Fanshawe, My Sister's Place, a women's shelter funded through the federal SCPI program, was told its funding was cut and it was faced with closing its doors.

I asked in June for the minister to ensure all housing funding was in place. Despite her assurances, funding for homeless advocates was cut in several communities. Only after intense pressure from the

Adjournment Proceedings

community, the media and the NDP in August did the funding miraculously reappear just a few weeks ago.

This is not acceptable. As I have previously stated, shelters are the last line of defence for preventing homelessness. With funding cuts consistently looming overhead, how is an organization supposed to help the most vulnerable people in our community?

I would like the minister to answer my question. Will the minister invest in a federal homelessness strategy, a true national housing program, and protect the most vulnerable people in this country?

Mrs. Lynne Yelich (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for London—Fanshawe for bringing this issue to the attention of the House. I am confident that as her party's housing critic she is cognizant of the complexity surrounding the issue of housing policy and the need for informed debate surrounding it, for this issue involves countless players working together to help meet the unique and varying housing needs of Canadians throughout our country.

I would like to assure her and her party that the new Government of Canada recognizes affordable housing's importance in improving the lives of individuals and families. Indeed, we are taking substantial action on a number of fronts.

For instance, Budget 2006 provided, pending confirmation of the government's financial results for 2005-06, an investment of \$1.4 billion and the establishment of three housing trusts, with the provinces and territories, for affordable housing, northern housing and aboriginals living off reserve.

I also believe we share a common desire, indeed, a fundamental commitment, that all Canadians should have a reasonable opportunity to own or rent their own home.

But where some would speak to the abstract world of strategies and structure in addressing this issue, we speak of action. We speak of commitment, one that is demonstrated in the nearly \$2 billion the Government of Canada provides annually to support 600,000-plus existing social housing units across the country, support that primarily assists low income households. It is a commitment demonstrated through our decision to ensure the maintenance of shelters and related services for Canada's homeless people in urban and rural communities and by extending the national homelessness initiative, including the supporting communities partnership initiative, to March 2007 at a cost of almost \$135 million.

The Government of Canada is acting on other fronts as well. For instance, in collaboration with provincial, territorial and local partners, we are delivering on the \$1 billion affordable housing initiative, funding that has created 27,000 units of new affordable housing in communities across the country.

Adjournment Proceedings

In addition to creating new units, our commitment to housing is demonstrated in our support of programs that maintain the existing affordable housing stock and funding for the residential rehabilitation assistance program and several related housing renovation and adaptation programs that provide financial assistance. Our commitment to repairing homes occupied by low income people and converting non-residential buildings into residential use has been extended for 2006-07 at a cost of about \$128 million.

The government's role in housing extends beyond helping low income households. Indeed, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, our national housing agency, helps all Canadians by lowering costs and improving access to mortgage financing through its mortgage loan insurance and mortgage securitization programs. In fact, CMHC mortgage loan insurance has assisted one in three Canadian families with the purchase of their home. Also, its mortgage loan insurance helps finance affordable housing with no premiums charged for affordable housing projects.

I again assure my colleague that Canada's new government is committed to housing and to taking the necessary action to keep our national housing system strong.

• (1845)

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: Mr. Speaker, I know all about the \$1.4 billion of the \$1.6 billion of NDP Bill C-48 money. I know about that and I would like to remind the minister through her parliamentary secretary that this is not a game of words and empty promises. It is about the lives and well-being of some of the most vulnerable people in our communities: women suffering in violent situations, their children, people suffering from mental illness, and seniors who cannot make ends meet.

I want to reiterate that her ministry and the government committed an outrage against Canadians, whom they are obliged to protect with true funding. There is no excuse for what transpired. There is no excuse at all for the failure to unequivocally state that after March 31, 2007, there will be funding in the budget for housing and a definitive program to ensure a national housing strategy that guarantees housing, a fundamental human right.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: Mr. Speaker, I would like to reiterate that Canada's new government is acting to support Canada's national housing system.

As her party's housing critic, the member opposite recognizes that our national housing system requires the coordinated action of many players to support housing choices for people with different needs, including those who need affordable housing. Key participants include everyone from municipalities and provinces to non-profit community groups, builders and architects. No one can do it alone.

Canada's new government is doing its part by helping Canadians most in need gain access to safe, affordable housing and we are doing our part to help Canadians access home ownership. I can assure her that this government will continue to work with the various housing stakeholders to strengthen our housing system.

The Deputy Speaker: The motion to adjourn the House is now deemed to have been adopted. Accordingly the House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 10 a.m. pursuant to Standing Order 24 (1).

(The House adjourned at 6:48 p.m.)

CONTENTS

Monday, September 18, 2006

Vacancy			
Repentigny			
The Speaker	2867		
Message from the Senate			
The Speaker	2867		
PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS			
Food and Drugs Act			
Mr. Wappel	2867		
Bill C-283. Second reading	2867		
Mr. Fletcher	2869		
Mr. Szabo	2869		
Mr. Fletcher	2870		
Ms. Gagnon	2871		
Ms. Priddy	2872		
Mr. Szabo	2873		
Mr. Merrifield	2874		
GOVERNMENT ORDERS			
Canada Elections Act			
Mr. Nicholson	2875		
Bill C-16. Second reading	2875		
Mr. Szabo	2877		
Mr. Comartin	2878		
Mr. Owen (Vancouver Quadra)	2878		
Mr. Hill	2881		
Mr. Gauthier	2882		
Ms. Bourgeois	2884		
Mr. Baird	2884		
Mr. Gauthier	2885		
Mr. Comartin	2885		
Mr. Del Mastro	2886		
Mr. Szabo	2886		
Ms. Davies	2887		
Mr. Martin (Winnipeg Centre)	2887		
Mr. Lukiwski	2887		
Mr. Szabo	2889		
STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS			
Fort McMurray			
Mr. Jean	2889		
Anthony Boneca			
Mr. Comuzzi	2889		
Anastasia De Sousa			
Mr. Ménard (Marc-Aurèle-Fortin)	2889		
Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry			
Mr. Lauzon	2889		
2015 World Expo			
Ms. Nash	2890		
Myanmar			
Mr. Temelkovski	2890		
Justice			
Mr. Hanger	2890		
Benoît Sauvageau			
Mr. Plamondon	2890		
Terry Fox Run			
Mr. Hill	2890		
Robin Cameron and Marc Bourdages			
Mr. Merasty	2891		
Softwood Lumber			
Mr. Casey	2891		
Sokol Polish Folk Ensemble			
Ms. Wasylcyia-Leis	2891		
Iran			
Ms. Neville	2891		
Afghanistan			
Mr. Bouchard	2892		
Dawson College			
Ms. Robillard	2892		
Conservative Government			
Mr. Preston	2892		
Dawson College			
The Speaker	2892		
Sergeant-at-Arms			
The Speaker	2892		
ORAL QUESTIONS			
Firearms Registry			
Mr. Graham (Toronto Centre)	2892		
Mr. Harper	2893		
Mr. Graham (Toronto Centre)	2893		
Mr. Harper	2893		
Mr. Graham (Toronto Centre)	2893		
Mr. Harper	2893		
Ms. Robillard	2893		
Mr. Day	2893		
Ms. Robillard	2893		
Mr. Day	2893		
Foreign Affairs			
Mr. Duceppe	2893		
Mr. Harper	2894		
Mr. Duceppe	2894		
Mr. Harper	2894		
Afghanistan			
Mr. Bachand	2894		
Mr. O'Connor	2894		

Mr. Bachand	2894	Government Contracts	
Mr. O'Connor	2894	Mr. Bains	2899
Mr. Layton	2894	Mr. Baird	2899
Mr. Harper	2894	Sponsorship Program	
Mr. Layton	2894	Mr. Epp	2899
Mr. Harper	2895	Mr. Baird	2899
Firearms Registry		Softwood Lumber	
Ms. Folco	2895	Mr. Julian	2899
Mr. Day	2895	Mr. Emerson	2900
Ms. Folco	2895	Afghanistan	
Mr. Day	2895	The Speaker	2900
Mrs. Jennings	2895	Benoît Sauvageau	
Mr. Day	2895	The Speaker	2900
Mrs. Jennings	2895	Mr. Duceppe	2900
Mr. Day	2895	Mr. Harper	2900
Afghanistan		Mr. Graham (Toronto Centre)	2901
Mrs. Barbot	2896	Mr. Godin	2901
Ms. Verner	2896	Mr. Bigras	2902
Mrs. Barbot	2896		
Mr. O'Connor	2896		
Firearms Registry			
Mr. Ménard (Marc-Aurèle-Fortin)	2896		
Mr. Day	2896		
Mr. Ménard (Marc-Aurèle-Fortin)	2896		
Mr. Day	2896		
Afghanistan			
Mr. Martin (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca)	2896		
Ms. Verner	2897		
Mr. Martin (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca)	2897		
Ms. Verner	2897		
Mr. Patry	2897		
Mr. O'Connor	2897		
Mr. Patry	2897		
Mr. O'Connor	2897		
Agriculture			
Mr. Casson	2897		
Mr. Strahl	2897		
Afghanistan			
Ms. Black	2898		
Mr. O'Connor	2898		
Ms. Black	2898		
Mr. O'Connor	2898		
Lobbyists			
Mr. Goodale	2898		
Mr. Baird	2898		
Mr. Goodale	2898		
Mr. Baird	2898		
Mr. Proulx	2898		
Mr. Baird	2898		
Mr. Proulx	2898		
Mr. Baird	2899		
Mr. Laforest	2899		
Mr. Baird	2899		
Mr. Laforest	2899		
Mr. Baird	2899		
		ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS	
		Certificates of Nomination	
		Mr. Nicholson	2902
		Ways and Means	
		Notice of Motion	
		Mr. Emerson	2902
		Government Response to Petitions	
		Mr. Lukiwski	2903
		Canada Grain Act	
		Mr. Anderson	2903
		Maher Arar Inquiry	
		Mr. Day	2903
		Committees of the House	
		Health	
		Mr. Merrifield	2903
		Criminal Code	
		Mr. Thompson (Wild Rose)	2903
		Bill C-350. Introduction and first reading	2903
		(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed)	2903
		Criminal Code	
		Mr. Thompson (Wild Rose)	2903
		Bill C-351. Introduction and first reading	2903
		(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed)	2904
		Address of the President of Afghanistan	
		Mr. Lukiwski (for the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform)	2904
		Motion No. 19	2904
		(Motion agreed to)	2904
		Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act	
		Mr. Lukiwski (for the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform)	2904

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