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Tuesday, February 3, 2015

—

Speaker: The Honourable Andrew Scheer

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Tuesday, February 3, 2015

The House met at 10 a.m.

Prayers

• (1005)

[English]

HOUSE OF COMMONS

The Speaker: I would like the House to take note of today's use of the wooden mace. The wooden mace is traditionally used when the House sits on February 3 to mark the anniversary of the fire that destroyed the original Parliament buildings on this day in 1916.

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

[English]

RESIGNATION OF MINISTER

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, let me start by saying how overwhelmingly optimistic I am about the future of this country, optimistic because over the past nine years, I have seen the stature of our country grow in the eyes of the world. The world has seen and come to know and to count on Canada's strength, strength created by sustained economic growth and by our enduring values, strength through our commitment to freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Simply put, the world has seen, in fact the world continues to see, the best that Canada has to offer.

When I joined my good friend Mike Harris back in 1995, I was perhaps just a little naive, driven by ideology, defined by partisanship, at the age of 25. I quickly learned, though, that to make a difference, to really make a difference, one cannot be defined by partisanship, nor by ideology. One needs, instead, to be defined by one's values. I believed then, and I continue to believe, that government has to be there for people and that through hard work, it can be a force for good.

When each of us chooses to enter public life, we do so united in one simple desire, the desire to leave behind a better country, a better province, and a better community and to pass on to the next generation a better place than the one we inherited from those who came before us.

Today, after serving 10 years in provincial politics, 10 years here in federal politics, in 10 ministerial portfolios, and with more grey

hairs than I choose to admit, I can step back and say that we have an Ottawa that is vibrant and strong, a province whose future is bright and hopeful, with strong health care and an innovative and resilient workforce, and a country that is the best in the world. We led the G7 in job creation, and we have been a beacon of dependable light in a world that is ruled by far too many dark and stormy seas.

Today Canada stands tall in the world, united with our allies and partners in the fight against terror, side by side with the only liberal democracy in the Middle East, with strong relationships in the Arab world, firm in our objection to militaristic expansionism in Eastern Europe, an expanded diplomatic footprint in Asia, and strong trade ties that will create lasting prosperity for generations to come. Canada stands tall in the world.

Last night I spoke to the Prime Minister and informed him that I was standing down from cabinet. I expressed my intention not to run in the next general election in the new riding of Nepean. I also expressed my intention to stand down as member of Parliament for Ottawa West—Nepean in the weeks ahead.

I will miss this place very much, and many of the people in it, on all sides, but the time has come for me to start a new chapter in my life.

If the House will indulge me, I would like to extend my profound gratitude and admiration to a few individuals who really made a difference for me.

I wish to thank my family for always being at and on my side. It is never easy to see one's son, grandson, brother, or uncle under the public's microscope. Not only have they been my strength during the difficult times, they have kept me grounded during the good ones.

Routine Proceedings

●(1010)

To the Prime Minister, in 2005, when I was a younger, somewhat thinner, provincial MPP, when many others counted him out, I believed in this Prime Minister, and I continue to believe in him today, all these years later. There is no better person to lead our country into its 150th year. He is one of our country's great leaders. I leave genuinely humbled to have enjoyed his confidence and truly honoured to have served with him, profoundly grateful to have sat in his cabinet all these years, and immensely proud of what we have been able to accomplish together for all Canadians. I am also distinctly privileged to count him as a friend and a mentor. I wish him and our party continued success for many years to come, and I look forward to campaigning for him and my colleagues in our party in the upcoming general election.

To all of my friends in this place, for a Canadian there is nothing more meaningful and nothing more special than to sit in the benches of this sacred House and to serve with all of them. I am grateful to them for their friendship, for their counsel, and for their wisdom.

John Diefenbaker once said that Parliament is more than a procedure; it is the custodian of the nation's freedom. There is no greater honour for a Canadian than to serve in this place, no greater honour than to serve the people who place their trust in us.

To my staff, past and present, it is said that behind any successful minister are great staff, and that is truly the case for me. I want to thank all of the staff and security in the House of Commons for their continued service to our democratic traditions.

To the public service in all the portfolios I have served in, and to our diplomats abroad, I leave with the feeling that my political career has been one of success in delivering real results for Canadians from coast to coast to coast. I thank all of them, from the bottom of my heart, for standing by my side and for their valued contributions to our country.

Finally, and most importantly, I thank the people of Ottawa West—Nepean, the people of Nepean, and the people of Ottawa. I am grateful for their continued trust, their vision, and their community. Their support over these past 20 years means more than I can ever convey in words. Being foreign minister was a tremendous experience, but I never took their trust for granted. I never forgot about our city. Every day I was reminded that it was they who put their trust in me and gave me this incredible opportunity. I was always committed to our people and its future.

I am so grateful for the volunteers in countless campaigns and riding associations, anyone who believed in me, in our party, in our government, and most importantly, in our message.

I stand before the House with many emotions. I am optimistic about Canada's future as a country. I am optimistic about my future and the opportunities that lie before me. At the same time, I am very saddened to leave this place behind. I am saddened to leave behind those for whom I care so deeply. I am grateful for the opportunity to serve my country, proud of the legacy of our government, and honoured to have had the opportunity to stand in this place.

May the true north stay strong and free, and may God bless Canada.

●(1020)

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, like many last night, I was shocked and surprised by the announcement by our friend across the way of his decision to step down as foreign affairs minister and to not seek re-election. Like many people, I spent the night thinking about the minister's contributions to this place, to our country, and to our city.

As many will know, we were both elected in 2006, but members should know that our connection was very close prior to his being elected to this place and Queen's Park. It was as early as grade nine. He was chosen by his school to represent the school and to meet the then mayor of Ottawa, and that happened to have been my mother. Some people have accused her of his being motivated toward politics because of that visit, but I know more. I know that at an early age, he was inspired by a teacher, someone who was involved in politics in the Progressive Conservative Party, who led him to become a young activist within the Progressive Conservative Party, along with a fellow minister down the way.

What always drove the minister, as far as I could tell, as for many of us in this place, was making a genuine difference in his community, in this place, and obviously, recently, on the world stage.

It was after having had a wonderful time with my family this past Labour Day weekend that I received a call. I was asked to accompany the minister on a trip to Iraq. I certainly was not planning on this trip. It was not part of my itinerary.

I have to share with the House and Canadians that the way the minister conducted himself on that trip, also with my colleague from the Liberal Party, showed his professionalism. It showed that he cared about this country and that he was a responsible minister and parliamentarian. On every visit with dignitaries, he included us. He asked for our advice and actually followed up on some of the issues we were advocating for.

Make no mistake. I have a long list of disagreements with the minister, but that is what politics is about. It is about putting forward ideas and presenting them in the best way possible, but I want to underline a couple of issues in the foreign affairs file the minister has taken on and led. When he was first named as the foreign affairs minister, I reached out to him and talked to him about the issue of women, peace, and security and the whole issue of sexual violence. He has led on that internationally. He recently had the government earmark \$10 million to carry on that fight against sexual violence in Iraq. He should be applauded for that. He took leadership on that, and for that I thank him.

Routine Proceedings

He also, time and time again, stood on the world stage and spoke out against discrimination against people, wherever in the world, because of their sexual orientation. As minister, he led like no other minister on the world stage when it came to the persecution of gays, lesbians, and transsexuals. Again, I want to thank him for what he has done in putting Canada in a good light with regard to fighting discrimination against those who are GBLTQ in this world.

I also want to talk about the dichotomy that is the minister. As passionate as he can get, as partisan as he can get, and he can, he is also someone who reaches out. He is someone who understands the importance of getting things done. He has done that here in Ottawa with his leadership on NCC reform, his reform of accountability in this place, and his focus on making sure our capital is going to be a place that shines. His voice in cabinet was absolutely extraordinary when it came to this city.

I want to finish by talking about why we get involved in politics and what I think the minister is about. He acknowledged in his comments that he has grown into his role.

•(1025)

I would argue that anyone who comes here and is static does not belong in politics. This is a place for growth. This is a place to learn. This is a place to engage.

The minister has done that. He found his best footing as the Minister of Foreign affairs, in my opinion. For that, he should be acknowledged. I think we all get into politics for good reasons and, ultimately, it is to make a difference.

[*Translation*]

The minister's service record is strong and distinguished. He has always served his constituents and his country with pride and passion.

[*English*]

The member has served this place with passion. He served his electors well. If I might say, "Rusty" may be gone but will not be forgotten.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Garneau (Westmount—Ville-Marie, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I will not repeat everything that my colleague from Ottawa Centre said about the minister. I agree with all of it. On behalf of the Liberal Party, I thank the minister for his two decades of service to Canada.

I thank him for his important contribution to Canada. I also thank him for serving the people of his riding, Ottawa West—Nepean.

•(1030)

[*English*]

As parliamentarians, we develop a bit of an instinct to know when some of our colleagues, perhaps, one day, lose the sacred fire, and the passion begins to wane. This is a very demanding profession.

However, I think this is why we were all so surprised to find out last night that the member was leaving us. If there is one person in this chamber whose passion never seems to have abated for one second, who always had fire in his eyes and who still has fire in his

eyes, it is surely he. I think we were all completely taken aback to find out last night that he had made the decision to leave us.

The public knows the member to be ultra-partisan, having sometimes been called a bullhorn. He has done that job very well. I have had the privilege of also discovering the member whom the public knows less well.

[*Translation*]

The minister is approachable. We have conversed about a variety of subjects. He has always found the time to listen, and he has listened sincerely. I believe that particular trait is what I will remember about the minister for years to come.

[*English*]

I thank him for inviting the member for Ottawa Centre and me to join him last September to go to Iraq. That was a very important moment in foreign policy, and to have allowed us to join him demonstrated what is often lacking in this place, and that is putting down the gloves in the national interests and putting away partisanship.

The member for Ottawa Centre knows the member better, but this trip allowed me to know him in a way I did not know him before. It is one thing to operate in this chamber, where there is always the requirement for a certain formality and, let us face it, we are on different sides of the House.

[*Translation*]

When we went to Iraq together, I saw I side of his personality that I did not know very well before. Frankly, when one is on the front line, with the Kurdish army on one side and the Islamic State on the other, when one is talking to a family of refugees in a refugee camp, one behaves differently, and aspects of one's personality come out that do not usually come out in the House.

[*English*]

I thank the member for allowing me to see that side of him. Again, I am still trying to understand why he is leaving, but he has a bright future ahead of him and all of us wish him the very best because I think there are also still some great things that he will accomplish in his life.

I thank him for his service to this country, on behalf of the Liberal Party of Canada.

The Speaker: I see the member for Saanich—Gulf Islands is rising. Does the House give its consent so that she may give remarks as well?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Speaker: The hon. member for Saanich—Gulf Islands.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I appreciate the magnanimous gesture of my friends to allow unanimous consent.

I also want to join in words of farewell and thanks to the hon. Minister of Foreign Affairs. I wish to associate myself entirely with what I thought was a very nice summary of those things with which we can agree from my friend from Ottawa Centre and the recollections from the hon. member for Westmount—Ville-Marie.

Routine Proceedings

I did have not a small quibble with the minister, but when he referred to himself in 1995 joining Mike Harris and claiming to be a little naive, I think more accurately we can say he was just a little rusty. But over the years, as we all know, his passion for partisan politics has not waned. We know him to be someone who is capable of being an extremely fierce partisan, but I have also seen the side of him that is friendly, jesting, and funny, and we have also had some nice moments.

I know that he has sacrificed a lot; anyone in public life does. I mentioned this to him when we were shaking hands a moment ago. However, I did not take out a political party membership card until I was 52. I had a very full life and busy times and a personal life before I came into politics. There is not a whole lot of life when someone is working flat out as a minister of the crown. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, as he takes his leave of this place, is young. He has his whole life ahead of him. I urge him to enjoy it, embrace it, and have a wonderful life.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs leaves us as a very young man, and I join others in wishing him nothing but the best.

• (1035)

The Speaker: If the House would indulge me, without repeating all the very kind words that have been said, I want to pay my greatest respects to the outgoing Minister of Foreign Affairs.

In 1995, when he was first elected at the very young age of 25, I remember riding the bus to school and reading the article about this new member of the provincial Parliament from Ottawa West—Nepean, and I followed his career with great admiration and can say that I have very much enjoyed working with him in the House. He did not always make my job in the chair easy, and members will miss his perambulations around the chamber during question period and other debates, and miss him for many other reasons as well.

I want to pass on my best wishes for the future to the outgoing minister.

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COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

JUSTICE AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Mr. Mike Wallace (Burlington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the 13th report of the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights in relation to Bill C-587, An Act to amend the Criminal Code (increasing parole ineligibility). The committee has studied the bill and, pursuant to Standing Order 97.1, request a 30-day extension to consider it.

In addition, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the 14th report of the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights in relation of Bill C-590, An Act to amend the Criminal Code (blood alcohol content). The committee has studied the bill and, pursuant to Standing Order 97.1, requests a 30-day extension to be considered.

The Deputy Speaker: Pursuant to Standing Order 97.1(3)(a), a motion to concur in the report is deemed moved, the question deemed put, and a recorded division deemed demanded and deferred until Wednesday, February 4, immediately before the time provided for private members' business.

* * *

PETITIONS

CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have a petition to present signed by Canadians from across the country calling upon the Canadian government to negotiate with the Government of China 10-year multiple entry visas for business and tourist purposes and 5-year multiple entry visas for students and Canadian citizens. The United States has negotiated this privilege for American citizens last year. Canada currently gives Chinese nationals coming to Canada 10-year multiple entry visas. Therefore, the petitioners are calling upon our government to negotiate a level playing field, a benefit that would help tourism and our business people, help reunite families, lower costs, and make our visa system more efficient.

• (1040)

AGRICULTURE

Mr. Mike Allen (Tobique—Mactaquac, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to present a petition on behalf of a number of the residents of Tobique—Mactaquac who would like to bring to the attention of the House their concerns about the ability of family farmers to produce the amount of food required to feed their families and communities.

[*Translation*]

The petitioners are urging the Government of Canada to adopt international aid policies to support small family farmers, especially women, and to recognize their essential role in fighting hunger and poverty.

[*English*]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, on this day that our dairy farmers are talking about supply management, I thought it appropriate to table this petition, which is asking to ensure that Canadian policies and programs are developed in consultation with small family farmers, and that they protect the rights of small family farmers in the global south to preserve, use, and freely exchange seeds.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to present two petitions.

The first is about the adoption of an international aid policy that supports small farmers, particularly women, and that recognizes their essential role in fighting hunger and poverty.

MINING INDUSTRY

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the second petition that I am presenting calls on the federal government to pass legislation to create an ombudsman for the corporate social responsibility of Canadian extractive corporations in developing countries.

[English]

NATIONAL SUSTAINABLE SEAFOOD DAY

Mr. Fin Donnelly (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to present a petition from thousands of Canadians across the country who are concerned about overfishing and the destructive fishing practices that are threatening marine life and the health of our oceans. The petitioners say that 120 million people are dependent on fish as part of their income, but over the last century, wild fish populations have declined. They say they feel Canadian consumers want sustainable seafood options. They are calling upon the Government of Canada to designate March 18 as national sustainable seafood day.

[Translation]

THE ENVIRONMENT

Ms. Rosane Doré Lefebvre (Alfred-Pellan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise in the House today to present a petition that calls on the Government of Canada to reject the idea of using the Port of Gros-Cacouna as an oil terminal, in accordance with the principles of sustainable development.

This petition was signed by several hundred people from the north and south shores of Montreal and from my riding of Alfred-Pellan in Laval.

AGRICULTURE

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to rise today to present two petitions.

The first has to do with the right of producers and farmers to keep their own products.

[English]

In particular, the petitioners ask for the rights of farmers in the global south to be able to save seeds. The petition is from residents of Victoria.

JUSTICE

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, the second petition is from residents of Saanich—Gulf Islands, who are calling upon the government to cease the incarceration of people with drug abuse issues and addiction, and to ensure that there are adequate facilities for drug abuse and rehabilitation programs so that people who need help can find it without being jailed.

NATIONAL AD HOMINEM FREE YEAR

Mr. Ryan Leef (Yukon, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have a petition today to declare 2015 national ad hominem free year.

Government Orders

QUESTIONS ON THE ORDER PAPER

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

The Deputy Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

[Translation]

The Deputy Speaker: I wish to inform the House that because of ministerial statements, government orders will be extended by 22 minutes.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

● (1045)

[English]

CITIZEN VOTING ACT

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC) moved that Bill C-50, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

He said: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the occasion to address the House today on the citizen voting act.

The citizen voting act has three principal objectives. The first is to help prevent non-citizens from voting in federal elections. The second is to require voters living abroad to provide proof of identity, past residence, and citizenship. The third is to create one set of rules for all Canadians voting from outside the country.

To start with the background that led us to this legislation, I would bring members' attention to the Ontario Superior Court ruling in Frank et al. v. Attorney General of Canada. In this case, the court struck down the law that had been in place preventing citizens from voting if they had been out of the country for more than five consecutive years or have no intention of returning. Estimates show that the reading could lead to 1.4 million new eligible voters and an outdated system to administer their votes.

I will now work through some of the individual problems that exist within the status quo and how the bill seeks to address them one by one.

The first problem is that an estimated 40,000 non-citizens are on the voters list. Elections Canada has brought this number to my attention. It has indicated that these lists are not perfect, and that as a result, names of people who have interactions with various levels of governments get into the overall system and inadvertently end up on the list of electors. These people are sent voter information cards that indicate where they can go and vote, although they are not eligible to do so.

Government Orders

The problem is that there will be some who go and vote, even though they are not citizens, because they think that they are allowed. If they get a voter information card that says they should show up at the elementary school around the corner to cast their ballot, logically they would think that they, as permanent residents, are allowed to do that. There will be people among that 40,000 who will accidentally break the law.

There will also be some who might deliberately break the law. With their names being on the voters list, they do not even have to sign oaths asserting that they are a citizens when they go to cast their ballots. It is only those who are not on the voters list who have take an oath of citizenship when they vote.

The solution in the citizen voting act would authorize the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration to provide the Chief Electoral Officer with the names, genders, birthdates, and addresses of non-citizens who are in Canada so that Elections Canada can cross-reference and remove them from the National Register of Electors. This would be a very difficult and tedious undertaking, I am afraid, but it is a worthwhile one. If it can reduce that number of 40,000 non-citizens to a smaller number, or perhaps eliminate it altogether, we can celebrate that as an improvement in the accuracy of the voters list and the fairness of our elections.

The next problem is that under the current law, Canadians voting abroad do not need to have any proven link to the riding in which their vote is counted. At present, if a person is living in London, England, or Washington, D.C., for example, and wants to vote in Canada, that person can register to vote in pretty much any constituency with which they feel that they have a connection, and that connection will not be verified by Elections Canada. Everyone else has to vote in the riding in which they reside, because the residential link is a critical part of our constituency-based system, but there is a double standard that allows some to pick their riding and do riding shopping, while others have to vote where they live or where they have a residential connection.

The solution is to bring about the same rules for everybody. The way we would do that is by requiring proof of past residence.

●(1050)

Obviously someone living abroad most likely would not have a current residence in Canada, so I think it would be reasonable to ask them to cast their ballot for the constituency in which they last lived before they left the country. The citizen voting act would do that. The bill would require that they prove their identity and their most recent Canadian address, using the same documentation as do voters who live in Canada under the new rules that came in through the Fair Elections Act.

The options would be a photo ID containing a prior address, or any two of the 39 pieces of ID approved by the Chief Electoral Officer of Elections Canada. If none of the documentation has their address on it, the voters would be able to rely on someone who would sign an attestation that in fact they did reside in the riding in which they want their vote counted, and that attestation would qualify as a proof of past residency.

These rules might seem familiar. That is because they are the same ones that the Fair Elections Act brought in. Under that bill, we

require people to show ID when they vote, but if that ID does not have an address on it, then they can rely on someone to sign an attestation or co-signing an oath that they in fact do reside in the riding in which they want to vote. We are simply taking that set of rules that we apply within Canada and applying it outside of Canada.

Some might ask about expired documents. If someone has been living abroad for 10 or 15 years, obviously their documents would not be up to date. We have specifically stated in the bill that expired documents are acceptable forms of ID, so if somebody has an old drivers licence that is past the expiration date, it would still qualify as proof of previous Canadian residency and render eligible that voter in the riding where he or she is attempting to cast a ballot.

The next problem is that there is a double standard for voting abroad.

There are two types of voters who cast ballots from abroad. There are those who are resident in Canada but are on vacation or working abroad during the election. Examples are the snowbirds who go down to Florida or California during the winter. They have to vote by something called a special ballot. When they vote, they actually have to apply for the ballot at each election. They have to provide ID to show where they reside in Canada, and then they get a ballot for the riding that they come from. They send that ballot back in the mail, and it is counted in the correct constituency.

By contrast, those who are long-term non-residents, those people who live outside of Canada, do not have any of those obligations. They merely apply to be on the voters list once, and then into perpetuity the ballot arrives in their mailbox as soon as the election is called. This causes a lot of problems.

One problem is that someone could easily have moved. Someone resident in Mexico City might move to another part of the world, but their ballot would still come from Elections Canada to the Mexico City mailbox of someone who has no connection to Canada and should not be in possession of a Canadian ballot. As a result, into perpetuity we would obviously have ballots going to the wrong people, and there is no way of verifying that the address is accurate in that kind of circumstance. The requirement to apply for a ballot for each election is an organic way to keep the list of those Canadians who are voting abroad up to date.

Next we move to the issue of proof of citizenship. The citizen voting act would require in law that everyone voting outside Canada provide proof of citizenship. This requirement would not apply to Canadian Forces members, but it would apply to everyone else.

●(1055)

Finally, the citizen voting act would apply some audit procedures to Elections Canada to make sure that all of these rules are followed. That process was established in the Fair Elections Act for voting when it occurs within the country. We are simply applying it to all of those who vote from outside of the country.

Government Orders

How does this proposed system compare to other countries around the world? Many like-minded democracies place restrictions on voting by non-residents with limited exceptions for citizens serving abroad.

For example, in the U.K., non-residents can only vote if they have been out of the country for less than 15 years. In Ireland, non-residents cannot vote. If they do not live in Ireland, they do not vote in Ireland. In Australia, non-residents can only vote if they have lived abroad for less than six years and intend to return to resume residence in the country within six years. They must provide either their Australian drivers licence number or their Australian passport number or have a person who is on the federal electoral list confirm their identity—not their address—by signing the application form. In New Zealand, non-resident citizens can vote only if they have been abroad for less than three years. In Germany, non-residents can only vote if they have been abroad for less than 25 years. They also must have lived in Germany for three consecutive months following their 14th birthday.

To avoid getting into all of the details, members can surmise from these examples that among our peer group, Canada, which currently allows Canadians living abroad to vote without restriction, has basically one of the most generous systems of enfranchisement for citizens abroad.

This legislation would not change that, but it would improve the integrity of the system. It would ensure that only citizens vote, that their vote is only counted in the riding from which they come, and that they only vote once. That is basic to the integrity of our electoral system, and the bill would bring the rules for Canadians abroad in line with the rules we have now established for those voting here at home.

That is in essence the proposal we bring forward to the House. I thank the House for this opportunity to address the chamber.

Mr. Craig Scott (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my general views about the bill will be made known in my reply speech, but I am hoping to ask a series of specific questions to the minister that could ease the way in committee if the answers are clear.

Although this may not be intended, a new provision, proposed subsection 143(2.11), says that any ID authorized by the Chief Electoral Officer must come from some governmental entity or an entity formed in Canada. I am just wondering whether it is known by the government that this language looks as though it would exclude private leases, leases issued by individual persons. Students, for example, are often subject to those leases. I am wondering if this was intentional, and if not, whether the government would be open to a clear amendment on that point.

Second, the snowbirds phenomenon is such that they have the temporary absence voting rules, but unlike other citizens abroad, who can be vouched for by anybody from the entire riding, temporarily absent Canadians can only have somebody from their poll vouch for them. However, the polls are not known until about 10 days before election day. That is when the VICs get issued, so the fact of the matter is that any snowbirds who have to rely on the new vouching provisions would not be able to do it in time. They are in a specific problematic situation. I am wondering if the minister realizes that and would fix it.

Third, under the current system a special ballot can be mailed to an address that someone has failed to change in the international register. As an example, a Canadian who moved from his or her address in Mexico City may have failed to change the address in the international register, and a Mexican may now live at that address and receive the ballot. Does the minister really believe that the Mexican will pick up the ballot, fill it out, send it back, and vote in Toronto—Danforth, or Nepean, or wherever else? How real is that scenario as one of the reasons for changing this entire system to make it much more difficult for citizens abroad to meet deadlines and fulfill the requirements in order to be able to vote at all?

● (1100)

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Speaker, on the first question about the list of eligible ID that voters abroad could use to prove who they are and where they last lived in Canada, the bill's intent is to see that the list of eligible ID produced by the CEO of Elections Canada would apply to voters abroad just as it does to those here at home. I do not have the section he refers to in front of me, but I would be happy to look at it and go over the specific wording. However, that is the intention of the bill. It is a very exhaustive list with about 39 different forms of ID. The bill requires that the ID be of Canadian origin. In fact, it would have to be of Canadian original to prove someone's past residence. One would not have a foreign driver's licence showing where one lived when in Canada, so it would be impossible to use a foreign ID to provide that information.

On the question of providing attestations, for example for snowbirds, the rules would basically not change a whole lot. The major change is that the person would have to provide proof of citizenship. For snowbirds, or someone who is vacationing abroad, that is pretty straightforward, because they would not leave the country without their passport, or else they would have a lot of trouble getting back in. A NEXUS card would apply as well, but proof of citizenship is a pretty straightforward requirement for someone who is vacationing outside the country, that is, if they ever want to come home.

The member's final question was whether or not a ballot mailed to someone's home, from which they had moved long ago, might be returned by someone who is not eligible to vote. When ballots are sent out and go to the wrong person because the address of someone changed long ago, we do not really know what will become of the ballot. I am not pointing to this example as evidence of an enormous crisis, but I think the member would agree that it is an administrative problem if we send ballots to people who are not citizens and just happen to reside in the former residence of a Canadian.

**Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Wind-
sor, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, I can obviously tell the minister is fighting a flu, so I will try not to be too long and prolong the agony.

Government Orders

I just want to ask some specific questions. My colleague asked one of them, but there is another one I want to ask. When we talk about people employed by the Government of Canada, such as military personnel, people working in embassies, and so forth, there is an exemption for them, but I am worried about their families who are also Canadian and also eligible to vote. Will they be included in that?

Second, the timelines here are really tight. People have to register. They are living in a country abroad, which could be halfway around the world, and they would have to do three things. They would have to apply, get their ballot, and it then it has to go back as their vote. With a 36-day writ period, it is a very tight timeline for people living halfway around the world to follow.

My third point is about riding shopping, as was described, where one gets to choose any riding. Was that really a problem brought to the minister by Elections Canada or any other entity? In the press release they say that they want to get rid of it, but where is the research showing this was such a major problem and major abuse?

• (1105)

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for showing me such mercy, given the state of my health today.

On the first question of the timelines, I did think about this quite a lot, because the member is right that ballots would have to travel to the voter and then be returned. One thing I would correct is to say that the application would not have to travel by mail. It could be done online. Therefore, the Canadian citizen voting, say from Abu Dhabi or Beijing, or some other location that is hard to reach, could actually provide a scanned document and email the identification and have the ballot mailed very quickly.

Canadian residents who happen to be around the world use that process right now. They do so with success. In my time I have never encountered a snowbird, for example, who said they wanted to vote but that there just was not enough time for the mail to go back and forth and so they did not get their vote counted. Therefore, I think if it works for Canadian residents who are visiting abroad, it should work for Canadian non-residents abroad. It basically would create one system for all electors who happen to be outside of Canadian borders, whether they are resident here or not.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. minister, knowing that we are going to have an opportunity for amendments.

My question very much builds on what my hon. colleague from Toronto—Danforth pointed out. There are a lot of complications within the bill, such as regarding residence. As my friend from Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor pointed out, we have Canadian families overseas, people in the diplomatic service, and people in long-term jobs or potentially teaching in foreign universities who have every intention of returning to Canada. Making sure that every Canadian has the right to vote is fundamental.

As we go through the minutiae of the bill, because it is complicated in how it would apply to different categories of citizens, is the minister prepared, as he was on his previous bill, the so-called

Fair Elections Act, to take amendments forward during the committee process?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for her question, although I do think she is over-complicating the bill. It is actually quite simple.

Basically, if someone is residing abroad and wants to vote, they merely have to submit their ID proving who they are and where they last lived in Canada. A ballot would arrive in the mail, they would tick the box, and send the ballot back to be counted. It is not that complicated as a procedure.

The member seemed to suggest that there are different rules for different categories of voters. Actually, the truth is the opposite. We would be removing the different categories. For example, before, special ballots for snowbirds were treated completely differently than ballots for people living abroad. We are now merging the same practice for all people who happen to vote outside the borders of Canada into one simple process: a person would send in their ID, they would be sent a ballot, and they would vote and send the ballot back.

Mr. Craig Scott (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank the minister for his presentation. Along with my colleague from Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor, I acknowledge that this may not be the best day for the minister in terms of his health. Accordingly, in the spirit of what we heard from the Minister of Foreign Affairs, I may be a little more gentle than I was intending to be.

Some here might have had a chance to read the piece that came out today in the *National Post*, where I make it very clear that I do believe—this sounds like how I started the debate on Bill C-23, what we call “the unfair elections act”—that the effect, at minimum, of these changes in Bill C-50 would voter suppression of citizens living abroad, and something that I am not sure the minister is fully aware of, namely, that it could create chaos with voting in Canada, because of the changes to a section that would prohibit the Chief Electoral Officer from authorizing any use of ID that basically does not have its origin Canada. I will explain why that could cause those problems.

I will stick with this phraseology that “in the result”, this is the problem, although seeing what has been knowingly put in the bill, I honestly think that the minister has to realize what these impacts would be. I hope that with some of the presentations during this debate and some of the criticisms he is already beginning to receive, he will be open to some serious amendments, including a couple that, to follow his own line, would be quite simple and could actually get rid of some of the serious blocking effects that I see. It is also important to note, although the minister did not really make hay of this in his own speech today, that in the presentation back in December when the bill was tabled, there very much was an effort to spin this bill in a way that created two false impressions. This is important to know.

Government Orders

One is that the press release in the backgrounder made it seem like the government was implementing the Frank judgement, which basically said that citizens away for more than five years now have the right to vote from abroad. It was very unclear from the presentation whether or not the Frank judgment was being accepted. It is important that everyone knows that Bill C-50 would not remove any provision in the Canada Elections Act that was struck down by the Ontario Superior Court of Justice in the Frank decision. It is still sitting in the statute. The reason for this is that the government has clearly decided it is going to continue to fight to prevent citizens who have been away for more than five years from voting. It is appealing the decision, and it even sought a stay of the trial judgment to try to prevent it from going into effect. The Court of Appeal for Ontario denied that stay.

The fact of the matter is that the government is still actively seeking to keep as disenfranchised Canadians who have been living abroad for more than five years, yet the presentation of the bill made it look like this was somehow an effort to bring things into line. If this were really bringing things in line with the Frank judgment, all the government would have to do would be to adopt the suggestion by the member for Halifax in her Bill C-575 and simply repeal the same sections the judge found to be unconstitutional in the case. Instead, the Frank decision is being used as a supposed reason for a wholesale change of issues that never arose in the Frank case. It is important to ensure that the Frank judgment does not carry the government along in any sense where people think the government is actually respecting that judgment. It is still appealing it.

Second, the press release directly claims that all Bill C-50 would do is to apply the same voter identification rules enacted by the so-called Fair Elections Act, Bill C-23, and extend those rules to Canadians voting from abroad. There is some truth in that. There are some analogues that get brought forward. For instance, the vouching for an address gets brought forward. However, Bill C-50 inserts a new prohibition on the kinds of documents the Chief Electoral Officer could designate as identity documents. It would apply to documents used by all.

• (1110)

The new subsection 143(2.11) would apply to all electors and would basically create additional limitations on what the Chief Electoral Officer would be free to authorize by way of identity documents.

Because of the wording in that provision, this would have impacts in Canada. It would also make it extraordinarily difficult for some Canadians abroad to produce the right kinds of ID that now they have to produce. They would not be able because of this change. This is new. This was not in Bill C-23.

I just want to set the scene by making clear that this is the case.

It is also important to note, to set the scene, although the minister has downplayed it in his presentation today, and I acknowledge that. There was a sign it was not going to go this way. There is virtually no reality to the idea that there is a fraud problem from voters from abroad. The judge in the Superior Court, Mr. Justice Penny, basically said that those kinds of claims were so unreal as to not even constitute a pressing and substantial reason under section 1 of the charter to limit the right to vote.

“Riding shopping” is not something that Elections Canada has ever seen as being a problem. All that happens at the moment is that multiple points of contact are available to increase the chances, the ease with which somebody from abroad can vote. The idea that there is something illicit going on when people choose to vote where their parents live versus choosing to vote where they last lived seems to me to be a spin that is designed to make this look palatable or necessary when there is actually no problem. There is no such thing as “riding shopping”, except perhaps in the minister's imagination.

It is important to clarify that when the minister talks about 40,000 non-citizens being on the register, this was brought to his attention—and I am glad that two years later he is acting upon it—by the Chief Electoral Officer. The new mechanism that would allow the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration to allow Elections Canada access to the non-citizen database that CIC has would be great. However, it is important to note that we are talking about a fear, by error, that approximately that number of people are on the national register, not on what is, until this point in time, the international register. To get on the international register, one has to actually show one's citizenship.

It is a separate issue that would be dealt with in the bill, but it should not be confused with anything to do with a concern that non-citizens are voting from abroad. I fear that, unintentionally, the minister's emphasis on that could allow people to think this is what is going on. No, the issue is cleaning up the national register for people who are in Canada. That is fine. That one particular piece is a good thing in the bill.

I do feel duty-bound to note that Elections Canada was not consulted on this, except for the discussion a couple of years ago on the issue of trying to ensure non-citizens were removed from the national register where they appeared in error. That will probably prove to be a problem at the time of committee because we will probably hear some very detailed testimony from Elections Canada about many problems the bill would create.

As long as the minister is open, seriously open, to changing them, because these have not been foreseen because there has been no consultation, we might well end up with a productive committee process. If the minister thinks it has all been thought through and that whatever he hears from Elections Canada will not change his mind, then we will have a serious problem. What we will have, in effect, is the minister confirming that the intention here is to make it much more difficult to vote from abroad and that it is not just the unfortunate result of how the act was written.

Let me go to this issue that is the sleeper issue. It is the question of subsection 143(2.11). It is a new provision that would basically create a new prohibition on the Chief Electoral Officer. It says:

—the Chief Electoral Officer is not permitted to authorize...a type of identification that has been issued by an entity other than...a Canadian government, whether federal, provincial or local, or an agency of that government; and...an entity that is incorporated or formed by or under an Act of Parliament or of the legislature of a province or that is otherwise formed in Canada.

It is fairly complex wording.

Government Orders

The bottom line, as the minister made clear, is to ensure that ID only originates in Canada, essentially. That seems to be the general idea. The problem, however, is that it has been done in a way that might actually end up creating some serious administrative, and even more serious problems, in Canada.

• (1115)

This new prohibition, which is intended to deal with voters from abroad so they have to somehow produce Canadian-originated ID, is going to have an impact on everybody who shows up on election day in Canada.

What is the reason for that concern? First, “formed in Canada” is not a legally known concept and is not defined in the bill. The question of what an “entity formed in Canada” means is going to produce some serious problems in Elections Canada trying to scope it out, and then having that interpreted on election day by pressed election officials. We really need to ensure that this will be clear. Obviously the intention is probably that organizations like the CNIB are covered, and it is not just documents issued by corporations—for example, utilities bills, et cetera. However, the language is used in a way that is very unclear.

Here is an issue. Now a voter can use a Visa, Amex, or MasterCard bill as one piece of ID to show an address. However, people could show up with it, and the deputy returning officer or the chief poll officer could look at it and ask if Visa is a company incorporated or formed in Canada, is there a Visa Canada, and who has issued the document. The chance of that kind of minute questioning will be a problem, even if it seems far-fetched. It will create serious workability problems. I know for a fact that Elections Canada is concerned about this extra burden and the mistakes that could be made.

The second thing is that it is not at all clear to me that private leases will be caught by this wording, as I asked in my question for the minister. The language is all about corporations, entities or government agencies. There is no scope there for a document that has effectively been issued by an individual, which is what private rental leases are. They are often a form of identification to prove address that students in university tend to use.

The bottom line is that this will create workability issues that I do not think the minister intended to create, but that we will hear about in committee from Elections Canada. The unworkability issue is major.

I am also concerned that some party scrutineers who now would be allowed to ask to inspect identification documents as a result of Bill C-23 would see these new rules as an opportunity to ask, more often than they should, for proof that this new provision has been met by whatever document has been presented by somebody showing up.

If somebody shows up with a Visa bill, somebody might ask the deputy returning officer if that is a document issued by an entity formed in Canada. Maybe it is a document issued by an entity doing business in Canada. We can imagine the opportunity for mischief that could occur.

I am being a bit like the minister in that I am looking down the line at what kind of abuse is possible. The minister looks in one place and I look in another. We have to talk about that.

In my remaining minutes, I want to talk about what everybody knows is a big concern. The big concern here is that the new requirements for citizens voting from abroad can be extremely onerous. They can produce delays that can result in ballots not arriving in time to be counted.

The primary problem is the requirement that voters have to register for each election, apply to receive their ballot or register, the same kind of thing collapsed into one, only once the writ has been dropped. People have to be aware that it has happened. They have to register quickly enough in order to ensure that all the mail can occur. As the minister has said, sending in their application, even if that is virtually, and receiving the special ballot and mailing it in and doing that from Dar es Salaam, New Delhi or Sydney, requires time.

There are all kinds of reasons to think that the way the mail service works or the way citizens abroad may be not be immediately on top of when a writ has been dropped could result in timelines that could be almost impossible to make. Currently, people can register in the international register at any time. However, I believe we will hear testimony from Elections Canada saying that currently when people wait to register until the election has been called, there is an increased incidence of the ballot not arriving in time.

• (1120)

A system has been created in this new bill whereby that problematic situation that we already know exists, for some who wait too long to register, get their ballots and mail them in, is now scripted as the only way. Therefore, the delay issue is huge.

We should also not underestimate the problem of ID. The longer people have been away, the chances that they have retained Canadian-issued IDs, apart from their passports, may go down dramatically. In some jurisdictions when people get local drivers' licences, they actually have to hand in their old drivers' licences. People who are hoarders, and have kept every ID they have ever had, may have no problem. However, with no notice, many of the two million Canadians already abroad may already have sort of jettisoned or lost the IDs that they now have to use.

They cannot rely on the Chief Electoral Officer to issue a list of acceptable foreign IDs that go along with proving people's addresses. Let us say people still have to prove their last known addresses in the way the bills wants, but they can use their passports and some foreign piece of ID as corroborating ID. The Chief Electoral Officer is not permitted to allow that, even though a foreign driver's licence is at least as good in proving who one is as a Canadian licence. It has nothing to do with the address, but it does with identity. Therefore, there are serious problems with actually producing two pieces of ID for some abroad that we have to take into account.

Government Orders

Let me now talk about vouching. The bill would get rid of the possibility that people could vote where they would have a strong connection to relatives and would focus only on people's last known addresses. The problem is they have to prove it affirmatively. If people do not have pieces of documentation saved, such as a driver's licence, which in New York state they have given up to the Americans, then they basically will have to rely on this new vouching provision.

The new vouching provision says that people have to provide proof of their last place of residence, so they would have to contact their neighbours and ask them if they remembered them when they were neighbours seven years ago. They would have to ask them to do this attestation. They would need a statutory declaration, see their IDs to prove they are voters, have them fill out a form, get the form back to them and then include it in their package in applying to vote. We can obviously see that the one big problem is the delay this will create. The need to have someone vouch for them within a 35-day election campaign period will already make it virtually impossible to meet that deadline.

The other issue is that all the same rules in Bill C-23 apply. A person cannot vouch for more than one individual. If a family of four living abroad can only find one neighbour who still lives where the family used to live and the neighbour lives alone, that neighbour can only vouch for one of them. The other three are out of luck.

Therefore, it is very clear that the issue of how the vouching system would work will not be as relatively easy as it is in Canada when somebody on election days goes with the person to vouch for him or her. The idea of saying that the rules are the same for those voting in Canada and those voting abroad is a very formalistic understanding of equality, because when the same rules are applied to very different circumstances, there is a serious disadvantage in complying with the rules. The committee will find example after example like this and the minister will really have to get his mind around them.

Let me give another example. Students going abroad to get their masters degrees or Ph.D.s quite often are heading off from a previous university. Now, sitting in London, Paris, or New York, they will have to prove that their last residences were in university towns and pretty much the only people who know that was the case are former students, who themselves have moved on. How will a proper vouching system be created for that particular case? It may sound like an imaginary issue, but it is not. When we think about students moving around internationally, they usually move from a university town or an address that they lived at to obtain their education.

• (1125)

What I would say is that in its result, Bill C-50 is a clear exercise in suppressing the votes of citizens abroad in a way that is diametrically opposite to the spirit of the Frank judgement, which the minister started out by invoking as the reason for these changes.

In sympathy for the minister and his illness today, as he seems to have the flu, I will not hit too hard any more, but I very much hope that he is not doing this intentionally in the bill. I also hope that, for once, we will be able to make serious changes at committee based on the evidence that there are problems with this bill.

Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we have been through this on a few occasions now, where we have talked about changes to the Canada Elections Act, and here we go once more.

I agree with 99% of his speech. However, one of the issues that I would like to address with him is the issue of coming into force. It states that it would come into force 60 days after royal assent. On top of Elections Canada getting used to the changes made in the former bill, Bill C-23, this will be a particularly hard thing to do, especially when we are dealing with outside entities, and especially with issue he brought up of the Canadian entity.

How do we get the poll clerks trained to the point where they are able to recognize that? It could result in the mass confusion he talked about. I am not sure if he addressed that issue, but could he address the coming into effect of this particular piece of this legislation?

• (1130)

Mr. Craig Scott: Mr. Speaker, that is an extremely good question. In fact, I took the liberty of talking to Elections Canada about that specific issue, and I very much expect that its testimony will be that 60 days would be impossible. The transitional provisions of the act do say that it would go into effect 60 days after entering into force.

It is not just an issue of the poll clerks across the country having to be trained, but the central staff at Elections Canada in Ottawa that would be receiving the applications from citizens abroad. They are in a better, more concentrated position to pass judgement on the identity documents that are coming in, but even they would need to do this accurately and take the time to do it within a very limited period.

I personally believe, and I believe that Elections Canada confirmed it during my discussions with them, that the 60 days is completely unworkable.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Ève Pécelet (La Pointe-de-l'Île, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am going to summarize what was said in somewhat simpler terms. I have many friends who moved to other countries to go to school or to work for Canadian companies located outside Canada. After this bill passes, I will have to call those friends and tell them that if they want to vote in the next election, they need to start preparing now, or else they unfortunately will not be able to vote.

I think that is going to cause quite a lot of stress for people who live in a country where they do not speak the language or do not have the necessary knowledge because they have not lived there long enough. It is truly ridiculous for the Government of Canada to treat citizens like that, regardless of whether they live in Canada or not.

Other members mentioned how students are already dealing with fairly high levels of stress. They will have to start thinking about preparing all those documents now. They do not have a driver's licence and cannot get a Canadian health card because they no longer live in the country. Where does that leave them?

Government Orders

Mr. Craig Scott: Mr. Speaker, it would be a really good idea to warn friends and students to be prepared, as my colleague said.

However, no one can register until an election is called. People can have their identification ready, but they cannot register.

Furthermore, it is not clear whether we can contact people in advance to ask them to swear that a certain individual was in a certain riding and sign an attestation. The bill is not clear on whether that can be done in advance. It may be that we have to wait until the election is called. There are some real obstacles, and this should be clear to the minister. I do not know why these obstacles exist.

In the United States, for instance, people have to register every year. However, people can do it on January 1 every year, whereas here you have to wait five years, or until the election is called. It makes no sense.

[English]

Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I listened with care to my colleague's exposition of the law, and it bothers me tremendously to know that even though we have a fixed election date and the law now says that the next election will be on October 19, even if we wanted to ensure that at each election we had a fresh voters list for Canadians living abroad, surely the doors could be open now.

How many people do we estimate would have to register and be processed and do all of those things within the 35 days of a writ? What possible reason could there be for not starting that process on January 1 of an election year under the fixed election law?

• (1135)

Mr. Craig Scott: Mr. Speaker, we know from the court case and from some other testimony that the government alone believes that 1.4 million or 1.5 million Canadians would potentially be enfranchised by getting rid of the five-year rule.

In terms of those of the right age who would have the right to vote and would be added to this—beyond the military and diplomats, et cetera, who are excluded from the provisions of all this—let us say that the court in the Frank case said that it was at least a million, that does not mean that people would want to vote or would try to register. However, the fact of the matter is that it is a right to vote and if someone has that degree of connection to Canada that they want to vote, then a certain percentage of that one million people would be what we are dealing with.

The idea of shoving all of this into the campaign period and overburdening Elections Canada makes no sense. Contrast that to France, which has gone out of its way in recent years to make it easier and easier for citizens abroad to vote. They can do it postally. They can vote by Internet now, and they can also go to one of over 700 locations around the world to physically vote. France does it three different ways to make it as easy as possible.

While France is trying to make it as easy as possible, the government here is going in the opposite direction, in the name of some kind of weird set of principles that have no application to any known mischief or problem.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault (Sherbrooke, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his speech on Bill C-50.

Does the member believe the government's claims that this bill comes in response to the Ontario Superior Court decision in Frank et al. v. The Attorney General of Canada, which specifically addressed paragraph 11(d) of the Canada Elections Act, or is it simply a way for the government to try to change the law on the pretext that it really is a response to the Superior Court decision?

Mr. Craig Scott: Mr. Speaker, ironically, it is indeed a response.

However, it is a response that goes against the decision. It aims to fix things ahead of a confirmation from the Ontario Court of Appeal, or perhaps even the Supreme Court.

It was a very reasoned decision, and I think the government's chances of winning the appeal are no more than 5%. This response confirms that from now on, people will have the right to vote even if they have been outside Canada for five years. The government does not want it to be too easy.

[English]

Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, to begin I would like to seek unanimous consent to share my time.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the member have unanimous consent, as this is the first round of debate, to share his time with another member?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Who is the member you will be sharing your time with?

• (1140)

Mr. Scott Simms: Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the member for Ottawa—Vanier.

To the consternation of my colleagues, I was not attempting a bait and switch there. I apologize, but I am sure that members have the deepest respect for the member for Ottawa—Vanier, as I and his constituents do.

I want to start by saying many of the points have been brought out already, and by way of background I want to say that I am a firm believer in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, where in section 3 it says everyone has a right to vote, providing they are a Canadian citizen and 18 years of age or over. The bill raises a lot of questions as to stifling that ability, and that is why I have questions. As another colleague pointed out, obviously with the majority in the House, this bill will end up going to committee, assuming that all members of the governing party vote in favour of this, and when it goes to committee, serious amendments should be sought. I mean serious.

There is one instance where it is positive. The rest, however, raises many questions, and as my colleague pointed out, may result in some chaos, certainly in the administration of our elections, regarding electors outside of the country temporarily or permanently.

Government Orders

I want to talk about some of the things in Bill C-50. I will get to the Frank decision in just a few moments, but first of all, I want to talk about eliminating the register of electors who temporarily reside outside of Canada and incorporating the information found in it into the register of electors. Basically there is a harmonization process that is going on with the process of special balloting.

When we hear Conservatives and the minister, in particular, talk about the same set of rules for both, a lot is being missed, in the sense that the circumstances are different either way. Remember that what is tantamount or most important is not the administration of this and the efficiency of the administration of this. What is most important is that nobody's rights are violated by denying them the right to vote, which is what people talked about with Bill C-23 and now Bill C-50 regarding the suppression of vote. That is the absence of any accusations of that being the intent.

Nevertheless, there is a level of suppression that is a continuation of what we had last, from vouching now to this, not to mention what the voter information card dismissal brought about in the last round of legislation.

The bill would require Canadian electors who reside abroad to apply for registration and a special ballot after the writs are issued at each federal election, stipulating that electors may only receive a special ballot for the address at which they last resided in Canada.

There are a couple of things here. What made it easier in the past was that people could register to vote living outside the country. Now they could only do it when the writ is dropped, and as pointed out before, the time period is of the essence here. The time period would become so narrow. Again these are special circumstances where voters live outside of the country, so we are making it particularly hard for them to do that, in light of the fact that they do have the right to vote.

The bill would require an external auditor to report on election workers, compliance with special ballot voting, procedure, and requirements for every election, and add the offences of attempting to vote by special ballot while knowing that one is not qualified to vote. It refers to electors temporarily residing outside of Canada, electors residing in Canada improperly attesting to the residence of more than one elector, and attesting to the residence of an elector when one's own residence has been attested to.

What we look at here is that we know the government wants to cut down on election fraud. We have heard all this before. It does not want to send a ballot to an address outside of Canada that could be picked up by a non-Canadian citizen. At the same time, we are reverting to a previous argument. The theme is a solution that is looking for a problem. Once again we find it within Bill C-50.

One thing that was brought about in the bill—and I will get to this right now because we agree with it—is authorizing the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration to provide the Chief Electoral Officer with information to help the CEO to delete the names of non-citizens from the register of electors.

We grant that it is a process that should be done and should be looked at. Virtually everyone in the House would agree that this is the type of measure that should be taken for the sharing of information to make sure we can exercise our right to vote.

● (1145)

The history behind people outside of the country being allowed to vote goes back to the First World War. The soldiers who fought valiantly for us while overseas were given the right to vote. That is a natural extension of being a Canadian and living in the country that we do, which is so great and wonderful. That extension still applies. There are extensions for people who work for the Government of Canada, whether they work for the military or several embassies around the world, to be able to vote as they would if they were residing in this country.

The question I have, and it has yet to be answered, is with respect to the families, particularly spouses or partners, who are eligible to vote but face different rules than do the people who are employed by the Government of Canada. That is problematic because they have to go through the process of re-registering every five years and the others do not. Therefore, there are different rules applying to two different people who are living in the same residence in another country for the same reason. I hope that some of the amendments would address this issue as we get closer to looking at it in committee.

In 1993, the rules were changed further to allow more people the right to vote. However, we again had the five-year rule that if they had been outside of the country for more than five years they were not eligible to vote, which is their right, despite the fact they are above the age of 18 and Canadian citizens. The Frank decision recently decided that was not good because it denies those Canadian citizens above the age of 18 who happen to reside outside of Canada, whether long or short term, the ability to exercise their right to vote under the Constitution.

In looking at the Frank et al decision, I see that section 3 of the charter states:

Every citizen of Canada has the right to vote in an election of members of the House of Commons or of a legislative assembly and to be qualified for membership therein.

The Frank decision posed this to the government to take action. However, there is some confusion in Bill C-50 as to whether that was done. I am not a constitutional expert, but in reading it I have yet to square it as to where the vote of these people who are more than five years outside the country has been protected, because it is not protected at all. I think an administrative nightmare has been created for many of them to do that. In the past they could register once they were outside the country. They cannot do that anymore. They have to wait for the writ to be dropped. That puts them in a tricky situation as far as timelines are concerned. I understand there are some online mechanisms that the minister has pointed to that would remedy this, but by the same token there is still that process.

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The verification of signatures for those people outside of the country appears to be absent from this, or I have yet to see it. I hope the minister can clarify the situation. That qualification is no longer there. It would have made it easier to identify and verify those people based on two signatures, one on the ballot and one on the application form, and that would have gone a long way toward helping Elections Canada. That is something we have to look at.

I would also like to talk about vote shopping. The government has stated on several occasions that vote shopping is a problem. For those Canadians who are not aware of what vote shopping is, in its base form, those people can choose the riding in which they want to vote. However, Elections Canada has never stated that it was a big problem or that there was too much abuse and the law had to be changed. I again go back to the theme that it was a solution looking for a problem. Unfortunately, it would impede their ability to vote; it would impede their right under section 3 of the charter. Therefore, in looking at this, we see the government wants to cut down on an abuse that we are not sure existed to any extent, by making it problematic for those who want to legitimately vote in the riding they left when leaving Canada. That raises many questions.

My final point is with respect to this coming into force in only 60 days. I cannot see how Elections Canada can administer all of these rules in that 60-day period.

• (1150)

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is interesting that the member opposite prefaced his speech with the comment about bait and switch.

My question is twofold. First of all, does he not see a problem with 40,000 electors on the list not being Canadian citizens? With respect to his last remarks on vote shopping, does he not see the potential for abuse, and perhaps existing abuse, wherein a number of foreign nationals decide to cluster into one riding and cast all of their ballots there?

Mr. Scott Simms: Mr. Speaker, the member may have misunderstood the first point, because we actually agree with the first point. I think what she is getting at is the data sharing with immigration. She used the figure 40,000 and I do agree with that. That is a valid point. Information sharing with Citizenship and Immigration Canada is necessary.

With respect to the second part of her question about accumulating votes into one riding based on what is outside, that is news to me. I did not know that existed and I am wondering if the hon. member could rise in the House and let me know what riding that is.

Mr. Craig Scott (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thought it might be good to follow up on the point about ganging up to try to swing ridings somehow or other. The number of citizens abroad who actually vote suggests that is unlikely to ever be effective, if it ever occurred. Elections Canada will confirm in testimony that it has never seen any organized effort, ever, to try to channel votes to particular ridings using the flexibility that currently exists in the Canada Elections Act to vote where one has a specific number of relatives. It is a fictional concern. The member for Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor put it well to say it is a solution in search of a problem.

Could the member tell me what the big problem is with the current flexibility? If individuals are away from Canada, what says that the last place they happened to live is their most meaningful link to a country? Why would there be this geographic fixation? If students live abroad, is it not just as meaningful to say that where their parents currently live is a valid place for them to exercise their valid right to vote as a citizen?

We are not going to go to the wall to say that the current flexibility of the list should stay, but the fact of the matter is that it is not as if it were an abuse problem either.

I wonder if my colleague could comment.

Mr. Scott Simms: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for the clarification and also for talking about the flexibility within the system.

There seems to be an exercise where that flexibility is being cut at every corner, so it therefore becomes an exercise of blaming them for voter suppression. Suppressed votes will be a result of what the government feels are administrative fixes.

What is the government's responsibility? A government is responsible for allowing a person to vote if that individual is 18 years or over and a Canadian citizen. There are special circumstances for people who live outside of Canada. Therefore in this situation, if they have an attachment to where they came from last, their home, then obviously they should be allowed to vote there. I would not want to give people the right to go all over the country and choose whatever riding they want. Nobody does. In its press release, Elections Canada did not describe that as a problem. I am at a loss to find out how people can gang up, go into a particular riding, and overturn the results based on people living outside the country who get to choose whatever riding they want. That is not their intent either. The flexibility allows these people to exercise their right under section 3.

The second part is the lack of time Elections Canada would have to adjust itself to the new realities in light of the fact that it also has to deal with the realities of what was Bill C-23. It is impossible now for Elections Canada to do this. If the government wants to fix administratively what is happening with Elections Canada and give it some help, then it needs to give Elections Canada some time.

• (1155)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mauril Bélanger (Ottawa—Vanier, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague from Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor for sharing his time and my colleagues in the House for unanimously agreeing to let him do so.

Government Orders

[English]

I have some questions about the bill. I happen to represent a riding where possibly one of the higher number of electors abroad cast ballots, given the fact that Foreign Affairs and National Defence headquarters, and many public servants, are in the riding. I have had a number of people write to me from abroad asking, “What gives?”

The first thing I need to understand, and I hope the government would offer a rationale for this, is that it used to be that Canadians living abroad beyond five years could not vote unless they were members of the Canadian Armed Forces, public servants working abroad, or Canadian citizens working for an international organization of which Canada was a member, such as NATO or the United Nations. They and their families could keep voting if they had been there for longer than five years.

Two students in the United States wanted to vote in the last general election and could not, because they had been abroad for more than five years and were not part of the forces, were not public servants, and were not working for an international organization that Canada is a member of, so they were not allowed to vote. They challenged that in court. That is the decision we heard referred to this morning, *Frank et al. v. AG Canada*. I have read it, and I will quote a couple of paragraphs from it in my presentation.

The reason I am bringing this up is that the distinction that remains standing in Bill C-50 is the Canadian Forces. They will be able to continue voting, as they did before, but their spouses and families, and certainly public servants and Canadian citizens working for international organizations, will not.

I have had two people write to me who are working as interpreters for NATO. They are Canadian citizens, and they are concerned now, because the rules under which they used to be able to vote would not apply if the bill were adopted.

What is the rationale for limiting this to the Canadian Forces and restricting, through Bill C-50's measures, the rest of Canadian citizens who used to be able to vote even if they were abroad for longer than five years? That needs to be explained.

I will quote two paragraphs from the decision, because I think they may indicate the nature of the debate here. The magnitude of the vote is not all that much. In paragraph 113 of the decision, it states:

I am equally troubled by the notion of what is or is not “fair” to the resident majority of voters. Substantive “fairness” is almost always in the eye of the beholder. To put the issue in context, since the Special Voting Rules were implemented in 1993, a vastly smaller number of non-resident Canadian citizens have exercised their right to vote than expected. Elections Canada estimated at the time that approximately 2,000,000 Canadians were living abroad and planned for 200,000 registrations. In the election that followed, a little over 15,000 special ballots were requested and issued. Over the next several general elections, the number of external ballots issued ranged from a low of 10,733 (in 2011) to a high of 19,230 (in 2000). In the most recent election, in the ten Canadian ridings with the highest number of special ballots, as a percentage of total registered electors in the constituency, the non-resident votes ranged from a low of 0.05% to a high of 0.2%. Also in that election, Elections Canada reported that barely 6,000 votes were recorded from international electors, compared to approximately 26,000 votes from Canadian Forces electors and almost 15,700 votes from incarcerated electors.

The other paragraph I will quote is paragraph 114.

● (1200)

This is comes from the government in its presentation of arguments.

The second objective, concerns over electoral fraud, while less vague than the first, is subject to the same frailties. In this case, the government has failed to identify any particular problem with non-resident voter fraud or of non-resident voting causing an undue drain on Parliamentary resources. Indeed, the only evidence of these concerns at all comes from the speculation of a political science professor teaching at the University of Buffalo - State University of New York, who opines that an increase in non-resident voting “could,” “may” or “might” give rise to concerns in the future. The available evidence from Elections Canada is that there are no documented problems associated with non-resident voting.

The reason I brought these up is that the numbers also show quite clearly that 6,000 of two million non-resident Canadians voted versus 26,000 Canadian Forces members. I am wondering if that is part of the rationale with respect to the first question I asked. It would be good for Canadians to know that.

Also, as has been brought up a number of times, there is the matter of delays. It is true that if 36 days, which is the span of an election, is the time that triggers when one can register, it will cause significant problems. One has to wonder if indeed that is not a way of suppressing votes that would otherwise be more likely to be cast. The question asked by a colleague of the member for Toronto—Danforth is quite accurate. Given that we now have a fixed election date law, why can Canadians who are resident abroad who want to vote not start registering now? If the law says that the election is going to be on October 19, 2015, then it would help Elections Canada, it would help voters, and it would help declared registered candidates. They would be able to approach these folks in terms of trying to convince them to vote one way or the other. Why not now, as opposed to once the writ is dropped? That to me is troubling, and I would like to hear the rationale for that, too.

Finally, there is a question about the last address. Why would people have to register every election, when they did not have to before? I am wondering about that. If they are part of the registry, and nothing has changed in their citizenship and so forth, why must they always re-register, and with the same address? What happens if they have lived in an apartment building that is now demolished and the address does not exist anymore? Will they be able to register if the address does not exist anymore? If the apartment building is gone and all their neighbours are gone, how will they get someone to ascertain that they were indeed living there? It is going to be difficult.

I wonder to what extent the Conservatives might be open to amendments to this kind of provision, because I do not believe they have thought things through completely.

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Finally, a number of us in this room have been declared candidates for our respective parties. I have always tried to send some material to Canadians residing abroad who are eligible to vote. If that registry no longer exists, and if they cannot register until the writ is dropped, then obviously, the local candidates, of whatever party, will have a difficult time communicating with these Canadian citizens who are eligible to vote, presumably, but who may be in the midst of trying to register. Therefore, we would have no idea of how to communicate with them, and voters will not have any idea of who the local candidates are.

All of these are issues of some concern. I have received, again, a number of complaints from constituents who are Canadian citizens who would vote abroad, and I hope that these will be answered either here by the minister or in committee, either by the government or by Elections Canada. These are serious matters, and if they are not answered, I would think we would not be able to support such a bill.

• (1205)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Dany Morin (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the NDP has long been defending Canadians' right to vote, whether they live in Canada or abroad.

In February 2014, my colleague from Halifax took the initiative and introduced Bill C-575 in order to extend the right to vote to all Canadians living abroad.

Does the Liberal member agree with the NDP that Canadian citizens living abroad should have the right to vote?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Mr. Speaker, it is not just the NDP that feels that way. I believe that all parties, except for the Bloc Québécois, are in agreement.

In 2006, the issue was raised at the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, which tabled a report recommending the abolition of the five-year rule. This report was supported by all members of the committee, except the Bloc Québécois members. The New Democrats, Liberals and Conservatives all agreed in 2006.

In fact, it is no surprise that the judge declared this law to be ultra vires given that even parliamentarians were in agreement.

[*English*]

Mr. Craig Scott (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thought I would follow up on the answer just given by my colleague for Ottawa—Vanier.

Back in 2006, when there was agreement by all parties to change this rule, the government of the day then replied to say, "Let us not do this immediately". It was something along the lines of having to do a comprehensive study of the special voting rules to do this.

Now, 10 years later, I am not aware that any such study was ever done, let alone one involving any committee of the House. Is my colleague from Vanier aware of a study?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Mr. Speaker, I am aware that it was never done. Indeed, the government responded as my colleague for Toronto—Danforth said. It did not refuse it, but it did not accept it at the time. The government wanted to submit it to a detailed overall study, which should have been done, but it has not been done. That is why we ended up with the Frank et al. court decision, which the

government has appealed and has tried to suspend the implementation of. That might give members a sense of where the government is situated on that.

More proof is contained in Bill C-50. If the questions we have asked are not answered, and if the rationale is not forthcoming, transparent, and real, then I think the concept of some sort of selective voter suppression might indeed be at the root of Bill C-50, and that would make it totally unacceptable.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent—Cartierville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we can make no sense of the bill. Why erect such barriers? What possible motives could the government have if not to suppress the vote?

Does my colleague have a more charitable interpretation of the government's motives than the most obvious one?

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Mr. Speaker, I do not have a more charitable interpretation.

I asked for an explanation of the rationale behind these measures. Why not continue to allow our public servants, Canadian citizens who work for international organizations of which we are members, and their families to vote as easily as the members of the Canadian Forces?

We have to know the rationale. If there is no justifiable, transparent and fair rationale, then the only possible conclusion is that there is indeed something fishy going on and the government has other hidden intentions that must be exposed.

• (1210)

[*English*]

Mr. Paul Calandra (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and for Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will be splitting my time with the member for Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke.

I am very pleased to rise in the House today to speak to the citizen voting act, which was introduced by my colleague, the Minister of State for Democratic Reform.

Our government has a strong record of democratic reform. We ended the per-vote subsidy. We made the House of Commons more representative with the Fair Representation Act. Most recently, we closed loopholes for big money, ensured that everyday citizens are in charge of democracy, and made it harder to break election laws with the Fair Elections Act. All of these initiatives have strengthened Canada's democracy and reinforced confidence in our electoral system.

Today I am very pleased to discuss our government's latest democratic reform initiative, the citizen voting act. The bill would ensure that everyone who votes is a Canadian citizen, and it would require voters living abroad to follow the ID rules set out in the Fair Elections Act.

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Specifically, the citizen voting act would ensure that only Canadians vote in federal elections by requiring proof of citizenship from everyone voting in federal elections while abroad. This would not apply to Canadian Forces members.

Second, the bill would allow the Chief Electoral Officer to cross-reference the National Register of Electors with Citizenship and Immigration data to remove non-citizens from the voters list.

Third, the bill would put an end to the possibility of riding shopping by ensuring that non-residents receive a ballot only for the Canadian address at which they last resided.

Fourth, the bill would apply the same voter identification rules to all Canadians. Under the Fair Elections Act, Canadians living inside the country must prove who they are and where they live. Canadians support this requirement, and that is why the citizen voting act would expand it further to residents living abroad.

Finally, the bill would create one set of rules for voting from outside the country. Anyone voting while abroad, whether temporarily, on vacation, or permanently, will need to apply for a ballot in the same way and follow the same rules.

Given the limited time that I have today to discuss the citizen voting act, I am going to focus on a couple of items. First, I will focus on riding shopping.

Currently the Canada Elections Act permits non-resident voters to choose the riding that they vote in. They can select from one of four options. First, they can choose their last place of ordinary residence. Second, they can choose the address of a spouse, a relative, or a relative of a spouse. Third, they can choose the address of a dependent. Fourth, they can choose the address of someone with whom they would live if not residing outside of Canada.

Voters living in Canada do not have such flexibility. They must vote where they live at the time of an election. They cannot choose the riding in which they want their vote to be counted, and justly so.

Geographic representation is an essential characteristic of our electoral process. Canadians in each electoral district elect the candidate who they feel will best represent their interests and those of the community. Particularly in this vast country of ours, territorial-based representation ensures that diverse communities are represented in the House of Commons.

I am sure members may think that when an expatriate voter chooses his or her riding, proof of past residence is required. However, they would be wrong: Canadians living abroad are not required to provide proof to Elections Canada of their last Canadian residence. By stipulating that a non-resident voter's last place of residence in Canada would be their residence for voting purposes, the citizen voting act would end the unfair option of riding shopping and standardize the rules for resident and non-resident voters. This would ensure that each voter has a direct and meaningful connection to the riding in which he or she is voting.

I would now like to turn to the issue of voter identification.

The citizen voting act would ensure that Canadians living abroad would follow the same rules as those living in Canada. The bill would build on the Fair Elections Act by requiring Canadians voting

by mail—both residents and non-residents—to include proof of identity and residence in their application for a special ballot. This requirement is similar to the rules set out in the Fair Elections Act.

The Fair Elections Act, adopted last June, contained important measures to reinforce the integrity of the vote by strengthening ID rules. According to Ipsos Reid, in April 2014, when debate about the Fair Elections Act was at its height, 87% of those polled agreed that it is reasonable to require someone to provide proof of identity and address before being allowed to vote. The citizen voting act would make this requirement consistent for all Canadians, both resident and non-resident.

● (1215)

The same three ID options for voting at the polls would apply to those applying to vote by mail: either a government-issued photo identification with the name or address; or two pieces of identification authorized by the Chief Electoral Officer, one with address and both with name; or two pieces of authorized identification with name and an oath or declaration of residence that is attested to by another properly identified elector.

In the case of non-residents, the attestation process would enable them to provide proof of their last residence in Canada by an oath or declaration. The person providing an attestation would be a fully proven resident or non-resident qualified to vote in the same electoral district as the person applying for the special ballot.

To account for the potential difficulty that non-residents might face in obtaining an attestation as to their former residence in Canada, the citizen voting act would allow the attester for the previous residence of a non-resident to be qualified to vote in the same electoral district not to be of the same polling division. This is a slight variation to the attestation process for Canadians voting at the poll that was introduced by the Fair Elections Act.

A non-resident Canadian applying for a special ballot must also provide, in addition to his or her own identification proving his or her identity, copies of identification providing the identity and residence of the person providing the attestation.

Standardizing the voter identification requirements for resident and non-resident Canadians removes preferential treatment for one group of voters over another and obviously just makes sense.

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Our government recognizes the unique circumstances of members of the Canadian Forces. A completely separate set of rules found in division 2 of part 11 of the Canada Elections Act governs their voting procedures. Canadian Forces members serving abroad can vote at the location they are stationed, and the citizen voting act would not affect those rules.

In conclusion, our government remains committed to ensuring that our electoral system meets the needs of voters, both in Canada and abroad. The amendments being made by the citizen voting act are necessary to ensure the fairness of the electoral process and to ensure that one set of rules applies to all Canadians.

To summarize, the bill would strengthen Canada's election laws by, first, ensuring only Canadian citizens vote in federal elections; second, putting an end to the possibility of riding shopping; third, applying the same identification rules to all Canadians; and fourth, creating one set of rules for voting from outside the country.

These important advancements will bring greater accountability, integrity, and accessibility to Canada's fundamental democratic process. These are common sense legislative changes, so I would encourage all members to support the citizen voting act.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault (Sherbrooke, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his speech.

However, I did not hear him mention that the government held consultations on drafting such a bill.

I have a very direct question for him: who was consulted? Was Elections Canada consulted by the minister responsible when the bill was being drafted? What was their response? What information did the government obtain and receive and what other consultations were held to draft this bill? What facts and figures did it obtain? In short, what consultations were held, specifically with Elections Canada?

[*English*]

Mr. Paul Calandra: Mr. Speaker, as members know, we spent all last spring talking about the Fair Elections Act. That was a piece of legislation that Minister of State for Democratic Reform brought forward that was heavily consulted on by the previous Minister of State for Democratic Reform and by members of Parliament on this side of the House.

As part of that consultation, I heard from a number of my own constituents with respect to the procedures for voting abroad. I am very lucky in my constituency, in that there is a big retirement community. Many of these constituents spend time in different parts of the world in the winter, and I had the occasion last April to speak with them about what we see in this legislation today.

When we bring forward changes to the voting procedures for all Canadians, we do so in a way that reflects the broader Canadian attitude that elections must be fair and must represent the core Canadian values of honesty and respect for Canadian law.

In doing so, we would not only speak to Canadians but with the Chief Electoral Officer. Debating this today is part of that consultation. We are hearing what the opposition would say with

respect to this bill, and in committee we will also flesh out the different parts of the bill a little bit more.

• (1220)

Hon. Mauril Bélanger (Ottawa—Vanier, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, would the member explain why the bill would treat Canadian citizens working for the Government of Canada as public servants abroad differently from the military?

Mr. Paul Calandra: Mr. Speaker, it is because our public servants working abroad are not the Canadian military. They actually are different from the Canadian military.

That is not to suggest that the work that is done by our public servants around the world is not very important work. At the same time, we know that when public servants are sent abroad, they are often stationed there for a specific amount of time and know the length of time they will be there, unlike members of the Canadian Armed Forces. As the member would know from his own constituency, a lot of the time they maintain a Canadian residence when working abroad.

I suggest to the member that Canadian Forces members have circumstances much different from those of the great public service we have. When Canadian Forces members are in Canada, they move around a lot within Canada too. Therefore, to compare Canadian Forces members with the broader public service does a disservice to the Canadian Forces but at the same time does a disservice to the very professional men and women of the Canadian public service, who, as part of their service, also like to maintain consistency and connection with the communities they come from.

Mr. Craig Scott (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, following up on the question just asked, I am wondering whether the bill would exclude the families of Canadian Forces from the special rules that continue to apply to the Canadian Forces and how that would be rationalized.

Second, what conceivable justification is there for creating such a short window for applying for a special ballot, receiving it, and then voting? What would be the problem in allowing registration well in advance of an election or, as the Americans do, from day one each year? On January 1, Americans can register for whatever elections are coming up that year. What would be the problem in having that system?

Mr. Paul Calandra: Mr. Speaker, I suggest that the member bring that forward at committee for greater debate.

As we know, once the writ is dropped, people living abroad or who find themselves outside of Canada have the ability to go online immediately and begin the process of applying for ballots. That can happen almost immediately. I suggest to the member opposite that 36 days is enough time for people to go online, start the process, and then receive ballots, but that is something that can be discussed at committee. I believe it is long enough, but I am willing to hear from experts who might think that 36 days is just not enough time.

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The main goal of this legislation is to make sure that people are allowed to vote. It is consistent with what we see in other western democracies, and I think it is what Canadians, by and large, would expect: that the people receiving ballots and voting in elections are entitled to do so. That is what the citizen voting act, in addition to the Fair Elections Act, would ensure.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as the member of Parliament for the great eastern Ontario riding of Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, it is my pleasure to rise in the House today to speak to the citizen voting act.

When it comes to elections, I am pleased to confirm that I have successfully earned the confidence of the people for the last five general elections. It is with gratitude and humility that I thank the electors of my riding for the honour and the privilege of serving them in this place. As members know, the people are always right. I look forward to being given the privilege of continuing to represent the people of Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke after the next general election.

Our government has a long list of important accomplishments, including the bill before us today. I congratulate the Minister of State for Democratic Reform for the excellent job he is doing on behalf of all Canadians. I look forward to working with him for many years to come.

This important bill would ensure that everyone who votes in federal elections is a Canadian citizen, and would require Canadians living abroad to follow the same ID rules as those voting from home. It would also fill a void created in the aftermath of the Ontario Superior Court decision in *Frank v. Attorney General of Canada*, which struck down the long-standing rules on voting while living abroad.

The citizen voting act would build upon our government's ongoing commitment to strengthen the fairness and integrity of our electoral laws. The commitment started from the time we were first elected to government when we brought into law a series of reforms to clean up the stench of corruption, which Canadians refer to as the "sponsorship scandal".

Unfortunately, Canadians may never find out what happened to the millions of dollars that were stuffed into envelopes, to be secretly passed to Liberal candidates to subvert the democratic process.

Since 2006, we have brought forward common-sense changes that protect Canadian democracy. One does not have to look too far back to recall the Fair Elections Act, which introduced important reforms that require proof of identity and residence to cast a ballot in federal elections.

Our government is committed to treating both resident and non-resident voters fairly and equally. That is why the citizen voting act would make important reforms to the voting-by-mail procedures and would make the process fairer and more consistent. The bill would also address unfair inconsistencies in the special ballot voting system.

I would first like to take a few moments to explain the relationship between the citizen voting act and the ongoing litigation regarding non-resident voting in Ontario.

In May 2014, the Ontario Superior Court, in *Frank v. Attorney General of Canada*, struck down the legal requirement that, in order to vote in federal elections, citizens residing outside Canada must have done so for less than five consecutive years and have the intention to return to Canada.

For the benefit of those constituents of mine who are currently serving their country abroad as members of the Canadian Armed Forces, I am pleased to confirm that the ruling did not apply to their unique situation and will continue not to apply their service out of country. In the last federal election, my riding received the highest number of non-resident votes in the country, in no small part due to the significant number of women and men from Base Petawawa that is located in my riding. I thank them for their support. I will always watch their backs to ensure that they have the necessary equipment to do whatever their country calls upon them to do.

As a result of the Ontario court ruling, Canadians residing abroad are now able to vote in federal elections, regardless how long they have resided outside Canada, so long as they have lived in Canada at some point.

For over two decades, Canadian law limited, to five years, the length of time someone can be abroad and still vote.

● (1225)

For over two decades, Canadian law limited to five years the length of time someone can be abroad and still vote. We continue to believe that this is fair and reasonable and that non-residents should have a direct and meaningful connection to Canada and to their ridings to vote in federal elections. That is why our government has appealed the Ontario court ruling. Here it is important to make clear that the citizen voting act does not make any substantive changes to the provisions at issue in the *Frank* litigation. Our government will leave the resolution of the constitutionality of those sections to the courts.

I will now turn to the substance of the citizen voting act. The bill proposes important reforms to the vote-by-mail process that would strengthen its integrity and fairness. Specifically, it would ensure that only Canadian citizens vote in federal elections by requiring all voters applying for a mail-in ballot from outside Canada to provide proof of their Canadian citizenship.

Further, it would authorize the Chief Electoral Officer to obtain information from Citizenship and Immigration Canada that would allow Elections Canada to remove the names of non-citizens from the voters list, or to ensure that non-citizens are not added in the first place. It would put an end to the possibility of riding shopping by stipulating that non-residents can only receive a ballot for the last address at which they resided in Canada, and that they must present proof of that prior residence.

We must apply the same voter identification rules to all Canadians by requiring that everyone voting by mail include in their application proof of identity and residence consistent with the Fair Elections Act. It would create one set of rules for voting from outside the country.

Finally, it would require the Chief Electoral Officer to carry out an audit of special ballot voting after every election.

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I will begin by focusing on what I think are the most important measures of the citizen voting act, the proposals that would ensure that only Canadian citizens vote in federal elections.

The National Register of Electors, or the NRE, is Canada's permanent database of qualified electors. It is intended to include only those who are eligible to vote in federal elections, those being Canadian citizens aged 18 and over.

I think we can all agree that the accuracy of the NRE is what is vital to the integrity and the fairness of Canadian elections. That is important to our Conservative government. However, its accuracy is only as good as the data that supports it. Elections Canada estimates that there are approximately 40,000 non-citizens currently on the National Register of Electors. That means that 40,000 non-citizens could receive voter information cards telling them to vote, even though they are not qualified to do so.

To deal with this unsettling issue, the citizens voting act authorizes my colleague, the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, to provide the Chief Electoral Officer with information of persons who are not Canadian citizens, including their name, gender, date of birth, and addresses. This would allow Elections Canada to cross-reference the names on the NRE and delete names that are not Canadian citizens.

Let me be clear. This would not be a one-time clean-up of the voters list. The new authority would allow Elections Canada to periodically request information from the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration to make sure that the list remains up to date. The purpose is clear, to not to allow 40,000 non-citizens to end up back on the National Register of Electors in the years to come.

The bill also makes an important change to require anyone applying to vote by mail from outside Canada to prove Canadian citizenship. Since proof of citizenship is required when travelling abroad, Canadians temporarily outside the country during an election would not be adversely affected by this change. I think we can all agree that this is reasonable practice and should be a part of Canada's election laws.

Collectively, these are important changes that would help prevent non-citizens from voting and should be supported.

• (1230)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Nantel (Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I listened to my colleague's speech.

I get the impression that her speech is rather partisan and that she is trying to change some rules and consider demographic data that, according to the government's studies, would be advantageous to her. I cannot help but wonder, when they talk about riding shopping, if there is a credible and objective source—obviously not the Conservatives' research—that talks about riding shopping in Canada. In any case, I have not seen one.

• (1235)

[*English*]

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Mr. Speaker, the purpose of this is fairness and equality for all Canadian voters. When a voter goes outside Canada for a vacation, they are required to prove their place of

residence, as is every Canadian still living in Canada and not vacationing outside the country. When they go to the voters booth, they have to prove where they live. This is making it equal and fair so that people who no longer live in Canada do the same.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault (Sherbrooke, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I was rather surprised by the tone of my colleague's speech. She was not able to give a single example of riding shopping, as she called it. I will take that to mean that she has none.

Take, for example, a Canadian citizen working abroad for the Government of Canada or for the armed forces. This worker's family will obviously move with her. Does the member realize that under this existing bill, this woman and her husband would have different rules for voting in the same election? It would be much easier for her, as a member of the Canadian Armed Forces, but her husband or her children over the age of 18 would have to follow a different procedure to vote.

Does the member realize that this bill will create a two-tier system for members of the same family living abroad? Some of them will have to go through such a long and tedious process that they may decide not to vote, while others, in the same family, will have a much easier time voting.

[*English*]

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Mr. Speaker, a completely different set of rules contained in division 2, part 11 of the Canada Elections Act provides comprehensive procedures for voting by Canadian Armed Forces at locations where they are stationed. This reflects the unique circumstances faced by Canadian Armed Forces personnel. Someone who is a family member can register online and go through the mail process quite easily.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Dany Morin (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I listened to my Conservative colleague's speech.

I still have to wonder why the government did not consider the bill introduced by my colleague from Halifax. This bill would have fixed a lot of the problems we are discussing today. If my Conservative colleague had listened to the comments and questions from Liberal and New Democrat members, she surely would have seen that we think the bill creates more problems than it fixes, while the bill introduced by my colleague from Halifax would fix a number of problems, in my opinion.

Has the member read Bill C-575, introduced by my colleague from Halifax?

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[*English*]

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Mr. Speaker, the member opposite referred to a question by his colleagues who are Liberals. I think the member for Ottawa—Vanier did ask a valid question in wanting to know what would happen if the former place or address of a Canadian citizen now living abroad was demolished. That person can submit an expired driver's licence showing that address, or any passports with that address, or they can scan any bill and submit it with their application online.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault (Sherbrooke, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to begin by saying that I will share my time with my colleague from Chambly—Borduas, who will also talk to us about Bill C-50.

As the deputy critic for democratic and parliamentary reform, I am honoured to speak today and to have the opportunity to work with my esteemed colleague from Toronto—Danforth, supporting him on a number of files. I also thank the member for Louis-Saint-Laurent for all of the work she has done over the past few years as the deputy critic for democratic and parliamentary reform. I also thank her team, Jean-François and Myriam, who work extremely hard. I will have the opportunity to work with them again in the future.

It is an honour for me to rise to speak to Bill C-50, but it is also a disappointment. Instead of making it easier for people to exercise their right to vote in Canada, this bill attempts to make it more difficult. That is the opposite of what we should be doing as a country. The government should be encouraging people to vote and making it easier for them to vote, whether they reside in Canada or are Canadian citizens residing abroad. The bill before us today will make it even more difficult for Canadian citizens residing abroad to exercise their right to vote.

This is out of step with what other countries are doing. Some of my colleagues gave examples of countries where, rather than making it harder to vote, they are making voting easier and more enjoyable, especially for the younger generation, who are voting less and less. Voter turnout for young people aged 18 to 25 has been between 30% and 40% in some elections. That is very low, and it means that over half of young people do not go to the ballot box to exercise their right to vote. Instead of making it harder, the government should be working on making it easier and more appealing for all Canadians to exercise their right to vote.

Bill C-50, introduced by the federal Conservative government, follows the decision handed down recently by the Ontario Superior Court in the Frank et al. case. The bill we are debating here today is supposed to be the government's response to that court ruling. This response is unsatisfactory, to say the least. The bill claims to be a response to that decision, but it is definitely not the response that we were expecting. Anyone who has read the Superior Court ruling would have expected a very different response from the government. The Superior Court ruling struck down paragraph 11(d) of the Canada Elections Act, which deals with the right to vote for Canadian citizens living outside of Canada for less than five years.

We might have expected a response that extended the right to vote to all Canadian citizens living abroad. That is something our party has introduced before. My colleague from Halifax, whom I would

like to thank, introduced a bill to extend the right to vote to all Canadian citizens living abroad and to make it easier for them to exercise that right. There are many Canadians—in fact, 2.8 million—who live outside Canada. Unfortunately, not all of them are going to vote. However, if we were being generous, we could say, and I am just picking a number, that an estimated 300,000, 400,000 or 500,000 might vote. It would make a lot of work for Elections Canada, which would have to review all these applications in the 35 days prior to the election.

● (1240)

I will spend a little bit of time talking about these changes because if Bill C-50 does pass in its current form, Canadian citizens living abroad will have to register for every election. When an election is called, they will have to send a form and supporting pieces of identification to Elections Canada. They will be able to vote in the election with a special ballot that they will then have to return to Elections Canada within 35 days, which is the time between the day the election is called and the day of the vote. This extremely short timeframe will make it practically impossible to vote.

In order to vote, the voter will have to prepare in advance and be very familiar with the procedure. When the election is called, the voter will have to immediately fill out forms and pay the requisite fees so that the mail arrives at its destination within the requisite period of time. Depending on where one lives in the world, it can be very difficult to send a document to Canada. These steps will sometimes be expensive for people who want to register to vote in a federal election. This will certainly not encourage them to exercise their right to vote.

If someone has the misfortune of having expired ID or ID that is not considered valid proof for Elections Canada under Bill C-50, then someone else will have to vouch for them. That is another aspect of the bill that makes things even more difficult. A person who was fortunate enough to have the required ID still had to go through a three-part mailing process in a very short time during the election period; but if a person has the misfortune of not having the ID requested by Elections Canada under Bill C-50, then they will have to go through an extra step. This is a complex step, since that person has to find someone to vouch for them who lives in the riding they lived in before leaving Canada. The voucher has to prove that the voter is a citizen of the riding in question and attest to the person's identity, citizenship, and right to vote.

This can take a lot of time if that person lives in a part of the world where postal services are limited, which makes it almost impossible to send the necessary correspondence to register on the voting list. This bill is the government's so-called answer to the Ontario Superior Court decision. However, instead of encouraging people to exercise their right to vote, it makes it almost impossible.

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I asked the Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister whether the government had conducted any consultations before drafting this bill. He did not answer me, which I took as a no. It seems that Elections Canada was not consulted before this bill was drafted, even though this bill would have a huge impact on the agency. Indeed, Elections Canada will have to process hundreds of thousands of applications in 35 days so that these people can vote before the election date. That is a significant amount of work.

Furthermore, clause 20 of Bill C-50 states that the bill will come into force 60 days after the day on which it receives royal assent. It will be a huge amount of work for Elections Canada to do to implement such a system and to conform with the new legislation.

• (1245)

The government is imposing a huge burden on Elections Canada. It does not even seem to have consulted the agency before it introduced this bill in the House.

I would be happy to take questions from my colleagues.

• (1250)

Ms. Ève Pécelet (La Pointe-de-l'Île, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am actually quite surprised to hear that today. It seems obvious to me that the government should actually be encouraging all Canadian citizens to vote, not making their lives more difficult. It should not make voting even more complicated than it already is.

However, I think we need to know what would happen after an election. Say everything goes smoothly: a citizen registers to vote in the next federal election, which will take place in October 2015. That person has to go through the whole process all over again for subsequent elections, which are supposed to take place every four years.

How can the government say that it is complying with the court's ruling to give all Canadians living abroad the right to vote when it is actually making their lives difficult, not just once but two or three times over? These people might have to move to another country where there might not be a Canadian embassy nearby.

What kind of government makes Canadians' lives even more complicated and prevents them from voting instead of encouraging them to vote?

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: Mr. Speaker, that is the irony of Bill C-50, which the government claims is a response to the court's ruling.

The court ruling indicated that all Canadians should have the right to vote. That right is protected by the charter. All Canadian citizens have a right to vote. The existing legislation bars Canadian citizens living abroad for more than five years from voting. That provision has been struck down.

However, there is a paradox here. The government wants to give all Canadians the right to vote, but it is discouraging them from doing so by making it extremely difficult or even impossible to exercise that right. That is hard to understand.

We had hoped for a much broader and much more satisfactory response in order to make things easier for Canadians who want to

exercise their right to vote. Instead, we have before us today a bill that does quite the opposite.

Canadians will have to re-register every time an election is called and they cannot even pre-register. If we had a fixed election date, then at least Elections Canada could be given a timeframe. That would be the minimum. However, that is not the case. The government decided to add a provision to the bill specifying that people cannot register until the day the election is called and they must register for each election.

That means that if a person registers to vote in the 2015 election and another election is called in 2016, that individual will have to register again. The registration is good for only one single election. What is more, people have to register during the election period.

Mr. Craig Scott (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, right now, citizens of France living overseas can vote electronically, and Americans living abroad can vote by email.

Bill C-23, the unfair elections act, contains a provision that stipulates that the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada must conduct a pilot project or test on electronic voting but that he must obtain the consent of the entire House of Commons and the Senate—not just one committee, but the entire Senate.

Does my colleague think that this is a coincidence?

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: Mr. Speaker, I also want to thank my colleague for his question, which ties in with what I said at the beginning of my speech.

Instead of making it easier for citizens to exercise their right to vote, as it is done in other countries, the government is making it even harder and cumbersome to vote.

It is completely unacceptable for the government to tie the Chief Electoral Officer's hands and prevent him from making suggestions to make it easier to vote. He cannot make suggestions without the consent of Parliament, even though he is the one with the necessary knowledge on how to get more Canadians to vote.

That is our goal on this side of the House. We want to increase voter participation, not decrease it, as the Conservatives are trying to do.

• (1255)

Mr. Matthew Dubé (Chambly—Borduas, NDP): Mr. Speaker, members may have noticed that some of my colleagues and I are fighting a little cold. If we do not seem all there, it is not because we are not interested in this topic.

Bill C-50 obviously deals with an important issue. The government addresses the same problems and same visions of democracy that we saw in Bill C-23 on election reform—or electoral “deform”, as we nicknamed it.

There are a number of problems with this bill. Before I get into them, I want to give a brief background. This bill came about because of a ruling by the Ontario Superior Court stating that it was unconstitutional to prohibit Canadian citizens living abroad for more than five years from voting in a federal election.

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This is an important issue, especially in 2015, in light of the global village phenomenon. We have increased access to other countries and opportunities—this is especially true for young people. I am thinking about young university grads who want to pursue opportunities abroad without ruling out the possibility of returning home. They remain invested in their home community even though they are abroad.

The right to vote has always been essential, because at the end of the day, it is the very essence of what it means to be a citizen. With how easy it is now to find information and follow the events leading up to an election, the right to vote is increasingly important for citizens living abroad, considering the global realities of today's world.

I would like to mention another very important point that also relates to the right to vote, which, as I said, is the very essence of citizenship. The number of Canadian citizens residing outside Canada translates into a lot of money for the public purse because those individuals pay taxes. We all know the famous slogan that served a certain American cause very well: No taxation without representation. This is another important factor that must not be overlooked, beyond the principles of citizenship. Those people pay taxes, and ultimately, they are entitled to have a say in how their tax dollars are used, that is, in the governance of their home country, where they are citizens.

There are a number of problems, but there is one that we already saw with Bill C-23. The government sees problems; some are legitimate, others do not even exist. They are scaremongers. Last time, the government talked about fraudsters, as though there were thousands of fraudsters across the country trying to steal the right to vote from other citizens. Obviously, there were some dubious findings there. The idea was that many non-citizens were trying to take advantage of the right to vote.

Earlier, I heard an hon. member allude to the fact that non-citizens were receiving ballots abroad, as though this happened frequently and there were wide-scale electoral fraud. That being said, some media reports indicated that it was hard to tell the extent to which citizens abroad were affected. If the journalists who were focusing on this issue were unable to dig up these numbers, I do not see how an hon. member can make this observation. What is more, when my colleague from Sherbrooke asked the hon. member whether there were any studies to back her comments, she was unable to provide an answer.

The point I am trying to make is that instead moving forward and finding progressive ways to improve our electoral system, the government always takes a step backward. Instead of moving forward, it takes two steps back. That must be extremely frustrating for the people who, like the NDP, want to see a higher voter turnout. That is the problem we saw with Bill C-23, which had negative consequences for seniors, aboriginal people, young people and students. We see the same problem here.

The thing that strikes me the most is the French example. In 2012, I went to France with my colleagues to observe the presidential election.

● (1300)

I was surprised because I did not know that France had elected representatives—senators and members of the National Assembly—who represent constituencies outside of France. They represent French citizens who live outside of France. I know one person in the area, in Gatineau, who is a French citizen. This is a well-established system because French citizens living outside of France even receive campaign material from political parties.

That says a lot about how important it is to the Republic that all French citizens be properly represented, not just French citizens residing in France. This relates to what I was talking about at the beginning of my speech: in the new global village, where more and more citizens are pursuing opportunities abroad but staying connected to and involved in their communities, the governing body should represent not just residents but all citizens, no matter where they live.

As pointed out by my colleague from Toronto—Danforth—who does an excellent job of developing our positions on democratic reform—the French system has another component: the right to vote by Internet. The Americans allow U.S. citizens living abroad to vote by email.

While other countries look for solutions that will make it easier for citizens living abroad to vote, our government seems to be stuck on making it more difficult. A fine example—and that is another problem with the bill—is the issue of people living abroad who serve the government. We think of course of members of the Canadian Forces who are deployed abroad. The government will say that they are still exempt from the five-week period proposed in Bill C-50.

Although the government is not saying as much, this is a step backwards from what was already in the act. I will explain. Previously, diplomats were also exempt because, after all, they also serve the country, Canadians and the government abroad. Now, diplomats will have to follow the same laborious process as all other Canadians living abroad. They do not get a break even though they are abroad to serve their country.

The same is true for military families. It is a good idea and it is important—and I am not being sarcastic here—to grant exemptions to members of our Canadian Forces. However, we also need to think about their families. Some of these members are undoubtedly accompanied by their 18-year-old children. Some have spouses who also have the right to vote. The government is forgetting to look at the big picture when it comes to people who are living abroad.

Today in his speech, the Minister of Foreign Affairs spoke about the team and the public servants who served him abroad. As my colleague from Sherbrooke mentioned, people like that, who are working for a minister and serving the crown—it is important to point that out—are also not granted an exemption from this long and sometimes difficult process. As a result, they will have to use courier services, which Elections Canada has no legal obligation to use. They will have to turn to courier services that sometimes take a long time to deliver things and, in some countries, are difficult to use. There are many problems with this.

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This once again shows, as Bill C-23 did, just how much difficulty the Conservatives have resolving problems, making it easier to access the electoral system and increasing voter turnout. They are once again introducing a bill that makes the process even more complex and forces Canadians to work even harder to exercise their right to vote. The right to vote should be an automatic part of citizenship. The government has the responsibility to make this process easier.

In closing, I would like to quickly mention one more thing, which I did not have time to really talk about. Once again, students are affected. When I was going to McGill, I saw how easy it was for American students to vote, even though they were living in Montreal. However, Bill C-50 contains an error that requires any lease used by a student as proof of residence to be for an official university residence.

• (1305)

Students who are going to school abroad and living off-campus as an individual and not in accommodation such as a university residence cannot use their lease as valid proof of identity.

It is because of these types of problems that we are forced to oppose yet another botched bill on an issue as fundamental as our democracy.

Mr. Pierre Nantel (Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I congratulate my colleague on his speech, even though he said he was not feeling well. It is true; we have all been hit.

His speech really showed me the extent to which this bill creates nothing but outdated bureaucracy. As we heard earlier, a number of civilized countries, both western and eastern ones, use new communication technologies.

Why does he think that the government insists on using outdated methods? Is it because it does not trust technology, or is it because it is not interested in catering to the modern voters who would use these new platforms?

Mr. Matthew Dubé: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his question.

We do not want to buy into conspiracy theories, but the Conservatives' speeches seem to indicate some fear of the unknown, whether we are talking about Bill C-23 or Bill C-50, which is being debated today. They use scare tactics, claiming that people will cheat the system and that non-Canadians will try to vote in our elections. Last time we heard about people who would cheat and vote several times.

Like my colleague, I have to wonder why they are doing this. Perhaps this issue does not concern Conservative voters. I do not think that is the case, since everyone, regardless of their political beliefs, should be trying to make it easier for voters living in Canada or abroad.

As my colleague mentioned in his question, as I said in my speech and as all of my colleagues have said, while other developed countries are using these technologies or using other means to make it easier for citizens, especially with respect to deadlines to register to vote, the Conservative government seems to want to make things harder.

Then we wonder why people are so cynical and why voter turnout is so low. The Conservatives need only look in the mirror.

[*English*]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, one of the things I have noticed about the government is that it seems to have its own election reform thoughts and ideas and wants to impose, with its biases, new laws that would affect a person's ability to vote. Even if it contradicts what Elections Canada might recommend or if unified opposition parties are opposing what is being done, its way is the only way.

It is interesting that this legislation would make it more difficult for people to exercise their right to vote. The government will say that it is exempting the Canadian military, for example, but many members of the Canadian Forces who serve abroad have spouses or dependents with them who are over the age of 18. They are going to be subjected to these new rules. Let there be no doubt that these new rules will make it that much more difficult for individuals to vote.

Would my colleague from the New Democratic Party provide his thoughts with regard to this issue? Yes, Canadian Forces members appear to be excluded from this, but not their significant others or dependent children over the age of 18.

• (1310)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Matthew Dubé: Mr. Speaker, I completely agree with my colleague: it is a problem. As I said in my speech, we have to consider the Canadian Forces, but we also have to consider their family members and all of the people who are serving their country and doing important work for governance abroad, people such as public servants and diplomats and their family members.

The Elections Act also included an exemption for members of the RCMP. Unless I am mistaken, that exemption no longer exists in Bill C-50. Once again, I do not mean to suggest that there is a conspiracy afoot, but I do not blame people for reacting to the government's measure with cynicism.

Earlier, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister accused us of disrespecting the Canadian Forces because we criticized that part of the bill. That statement was so ridiculous that it was a little hard to believe. It said a lot about the Conservatives' approach.

They grant exemptions for the Canadian Forces not out of respect for the Canadian Forces, but just because they want to hand out goodies in a show of support for the troops. That is the kind of thing we hear quite a lot. If they really supported the people who serve us abroad, they would make more of an effort to encourage them to participate fully in our democracy.

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, for Official Languages and for the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I should say first that I will be sharing my time with the Minister of State for Western Economic Diversification.

I am pleased to address the House with respect to Bill C-50, the Citizen Voting Act. The bill deals with electoral reform intended to strengthen the integrity and fairness of our electoral system.

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Canada has one of the world's most generous electoral systems with respect to the right to vote, and Canadians are proud of their democracy. That is why our government is taking measures to ensure the integrity of the electoral process. I will therefore explain how the citizen voting act, which we have the pleasure of discussing today, protects our electoral system.

Preserving the integrity of our electoral system is important. Elections Canada estimates that there are about 40,000 names of non-citizens currently listed in the National Register of Electors. This means that there are 40,000 non-citizens who could easily obtain a voter information card telling them where and how to vote, and could therefore go to a polling station and vote. As we know, that is in fact illegal.

That is why the citizen voting act will authorize Canada's Minister of Citizenship and Immigration to provide the Chief Electoral Officer with the name, gender, date of birth and addresses of non-citizens, so that Elections Canada can compare the data and remove non-citizens from the National Register of Electors.

The citizen voting act will make it a legal requirement for anyone voting outside Canada to provide proof of Canadian citizenship. The rule does not apply to members of the Canadian Armed Forces, of whom we are extremely proud. I would like to take this opportunity to mention the extraordinary work they are doing against the terrorist threat constituted by the Islamic State in Iraq.

Getting back to the citizen voting act, I would like to talk about another problem that affects the system as it currently exists. Canadians living abroad do not have to prove that they lived in the riding in which they vote. They can in fact vote in the riding of their choice, on the basis of unverified personal or family ties. Voters living in Canada, on the other hand, have to vote in the riding in which they are residing when the election is held. They cannot choose their riding. It is unfair to allow someone who has never lived in a community to vote for the person who will represent that community. That is why the citizen voting act will ensure that Canadians living abroad are bound by the same rules as those who live in Canada.

Canadians living abroad will have to provide proof of their identity and their most recent Canadian address with the same documentation required of voters who live in Canada, namely photo identification with their previous address or two of the 39 pieces of identification approved by the CEO of Elections Canada. If they do not have a piece of identification showing their previous address, voters living abroad may use an attestation as to their previous address produced by a voter in the same riding who has proven their identity.

Like the Canadian public, we believe it is reasonable to require that a person provide proof of their identity and their address in order to be entitled to vote. Canadian residents who happen to be abroad when an election is held, people like the snowbirds, have to apply for a special ballot at each election and produce pieces of identification and proof of residence. It is a different matter for citizens living abroad, who, once they have applied for a ballot for an election, automatically receive a ballot for every subsequent election at their overseas address, even though we do not know whether or not they still live there.

That is why the citizen voting act is so necessary. It will remove this inequality between Canadians by establishing a single set of rules for citizens who vote outside Canada.

The citizen voting act strengthens the rules that apply to special ballots to match the standards of integrity adopted when the Fair Elections Act was passed last June. It harmonizes the rules for voters whether they are temporarily or permanently residing outside Canada.

● (1315)

The Citizen Voting Act contains measures to safeguard the integrity of our electoral system.

To summarize, we will establish a single register, the National Register of Electors, which will be maintained by Elections Canada, for voters who reside in Canada or who are in Canada when an election is held.

The existing information on non-residents will be retained, and all of the information on voters will now be included in the national register. We will ensure that people living outside Canada—other than members of the Canadian Armed Forces—who want to vote have to produce proof of citizenship.

Voters living abroad will no longer be able, as they were in the past, to choose the riding in which they want to vote without showing a connection to that community, and they will be able to obtain a ballot only for their most recent address in Canada. They will be subject to the same rules as other Canadian citizens with respect to identification and proof of residence.

Lastly, the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration will be authorized to provide Elections Canada with information about non-citizens so that their names can be removed from the voters list.

Canada has one of the world's most generous electoral systems with respect to the right to vote. Many democracies like ours place restrictions on voting by non-residents. I am thinking of Ireland, for example, where non-residents cannot vote. Canada is much more generous with respect to the right to vote. It is therefore reasonable to expect citizens living abroad to meet the same identification requirements as those living in Canada.

Since our government came to power, it has worked tirelessly to reform the Canada Elections Act, so that our system remains one of the most respected in the world. Each of the government's successive reforms have sought to maintain the integrity and fairness of our electoral system.

The Citizen Voting Act is part of that series of reforms and demonstrates once again our government's commitment to strengthening the integrity and fairness of our electoral system.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse (Louis-Saint-Laurent, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I listened carefully to the speech by my colleague, who is also my neighbour, near Quebec City, Quebec. I would like to ask him a question.

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I have been working on the issue of democratic reform for a long time. He mentioned how many changes his government has proposed to the Canada Elections Act to date. We know that the main changes were in Bill C-23, which was introduced last year and amended a number of things. With a lot of pressure from the official opposition, from our party, the Conservatives ultimately backed down on several fairly major points in Bill C-23, in particular vouching.

In the case of this bill as well, I would like to know whether he would be open to changing some elements of the bill to make it as effective as possible, in particular to improve access to the vote for Canadians living outside Canada, rather than restricting it as is being done here. Voting is being made more difficult for all Canadians, not just for those who have been outside Canada for more than five years. Could we find ways of facilitating it as much as possible, rather than making it more difficult?

• (1320)

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for her question. I would note that it has always been a pleasure for us to work closely with the official opposition on various bills that enable our society to grow.

We think this bill is fair and equitable for non-residents of Canada. It is equivalent to what people who leave for brief periods have to do. People who vacation in Florida for two months have to provide proof of identity. We think that non-residents could do exactly the same thing: provide proof of identity and specify the electoral district where they lived and what their last address in Canada was. That is fair and equitable for all Canadians.

[*English*]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have a specific question for the minister.

As I pointed out in a previous question, I am always somewhat suspicious of the government when it brings in changes to the Canada Elections Act.

Can the minister indicate which of the actions in the legislation are actually actions recommended by Elections Canada? In other words, is there anything in the current legislation, and if so, what were the actual recommendations that came from Elections Canada to the government in terms of requesting changes?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Mr. Speaker, I believe all Canadians should vote in the electoral district where they reside. At present, a non-resident can choose an electoral district they have never known in a province where they have never lived. We think a non-resident who wants to vote in Canada should vote in the electoral district where they voted the last time, based on their last place of residence. I think this recommendation is really very important.

Ms. Élane Michaud (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have a technical question for my colleague from Lotbinière—Chutes-de-la-Chaudière. I really did not hear my colleague mention this in his speech.

There is a new section in Bill C-50—section 143, subsection 2.11—that specifies the documents that Elections Canada may consider to be a piece of identification. It says that these are

documents issued by local governments, the federal government, provincial governments or an entity that is incorporated or formed in Canada. However, it does not specify whether that includes aboriginal governments. This provision still leaves a grey area and it could restrict the right to vote of Canadian citizens who live here. They will have to present two pieces of identification, but they will not necessarily have access to anything other than a document issued by an aboriginal government.

I would like my colleague to state whether his government considers this to be included in the bill or not. If it does, will they clarify this provision in committee?

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Mr. Speaker, this bill identifies the 39 pieces of ID approved by Elections Canada. Two of those pieces of ID are required to identify non-residents. Those 39 pieces of ID will be recognized. If my colleague would like other pieces of ID to be added to the list, she could propose them in committee.

[*English*]

Hon. Michelle Rempel (Minister of State (Western Economic Diversification), CPC): Mr. Speaker, it gives me great pleasure to rise in the House today to speak to this act, which addresses some important concerns that have been raised in recent court rulings, which have been discussed in debate already today. As well, it clarifies some of the procedures by which certain types of voters participate in our democratic process.

As the debate was going on today, I had the opportunity to listen to a few of my colleagues' concerns and some of the technical questions that were raised. I would like to use the bulk of my speech to try to address some of the concerns raised in the House today.

I was very pleased to hear that there was some general consensus on the need to remedy the fact that, according to Elections Canada, there are approximately 40,000 non-citizens on our voters list at present. My colleague from the Liberal Party, the member for Winnipeg North, just asked what some of the recommendations were. I believe that this particular fact was brought forward by Elections Canada. There seems to be consensus in the House on the sharing of information between Citizenship and Immigration and Elections Canada to ensure that only those who are eligible to vote, as per our country's legalities, are actually on the voters list. That is a very positive thing.

Just to clarify for the House, this act would authorize the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration to provide the Chief Electoral Officer with names, genders, birth dates, and addresses of non-citizens so that Elections Canada could cross-reference and remove them from the National Register of Electors.

Government Orders

One of the things that came up several times, both in questions and in speeches, was that there is no evidence of riding shopping. I want to go back a bit, because through this Parliament, we have had some fairly substantial debates in this House on how the electorate ties into local representatives. I believe that we are even going to be talking about it today with respect to the reform act. That is a very worthwhile debate. How do elected representatives function in this place? How do we do our jobs, and what is the tie between the electorate and the elected representative?

We need to ensure that this particular relationship is enshrined in our legislation and protected. The reason we have 308 members of Parliament here is to recognize the fact that there are different interests in different communities in this great, vast country of ours. The question becomes how we ensure that the integrity of that relationship is maintained. The context of this act addresses that.

Going back to that riding-shopping phenomenon, my question for the House is this: How do we know that this is not happening? Right now, there is no verification process for electors living abroad who are on the international list of electors. As well, because there is no process in place, there is no audit procedure to ensure that compliance rules are being followed. I am actually quite supportive of putting legislation in place that would require the verification of the different voting requirements contained in this bill for that reason. It would ensure that those who are abroad have a tie to their elected representative and would ensure that there is a verification process that every other Canadian citizen who is participating in the voting process has to follow.

Just to clarify, what we put forward as a government in the citizen voting act would ensure that Canadians living abroad would follow the same rules as those living in Canada. The bill would require that they prove their identity and most recent Canadian address, using the same documentation as voters who live in Canada use under the Fair Elections Act.

I was pleased to hear my colleague from Toronto—Danforth earlier today. He stated that it is relatively easy for attestations to occur under the amendments made in Bill C-23. “I believe” was the term he used. This attestation procedure would continue to exist under this particular act. Having this requirement for verification would ensure that we have the data that would ensure both compliance and a link to a particular community and an elected representative in Canada.

There was a bit of a discussion as well about ballots going to the wrong address and whether this was a real problem. We go to great lengths in this country to ensure that the balloting process at on-site elections during a writ is sacrosanct. We have to make sure that ballots are handled with the utmost care. That is the reason we have scrutineers in our election campaigns.

● (1325)

We should be trying to prevent problems and ensuring that a ballot, which gives people a democratic right to vote for an elected representative, is being sent to a correct address. I do not think we should be arguing over whether this is a problem. It is a problem if it goes to a wrong address. This act would rectify that.

The 60-day coming into force period was discussed earlier today as well. With respect to the criticism that there would be no time for Elections Canada to adapt to the new rules, the House needs to understand that what is being proposed in this legislation is an extension of existing procedures and not the reinvention of a wheel.

When I work with my department officials, I always like to give a shout-out to the hard-working public servants within WD Canada. We work toward a goal. We ask what the legislative requirement is. One of the most important roles of the public service is to implement and execute directions from government. We try to put together a project plan. We put resources around that to ensure we have a plan in place to execute the needs of the government direction.

There certainly is a clearly defined need to have this implemented, given that the Frank ruling that came out adds approximately 1.4 million people to our voting list. Therefore, we need to ensure there are procedures in place in short order to protect the integrity of the voting process in Canada. Given the need that has been precipitated out of this ruling, as parliamentarians, I hope we would look at ways to make this happen through committee debate, rather than saying this cannot be done without giving any specific reason.

The issue of the families of diplomats came up. The Canada Elections Act has always clearly spelled out who is exempt from the different requirements for out-of-country voting. The Canada Elections Act applies a separate set of rules for members of our armed forces. They are under different circumstances than many of those who are living abroad. They are deployed in short order. Sometimes they do not know how long they will be overseas or where they will be. We want to ensure that the men and women of our armed forces have every right to participate in the democratic process. That is why there are separate rules for them.

● (1330)

However, it is worth re-emphasizing that this act puts in place a set of rules for voting overseas that is consistent among voters across the country. Whether they are on vacation, or are a snowbird or have moved abroad, they would have one very similar set of rules that would be applied across the board. That is a positive thing. People on vacation have used the special balloting rules without incident for a long period of time. I think it is reasonable to say that those rules can be extended to others, especially those people who have been out of the country for a certain period of time.

There was also some debate regarding the requirement for identification from a Canadian source and whether that would disenfranchise voters. We had this argument with respect to Bill C-23, and I hope there was some consensus respecting the 39 eligible pieces of identification listed by Elections Canada. It is a robust and comprehensive list. That set of identification is also pertinent to this act, and I think in no way disenfranchises people. There are 39 forms of ID. Surely, there is something on that list that can be shown to meet the requirements in the act.

Government Orders

With respect to there not being enough time for people to register, to get their ballot and to vote, people already do this with the special ballot rules. If my colleagues would avail themselves, the special ballot rules are readily available on the Elections Canada website and many of the rules contained in this act are similar. Again, this has been happening with ease for a lot of people.

Out of curiosity, I went to the Canada Post website to see how long it took for a letter to reach its destination. It states that it is four to seven business days for international letters. Given the variety of ways that people can register to vote, be it online, at the embassy or by fax, there is a way for people to get that information and interact.

Therefore, I support this law. It provides great clarity, given the Frank ruling.

• (1335)

Mr. Craig Scott (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for the kind of debating that really elevates the scrutiny of bills in the House. There was a conscious effort to address a number of concerns that were heard in the first part of the debate so far. I truly appreciate the effort.

I want to ask two quick questions in clarification.

First, it is not true that it is merely an extension to the existing Bill C-23 procedures because subsection 143(2.11) is reworded to prohibit the authorization of any documents to be used for ID unless issued by a government entity in Canada or by an entity incorporated or formed in Canada.

The wording is done in a way that a number of possible things that are currently among the 39 pieces of ID may no longer easily qualify. Private leases that are not issued by corporations is one. The other is that it will be very unclear whether utilities bills, credit card bills, et cetera necessarily meet this new definition.

I am not saying this is deliberate, but the government has tried to come up with a definition of documents originating in Canada that actually, it appears, would not cover all 39 that currently exist. I know Elections Canada is very concerned about the administrative chaos that this could cause.

Second, is there any harm in extending the period when one can actually register, especially when we have fixed statutory elections?

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Mr. Speaker, on my colleague's first question, in talking to folks who have been involved in the drafting of the bill, trying to get some clarification on his first point, my understanding is the intent of the wording around this clause is to ensure that the identification can be verified as having a Canadian source.

Second, the verification is happening in Canada. I know there was discussion earlier about whether somebody at a poll could look at this, et cetera, but just to clarify, this verification process is happening in Canada.

All that said, I am sure this is a point of clarification that will come up in more technical detail in committee. I hope the House, on next reading of the bill, will be able to speak to it in greater depth.

With regard to the time period for registration, again, there is precedence for the time period that is prescribed in the act, and that is

the special balloting procedures that we currently abide by under the Canada Elections Act. In every instance that I have heard, this process happens without incident, and that precedent should be good enough to show this could be applied under this act.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the member answering the question I had posed to her colleague on whether the legislation included recommendations from Elections Canada.

As a whole, people across Canada have a deep amount of respect for Elections Canada. They see it as an independent agency, which it is. It does phenomenal work in protecting the integrity of our democratic system in our elections.

The member cited one aspect from Elections Canada. Could she indicate if there are other aspects of the legislation that have come to the government through a recommendation by Elections Canada, outside of the citizenship and immigration aspect?

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Mr. Speaker, I would like to avail myself of this opportunity to remind my colleague opposite about the function of parliamentarians in this place, and that is to make laws. The Frank ruling creates some circumstances which must be addressed in terms of legislation and of ensuring there is clarity on voting procedures for approximately 1.4 million, which I would loosely say are new electors to Canada.

Again, while respecting Elections Canada as an organization that serves the Canadian people, it is incumbent upon the House to also understand that sometimes laws come from parliamentarians, because that is our job.

• (1340)

Mr. Andrew Cash (Davenport, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is an honour to rise in this place on behalf of the good people of Davenport in the great city of Toronto to participate in the debate on Bill C-50.

It is important to the people in my riding. Many people in Davenport, in fact many people in Toronto, go back and forth between Canada and their home countries, the countries in which they were born. Many of my constituents live in both places and care deeply about Canada and the electoral process. They are Canadian citizens, yet from time to time over the course of one's life, end up living elsewhere for a period of time.

We already know from the various accounts that we have heard in this place how difficult it is for many immigrant Canadians to receive government services, to access Service Canada, for example, and how difficult and tricky that is for many in our community. We now are seeing another example of how the government erodes the trust of Canadian citizens who are immigrants or Canadian citizens living abroad. This bill is part of a long litany in a grand narrative, the result of which is a deepening lack of trust.

There is also a very adversarial relationship between the government and expert opinion of society and court rulings. In fact, the government has no hesitation in spending money, the dollars of hard-working Canadians, to fight court challenges and to thumb its nose on what Canadian jurisprudence would lead us to.

Government Orders

In this one I am referring to Superior Court Justice Michael Penny who made it clear that long-term expats who cared deeply about Canada should have the right to vote. The federal government, though, did not withdraw its appeal of the Frank judgment when it tabled Bill C-50, even though it wrote its press release and background on Bill C-50 to make it appear as if it was accepting the Frank judgment.

We have a bill, and it is important that Canadians understand that parliamentarians have been attempting to deal with this issue in a manner that reflects the values of Canadian society, which is that if an individual is a citizen in Canada, regardless of where they live, they have the right to vote.

The government will say, as it did in earlier debates around its unfair elections act, that it is making things simpler and streamlining the system. In fact, we know that is not the case. One would think that when we are faced with the reality of plummeting voting rates in liberal democracies, including Canada, that we would, as parliamentarians, be thinking about ways in which we help facilitate and invite Canadian citizens to participate more fully in the electoral process. However, we are seeing the government, once again, going in the opposite direction, to the extent that organizations have raised serious concerns about this legislation.

Dylan Penner from the Council of Canadians said, “Bill C-50 is a blatant abuse of power. The current government is trying to legislate its way around a court decision it doesn't like”, and we have heard that one before, “to further stack the deck in its favour for the next election”, and we have heard that one before too. He goes on to say, “Rather than accept a court ruling that restores voting rights, the government has decided to change the law in a way that infringes voting rights.”

• (1345)

I would like to add that I will be splitting my time with the member for Gatineau.

I would also like to quote from the organization Leadnow, which asked the Prime Minister and the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration to commit to respecting section 3 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which guarantees all Canadian citizens the right to vote. It reads:

Any further attempt by this government and future governments to overturn the recent court ruling that reaffirms that right will be considered an affront to the democratic rights of all Canadians.

In a sense, that gets to the crux of the issue here.

This is part of a long narrative by the Conservative government in pushing the envelope around democratic rights and freedoms, of obfuscating in and outside this place regarding its intentions. There have been countless inquiries. There have been police inquiries into voter fraud.

In short, Canadians do not trust the government.

We heard earlier this morning from the former minister of foreign affairs about the importance of this place, of the centrality of this place to preserving democracy in Canada, yet time and time again we see a government that is willing to play fast and loose with the rules, in the hope that Canadians who are struggling just to get by in

their day-to-day lives will not notice as the government starts stacking the deck in its favour. This legislation is just an example. We have not heard any compelling evidence or arguments from the government to show that is not the case, and here I am talking about the grand narrative.

Over 2.8 million Canadians live abroad. These are Canadian citizens who pay about \$6 billion in Canadian taxes. We need to be thinking of ways to include them more easily in our electoral process. That is a project that any government would think important and vital, but that is not what we see here. It is important that we get to some of the nuts and bolts of how these things play out. We have the legislation, but parliamentarians need to hear how these bills would affect people living their day-to-day lives.

Bill C-50 proposes to give Canadian citizens only five weeks before an election to complete the process. The citizen must send in the form and Elections Canada has to mail out a special ballot. The citizen then has to mail that ballot back. As one Canadian abroad put it when consulted on the impact of Bill C-50, “With international postal delays being what they are, expats have to use FedEx or other courier services to have any hope of their vote being counted.”

Elections Canada is not legally mandated to do the same. In other words, if Elections Canada sends the ballot by surface mail, voters outside of North America are going to have a difficult time. Even just the timing of this is going to be difficult. One would think that the government would take these issues into consideration, but what do we expect from a government that is seeking to tear down bit by bit our own postal service. I suppose that is what we get.

This legislation is of deep concern to our party. We have a solution in Bill C-575 put forward by the member for Halifax. I would urge the government to look seriously at that legislation.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault (Sherbrooke, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague from Davenport for his excellent speech on Bill C-50.

Since this is a matter of consideration on the government's part, it seems to me that there was not much consultation, based on the replies we have heard so far today from the government. The government does not appear to have consulted Elections Canada in drafting Bill C-50.

I would remind the House that many of the measures in this bill will of course affect Elections Canada, because that is the body that oversees the election process and registration applications for the voters list.

Is the member concerned about the government's failure to consult or about the situation that Elections Canada could face if it receives hundreds of thousands of applications? Is he concerned about the courageous voters who do decide to go through the process? Hundreds of thousands of applications in just 35 days of voting does not leave very much time. Is he also worried about Elections Canada's ability to process all those applications in time for the election and the organization's ability to manage such a huge volume of applications in such a short timeframe?

Government Orders

• (1350)

[English]

Mr. Andrew Cash: Mr. Speaker, that is an excellent question underlining significant issues around how the government moves forward with legislation, particularly if it is not consulting the major stakeholder, Elections Canada, and not laying the groundwork. Not hearing back from Elections Canada and getting its expert feedback further erodes Canadians' trust in the government and its intentions.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Nantel (Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate my colleague on his speech. I know that he is very much in touch with the young people and the culture in metropolitan Toronto.

We have our usual suspicions about this government's blatant electioneering. However, beyond that, I would like to ask my colleague if he believes that this bureaucratic process is daunting for young people and out of step with the modern technologies embraced by other countries that want to make it easier to vote. Will this instead discourage a young, mobile Canadian who would like to become engaged in politics?

[English]

Mr. Andrew Cash: Mr. Speaker, my hon. friend raises a very important point, which is whether we want more people to vote in this country. Do we want people engaged in our electoral process? Do we not want to encourage participation and engagement, and facilitate it?

That is what we want, and that is not the intention of the government.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for his speech.

Does he also have concerns about the coming into force of the bill? Clause 20 of Bill C-50 states that the bill will come into force 60 days after it receives royal assent. Elections Canada will only have 60 days to implement the new provisions and make the changes to the register of electors required by the bill.

Does he think that this is a reasonable amount of time for Elections Canada? Should the government at least give Elections Canada the time it needs to make the necessary changes?

[English]

Mr. Andrew Cash: Mr. Speaker, that is an excellent question, highlighting some of the great work that the member for Sherbrooke has been doing in this place since he was elected in 2011. Indeed, it raises serious concerns that the government has not thought this one through, or that it has thought it through and it really does not matter whether or not Elections Canada scrambles.

By answering it this way, I do want to emphasize the great respect that the NDP and I have for the people at Elections Canada. They do phenomenal work, but they need the tools and the time. They need to have an opportunity to provide input when significant changes to their mandate are made.

[Translation]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Before I give the floor to the hon. member for Gatineau, I would like to inform her that I will interrupt her at 2 p.m., when statements by members will begin. There are four minutes left.

The hon. member for Gatineau.

• (1355)

Ms. Françoise Boivin (Gatineau, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we will try to do the best we can in the four minutes left to us to talk about a bill as important as Bill C-50.

To begin, I want to commend the exceptional work done by my colleague from Toronto—Danforth, who, on behalf of all of us in the official opposition, is trying to make sure that democracy continues to be alive and real in this wonderful country.

I am both happy and sad to rise. I am happy to do so on behalf of the people of Gatineau and to have a moment to speak to Bill C-50. At the same time, I am sad to see that Bill C-50 is being described as a response to a decision of the court. Once again, this shows me that this government has a strange way of responding to decisions of the courts. Every time, I am gobsmacked.

Frank et al. v. Attorney General of Canada was decided in the context of section 11, paragraph 11(d) of the Canada Elections Act. It stated that every Canadian citizen who had been absent from Canada for at least five consecutive years could not vote in Canadian federal elections.

In fact, what Justice Penny tells us in Frank is simply that the principle stated in section 3 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees every Canadian the right to vote, without limitation. There is no exception depending on the context; it is an intrinsic right of every Canadian citizen. This is the primary method by which we are able to speak democratically in this country. It is the right to speak in the context of an election. It seems to me that this principle was obvious. The court made the decision that had to be made: that the right to vote cannot be taken away from Canadian citizens. We are talking about Canadian citizens. We are not talking about people who have no ties to Canada. They may not be in Canada, but they are Canadian citizens. What did the government do? It introduced Bill C-50.

As I listened to the debates all morning, I was pleasantly surprised. I would say I was somewhat surprised because people sent me messages on Facebook, including a message from one person in particular. We know that in paragraph 11(d), to which I referred just now, there was in fact an exception relating to the military. The person in question said that all the rules obviously will not apply to our troops—and I am very pleased to know that—but this will not necessarily be the case for the family members of military personnel. That is a double standard.

I have some difficulty with that example and with others as well. What Bill C-50 does is leave us with different kinds of citizens.

Statements by Members

I agree with all my colleagues who have spoken in the House and said that, insofar as we can, we must do everything in our power to make access to the vote as easy as possible—not to encourage ways of hijacking democracy, but to enable the most possible people to express their democratic choice. We might say that this government has a lot of trouble acting that way.

The bill tells us that it is in response to the court's decision, but the decision says that people may not be prohibited from voting. What are the Conservatives doing? They are prohibiting people. I truly have a lot of trouble understanding how this government reads the decisions of the courts. In any event, they have continued to appeal the case.

I know my time on a subject this important has unfortunately already expired. However, I will certainly have an opportunity to speak to this issue at greater length.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The hon. member for Gatineau will have six minutes for her speech and comments when the House resumes debate on this motion.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

[*Translation*]

BLACK HISTORY MONTH

Mrs. Maria Mourani (Ahuntsic, Ind.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to take this opportunity during Black History Month to acknowledge the extraordinary contribution that blacks make to enriching the identity of Canada, Quebec and Montreal.

I was born in the Ivory Coast to Lebanese parents. The symbolic elephant remains dear to me. Being black is not about colour; it is about belonging to an identity defined by great trials and injustices, but mostly by great accomplishments.

This is month is an opportunity to acknowledge the contributions blacks have made to humanity. Nelson Mandela was one of those exceptional people. It is high time the federal government declared a Nelson Mandela day so that future generations remember the remarkable role this man played.

I would also like to acknowledge the blacks of Ahuntsic—Cartierville, including the writer Dany Laferrière, who, a few years ago, agreed to give his grandmother's name to the Internet café at the Ahuntsic cultural centre, the Café de Da.

* * *

• (1400)

[*English*]

CONSTITUENTS OF STORMONT—DUNDAS—SOUTH GLENGARRY

Mr. Guy Lauzon (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to add my voice to those in Cornwall, in Canada, and around the world praising the actions of some of Cornwall's finest. They are constables Kim Norman, Cody Casselman, Michel Riel, Rodney DeGray, Casey MacGregor, James Lemoyre, sergeants Patrick Paquette, Dan Doyon, and George

Knezevic, as well as civilians Jody Sheard, Josee Lalonde, Claire Denis, Jenna Legault, and Tasha Marcotte.

These individuals demonstrated how generous the Cornwall community is by raising money to help an elderly man buy back the wedding ring he had pawned in order to buy groceries for himself and his wife. These compassionate, caring people saw a problem and took it upon themselves to correct it. They truly demonstrated what it means to be a Canadian.

It is constituents like these who make me so proud to serve as the member for Parliament for Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry.

* * *

VARKEY GEMS FOUNDATION GLOBAL TEACHER PRIZE

Ms. Libby Davies (Vancouver East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to pay tribute to a very special teacher in Vancouver East. Vancouver Technical Secondary School teacher Mark Reid is in the running for the \$1 million Varkey GEMS Foundation Global Teacher Prize, given to an exceptional teacher who has made an outstanding contribution to the profession. It is widely referred to as the Nobel prize for teaching.

With nominees from more than a hundred countries, Mr. Reid is in the top 50 and one of only three Canadians being considered for this prestigious award.

The global teacher prize was set up to shine a spotlight on educators and to recognize and celebrate the important role teachers play in our society. It brings to light the dedicated work that teachers do.

To Mark Reid and all teachers whose hard work and caring motivation contributes every day toward nurturing and inspiring the young minds of tomorrow, I know Parliament extends its heartfelt thanks. Keep up the wonderful work.

* * *

REUBEN COHEN AND GILBERT FINN

Mr. Robert Goguen (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise to pay tribute to the lives of Reuben Cohen and Gilbert Finn, two prominent New Brunswickers who have recently passed away and who made great contributions to my riding and to the province of New Brunswick.

Reuben Cohen was a lawyer, financier, and philanthropist, born in Moncton from eastern European immigrants. Throughout his life he supported the University of Moncton, my alma mater, among others, by enabling its gallery to acquire an important collection of Acadian art.

Mr. Cohen also contributed to the expansion of the YMCA of Greater Moncton, and as chancellor of Dalhousie University, he was instrumental in securing funding for the first Canadian chair in black studies.

Statements by Members

[Translation]

Gilbert Finn was a prominent Acadian. He was a champion of health and education. He was one of the primary advocates for the creation of Moncton's Dr. Georges-L.-Dumont University Hospital Centre. He also served as Lieutenant Governor of New Brunswick from 1987 to 1994 and was the former rector of the University of Moncton.

[English]

My thoughts and prayers go out to the friends and families of these two important gentlemen.

* * *

MENTAL HEALTH

Mr. David McGuinty (Ottawa South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am delighted to rise in the House today to recognize an outstanding achievement by my constituent Raphaël Guévin-Nicoloff. He has recently completed a 2,000 km bike ride from Buenos Aires to Tierra del Fuego in memory of his brother Simon, who suffered from depression and tragically took his own life 10 years ago. Through this impressive feat, Raphaël has raised over \$4,000 for the Canadian Mental Health Association.

Twenty per cent of Canadians will personally experience a mental illness in their lifetime. We all know that mental illness indirectly affects all Canadians through a family member, a friend, a neighbour, or a colleague.

I ask the House to join me in applauding Raphaël's incredible determination in the face of such tragedy and encourage all Canadians to work together to continue to raise awareness about mental illness.

[Translation]

Congratulations, Raphaël.

* * *

[English]

CANADIAN FLAG

Mr. Peter Goldring (Edmonton East, CPC): Mr. Speaker, how a nation views itself is a measure of its pride and self-esteem. How a nation is viewed by the world is a reflection of its collective deeds. How a nation projects this image is through its national symbol, a flag.

Our nation is known throughout the world for its deeds in war and peace. Canada's symbol is its flag, which floats supremely over this very House. Our flag is the embodiment of our nation's heart and soul. For 50 years our flag's symbolism has been world renowned of a nation that serves mankind by supporting freedom, justice, and tolerance in the God-given belief that all mankind should share these virtues together in harmony.

Canada's flag is not merely a symbol for our country, but is truly emblematic throughout the world as a symbol of hopefulness, as a symbol of the desire for peace, and as a symbol of our Canadian way.

● (1405)

MILLENNIUM KIDS

Mr. Andrew Cash (Davenport, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is a privilege to rise in this place on behalf of the good people of Davenport in the great city of Toronto to honour a remarkable young woman from my riding. Mercy Justine Hildebrand began advocating for Canada's millennium development goals when she was just eight years old, and with her mother Sara's help, she formed a group called Millennium Kids, made up of children who were all born in the year 2000, the same year that Canada, along with the global community, committed to the UN millennium development goals by 2015.

She is now 14, and yesterday she was in New York participating in the United Nations Economic and Social Council's youth forum on youth engagement in the transition from millennium development goals to sustainable development goals. Mercy Justine is part of a new generation of young people in our country who believe that Canada must play an active part in the global struggle to eradicate poverty, hunger, gender inequality, and preventable disease.

I am very proud to stand here as her member of Parliament to say thanks to Mercy Justine Hildebrand for her passion, her commitment, and most importantly, her leadership.

* * *

AUSCHWITZ

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon (Mississauga East—Cooksville, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I was honoured to be part of the official Canadian delegation to Poland for the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the German Nazi concentration and extermination camp.

More than a million people were murdered there between 1940 and 1945. At the commemoration, we listened to the testimony of three survivors: Halina Birenbaum, who grew up in the Warsaw ghetto and was imprisoned at Auschwitz; Kazimierz Albin, one of the first prisoners at Auschwitz at age 18, who would later escape and join the resistance; and Roman Kent, who issued a strong plea to world leaders that I would like to relay back to the House. He said, "We survivors do not want our past to be our children's future." I would ask my fellow parliamentarians to remember Mr. Kent's words.

We must all work together to protect innocent people here and around the world. We should never sit on the sidelines when we face evil, oppression, hatred, or injustice.

* * *

GOVERNMENT OF CANADA

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this week marks the ninth anniversary of our Conservative government, during which time we have provided real results to Canadians.

We have cut taxes more than 160 times, reducing the federal tax burden to its lowest level in 50 years and saving the average family \$3,400; supported families with children, including the universal child care benefit, the child tax credit, and the children's fitness tax credit; provided \$2.8 billion for seniors and pensioners in annual tax relief, and \$5.8 billion this year for B.C. health care and social services. We have concluded free trade agreements with 38 countries; invested in public infrastructure and transportation; and passed tough-on-crime reforms, cracking down on gun and gang crime and violent and repeat offenders.

Our Conservative government is making positive changes that are improving the lives of my constituents, British Columbians, and all Canadians.

* * *

POVERTY

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims (Newton—North Delta, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today Dignity for All released its national anti-poverty plan for Canada.

As members may well know, poverty affects one in seven Canadians. I repeat, one in seven. In a prosperous country like ours, the government must take action to address this startling number. Too many people are facing income insecurity. Too many people are working full-time jobs and are still not able to make ends meet. No one should be forced to play eney meeny miney mo between bills and medications.

What we need to help individuals and families grow and thrive are more full-time, well-paying jobs, a strong public health care system, an enhanced federal minimum wage, and a national early childhood education program. We need an economy that works for all Canadians. Solving poverty requires a commitment to human dignity and justice.

From the bottom of my heart, I wish to thank all those who participated in assembling the national anti-poverty plan released this morning.

* * *

•(1410)

[*Translation*]

25TH SUICIDE PREVENTION WEEK IN QUEBEC

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lotbinière—Chutes-de-la-Chaudière, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this week is Quebec's 25th suicide prevention week. This year's theme is "You're important to us. Suicide is not an option."

This issue is particularly close to my heart as a father and parliamentarian, since it can affect people of all ages, including our young people.

Many factors may cause a person in distress to think that there are no solutions to their problems.

I encourage all my constituents and all Quebecers to join the movement and tell their loved ones, "You're important to us. Suicide is not an option."

Statements by Members

It is important that people talk about their problems and not keep them to themselves. That is why members of the Association québécoise de prévention du suicide have been listening since 1986. Bravo and thank you to all the people working in our regions.

If you are in Quebec and are worried about a loved one, do not hesitate. Ask for help by calling 1-866-277-3553.

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ANTIQUÉ SNOWMOBILE FESTIVAL

Ms. Éloïse Michaud (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to take a moment to tell people about the 20th edition of the Neige en fête festival, which will take place from February 12 to 15 in Saint-Raymond, which is in my riding, Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier.

The Neige en fête festival is Quebec's largest annual gathering of snowcats and snowmobiles. Every year, hundreds of fans from across the country and even the United States gather in Saint-Raymond to give people a chance to see these distinctly Canadian antique vehicles.

For years, snowcats and snowmobiles were the primary means of transportation during our harsh winters, and they remain an important part of our heritage.

Nowadays, snowmobiles still hold a special place in the hearts of Quebecers. They are also an economic driver for quite a few regions, including Portneuf.

I would like to thank and congratulate Denys Tremblay, chair of the organizing committee, his team and the volunteers who make this festival such a success year after year.

I invite everyone, including all of my colleagues, to come to the Neige en fête festival in Saint-Raymond to admire these beauties from another era that bear witness to our past and the genius of our home-grown innovators.

* * *

[*English*]

PUBLIC SAFETY

Mr. Earl Dreeshen (Red Deer, CPC): Mr. Speaker, last week the Liberal member for York West said that if ISIL attacks Canada, it is because our Prime Minister put us in that position. I think I speak for everyone on this side of the House when I say that these comments are shameful.

Jihadist terrorism is not a future possibility; it is a present reality. Violent jihadists oppose everything about our society and our values. They hate pluralism, tolerance, and the freedom of others.

The Liberal leader refused to condemn his colleague's comments, which is yet another sign that he is simply not in a position to lead a country.

Jihadi terrorists aim to destroy the kind of open, diverse, and free society that Canadians have chosen. We as Canadians will not let that happen, which is why we have joined our allies in combatting the threat of terrorism, both at home and abroad.

Statements by Members

[Translation]

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent—Cartierville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, one of the main challenges of the 21st century is switching from self-destructive development to real sustainable development that brings human beings into harmony with the earth.

Every country and every community must wage this global battle.
[English]

This is why I rise today as the member for Saint-Laurent—Cartierville to applaud the borough of Saint-Laurent, proud winner of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities' Sustainable Community Award.

[Translation]

With this award, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities is recognizing Saint-Laurent's efforts in support of public transit and the construction of LEED-certified buildings.

[English]

This award speaks to Saint-Laurent's outstanding achievements in urban development and bodes well for a promising future.

I thank the Federation of Canadian Municipalities for its recognition of Saint-Laurent's ambitious vision for its residents and look forward to continue working with the people of Saint-Laurent to make the borough an even greener and better place to live in.

[Translation]

Congratulations, Saint-Laurent.

* * *

● (1415)

[English]

TAXATION

Mr. Rob Clarke (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, CPC): Mr. Speaker, thanks to our government, Canadian families can be assured that their hard-earned money is making it way back to their bank accounts. Our plan is simple, and we stand by it. We trust parents to invest in their children and spend their money as they see fit.

Soon families in my riding of Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River will receive almost \$2,000 annually per child under the age of 6 and \$720 per year for youth age 6 to 17.

The NDP and the Liberals, on the other hand, want to take this money away and spend it on big government bureaucracy instead. They would take this money away from families and hike taxes.

Despite the opposition and third party Liberals, who have positioned themselves against middle-class families, I am proud that our government is giving money back to each and every family with children in Canada.

[Translation]

THE ECONOMY

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, not so long ago, the Conservatives were constantly claiming that the economy was their top priority.

For some time, the development of the oil economy concealed their incompetence and their inability to diversify our economy. However, now that the price of oil has plummeted, we can see that the emperor has no clothes.

They would like us to forget that there are 200,000 more people out of work than before the recession. They would like us to forget that 400,000 good jobs have been lost in the manufacturing sector in the past 10 years. I have news for the Conservatives: families are not fools. They know who is responsible for the current economic mess.

There is hope, however. Families also know that they can count on Tom Mulcair's NDP, which has concrete solutions to help people make ends meet, including public daycare, increasing the minimum wage and implementing a plan to create jobs in SMEs.

We in the NDP have a dynamic team and a strong leader, a man of principle and experience who is capable of replacing the Conservative government this year.

[English]

The Speaker: I would just remind the hon. member that we refer to each other by titles or ridings, but not by proper names.

* * *

AL WILSON

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise to pay tribute to one of Canada's great veterans in Flamborough, a community within the riding I represent.

His name is Al Wilson. In World War II, Al was a member of Canada's legendary elite special forces unit, the Devil's Brigade, which conducted covert missions behind enemy lines.

Al would be in Washington today with his family and some fellow soldiers receiving the U.S. Congressional Gold Medal, the highest civilian award bestowed by the U.S. Congress, for his service in the Devil's Brigade. However, just yesterday morning Al passed away at the age of 90. Though he was a humble man, the legacy of his life and the missions he and the Devil's Brigade members carried out during World War II to secure the peace and freedom we enjoy today will never be forgotten.

Our hearts go out to Madge, Al's wife of 69 years, and his family. Lest we forget.

*Oral Questions***ORAL QUESTIONS**

[Translation]

EMPLOYMENT

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, retail sales are a good indicator of economic vitality. Since the beginning of the year, the number of closures and job losses keeps growing. The closure of Target alone represents the loss of 17,000 jobs in 133 communities across Canada. The job market is in crisis. Where is the Prime Minister's plan? Where is the budget?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, over the past few months I announced a number of economic initiatives with our economic action plan to cut taxes to ensure that jobs are created. We will carry on despite the uncertainties of the global economy.

Now is not the time for NDP policies, policies that the Canadian Federation of Independent Business said were stupid and anti-small business.

[English]

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, why not quote Dan Kelly, the head of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business? He said, "Good on [the NDP leader] for proposing a cut in the small [business corporate] tax rate." That is a quote from last week. I do not know who the Prime Minister speaks to at the CFIB, but Dan Kelly speaks for the CFIB.

What we are seeing is a loss of jobs that reflects the failure of the current government to protect the middle class. All those job losses, tens of thousands in the retail sector, are a representation of its failures. The Conservatives only have a plan to help the richest 15%. What about the middle class? What about the other 85%?

• (1420)

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, speaking of Mr. Kelly, he complimented the fact that the government has already cut small business taxes, something the NDP actually opposed. It is not surprising Mr. Kelly would compliment the NDP when it actually embraces Conservative policy after the fact, but what he did say about the NDP's unique policies is that they were stupid, dumb, and anti-small business.

We are cutting taxes for 100% of Canadian families, and the New Democrats would raise taxes for 100% of Canadian families.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order, please. The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, this is from Dan Kelly of the CFIB, who said, "Good on [the NDP leader] for proposing a cut in the small [business corporate] tax rate", because the Conservatives have never done it.

Last Friday, I was in the Legion hall in Sudbury, and a woman there said to me that she always thought that in her lifetime things would get better, but actually things are getting worse, and that is borne out by the statistics. Under the current government, the middle class is doing less well than it used to, precisely because of the Conservatives' wrong-headed policies. Instead of helping the rich, they should help the middle class.

Where is the plan? Where is the budget?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this government reduced the small business tax rate, and the NDP voted against it. This government made more businesses eligible for the small business tax rate, and the NDP voted against it. That is why the CFIB called the leader of the NDP's policies dumb and anti-small business.

The reality is this. We have, notwithstanding the challenges of the world around us, created 1.2 million net new jobs. Even *The New York Times* says we have the most prosperous middle class in the world. Everybody knows that all the NDP wants to do with the economic crisis is use it as an excuse to raise taxes on the middle class.

[Translation]

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, what the Prime Minister has failed to mention is that the jobs he is boasting about are part-time, precarious and temporary jobs. Good jobs, the 400,000 good jobs in the manufacturing sector that were lost by putting all of our eggs into the resource extraction basket, will never return because the Conservatives do not have a plan. If they believe in good jobs for the middle class, when will we see a budget?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we have been very clear. We have created 1.2 million jobs since the worst recession hit the Canadian economy. The vast majority are full-time, well-paid, private sector jobs. The statistics are very clear on that.

We stand for tax cuts and job creation, and we oppose the NDP's plan to raise taxes and kill Canadians' jobs.

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[English]

TAXATION

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we put forward a concrete plan to help the manufacturing sector, especially with an innovation tax credit. The Prime Minister stands there with his arms folded doing nothing. While the NDP proposed tax cuts to help small businesses create jobs—and small businesses create 80% of the jobs in Canada—he gave \$50 billion to large corporations for no reason whatsoever. It produced nothing except a windfall for those corporations, which are sitting on dead money. The Conservatives are taking Canada in the wrong direction.

What Canadians want to know is this: when is there going to be help for the middle class? When are we going to see a budget?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, let me just talk about some of the recent things that I have announced, such as the new programs for small business financing and expansion of those programs. That was something this party supported and something the NDP voted against.

Oral Questions

I announced record new investments in federal infrastructure to aid federal infrastructure investment over the long term. The NDP was opposed to that.

We introduced new measures for apprentices to make sure apprentices are trained for the jobs that are available. The NDP voted against that.

All the NDP members do is sit there with their arms crossed, demanding high debt and high-tax policies. We are never going to embrace those.

• (1425)

Mr. Justin Trudeau (Papineau, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, last week we learned that our economy began to shrink in November, back when oil prices were at \$75 a barrel. The Bank of Canada recently said that middle-class families in western Canada face falling house prices and job losses.

Why is the government giving a \$2 billion tax break to those who do not need it, the wealthy, and nothing to those who actually do need it?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, what this government is doing is bringing in tax reductions and benefits for every single Canadian family, including the expansion of the universal child care benefit so that we not only raise the amount of money we give for those with children under six but also give benefits all the way up to the age of 17. There is the expansion of the children's fitness tax credit, giving more deductions for expense costs that families incur, and, of course, the family tax cut to ensure that single-income families are treated fairly under the tax system.

We know the Liberal Party wants to raise those taxes on 100% of those Canadian families. We are going to cut taxes for Canadian families.

[Translation]

Mr. Justin Trudeau (Papineau, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the government has cut the infrastructure budget by 90% when the middle class needs investments and better jobs.

The Prime Minister insists on giving tax breaks to the most wealthy. That is the wrong priority. The infrastructure investments that the provinces have called for will help all Canadians. However, the Prime Minister wants to help only the wealthiest 15%.

Why?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our priorities are cutting taxes and increasing the universal child care benefit for all Canadian families.

I know very well that the Liberal Party has been opposed to these policies for a long time. It wants to raise the taxes paid by Canadian families. That is quite the opposite of our policies.

* * *

[English]

PUBLIC SAFETY

Mr. Justin Trudeau (Papineau, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in the years following 9/11, the current Minister of Justice said that parliamen-

tarians could provide a credible and independent check and balance to oversee our national security agencies and the power of the state.

Why has the government left parliamentary oversight out of its current anti-terror bill?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we already have a rigorous system of oversight on our national security and police agencies. Specifically on intelligence, we have the Security Intelligence Review Committee, which is a robust mechanism for independent, expert, third party oversight. It functions very well. We are proud of the work it is doing.

What we have to tackle now is making sure our police and security agencies have the power necessary to tackle terrorism and violent jihadism, and that is what we are doing.

[Translation]

Ms. Rosane Doré Lefebvre (Alfred-Pellan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the new security bill does nothing to solve the problem of resources.

At this time, CSIS cannot even monitor all the people who have been identified as potential threats. Agents are already swamped just with high-risk travellers.

How does the minister expect those new powers to be useful when the agency cannot even fulfill its current duties?

Hon. Steven Blaney (Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we have increased the Canadian Security Intelligence Service and Royal Canadian Mounted Police budgets seven times in the House. All seven times, the opposition parties voted against those increases.

Today, because we increased the Canadian Security Intelligence Service budget by nearly a third, it can invest over \$200 million in protecting Canadians. CSIS needs tools, and again yesterday, the New Democrats voted against that.

Ms. Rosane Doré Lefebvre (Alfred-Pellan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, clearly, we cannot increase CSIS's powers without increasing civilian oversight at the same time.

Instead of increasing oversight of our intelligence agency, the Conservatives are doing the opposite and reducing it by eliminating the Office of the Inspector General of CSIS.

Why are they refusing to increase civilian oversight now, when it is more crucial than ever?

• (1430)

Hon. Steven Blaney (Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canada is under attack. We are at war against the terrorists and against jihadism. To help wage that war, we have the Canadian Security Intelligence Service. We believe that liberty and security go hand in hand.

Oral Questions

In Canada, we have a unique, reputable, independent Canadian model consisting of experts who oversee our security agencies. I have full confidence in them, as do the Canadian people.

[English]

Mr. Murray Rankin (Victoria, NDP): Mr. Speaker, way back in 2005, even the Minister of Justice thought that more oversight of CSIS was a good idea. He said:

...it would also cause a little bit more diligence on the part of the security agents themselves, just knowing that this oversight body was in place.

Oversight helps prevent abuses. It makes sense, but instead of making good on these words, the Conservatives have actually cut CSIS oversight.

It is a simple question. Does the Minister of Justice still believe that more oversight would help prevent these abuses?

Hon. Steven Blaney (Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the international jihadist movement has declared war on Canada, and we believe that third-party, non-partisan, independent, expert oversight of our national security agency is a much better model than political intervention in the process. Also, key powers of the new legislation are subject to judicial review and judicial authorization.

It is much more than the empty talk of the NDP, which opposed measures against terrorism yesterday.

Mr. Murray Rankin (Victoria, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I guess accountability sounded just fine to the Conservatives until they had to start actually being accountable.

One thing is very clear. Much more needs to be done to stop radicalization on the ground in Canadian communities. Canadians all across the country, in community centres, and yes, in mosques, are doing this work already and are trying to get the federal government to help. These groups are our best allies in ensuring that hatred and violence are rejected in Canada.

Why have the Conservatives failed to reach out and support them?

Hon. Steven Blaney (Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it looks like it is a wake-up call for the NDP. More than a year ago, the government introduced the Combating Terrorism Act with our counterterrorism strategy, which has four pillars. The first pillar is prevention.

What did the NDP do? It opposed all the measures we put forward to fight terrorism.

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FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Mr. Speaker, as of today, Mohamed Fahmy, the award-winning Canadian journalist, has spent 402 days detained by Egyptian authorities. He was imprisoned because he was doing his job as a journalist.

His friend and Australian colleague, Peter Grete, was released over the weekend. Can the Minister of Foreign Affairs please inform the House as to the status of the release of Mr. Fahmy?

Mr. David Anderson (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, both the former Minister of

Foreign Affairs and the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and Consular have raised this issue of Mr. Fahmy's case with their counterparts, and I can tell the House that this has been raised at all levels of our government. We welcome positive developments and remain hopeful that Mr. Fahmy's case will be resolved shortly.

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Foreign Affairs. First, I would like to thank him for taking on this role, and I look forward to working with him.

While the conflict between Ukraine and Russia escalates, key members of Russia's business and political elite are still not on Canada's sanctions list, despite the fact that our allies do list them.

I have a simple question for the minister. Why are Igor Sechin, Sergey Chemezov, and Vladimir Yakunin not on Canada's sanctions list, when they are on the sanctions list of both the United States and the U.K.? Why are they not on our list?

Mr. David Anderson (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canada has one of the strongest sanctions regimes in the world, which has been coordinated with our allies to target key individuals and entities and to isolate Russia politically and economically.

Russia's ongoing campaign of aggression against Ukraine is disgraceful. It continues to show a shocking willingness to sacrifice civilian lives to achieve its illegitimate goals. We call on Russia to immediately respect a ceasefire, to immediately end its support of these proxies, and to allow peace to return to eastern Ukraine.

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the fact remains that Canada's sanctions simply do not match up with our allies'. These three friends of Putin are being protected by the current government. It is strange.

Unfortunately, Canada is also offside with every single one of our allies when it comes to the Arms Trade Treaty. One hundred and thirty countries have signed the treaty. Every single member of NATO, Israel, and Ukraine have all signed the treaty, but not Canada.

Why are the Conservatives keeping company with countries like North Korea, Syria, and Iran when it comes to opposing the Arms Trade Treaty? Why are they keeping company with them?

• (1435)

Mr. David Anderson (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, signing the Arms Trade Treaty would not improve on how Canada assesses exports of military items. We already have one of the strongest export control systems in the world. The ATT actually brings other countries up to the standards we already have.

Oral Questions

There are some concerns about how the treaty affects lawful and responsible firearms owners. As such, we continue to consult various stakeholders and experts on their views.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it would seem that the entire world, except for Canada, recognizes the need to stop weapons from falling into the hands of those who commit war crimes, violate human rights and participate in organized crime.

When will we finally sign the arms trade treaty?

[*English*]

Mr. David Anderson (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I said, Canada has some of the strongest export controls in the world. They include the Export and Import Permits Act and the Automatic Firearms Country Control List.

In addition, we rigorously assess all exports of military goods and technology on a case-by-case basis. We believe that the ATT actually brings other countries up to our standards. We will continue to maintain some of the highest standards in the world on these issues.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Canada could do so much more to send a clear message to Russia. The government claims that it wants to coordinate its efforts with those of the United States, but it is not really doing so, not entirely.

Certain oil barons who have business dealings with Canada have magically disappeared from our sanction list.

What is the point of Canadian sanctions if we spare the people and companies that could really make a difference?

[*English*]

Mr. David Anderson (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I already addressed the issue of the sanctions, but I can tell members that Canada has been a leader. Everyone knows that. We have been a leader in the global response to Russian aggression in Ukraine, and we have been one of Ukraine's strongest supporters.

I can go through a whole list of things we have done. We have provided over \$515 million in assistance to Ukraine just in the last year. We have placed sanctions against more than 210 individuals and entities. That is more than our U.S. and EU allies. We have confirmed Ukraine as a development country of focus and as a profile country under our global markets action plan. We have contributed hundreds of observers to help monitor democratic Ukrainian elections. We have provided funds and technical advisers to them. We will continue to work with Ukraine.

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INFRASTRUCTURE

Mr. Adam Vaughan (Trinity—Spadina, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the current government has spent \$29 million on billboards to advertise new infrastructure spending. One cannot sleep under a billboard. One cannot get drinking water from a billboard. One cannot ride a

billboard to get to work, and they make really bad bridges if one is trying to cross a river.

To put this in perspective, \$29 million on billboards is more money than the current government is spending on infrastructure, new infrastructure, in Prince Edward Island, one whole province. This is ridiculous. It is unsustainable. Instead of building a strong Canada, the current government buys billboards.

When will the minister cut this advertising budget and spend the money on cities and towns across Canada and build a better Canada for us all?

Hon. Denis Lebel (Minister of Infrastructure, Communities and Intergovernmental Affairs and Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government has introduced the largest and longest infrastructure plan in Canadian history, with \$75 billion.

This Prime Minister recently announced new investments in funding to deal with federal infrastructure. We encourage provinces to do the same with respect to their infrastructure. We will respect our partners' competence and jurisdiction.

* * *

STATISTICS CANADA

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent—Cartierville, Lib.): Except that 75% of this money is postponed until after 2019, Mr. Speaker.

[*Translation*]

By abolishing the mandatory long form census, the Conservatives compromised the reliability of our official statistics to the point where it is having a negative impact on the economy and good governance. The Institut de la statistique du Québec confirmed that the number of disadvantaged families has been underestimated and that income has been estimated incorrectly. The institute has said that things are such a mess that decisions are being made blindly.

Why are the Conservatives attacking Statistics Canada? Why did they do something so ideological, out-of-touch, harmful and—to use a word that the Prime Minister used today—stupid?

● (1440)

Hon. James Moore (Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that is not at all the case. As we did in 2011, we will collect quality statistics in 2016 that our government, the governments of every region of the country, the private sector and our researchers can use to glean useful information about the entire country.

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CHAMPLAIN BRIDGE

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent—Cartierville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I get the impression that the minister does not even believe himself.

That being said, will the Prime Minister refute the preposterous rumour that he is opposed to the Caisse de dépôt et placement du Québec partnering with the consortium that was asked to submit a bid for the rehabilitation of the Champlain Bridge, even though the Government of Quebec wants the Caisse de dépôt et placement du Québec to be a major partner?

Does the Prime Minister view the Caisse as a pariah, or does he think that the Conservatives' toll scheme will render the contribution of one of Quebec's flagship institutions irrelevant? Is the Prime Minister really that out of touch?

Hon. Denis Lebel (Minister of Infrastructure, Communities and Intergovernmental Affairs and Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are proud of our progress on the new bridge over the St. Lawrence, the new Champlain Bridge.

The process has been open and transparent from the beginning. Six consortiums submitted bids to a fully independent selection committee that then selected three consortiums. All partners—be they financial, from the construction sector or from architectural firms—were invited to be part of one of the consortiums.

We have been very thorough about this, and we will deliver a bridge. We waited long enough for the Liberals to do something. We will get the job done.

* * *

[English]

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Mr. John Rafferty (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the new Minister of Veterans Affairs has an interesting idea of transparency. It seems to involve posting blurry photos of anticipated reports on Twitter. I do not know any World War II veterans who use Twitter or any veterans who like staring at a computer screen to try to make out tiny text.

Perhaps the minister could be transparent and tell us how he is progressing in re-opening the closed Veterans Affairs offices, like the one in Thunder Bay, and if the Conservatives will be stopping their \$700,000 lawsuit against veterans.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member is criticizing the minister for having direct contact with veterans, exactly what we want the minister to do. The committee also asked the minister to report to it on January 30, which is exactly what he did.

The member asked what kind of progress we have made. I have examples here. One of the recommendations of the committee was to increase research on mental health, and last November, our government announced new funding to support further research on mental health for veterans.

There was another recommendation to extend psychological counselling to the families of veterans in December. We have extended the number of psychological counselling sessions available to family members of veterans.

[Translation]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine (Châteauguay—Saint-Constant, NDP): Mr. Speaker, our veterans deserve better. They deserve more than an

Oral Questions

infographic off-handedly posted on Twitter as the minister's response to the recommendations of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

Our veterans expect real measures, but once again, they have been let down. New minister, same old disappointments.

When will the minister make real commitments that will finally help veterans in need?

[English]

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Talking about concrete measures, Mr. Speaker, let us talk about the nine new offices this government is opening under the leadership of the Prime Minister and the Minister of Veterans Affairs. We are talking about nine clinics that will be focused on mental health. For example, there will be one in Halifax, St. John's, Chicoutimi, Pembroke, Brockville, Kelowna, Victoria, and Montreal, and just last Friday, the minister was in Hamilton announcing a new clinic in Hamilton.

These are real results delivered to our veterans to support them on mental health issues.

* * *

[Translation]

STATISTICS CANADA

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP): Mr. Speaker, another bad Conservative decision was the elimination of the long form census, a decision that has hurt municipalities and provinces, which lack data for development planning.

As Statistics Canada prepares its next census, now is the time for the Conservatives to admit that they were wrong and to restore the long form census.

Will they do so?

Hon. James Moore (Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in 2016, as was the case in 2011, Statistics Canada will have the money and forms it needs to get access to reliable, important information so that the Government of Canada, as well as all the other governments across Canada, can do their job.

● (1445)

[English]

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP): Talk about quality information, Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives' decision to cancel the mandatory long form census was cynical and irresponsible and they are refusing to bring it back out of sheer stubbornness. Policy-makers, business leaders, city planners, and health officials are all warning that they do not have the detailed census data they need to do their jobs. They need the facts.

What could the minister possibly have against evidence-based policy?

Oral Questions

Hon. James Moore (Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the census in 2016 will yield quality data for the Government of Canada, for all levels of government, for the private sector, and for researchers to make sure that they do have quality data from across this country for planning, for city planning, and Government of Canada planning moving forward.

We received quality data out of the last census. We will have quality data out of the coming census. If my hon. colleague has any doubts about that, I certainly invite her to invite Wayne Smith, the CEO of Stats Canada, to come to the industry committee to spell out to her yet again why Stats Canada has the money and the process necessary to do a quality census for all Canadians.

* * *

JUSTICE

Mrs. Joy Smith (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the activities around prostitution are illegal because they are harmful to vulnerable individuals and all of society.

On December 6, our government's response to the Bedford decision, the Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act, came into force. Could the Minister of Justice update the House on the impact it is having on prostitution in Canada?

Hon. Peter MacKay (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for Kildonan—St. Paul, who is a true champion for women.

This law is having a direct impact on prostitution in Canada. Hamilton police recently rescued a missing 15-year-old girl from exploitation as a prostitute. Her pimp was charged twice under this new law. Durham region's human trafficking unit rescued a 16-year-old and her pimp is now facing charges as well, charges that were not previously available. We are proud of this impact of the new law.

I congratulate our law enforcement members everywhere, who are working hard each and every day to keep our communities and streets safe.

* * *

SENIORS

Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Speaker, according to a recent report from Laval University, the Conservatives' decision to make seniors wait two more years for OAS will significantly increase poverty. The poverty rate among Canadians aged 65 and 66 will go from 6% to 17%. As Canadians, we cannot allow this travesty. Our seniors deserve to live in dignity instead of struggling to survive.

Why are the Conservatives cynically allowing poverty to increase among seniors?

Hon. Alice Wong (Minister of State (Seniors), CPC): Mr. Speaker, when it comes to seniors' poverty, our government has a record we can be proud of. Canada has one of the lowest seniors' poverty rates in the world thanks in part to our actions, which include removing thousands of seniors from the tax rolls completely, making significant investment in affordable housing for low-income seniors, and introducing the largest GIS increase in a quarter century.

We will not impose a carbon tax on seniors like the NDP or remove pension income splitting, as the Liberals have committed to doing.

Canadians know they can count on our government to deliver for seniors.

[Translation]

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé (Saint-Lambert, NDP): Mr. Speaker, by changing the retirement age from 65 to 67, the Conservatives will double the number of low-income individuals. A number of organizations, such as the Canadian Medical Association and the Canadian Nurses Association, have joined the NDP in calling for the creation of a Canadian strategy to improve the health and economic situation of our seniors.

Will the Conservatives support our seniors instead of making them even more vulnerable?

[English]

Hon. Alice Wong (Minister of State (Seniors), CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canada's low-income rate for seniors has fallen from 29% in 1976 to 5.2% in 2011, the most recent year for which data is available. This is one of the lowest rates in the industrialized world.

I just mentioned the list of things that we have done for seniors. We are proud of the contributions our government has made for seniors. We are going to continue to stand up for the priorities that matter to them.

* * *

[Translation]

INFRASTRUCTURE

Mr. Hoang Mai (Brossard—La Prairie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, apparently the Prime Minister was categorically against the Caisse de dépôt et placement du Québec being involved in the Champlain Bridge replacement. According to *Le Devoir*, the Prime Minister cited the Charbonneau commission and the Government of Quebec's allegiance when he refused to do business with the organization that manages Quebecers' nest eggs, which, by the way, is involved in a number of similar projects around the world.

My question is simple: can the minister tell us whether there is any truth to what is being reported?

● (1450)

Hon. Denis Lebel (Minister of Infrastructure, Communities and Intergovernmental Affairs and Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the preamble to the question is entirely false.

I had the pleasure of being at that meeting. The Caisse de dépôt et placement du Québec, like any other organization, could be part of a consortium that applied to build the bridge. That is what we hoped for.

Oral Questions

We are currently reviewing the results of many months of tireless work. There were initially six consortia; three have been selected. Any organization or bank could be part of a consortium. That was the choice of these organizations.

Mr. Hoang Mai (Brossard—La Prairie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the truth is that things are off to a bad start for the Champlain Bridge replacement.

In addition to wanting to change the name and impose a toll that everyone criticizes, the Conservatives are double-crossing Quebecers by excluding the Caisse de dépôt et placement du Québec.

Do the Prime Minister's backroom manoeuvres against Quebecers' interests not prove that the Conservatives' open and transparent bidding process is basically a sham?

Hon. Denis Lebel (Minister of Infrastructure, Communities and Intergovernmental Affairs and Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, what has been clear from the start is that this party and this member are misinformed.

I already said that what he just restated in a question was false. It did not happen like that.

We will deliver a bridge on schedule. On October 5, 2011, we announced that a toll bridge with public transit would be built through a public-private partnership. We are doing what we said we would do all along.

* * *

[English]

POVERTY

Ms. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Canada continues to struggle with helping its most vulnerable citizens.

The Dignity for All campaign estimates that there are 4.8 million Canadians who cannot make ends meet and 250,000 homeless Canadians while shelters are bursting at the seams. Instead of tackling poverty, the government is spending \$2 billion every year on income splitting so that the wealthiest can get thousands in tax breaks.

Will the Conservatives abandon their reckless income-splitting plan and instead invest in fighting poverty?

Hon. Candice Bergen (Minister of State (Social Development), CPC): Mr. Speaker, our plan not only to decrease taxes but also to increase benefits for all Canadians will help, proportionately, middle to lower income Canadians the most.

What our plan will do is to put money directly into the pockets of the people who need it the most. We know that the Liberals would create a huge bureaucracy and increase taxes on Canadians, on 100% of all Canadian families.

We are not going to do that. We believe that families are best served when they have money in their pockets. In fact, the president of UNICEF said that it is our universal child care benefit that has directly helped reduce poverty for children in Canada.

We will keep doing that. We will not follow their plan.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (St. Paul's, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today, Dignity for All highlighted the shocking extent of hunger in Canada, especially amongst aboriginal peoples and northerners. Food bank usage is up 25% since 2008, and 70% of people in Nunavut are struggling to feed themselves. Canadians were horrified that the government's response to northerners scavenging for food at the dump was to deny the problem instead of fixing it.

Why is the government spending \$2 billion a year on income splitting for our wealthiest families instead of dealing with urgent issues like hunger?

Hon. Bernard Valcourt (Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I have said many times, since nutrition north was put in place we have seen the benefits. We have seen northerners benefit from the program. As a matter of fact, the transportation of nutritious perishable food has gone up by 25%. The cost to a family of four has gone down by \$110 a month. That is significant.

In addition, we have already indicated to the House, to all members, and northerners that we have accepted the recommendations of the Auditor General. In the next few weeks and months, we are going to keep consulting with northerners to improve the program.

* * *

[Translation]

RAIL TRANSPORTATION

Ms. Ève Pécelet (La Pointe-de-l'Île, NDP): Mr. Speaker, all the reports and experts are saying the same thing: the Conservative government needs to do more to prevent another rail disaster.

La Pointe-de-l'Île is a hub for the transport of dangerous goods, and my constituents are not at all reassured, given how the government is dragging its feet.

Can the minister assure us that Transport Canada has enough inspectors to enforce compliance by the rail companies that go through La Pointe-de-l'Île?

[English]

Hon. Lisa Raitt (Minister of Transport, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the safety and security of Canadians is Transport Canada's top priority.

That is why it has been taking strong action with respect to these matters. In particular, it has hired more inspectors. If members take a look at websites in Canada, they will see that there are many positions out there that the department is seeking to fill right now. We encourage people who are interested in that line of work to indeed take it up.

That being said, our government has invested heavily as well, investing some \$100 million in rail safety. We take this commitment very seriously and will continue to work on the matter.

Oral Questions

●(1455)

[Translation]

NATIONAL DEFENCE

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault (Sherbrooke, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives have abandoned not only our veterans, but also our military heritage. Two armouries in Sherbrooke are in a very sorry state. The health and safety of the staff who work there are even at risk. The problem has been known for too long, while the Department of National Defence has been dragging its feet.

Is the government going to do something about this, or is it going to continue putting our soldiers and the staff at those two armouries at risk?

Mr. Bernard Trottier (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Works and Government Services, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the government is proud to contribute to the rehabilitation of armouries, including the armouries in Sherbrooke. We are conducting an assessment of the site and we will keep the House of Commons informed of the continuing progress.

[English]

Mr. Blake Richards (Wild Rose, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today the world is reacting with shock and outrage to a new video released by ISIL. This video is further proof that these jihadi terrorists have declared war on our values and our way of life. Can the Minister of National Defence please speak to this matter?

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the video released by ISIL is horrific and barbaric. The international jihadi movement has declared war on Canada and our allies. Left unchecked, these ISIL terrorists are a threat not just to the region but to Canadians as well. This is why Canada is joining our allies in the international campaign against ISIL terrorists. We will never back down or shirk our responsibilities when it comes to protecting Canada and Canadians.

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INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Hon. Mark Eyking (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, dairy farmers produce some of the highest quality milk as the basis for many of the great products we enjoy. The supply management system has kept this industry stable for farmers and consumers. Is the Minister of International Trade planning on scrapping any part of the supply management system in the trans-Pacific partnership agreement?

Hon. Ed Fast (Minister of International Trade, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I can assure the member that we have made a very clear commitment to support Canada's supply management system. At the same time, consultations are ongoing about the compensation that will be paid under CETA. This is an agreement that will drive economic prosperity in Canada for many years to come. That is why we have had support all across the country, from every sector of our economy, for this agreement, which will drive economic growth and create jobs for many years to come.

CANADA POST

Mr. Robert Chisholm (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives gutted Canada Post, refused to consult Canadians about it, and are now hiding details about the bungled plan. With more than 300,000 new boxes being purchased in the U. S., and huge cuts being downloaded to municipalities, Canada Post is refusing to say how much this will cost.

With five million households losing service and 8,000 good jobs on the line, Canadians deserve to know: Will the minister hold Canada Post accountable and give Canadians the facts?

Hon. Lisa Raitt (Minister of Transport, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as the hon. member knows, the following are the facts. There are fewer pieces of mail being delivered now than in 2013. Indeed, 1.2 billion fewer letters are being delivered. Canada Post has a responsibility to make sure that it is self-sustaining. As such, it developed a five-point plan. It is executing that five-point plan to ensure that it will continue to give good value for taxpayer dollars.

* * *

SEALING INDUSTRY

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill Gordon (Miramichi, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today is Seal Day on the Hill, a day to recognize and help raise awareness of Canada's ethical and humane seal hunt.

Can the Minister of Environment update the House on what the government is doing to stand up for sealers and the traditional values of northerners?

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq (Minister of the Environment, Minister of the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency and Minister for the Arctic Council, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today is a day to celebrate the way of life of northerners. This includes defending the seal hunt, which is at the very heart of the economic well-being of our communities.

Our government has been working with the European Union to negotiate access for Canadian indigenous seal products to the EU markets since the WTO decision of last year.

The seal hunt not only provides a livelihood for our families but also enables Inuit to maintain their traditional way of life.

Our government will continue to stand up for northerners and all Canadians to support this important industry in Canada and abroad.

Government Orders

● (1500)

THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr. Bruce Hyer (Thunder Bay—Superior North, GP): Mr. Speaker, we know that we need to price carbon, but we have two parties with no plan to price carbon and one party with a flawed and ineffective plan. Citizens' Climate Lobby has an excellent plan to reduce both carbon and poverty. Will the government consider the carbon pricing system that is not a tax and will put money into pockets of Canadian families, the carbon fee and dividend?

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq (Minister of the Environment, Minister of the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency and Minister for the Arctic Council, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government's record is clear. We have taken decisive action on the environment while protecting our economy. We will continue to implement a sector-by-sector regulatory approach to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. We have already taken action on two of Canada's largest sources of greenhouse gas emissions, the transportation sector and the electricity sector.

Building on these actions, we recently announced that we will be taking action to limit the growth of HFCs, which are the most potent and fastest-growing greenhouse gases in the world.

We are reducing emissions without damaging the economy, which is what the Liberals and NDP would do with a carbon tax.

* * *

[Translation]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Mr. André Bellavance (Richmond—Arthabaska, Ind.): Mr. Speaker, while dairy producers are on the Hill, there is growing international pressure on Canada to make concessions on the supply management system. The trans-Pacific partnership discussions are increasingly focusing on agriculture. The United States, New Zealand and other countries are becoming more and more demanding, as demonstrated by the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, Tom Vilsack, who says that Canada is not offering as much as it should.

In his speech to dairy producers this week, will the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food not only confirm his support for supply management, but also clearly state that his government cannot afford to do without it?

[English]

Hon. Ed Fast (Minister of International Trade, CPC): Mr. Speaker, there is no government that has done more for our farmers and for the agriculture sector than this Conservative government. We have made it very clear that we are going to continue to promote and support our supply managed sector. That has never prevented us from concluding negotiations on a trade and economic partnership.

As we always do, we only sign agreements that are in Canada's best interests.

PRESENCE IN THE GALLERY

The Speaker: I would like to draw to the attention of hon. members the presence in the gallery of the Honourable Darrell Pasloski, Premier of Yukon.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Speaker: I would also like to draw to the attention of hon. members the presence in the gallery of the Honourable Peter Taptuna, Premier of Nunavut, and the Honourable Johnny Mike, Minister of the Environment of Nunavut

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

● (1505)

[English]

RED TAPE REDUCTION ACT

The House resumed from January 26 consideration of the motion that Bill C-21, An Act to control the administrative burden that regulations impose on businesses, be read the third time and passed.

The Deputy Speaker: Resuming debate. The hon. member for Dartmouth—Cole Harbour has eight minutes remaining.

Mr. Robert Chisholm (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have the opportunity to rise and finish my intervention from last week on this important bill.

Bill C-21, An Act to control the administrative burden that regulations impose on businesses, known as the "red tape bill", is an interesting idea, an idea that has been tried by a number of governments at all levels. It comes up especially when parties are campaigning, when candidates go out and talk to small business people. They say they are going to get in there and work to get rid of red tape and bring the cost burden of red tape down for people with small businesses. They are going to make a real difference.

It should be the goal of all governments to ensure that any regulations that exist are up to date and current and accomplish what they set out to accomplish. Otherwise, they should be jettisoned. They should be revised or just gotten rid of. Any government worth its salt would do that as a normal administrative practice within its responsibilities.

However, sometimes, mainly for political reasons, governments like to trot out a particular catchy phrase in the way that this bill does. It talks about one for one. It talks about how the Conservatives have communicated with public servants within the bureaucracy and have told them that if they are going to bring a regulation forward, then they have to get rid of a regulation. It has absolutely nothing to do with whether the regulation they are bringing forward has any merit or whether the regulation they want to get rid of does not have any merit; it is simply on the basis of one for one. It is nothing more and nothing less than bald politics. It has nothing to do with proper administration.

Government Orders

An issue that we have raised here on a number of occasions is that there are many good reasons for regulation. The government has a role to play beyond just ensuring that businesses are able to operate effectively and efficiently and that the rules and regulations that affect them are appropriate and efficient; on behalf of the public interest, the government also has to ensure that there are good health and safety regulations. It ensures that there are good regulations that protect Canadians in the area of food safety and good regulations to ensure that the immigration process works smoothly. There is an important role for regulations to play in the process.

My concern with a bill like this is that the Conservatives are just looking for numbers and looking at being able to roll out a banner during the election campaign to say what they have been able to accomplish with their one-for-one campaign. If the Conservatives were truly serious, then they would prove to small business and to Canadians by their actions that they were in fact administering the federal government effectively and efficiently.

I took the opportunity over the past year and a half to communicate with small business people on the issues they were most concerned about as they related to the role of the federal government. The top of the list tended to be taxation. That is why small business people in my community in the constituency of Dartmouth—Cole Harbour have responded so well to the announcement by our leader that when we are elected in 2015, we will bring forward a reduction in the small business tax from 11% to 9%.

• (1510)

That tends to be at the top of the list of small businesses in my community. That is why they have responded so well.

The second item that tended to be important was cracking down on anti-competitive credit card merchant fees. That was something that the government had talked about doing. It talked about it in the Speech from the Throne last year. It talked about it before in the election campaign, saying that it was going to bring down the cost of the use of credit cards for merchants.

What happened? The government bowed to pressure from the big banks. It decided in favour of the wishes of the big banks, which make billions of dollars in profit every year as a result of many of the things that the government does. The government decided to land on the side of the big banks rather than the small businesses, and it has not done anything with the credit card merchant fees.

That is another commitment that the New Democratic Party has made to Canadians.

The small business people in my community are always concerned about paperwork and regulations that are useless or do not make sense. They are concerned about them, but those matters fall well down the list in terms of priority.

If I may, allow me to bring up a couple of other points. In this bill, what the Conservative government talks about is a focus on inefficient and unnecessary regulation. It also talks about the bureaucracy and the burden of paperwork.

As I was thinking about this, I thought about the infant from Egypt who was prohibited from travelling with her family to Canada simply because of unnecessary, unfair, and unrealistic policies made

by the Conservative government. I see it in my office all the time, whether it is with immigration, employment insurance, the Canada pension, or Canada pension disability. The Conservative government is not doing Canadians any favours when it comes to dealing with the kinds of forms, processes, policies, and regulations that ordinary Canadians need to deal with in order to access some of the programs that still exist in this country. If the government were truly concerned about getting rid of inefficient and ineffective regulations and policies, it would pay much more attention to the ones that we have brought to the attention of members here in the House.

This bill, unfortunately, could be much more than it is. It is no more than political rhetoric on behalf of the government. If it was truly concerned about dealing with regulation, it would simply do it and prove to Canadians through its actions that it is making a difference on the issue of regulation.

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusksing, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am grateful for the time to ask my colleague a question on his very eloquent speech on this specific issue.

We know that red tape is problematic. However, we do not see that the Conservatives are on the right track when it comes to safeguarding the regulations and standards that protect the health and safety of Canadians.

As we look at what the Conservatives are saying they are trying to do, what we are seeing more and more is smoke and mirrors. The Conservatives have boasted that they are helping small businesses by eliminating red tape, yet they did not renew the hiring credit for small businesses. We have heard that on a number of occasions. Instead, they spent \$500 million on an ineffective credit that would create only 800 jobs.

Perhaps my colleague could elaborate on that a little bit, because while red tape is quite problematic for the thousands of small businesses that make a big difference in my community of Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusksing, the fact that the hiring credit is not there impacts them even more. Maybe my colleague could elaborate on that.

• (1515)

Mr. Robert Chisholm: Mr. Speaker, my colleague is absolutely right. The government turning its back on the hiring tax credit, again something cited by small businesses in Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, showed it was on the wrong track.

Hiring young people, reducing taxes, growing the economy, having more people working and being able to buy goods and services from small businesses, ensuring seniors have a pension on which they are able to support themselves and continue to live in dignity in their community are the kinds of priorities that I hear from small businesses in my community. I know the hon. member feels the same way,

Small businesses are an integral part of our communities right across the country. It is time we started to listen to them the way the leader of the New Democratic Party has listened to them.

Government Orders

[*Translation*]

Mr. François Choquette (Drummond, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my hon. colleague for his speech and the work he does in his community. We know that he cares about the people in his community and he works very hard.

There are always questions that come to my mind. As the environment critic and a member of the Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development, I know how much the Conservatives like to reduce environmental protections.

It would seem that they want to again reduce environmental protections with this bill. Of course, no one is opposed to cutting red tape. We all support that.

However, some regulations are useful and in the public interest. They must not be cut. I am also thinking of some controls that are really beneficial for Canadians and some specific measures that help small businesses and protect the environment and people's safety. These protections must not be reduced.

Does my colleague believe that we really need to cut red tape because it will be beneficial for SMEs, but that we must also ensure that we keep those measures that protect the environment and people's safety?

[*English*]

Mr. Robert Chisholm: Mr. Speaker, my colleague from Drummond is absolutely right. As the official opposition critic for the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, I have been concerned with some of the changes that have happened since the Fisheries Act was amended back in 2012. These changes have affected our ability to protect the ecosystem of our lakes and rivers in Dartmouth—Cote Harbour and across the country.

These are areas where, as I said before, regulations serve an important public interest. The concern is that with the government's gimmicky one-for-one approach and the fact that it is giving sole responsibility for doing this to the President of the Treasury Board is a matter that concerns me and our caucus a great deal.

The government needs to do a better job. Then there will be no need for gimmicky legislation like this.

• (1520)

Mr. Dennis Bevington (Northwest Territories, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am here today to talk about Bill C-21, an act to control the administrative burden that regulations impose on businesses. It is a good bumper sticker for Conservative politics later on in this year. It is also a bill that is in some ways very confusing.

If we take the basic premise that we will get rid of a regulation for every regulation we create, that logically says there are quite a number of regulations that do not need to be on the books right now. Why does the government not do some homework and identify the regulations that are not important to the Canadian public, to businesses and to the happiness of the Canadian state and simply eliminate those regulations? Would that not make more sense than tying up the time of the House of Commons with a bill that really does not nail anything down? It simply lays out a pattern that can or cannot be obeyed. It is sort of like the elections limits law earlier in

my time in Parliament. People could follow it if they wanted or they did not have to follow it

The President of the Treasury Board may establish policy or issue directives respecting the manner in which the rules can be applied. We have another law that is really for public consumption. It really will not affect too much in the way that business regulations are set or not set in Parliament.

For instance, it says in the preamble of the bill that the one-for-one rule may not compromise public health, public safety or the Canadian economy. It is in the part of the bill that is not law. It simply talks about the bill. Where Conservatives outline their concerns about where we should not touch regulations on a one-to-one basis, it really is inappropriate, it does not work and it is not part of any requirement of government to follow.

Environment, immigration or human rights are not mentioned. A whole number of things are not mentioned. The Conservatives' thoughts are very different from their thoughts about foreign regulation or how to sell the Canadian public on the idea they are taking care of the economy, the economy being a very complex organism which has social, cultural and environmental aspects to it at all times.

I was a small businessman for many years in the Northwest Territories. I dealt with small businesses in limited markets under very difficult conditions. Regulations set out a pathway for businesses in many cases. They provide, and should provide, a mechanism by which business people can conduct their business in a good and proper fashion. That is the purpose of regulation. Regulations put everyone on a level playing field. Everyone is required to abide by regulations.

Within the economy, there are some rules and conduct that can make business work. Therefore, regulations are very important. To simply deal with regulations in this rather cavalier fashion, saying that for every new regulation we create we are going to take one away, is patently absurd.

Let us go back to the environment. The Conservatives have been changing environmental laws to help large resource developers to effect their businesses better in the three northern territories. That has not worked very well for them. With the changes to the NWT environmental legislation that occurred last year along with devolution, they are now in court with first nations over those changes.

• (1525)

Now we have uncertainty in the Northwest Territories about how development is going to proceed because of those changes. Now the government has decided to do a somewhat similar thing in Yukon with Bill S-6. It would make changes to the Yukon environmental legislation.

The bill has created a firestorm among first nations and ordinary Yukon citizens right across the territory. The people of Yukon understand that the best way for developers to proceed is with the full understanding and co-operation of first nations.

Government Orders

What the government has done in both territories is created this chasm and brought legislation forward which has the exact opposite effect of what it says it is trying to do. I think this bill will probably be similar in some ways.

As I said earlier, if regulations are not appropriate, they should be taken down. We should not wait until another regulation comes along to decide that a regulation is not appropriate anymore. That really is an unbelievably inane way of conducting government.

The NDP has some sensible suggestions for small business. What are we going through right now in Canada? We have a dollar that has dropped by about 20%. What does that do for small businesses that want to innovate and expand their production base, much of which would be imported machinery?

What we need is an innovation tax credit to encourage investments in machinery, especially at this time when we are dealing with 80¢ dollars that have to buy equipment from countries that have a better exchange rate, like the United States.

The NDP tax innovation credit is a good idea. It is an idea for 2015, for the situation in which we exist today. The New Democrats would also extend the accelerated capital cost allowance, which would allow businesses to quickly write off the cost of processing equipment and machinery. This allowance is set to expire this year. At the very time it is needed most, it is going to expire.

Hopefully over the course of this year, as the government changes, we will be able to put some of these things into effect.

As well, cutting the small business tax rate from 11% to 10% and then to 9% is a good solid idea. Small businesses create jobs, they grow communities and they provide services to those who would not have them otherwise.

We do not see multinational corporations investing in small business in my communities in the Northwest Territories. We see the average Joe, the person who has a few dollars and wants to make a difference putting that to work in his community. A lower tax rate for those people ensures that the money will circulate within the economy.

Lowering the tax rate for multinational corporations with multitudinous shareholders all over the world means that the money is dispersed to other sources, dead money in many cases, sitting in banks, good to no one at all. Perhaps we should have a look at other ways to activate that money. That is something the NDP government can look at as it moves into the future.

I have a minute left, and that is probably all the bill deserves. It is really does nothing. The way it is set up it will be meaningless in the future. It is just another wasted effort on the part of the Conservative government to try to show how it can use symbols rather than real work to persuade Canadians that it is on their side.

• (1530)

Mr. Mark Strahl (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened with some interest to the member's speech. I want to know how many times he has voted against the accelerated capital cost allowance? I think it was in several budgets in a row, and the NDP voted against it. Suddenly, it is a great manufacturing job-

saving idea, because it was in a press released issued by the NDP. We issued it in a budget.

How many times did the member vote against cutting the small business tax rate? Again, several times over several budgets, I recall the member standing and voting against decreasing the small business tax rate.

If those are such great ideas going into the next election, why did the member and his party vote against them for the last three years?

Mr. Dennis Bevington: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague, the parliamentary secretary, for his question. Of course, it is an interesting question. I think, perhaps, that as a rookie member of Parliament, he might not yet understand how Parliament actually works.

There is the government, and there is the opposition. The opposition opposes the government. It is an adversarial system we work in. For the Conservatives to continue to talk about our voting record on their budgets is facetious, because this is the system we live in and work in.

If we lived and worked in a different parliamentary system, where every person voted on every particular issue as they saw fit, then the Conservatives might have an argument, but they do not. They just have hot air.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, small businesses have a great sense of frustration. Whether it is the municipal, provincial, or national government, they want to see government look at ways it can become more efficient. We need to recognize that there are regulations that are redundant and are no longer necessary.

The bill before us is not earth shattering. It is a small step, and there is a bit of a commitment to deal with regulations.

I listened to today's question period, when the New Democratic Party tried to come across as wanting to be sympathetic to small business. My understanding is that the small business community in Canada supports this proposed legislation, so why would the NDP not support the legislation?

Mr. Dennis Bevington: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague for that question, and I will repeat something from my speech that will answer it.

I said at the time that if there are regulations that are inappropriate that are within the purview of the government to change, well then it should change them, and do a decent job. It should do a review of regulations in one sector or another and get rid of the ones that are not required. However, to put forward a bill that says that if we put a new regulation here we will have to pull another one out there, willy-nilly, is really not the way government should operate.

We should operate from the basis of review, understanding, research, and conclusions, not from a point of view of putting up one and taking away another. It is really ridiculous and inappropriate for the government should operate.

Mr. Robert Chisholm (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I appreciated the member's intervention, as a businessman himself.

Government Orders

Does the member not think it is somewhat ironic that the bill proposes to introduce new regulations in order to set up the one-for-one process and that it would all be under the responsibility of the President of the Treasury Board? He would decide what would qualify for the one-for-one, and it would be after he had established a whole bunch of additional regulations. Would the member not agree that it is a bit of a waste of money?

• (1535)

Mr. Dennis Bevington: Mr. Speaker, I hate to think what the cost of putting the bill through this process has been. It is expensive, and it takes away from other more important things that could be done within the current Parliament. For that matter, whether we vote on it today or tomorrow, the vote for us will be the same: we do not think it is necessary, and we are not going to vote for it.

Hon. Michelle Rempel (Minister of State (Western Economic Diversification), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will start by saying that I will be splitting my time with the esteemed member for Peace River.

I just love this bill. It is a common-sense bill that is applauded by small business.

I will walk the House through what regulatory burden is, why this bill is necessary and important, some of the key points the bill covers, and some of the potential improvements small business would see because of it.

This was one of the key recommendations of the red tape reduction action plan.

For the information of hon. members, regulatory burden is essentially government burden. I will read a bit from a posting on the Industry Canada website under "SME Research and Statistics". It states:

The burden of government is the intervention and interference of government in the operations of a business.... It is the cost involved in complying with regulatory requirements, collecting taxes and responding to information demands from government.... it is the administrative hurdles...the delays, the uncertainties and the frustration involved in dealing with public bureaucracy.

The above definition recognizes that government burden goes beyond regulations to administrative practices such as policies, guidelines and other requirements imposed by a government department.

The article goes on to talk about some of the components of the administrative burden of regulatory oversight as it relates to small business, because there is actually a quantifiable cost. That is what is at the core of this bill.

If we argue that government regulations are a burden on small business and on business in general, why have them at all? We have talked a bit in the House about why regulations are important. I agree that there is definitely a role for government to ensure the health and safety of Canadians. Regulations also ensure that public funds are spent appropriately. They also help to ensure that there is public confidence built into things like the build-out of major natural resources projects, because we will know that the government is there to ensure that the health and safety component is there.

Certainly regulations are important, but there is a cost to having them. If there is a cost to regulations, and it is important for regulations to exist, what is the sweet spot between the two? To me it is ensuring that public safety and the health of Canadians are not compromised, that public funds are used effectively, and that we are

evaluating both the positive and negative opportunity costs for business associated with developing a regulation and monitoring on an ongoing basis whether it is effective and efficient, based on the original review.

The question then becomes how we strike this balance. It is important to first define each of the components of that particular opportunity cost calculation.

First of all, does the regulation do what it says it will do? Does it address a need that has been brought forward by Parliament or legislation?

What is the direct cost in terms of staffing hours required by business to comply with the regulation?

What is the cost in terms of the impact on the public service and the public sector? Will we have to employ more bureaucrats? Will we have to put other resources in place to monitor its effectiveness or to ensure that there is compliance?

What about the certainty to business? For example, certainty of regulations often becomes a determinant of investments, especially major capital infrastructure investments, like some of our natural resources projects and whatnot. When a company is looking at putting billions of dollars into a capital investment or having an ongoing operation over a 25-year period, certainty with regard to regulations is also a determinant of investment, because it impacts the decision-making process in terms of investment or long-term spending.

Also, does this create any redundancies? What is the cost in terms of overlap with other regulations?

I think it is important to first define these areas and then to use those definitions to actually monetize and calculate the costs.

• (1540)

I read some of the committee testimony, and it was interesting.

I am sure my colleagues on the other side of the House would agree that sometimes regulations can create an incentive to innovate. When we have a policy question that needs to be addressed, can we put a regulation in place that incentivizes behaviour in a certain way that can create growth? More often than not, the monetary impact will probably be detrimental, but these are certainly the sorts of opportunity cost calculation factors we need to be looking at when talking about regulations.

The last component is ensuring that after we have defined them, we can actually measure these costs in the long run. We would not only measure the effectiveness of the regulation but also the costs, both pros and cons, to businesses, the public, et cetera. My colleague who spoke earlier asked why we would have this bill. It is because it would enshrine these principles in legislation and in the operating practices of government, and that is a very good thing.

Government Orders

Why should we have this law? I am so glad the member brought this up. The first reason is that businesses are telling us that they need this. I read through some of the committee testimony, and I want to share with the House something I thought was very impactful. Laura Jones is the executive vice-president of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, and in committee she said:

...it is a pleasure to be here to represent [the small business] perspective on red tape. I want to be clear about one thing, though, and that is that small businesses absolutely support necessary and important regulations,...

There is an acknowledgement that regulations need to exist.

...those regulations that protect human health, safety, and the environment. In fact, it might surprise some people to know that when we ask small businesses how much of the regulatory burden they think could be cut without sacrificing those important goals, they are saying between 25% and one third. It depends on whom you ask and how you ask the question, but it's roughly in that range.... they're telling us that between two-thirds and three-quarters of the rules in the system are legitimate, necessary rules that they support.

She went on to talk about how while there is support for regulation and acknowledgement that yes, it can incent innovation, there is also a significant and disproportionate impact on small business, because the cost of regulations and the administrative burden on a per-employee basis affects small business the most. We are hearing from industry and industry groups that this particular piece of legislation would ensure that there would be certainty and monetization of the opportunity cost calculation associated with regulatory decisions.

I love that the Prime Minister said, with regard to the regulatory burden, that it is a hidden tax and a killer of jobs. I actually could not agree more. I have personally been impacted by the regulatory burden, though not in a small-business sense. I managed a significant portion of the University of Calgary's research compliance process, and I saw the burden of compliance on government-funded researchers.

It is incumbent upon us to ask how we can ensure that we still have compliance but do it in such an effective way that it is not actually impeding business from being done.

I have to give my colleague, the Minister of State for Science and Technology, a nod for acknowledging a review of that particular problem in the science and technology strategy.

I will close by talking about how this act would achieve some of these balance points we have talked about. Again, the one-for-one rule is a cornerstone of the red tape action plan and would impose new discipline across the regulatory system. It would maintain the current protection of health and safety as it controls both the number of regulations and the growth of the administrative burden for businesses.

What I want to emphasize is that the reason this is effective and necessary is that it would enshrine in our business processes the calculation of costs associated with putting a regulation in place and would ensure that it is reviewed on a regular basis. Under this particular system, it would be incumbent on the public service and on us as legislators to look at the costs that could be incurred through regulation, to be transparent about them, and to talk to people during the consultation process about the assumptions we are making in terms of costing.

By the way, I also read in committee testimony that there was some question about the consultation process when it came to regulatory review. The *Canada Gazette* process has been in place for a very long time and certainly supports that.

I just think that this particular piece of legislation would enshrine in legislation that practice, which would ensure the efficacy, predictability, and stability of our regulatory system for a long time to come.

• (1545)

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusking, NDP): Mr. Speaker, although she attempts to make great points on this issue, the reality is that when we look at regulations and how the current government and the previous Liberal government have actually handled regulations, the record is quite contrary to what they are saying they are trying to achieve. The Conservatives do not have a good track record when it comes to safeguarding regulations and standards that protect the health and safety of Canadians.

When we look back at 2013, we see that the former transport minister granted WestJet an exemption on flight attendant requirements under the Canadian aviation regulations, thereby allowing WestJet planes to fly with one flight attendant for every 50 passengers. We tried to have that reversed to ensure that the ratio of 1.4 was maintained, but the current government certainly went the other way.

Then in 1999, the Liberals further deregulated rail safety by continuing to implement the safety management systems approach adopted by the Mulroney Conservative government.

As I have indicated before, when it comes to regulation these are not people that Canadians can trust.

The Conservatives promised to reduce exorbitant transaction fees, but if they really want to make a difference, why will they not pressure Visa and MasterCard about transaction fees? That is what would actually make a difference for small business.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Mr. Speaker, with respect to my colleague's question about track records, I will speak specifically to the subject matter of this bill, the government's ability to ensure the health and safety of Canadians while reducing the compliance burden on small business.

The one-for-one regulatory plan, as of June 14, 2014, has resulted in a net annual reduction of over \$22 million in the administrative burden on businesses, and is estimated to have saved about 290,000 hours annually in time spent dealing with regulatory red tape, and has seen a net 19 federal regulations taken off the books.

As someone with a small business background and who has seen what small business needs to survive, I think this particular piece of legislation, which says "We're going to put stability, predictability, and efficacy at the core of how we approach regulations", is something that small businesses across Canada can cheer for.

Government Orders

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the comments made by the member across the way. One of the concerns that I suspect many Canadians have is a sense that we need to get a comprehensive approach dealing with regulations. It does cause a great deal of frustration. All one has to look at is the amount of paperwork involved in income tax. There is a sense that the government needs to show stronger leadership in working with other levels of government in dealing with regulations, especially for our small business community.

When we talk about enhancing and seeing our small businesses grow in Canada, thereby creating critically important jobs, one of the issues that needs to be addressed is having an overall, comprehensive approach dealing with regulations at different levels of government.

To what degree does she believe the federal government needs to play a stronger leadership role?

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Mr. Speaker, that is a great question because I can give a specific example in response. In economic action plan 2012, when we put forward the responsible resource development regulatory framework, the principle of reducing barriers for business in environmental reviews was enshrined. It acknowledged that where we can harmonize review processes in that particular subject matter, we should do so.

Certainly, this was cheered not only because it protected the environment and ensured a stronger review system, but also because it harmonized the time and effort it took to go through these types of processes. I think that is a fantastic example. However, I am not sure my colleague opposite supported it, so I will have to leave it at that.

• (1550)

Mr. Chris Warkentin (Peace River, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is a privilege to stand in the House and follow the minister. We definitely want to thank her for all of her work at WED and for her commitment to small business. It is a privilege for me to share a province with the member, where we are proud of the work that she has done.

The red tape reduction act is one that is very close to me. I have the privilege of serving on the Red Tape Reduction Commission, and what we have heard again and again from small businesses from coast to coast is the need for the government to get a handle on the amount of red tape that is developed. This one-for-one rule is really moving the goalpost further down the field to ensure that we get to a place where we can address some of the concerns of small businesses and other businesses across the country.

As members know, this legislation would fulfill a commitment that we made as a government. In October, 2012, we brought forward the red tape reduction action plan in response to the commission's recommendations. With this legislation, we hope to make it the law of the land that regulators strictly control the administrative burden they impose upon businesses. Under the one-for-one rule, for every new regulation that adds an administrative burden on businesses, one must be removed.

This is smart legislation. It would help Canadian businesses become more productive and help them succeed in an increasingly global and competitive marketplace.

The red tape reduction act would require that regulators take seriously the requirement to control the amount of red tape imposed upon businesses and the related costs. The legislation is designed to be tough. It would challenge regulators to think through how regulations could be designed and implemented in ways that do not impose unnecessary red tape upon businesses.

It is tough, but it is also quite flexible. The government's commitment to maintaining Canada's high health and safety standards is unwavering. The one-for-one rule would be applied without compromising the protection of the health and safety of Canadians.

This legislation is very timely. As we know, one of the government's top priorities is creating a climate in which business can innovate, invest in the future, and create economic growth and jobs. Too often, red tape gets in the way by tying up a company's time, energy, and production resources. The red tape reduction act would allow businesses to use their resources to become more productive by eliminating unnecessary regulatory red tape.

Given what is happening in the global economy today, we know that Canadian businesses have to be at the top of their game to succeed. The good news is that the Canadian economy has come through a global economic downturn, that recovery is happening, and the economy is in relatively good shape. Canada is positioned for sustainable economic growth.

It is worth remembering that when the hard times arrived in 2008, Canada was in a position of economic strength compared to its international partners. This allowed us to put in place one of the most comprehensive stimulus packages in the world. At the time, international observers, such as the International Monetary Fund, were predicting that Canada would be one of the fastest countries to recover. I am proud to say that these predictions have come true, given our relative economic and fiscal strength.

Since we introduced the economic action plan to respond to the global recession, Canada has recovered more than all of the output and jobs lost during the recession. The Canadian economy has boasted one of the strongest job creation records in the G7 over the recovery, with nearly 1.2 million jobs created since June, 2009. Over 90% of the jobs created since June 2009 are full-time positions, 80% of those in the private sector, and over two thirds in high wage industries.

What is more is that the real GDP is significantly above pre-recession levels, the best performance in the G7. Not only has Canada weathered the economic storm well, but the world has also noticed. Both the International Monetary Fund and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development expect that Canada will be among the strongest growing economies in the G7 over this year and next. The World Economic Forum rated Canada's banking system as the soundest in the world for the seventh year in a row in its annual Global Competitiveness Report. According to KPMG, total business tax costs in Canada are the lowest in the G7, and 46% lower than those in the United States.

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•(1555)

In addition, four credit rating agencies, Moody's Investors Service, Fitch Ratings, Standard and Poors, and DBRS, have reaffirmed their top rating for Canada and expect Canada to maintain its AAA rating in the year ahead.

However, we cannot rest on this record of success. Despite solid job creation since 2009, too many Canadians remain unemployed. That is why the government's economic action plan focuses on the drivers of growth and job creation—innovation, investment, education, skills and communities—underpinned by our ongoing commitment to keeping taxes low and returning a balanced budget by 2015.

Clearly, responsible fiscal management has to be in place for us to succeed. Canada is one of the few countries that can now boast of having a declining tax rate and a low debt. That is why we remain committed to eliminating the deficit. Reducing debt helps to keep interest rates low and encourages businesses to invest and create jobs.

Reducing debt signals that the public services are sustainable over the long run. The gains that we saw as a result of Canada's low-tax plan are fostering long-term growth that will continue to generate high wage jobs in Canada into the future. It strengthens the country's ability to respond to economic shocks, such as the global financial crisis that we witnessed in 2009, and it will ensure that Canada keeps its economic advantage now and for generations to come.

Helping Canadian companies succeed in the global economy has clearly been a priority of this government and we certainly have seen the success of that. By taking action such as enshrining the one-to-one rule in law, we are making the regulatory system more conducive to business success and to economic growth. We are creating a more predictable environment for businesses, particularly for small and medium-size businesses, and we are freeing entrepreneurs from the burden of regulatory red tape.

It is all part of our plan for Canada. I certainly invite hon. members across the way to join me in supporting the bill we are speaking about today. It will help us to further eliminate unnecessary rules and costs that have been the source of frustration for business people and entrepreneurs across this country, and it will bolster Canada's strong reputation as one of the best countries in the world in which to do business and to invest.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, if I did not know any better, I would say the member had the wrong speech from the Prime Minister's Office. He is talking about the government's economic action plan and jobs and so forth, and many of the numbers he has put on the record I would challenge. However, I will issue him the ultimate challenge in an area where the government has not been very successful, and that is the whole issue of debt reduction. The government has not been able to balance a budget despite being very clear that it wants to be able to show that it can.

Given the type of speech the member gave, I would question the government's inability to issue a national budget at a time when there are issues affecting confidence in Canada's economy. The Prime Minister has let Canadians down by postponing a budget

indefinitely. Could the member explain why he thinks the Prime Minister has disappointed Canadians in that fashion?

•(1600)

Mr. Chris Warkentin: Mr. Speaker, it is interesting that the member would dispute the numbers of the World Economic Forum and the organizations I referenced, who are bringing forward these numbers, including Stats Canada. It is interesting that the Liberal Party would disagree with these numbers.

With regard to the budget, I can guarantee that we will continue to bring in budgets that will foster economic growth in this country. We will continue to lower taxes for small business. We will continue to reduce taxes for Canadian families.

We know the Liberals have not put out any policy on much, but we do know that they will raise taxes, that they will raise the debt, that they will raise the deficit and they impose a level of taxation that will be unsustainable for Canadian businesses and Canadian families.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Djaouida Sellah (Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I listened carefully to my colleague on the other side of the House, but I did not hear him talk about anything relevant to small and medium-sized businesses.

I visited SMEs in my riding of Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert, and business owners all agree that unnecessary red tape hurts them financially and causes them to lose valuable time.

Why do the Conservatives not eliminate regulations that are not in the public interest, unless it is because these regulations serve their own interests? I would like a straight answer from my colleague on the other side of the House.

[*English*]

Mr. Chris Warkentin: Mr. Speaker, I think the member probably missed the opportunity to listen to the speech, because it was centred around the one-to-one rule that will now be legislated.

It is interesting, because she asks about the unnecessary burden of red tape, and I agree. As a matter of fact, when I sat on the Red Tape Reduction Commission, what we heard from Canadian businesses was that it is a costly endeavour to comply with the red tape that is required at the federal, provincial, and municipal levels. It is estimated that it costs businesses across the country about \$31 billion to comply with regulation across jurisdictions on an annual basis. This is an incredible burden.

What the NDP, even in this debate, has reinforced time and time again is that it wants to see more red tape. It opposes the one-to-one rule. The one-to-one rule would actually require, as the member calls for, the removal of unnecessary red tape. If a new regulation is brought forward, one would have to be taken away, one that is no longer necessary, so that these small businesses would not have to comply with unnecessary red tape.

I believe that the member desires to see red tape reduced. That is why I call on her to split from her party and actually vote for the bill, which would reduce the amount of red tape for small businesses in her constituency.

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[*Translation*]

Mr. François Lapointe (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with my colleague from Compton—Stanstead. I will therefore be speaking for just 10 minutes, in order to leave him the other half of my 20 minutes.

I have the honour today to address my colleagues, and those who are kind enough to be watching us on CPAC, on the subject of Bill C-21, An Act to control the administrative burden that regulations impose on businesses.

I would recall at the outset that for a long time, the government called this its bill to reduce—and not to control—red tape. We can already see that there has been some backsliding with respect to the government's real intent to deal with the problem.

Over the last seven years, a number of ministers have made numerous announcements at various locations in Canada, with much fanfare, to express how eager the government was to attack the administrative burden. The Conservatives said they wanted to reduce what they called “red tape”. They made it into a major obsession, which has unfortunately produced very little in the form of Bill C-21.

However, this is an important issue, not to say a major problem. Roughly \$30 billion in time and costs are imposed on SMEs and entrepreneurship in general in Canada with forms and various other requirements. That is a lot of money. For an SME or a business, the situation is even worse in terms of its resources.

When you have more than 100, 125, 200 or 300 employees, you can set up human resources or administrative services where people can focus on administrative requirements. The business thus becomes more efficient, and in proportion to the company's overall operations, such requirements pose less of a problem.

However, for the owner of a small business that has generated 5, 10, 15, 20 or 30 jobs through hard work, whenever a form or a request from a public servant appears, it is always handled by a single person: the small business owner. It is a heavy burden, especially for small businesses and microbusinesses. It is also a burden for medium-sized businesses, but it is even more serious for small and microbusinesses.

We have to deal with this problem, because 98% of our active businesses in Canada have fewer than 100 employees. Ninety-eight per cent. The category includes people who work very hard and have created jobs, but do not yet have sufficient turnover to have human resources and administrative departments. These people have to shoulder the administrative burden themselves.

Sixty-four per cent of employees in the private sector work in an SME; 64% of people in Canada who are not employed by provincial governments or the federal government work in an enterprise with fewer than 100 employees.

This is the sector of the Canadian economy that creates and maintains the most jobs, and it is these enterprises that have to come up with most of the \$30 billion invested in time and trouble because of good old red tape.

In addressing this major and important issue, we unfortunately have serious problems with respect to the bill that is before us at third reading today. The bill embodies the government's desire to apply the one-to-one rule, which is designed to eliminate a regulation for every new regulation made by the government.

I do not know how many times I have to drive this home. The one-for-one rule always gives nothing more than zero. We are faced with a solution whereby the sum total of what was to be an attack on red tape to liberate Canadian businesses still amounts to nothing more than zero. That is the major solution offered by this bill.

A few weeks ago, we were fortunate to have Kevin Page with us in Parliament. He gave a speech to my colleagues and me. He made a very accurate observation to the effect that when there is a complex issue, someone always thinks of a simple solution. The problem is that it is often a very bad solution.

● (1605)

When I think about the one-for-one rule, I cannot help but think about what Mr. Page said that day. That is exactly what we have here: a simplistic measure.

Another problem with this bill is that the President of the Treasury Board could decide to eliminate regulations. The member for Parry Sound—Muskoka is currently President of the Treasury Board and his record is not entirely spotless when it comes discretionary decisions. Take for example, the \$50 million invested in gazebos in Ontario when the G20 leaders were visiting.

It is a serious problem when a bill places so much power in the hands of a single representative of government, particularly when the person who currently holds that position does not have a completely spotless record when it comes to discretionary decisions.

The Conservatives also have a poor track record with respect to workplace health and safety, and the bill says nothing about the environment.

We would not want Bill C-21, which gives the government power to tinker with forms and abolish regulations, to be exploited by a government with a very bad track record. Just think about the train tragedies that have occurred in recent years in Canada. The regulatory management that preceded those accidents was part of the problem, and it was the Conservative government that was in charge. We would not want Bill C-21 to be used to do away with regulations that are for the common good or important for the environment.

The NDP would like the report to contain clear obligations on how we will ensure accountability in how the government will use this law and in how the stakeholders will be consulted before a regulation is eliminated. It would be very important to give that responsibility to an organization and not just to the President of the Treasury Board.

However, the nine amendments presented by my colleagues in committee were all rejected. That is just another problem with this bill, which seeks to address an important issue. We need to cut red tape, but we do not want to adopt a solution that has no effect. It is therefore difficult for parliamentarians to determine whether this is a worthy bill.

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In short, according to a document produced by Industry Canada, red tape decreased by about 11% between 2005 and 2008. The report concluded that employment trends and the decrease in workers' compensation claims were the primary causes. This shows how complex the situation is.

If people are being injured at work and there is no job stability, even if we reduce the administrative burden, we will not decrease red tape. If business owners are constantly having to replace employees and if these employees are getting injured every three days, there will be no decrease in red tape. Business owners will have to deal with all kinds of hassles. This is a much bigger and more complex problem.

There are solutions, but they would require a lot more work and co-operation. For example, Belgium is working on digital solutions. Business owners send their papers in electronically, so they are not forced to send them every time a government official has a question.

Furthermore, some European countries have created statuses for microbusinesses. These countries are trying to cut red tape for people who are getting into business and who have only about 10 employees. These companies get a special tax status to make their lives easier. There are solutions that would have an impact.

• (1610)

Those solutions are not in this bill, and it has a number of problems. I will have to continue to think on this bill.

[*English*]

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I listened with great interest to my hon. colleague.

Bill C-21 is yet another bill in which the government passes off fluff for action. It is as if the government has created itself as Don Quixote and is going to go after windmills called red tape.

The government has systematically attacked the basic systems that are in place to ensure a viable economy. One example is its attack on the environmental legislation, which stripped all of the water protections, and the government's dumbed-down idea that it would somehow make it easier to get the pipelines approved. Then it has run into one bit of opposition after another because there are no clear rules in place.

The Conservative government is afraid to bring in a budget. It cannot have a plan and cannot even count the money, and yet it has created this false attitude that it is going after red tape.

Could my hon. colleague tell me why he thinks we are wasting time on a bill like this flop, rather than dealing with clear issues like the budget and protecting citizens?

• (1615)

[*Translation*]

Mr. François Lapointe: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for the question. He shares my concerns.

I said before that we fear that this legislation, which can be used to play around with the regulations, might be exploited once it gets in the hands of the Conservatives. We saw them do this with the environment. For example, I do not know how many hundreds of

rivers were protected in Canada. Now there are hundreds that are no longer protected. My colleague shares my concerns.

The other part of the problem is the incredible inaction on the part of this government when it comes to finding real solutions that could help small businesses. Taxes have been greatly reduced for big business.

However, practically no tax cuts have been given to SMEs. The opposite should have happened over the past seven or eight years. Why? Because when we give SMEs some breathing room, then they are less likely to take their money and invest it somewhere in Asia or who knows where. They are more likely to create jobs. That is what the government should have done.

Again, this is a meaningless solution for SMEs. Nonetheless, there are some really great structural solutions that would truly help SMEs, which the Conservatives are doing absolutely nothing for.

Mr. Marc-André Morin (Laurentides—Labelle, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I think the reality must be the same in my colleague's riding.

Red tape is not the only problem small businesses are facing. In my riding, what I have seen and what entrepreneurs have told me is that people have lost seasonal employees because of the cuts to employment insurance. Those entrepreneurs have had a hard time getting workers to come and fill an essential need. There are plenty of ways to hurt businesses in addition to harassing them with endless red tape.

I would like my colleague to say a few words about that.

Mr. François Lapointe: Mr. Speaker, my colleague referred to employment insurance reform, which is totally out of touch with what is going on in so many industries, particularly in eastern Canada and Quebec. That is certainly causing problems. It also relates to another comment I had.

If circumstances are such that a business has to hire new employees every six months, there could easily be a shorter form for when employees are replaced. However, if the form has to be changed every time, that will result in more paperwork, not less. It is like I was saying before.

There is another unbelievable phenomenon happening in my riding. It is so hard to manage the innovation tax credit that a significant proportion of small and medium-sized businesses no longer bother to claim it and have given up on some of their efforts to innovate.

In many cases, it is medium-sized businesses, not small ones, that have managed to keep claiming the tax credit. I have asked them if it is that hard for them to do. They have told me that the administrative hassle costs them between 30% and 35% of the amount they get back. I have asked them if there is really more paperwork. They have told me no, but the government checks and double-checks their answers, and they have to call an official 18 times, and the official challenges everything they submit.

Government Orders

Officially, the program does not involve any more red tape. However, the program is now managed in such a convoluted way that small businesses are, for the most part, abandoning their efforts to innovate. That is really bad for the country's economy in the medium and long terms. There are all kinds of examples like that one.

Once again, Bill C-21 is a long way from fixing this problem.

Mr. Jean Rousseau (Compton—Stanstead, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the subject today affects many more businesses across Canada than we might think.

I am simply going to take the example of the manufacturing sector, which plays a key role in Canada. It once accounted for 65%, but it is now 50%; it is declining somewhat. In that segment, we find not just companies with 500 or more employees. From one end of my riding to the other, there are companies with five or 15 or 50 employees. These manufacturing entrepreneurs need an appropriate operating framework. They have enough competition at the international level. Today, no sector of economic activity, whether in Canada or elsewhere on the planet, can be exclusive to one region, one riding or one country any longer. Everything is global these days. You produce something, a natural resource, and it can be processed or manufactured anywhere on the planet.

I am talking about the manufacturing sector, but there are other sectors such as agriculture or retail, which now has to adjust to e-commerce. What is needed is a genuinely flexible framework. Bureaucracy and red tape, as it is called today, are certainly part of operating a business. However, I have sometimes had businessmen or businesswomen tell me that they had to spend one day a week doing nothing but administration. They had to fill out reports: one for the environment, another for workers' compensation, because there is also bureaucracy at the provincial level. Put it all together and it adds up to a lot. People have to be able to operate their businesses in a sound environment and, most importantly, a competitive environment.

Bill C-21, An Act to control the administrative burden that regulations impose on businesses, is intended as a response from this Conservative government to the Canadians and the small and medium-sized businesses that have often voiced their concerns about the expanding administrative burden that regulations impose on the cost of doing business in Canada. If we want to prosper, we must really have an attractive framework.

The government therefore wants to institute the one-for-one rule. As my colleague said earlier, plus one minus one equals zero. You do not have to be very good at mathematics to understand that calculation: $1 - 1 = 0$. However, the one-for-one rule must not interfere with public health or safety. There is an environmental framework and a framework for public health and safety. It applies mainly to employees but can also relate to the cleanliness of food processing. This must all be as transparent as possible.

Once again, they are going to give a minister, Mr. Gazebo, some latitude, rely on his judgment, and trust him to reduce administrative burdens and make decisions about this subject. I am sorry, but the Conservatives and Liberals really do not have a good track record in this regard, particularly when it comes to regulations that protect Canadians' health and safety. I stress this again. We have seen very

clearly the disastrous consequences for the environment and public safety that deregulation has had for the Canadian public in recent years.

Regulations that are in the public interest should be retained, of course. What needs to be done is to closely monitor the aggravating factors and the factors that are mitigating and user-friendly for businesses and business owners.

Bill C-21 seems to disregard that obligation. We would have liked to have assurances that deregulation will not apply to regulations that affect health and safety and, most importantly, the environment.

● (1620)

If the Conservatives really wanted to help small businesses, they would have supported the NDP's proposal to create an ombudsman position to deal with issues such as the excessive credit card fees that the big banks unfairly charge merchants. This is an ineffective injustice that my colleague from Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup has been battling vehemently since he first came to the House.

Small and medium-sized businesses create most of the new jobs in Quebec and Canada, not only in the major centres, but also outside the urban areas. In addition, small businesses make those regions thrive. Unfortunately, small businesses and the regions outside urban areas get very little attention from this Conservative government. The Prime Minister and his key ministers have completely ignored them at the expense of big businesses, the ones that have been given billions of dollars in tax cuts. We see what happens when you favour a single sector of economic activity, with the price of oil falling. The Conservatives find themselves in a precarious position, making it up as they go. They are no longer even capable of producing a budget in real time, something that is essential to help Canadian business owners across the country.

I talked about the fiscal and administrative environments as well as the actual environment. When someone operates a business, we want them to do so in a way that respects the environment. Of course, the government also deregulated that. It said it would let project proponents self-regulate. Canada is one of the only countries in the world that lets everyone do almost whatever they want, wherever they want, whenever they want. Furthermore, the provinces have tried to protect themselves when it comes to natural resources, just in case the federal government is unable to impose an environment that is not highly regulated, but that people respect.

Thinking clearly about what is happening also means having a healthy, clear and successful framework. I am thinking of future generations. That is what is so aggravating about this. Future generations do not have an environment in which they will be able to develop our natural resources without polluting. If you add this to our changing demographics and our aging population, it is going to be a disaster. We were talking earlier about renewing our workforce. Businesses have a real challenge on their hands. The workforce, the next generation, the men and women who want to be part of this prosperous Canada should have the opportunity to do so, and they should be able to run businesses even in areas where crops cannot be grown as they once were here in Canada. There are areas where climate change is preventing people from farming the same way they did in the past.

Government Orders

The regulatory framework in which most businesses in Canada will operate is made up of nearly 2,500 regulations spread over more than 15 departments. These cover everything from agricultural businesses to R and D companies researching the energy of the future. Business people across Canada need to dedicate a huge amount of time, money and consultation to complying with these regulations.

At present, red tape is preventing the collective growth of entrepreneurship. The need to prove that they comply with regulations by collecting, processing and retaining information, preparing reports and filling out forms is such that it discourages many people from actively taking the reins of businesses across the country. I talked about demographic changes. That will be the result if there is not an appropriate framework.

This small bill, which is truly small, contains about 11 clauses. In actual fact, there are only four. It is a question of semantics. It does not address the real problems, which cause quite a few headaches for Canadian entrepreneurs.

In closing, it is not until the NDP comes to power in 2015 that things will change and entrepreneurs will prosper.

• (1625)

[English]

Mr. Dan Albas (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have to say to the member opposite that I really enjoyed his speech. He was all over the map, just like his party is on this issue.

On one point, we had a member get up previously to say how filling out EI forms is red tape, yet the NDP is constantly saying that it supports having a strong EI system so that people can get the help they need. We try to balance everything so that at the end of the day, entrepreneurs can do what they do best, which is build their businesses.

However, I will just come back to this member in particular.

First of all, the NDP has been completely unclear as to whether or not it is going to support this bill. Could that member show some leadership and please say yes or no? Could he say whether the NDP will be supporting or not supporting the bill?

Second, the NDP claims to be the party that supports evidence-based decision-making. The one-for-one rule has reduced 250,000 man-hours of work that entrepreneurs needed to do in order to submit forms to the federal government. It has saved over \$30 million. Does the member realize that the administrative burden is decreasing on small business or not?

• (1630)

[Translation]

Mr. Jean Rousseau: Mr. Speaker, when it comes to the math, you will really have to bring the Conservatives up to speed because the one-for-one rule always equals zero.

Although my colleague says that \$30 million has been saved with a bill such as this one, that is surely not enough to save the hundreds of thousands of jobs lost after the economic downturn. That is a fact. It means that they did not do enough.

The NDP will be the only party to do enough to restore Canada's international reputation.

[English]

Mr. Robert Chisholm (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate my colleague's intervention and the wisdom of the advice that he offered to this chamber, especially in the face of some of the rather insulting questions that came from the other side.

In particular, I want to ask him to expand a bit more on the fact that if the government was convinced that it could reduce red tape and could get rid of useless regulation, why has it not done it? Why does it need to bring in another bill, with more regulations, at more cost to government, and with more delay? Why is it that the current government just cannot get the job done?

[Translation]

Mr. Jean Rousseau: Mr. Speaker, business owners tell us that it is always the same story: the federal government keeps asking them for more. What they want is less. One-for-one will always equal zero. Zero does nothing to help business owners who want their businesses to prosper.

As I said, international competition is fierce. Business owners want to keep their businesses, they want their businesses to remain prosperous and they want the regions across Canada to thrive and contribute to Canada's economic prosperity. However, that is not what is happening at all.

Earlier we heard about employment insurance. Are members aware that it is not eight out of ten but just three out of ten applicants who receive the EI they are entitled to? That is because the decisions almost always have to be appealed. It is always a long administrative process. In the end, people get discouraged and give up. That is not what we want for Canadians across the country

[English]

Mr. Dan Albas (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I certainly appreciate that the member gets really jumpy when we ask him to make a decision. Does he support a reduced burden upon small business?

The previous member who asked him a question gave him the biggest softball I have ever seen. Does the member realize that this bill would enshrine a policy that has been enacted by the government for two years, saving entrepreneurs over 200,000 hours and over \$30 million collectively? Would the member stand in his place and say whether or not he supports small business, yes or no?

[Translation]

Mr. Jean Rousseau: Mr. Speaker, I think that the member has spent far too much time in his senior minister's gazebo.

Government Orders

That is not what business owners across Canada are telling us at all. They are telling us that we need to be aggressive about the current situation. This means cutting red tape for them. That is not what is happening. The government wants to reduce the administrative burden. I can confirm that. We support that goal, but not with a bill like this one. This bill does not do anything meaningful to ease the burden on administrators and accountants.

The Deputy Speaker: Order. 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 Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, Employment; the hon. member for York South—Weston, Rail Transportation.

Resuming debate. The hon. member for Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel.

Ms. Mylène Freeman (Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel, NDP): Mr. Speaker, before I begin, I would like to let you know that I will be sharing my time with the member for Chambly—Borduas.

I am pleased to rise to speak to Bill C-21 because this gives me an opportunity to talk about how important small businesses are to me and my riding and about why we should support them.

Specialized industries and big businesses should not be the only beneficiaries of our desire to support our economy. We need to recognize that small businesses are central to our economy. I will explain why. Small businesses are one of our biggest drivers of economic growth. We have to help them thrive. Small businesses already account for nearly half of Canada's GDP, and they are responsible for close to 60% of all jobs in Canada as well as 75% of net new jobs. When the economy is in a downturn and fewer jobs are being created as we lose big companies, small businesses are the ones making a difference and creating jobs, especially in rural and remote areas. As a result, they are very important and create 75% of net new jobs.

We in the NDP believe that SMEs should be a priority for any federal government, because they directly support job creation. That is why we proposed reducing the small-business tax rate from 11% to 9% during the last federal election. That measure directly targeted SMEs. We also proposed other simple, concrete measures to help SMEs. For instance, we proposed expanding the hiring tax credit for small businesses. The Conservatives cancelled it in 2014, which was really sad to see, because it meant taking away a tax credit that created jobs and helped people enter the workforce. There are 1.3 million unemployed Canadians. Eliminating this kind of hiring credit that created jobs was a move in the wrong direction. At the same time, in the most recent budget, the Conservatives spent \$500 million to implement measures that, according to the Parliamentary Budget Officer, will create only about 800 jobs. Clearly, that is not a good investment.

Furthermore, youth unemployment is very high. It is actually double the national average. We need to take a closer look at that in order to reverse that trend. Everyone knows that our youth are Canada's future. As parliamentarians, we have to invest in their future. That is why we proposed a tax credit worth up to \$2,000 for hiring young people, in order to help businesses train young people aged 18 to 25 and provide them with good jobs.

In addition to all of that, as part of our campaign to make life more affordable, we proposed ways to reduce operating costs for our retailers and merchants, by directly tackling the anti-competitive credit card fees imposed by credit card companies. The Conservatives introduced a voluntary code of conduct recently, but that is not enough to reduce credit card transaction fees. We in the NDP are concerned about the excessive fees that businesses have to pay, since they can amount to 1, 2 or 3% of sales.

● (1635)

The exorbitant fees charged by credit card companies do not help our communities. That is money that comes directly out of our communities and will not be reinvested. A ceiling needs to be imposed to make these fees more equitable for the companies, but especially for our merchants. That would be fairer to the families who are trying to make ends meet.

These proposals truly support the entrepreneurs in my region whether they have just started their company or have been in business for decades. I travel around my riding and talk about these proposals, which are very well received by the Vallée de la Petite-Nation chamber of commerce and the chamber of commerce and industry of Deux-Montagnes, Saint-Eustache, Sainte-Marthe-sur-le-Lac, Mirabel and Argenteuil. These proposals will directly affect business owners in my riding.

In a riding like mine, a big part of the economy is based on agriculture and agri-food, and most of the business owners work in that field as well. These farmers are at the heart of our rural areas and a job creation strategy in the rural areas and small communities. I wanted to point that out because we have to think beyond taxes and red tape. We also have to think about what we can do to encourage and support our farmers.

The bill before us, Bill C-21, An Act to control the administrative burden that regulations impose on businesses, is meant to reduce red tape for businesses. The Conservatives are proposing to do that by giving more power to the Treasury Board. That is where they start to take away the SMEs' power to create jobs.

We still want to find ways to reduce the administrative burden on SMEs and allow them to focus on what they do best, namely growing their business and creating jobs. However, the NDP wants to prevent the government from eliminating rules regarding health, food safety, transportation safety, management systems and the environment. It is not unreasonable to ask the government to protect the environment, workers and our food.

We are concerned that the measures introduced to concentrate power in the Treasury Board are not steps in the right direction. We do not trust that the Conservatives will do a good job. In closing, I will provide two examples.

Government Orders

First, in the October 2013 budget implementation bill, Bill C-4, the Conservatives made changes to the Canada Labour Code in order to gut the powers of health and safety officers in federal workplaces. They are directly compromising Canadians' health and safety.

• (1640)

Second, they do not necessarily want to reduce red tape because they increased the paper burden with the Building Canada fund. We do not know how they can be trusted. When they have the opportunity to take occupational health and safety seriously, they do not do so, and when they say that they want to reduce red tape, they make more for our municipalities, which also create jobs.

For all those reasons, I cannot support this bill.

• (1645)

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the member made a great deal of reference to small businesses and how we should support them, and she referred to taxes and so forth.

Last fall the federal government came up with its so-called initiative, the small business job credit program, which in a bizarre way encouraged some small businesses to look at laying off staff.

On the other hand, the Liberal Party came up with the EI premium exemption, which was widely accepted outside of political circles as a program that would have generated tens of thousands of jobs for every region of the country. The NDP balked at the Liberal proposal back then, and we raised concerns with respect to what degree the New Democrats were committed to supporting small business.

This is a fairly small and relatively insignificant bill in terms of moving forward on dealing with regulations. However, from what I understand, the small business community has come out in support of the legislation.

My question for the member is this. When the small business community supports the legislation as a small step forward, why would the NDP not support that initiative?

[Translation]

Ms. Mylène Freeman: Mr. Speaker, unfortunately, I did not have a lot of time to consider that, but I believe that it is simply because we do not trust the Conservatives when it comes to Canadians' health and safety.

Why would we trust them to abolish regulations? We have to give SMEs more power to create jobs, but we have to do that by investing in them, as I clearly outlined in my speech. That is what SMEs really want.

I always find it interesting to hear the Liberals talk about employment insurance. We must remember that they raided the employment insurance fund. Honestly, in a riding like mine, many seasonal workers must now live with the consequences. They are told that there is no more money in the fund or that they will not have access to it, or they are treated as though they have not been looking for work. It is very insulting.

Mr. François Choquette (Drummond, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate my hon. colleague on her speech and on the excellent work she is doing for her constituents and small

businesses, as she explained. She has been travelling around her riding, which is her job, and meeting with chambers of commerce.

She talked about what would help small businesses, and it is not this little bill, which is a real joke, a total farce. It is a fraud, actually. It will not really cut red tape. Yes, we need to cut red tape, but we also need to help small businesses.

The member did a good job of explaining several concepts, and I would like her to clarify how we, the New Democrats, can help small businesses. What is the NDP's plan for helping small businesses?

Ms. Mylène Freeman: Mr. Speaker, the worst part is that the Conservatives know what they could be doing. They cancelled the hiring tax credit for small businesses. We wanted to enhance it because it would have created direct jobs.

It would be easy for the government to change the credit card fees that big corporations charge businesses, and that would have a direct impact not only on businesses but on all Canadians.

Regulation is not bad in and of itself, but the Conservatives see it that way. Unfortunately, that attitude has gotten us into some difficult situations. For example, if the rail safety reports produced by the Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities had been implemented, then what happened in Lac-Mégantic could have been avoided.

This aversion to regulations is actually a threat to the health and safety of Canadians. We have reached the point where we can no longer trust the Conservatives. We have no choice but to oppose this bill. Unfortunately, the Conservatives are allergic to regulations. This should not be about getting rid of regulations; it should be about finding the best way to protect Canadians and create jobs at the same time.

• (1650)

Mr. Matthew Dubé (Chambly—Borduas, NDP): Mr. Speaker I also have the pleasure of speaking to Bill C-21, which addresses the administrative and financial burden imposed on our small and medium-sized businesses. This is quite clearly a matter that affects all of us, because we all have such businesses in our communities.

In my constituency of Chambly—Borduas, I belong to two chambers of commerce and industry: the Chambre de commerce et d'industrie du bassin de Chambly, and the Chambre de commerce et de l'industrie de la Vallée-du-Richelieu. The latter is an example of one of the newest and fastest-growing chambers of commerce in Quebec, and indicates what a strong upswing we are currently enjoying.

With respect to the Chambly chamber of commerce, we also know that with assistance from the Quartier Dix30 centre, good work is being done to promote the services available in the regions and municipalities in the Chambly basin.

Government Orders

When you talk to these people, you can be sure that they will all tell you the same thing, regardless of where they come from, their riding or the circumstances on the ground. They all want us to reduce the tax burden and cut red tape. If we are going to do that, however, we have to do it right. When I talk about doing it right, the example that comes to mind does not involve small and medium-sized businesses, but it says a lot about the approach taken by the Conservatives. I am referring to the report of the parliamentary budget officer of the time, which talked about cuts the Conservatives had made. They said they had to reduce the size and cost of government. They talked about austerity, and so on. We realized, and the parliamentary budget officer demonstrated this, that because of these cuts, we reduced services to citizens but did not really reduce the size of government, improve its efficiency, or actually reduce costs all that much.

When we consider this example, we realize that we all want the same thing. We all want to reduce an unnecessary burden. At the same time, however, it has to be done in an intelligent and effective way. We supported Bill C-21 at second reading and it went to committee. Some 12 amendments were proposed, but none was accepted. The very purpose of those amendments was to make our approach more coherent.

As my colleague from Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel so rightly put it, regulation in itself is not a bad thing. We just need regulation that is intelligent. For example, when we talk about the safety of a company's employees, the safety of Canadians, health, protection of the environment and all such matters, these are things we want to improve, things that must be in place and must be properly managed and regulated. However, at the same time, we have to find ways of reducing the tax burden.

The problem with Bill C-21 is not only that there is no oversight of those issues, but also that the bill gives the president of the Treasury Board too many discretionary powers. From what we have seen, the current President of the Treasury Board is incapable of making good decisions that effectively reduce the existing burden of our small and medium-sized businesses.

In terms of reducing the tax burden, it is important to raise a number of points to confirm and explain the NDP's approach to this issue. I had an opportunity to raise these points with the *Chambre de commerce et d'industrie du bassin de Chambly*. About 100 people attended a conference that I offered to the entrepreneurs of part of my riding to explain our approach. First and foremost, this approach involves reducing taxes for small and medium-sized businesses. We often talk about this, and it is extremely important.

The example that proves that we can walk the talk is Manitoba. After five majority NDP governments, the tax rate for small and medium-sized businesses is 0%. That speaks volumes about our approach. We realize that they are the economic driver of our communities. We must legislate or not legislate—or, in this case, impose or not impose legislation—accordingly.

• (1655)

The other issue is the hiring tax credit. This measure was introduced by this government, but unfortunately it was cut in the last budget. We wanted to see a new and improved version of it. We even used it as a basis for a proposal that I had the chance to make a

little over a year ago with my colleague from Parkdale—High Park. We proposed a similar tax credit that also applied to the hiring of young people. After all, there is a problem not just with youth unemployment, but also with youth underemployment.

A Statistics Canada report indicated last year that an increasing number of well-educated young people are struggling to find work that matches their qualifications and talents. We proposed providing a tax credit to SMEs to create new jobs, not just replace their employees with younger workers.

The credit sought to encourage growing businesses to hire and train young workers, who would become contributing members of our communities and our economy for the future. This is just as important for the SMEs as it is for everyone in our communities.

After all, we can see a domino effect among young people. When families of consumers settle outside urban centres, that leads to new businesses and new schools in the area and to all sorts of positive effects that contribute to our communities. I have seen this in my constituency, which has some of the fastest-growing municipalities in Quebec. There are growing numbers of young families where I live.

We are not just talking about a tax credit to reduce the tax and administrative burden on small and medium-sized businesses; we are also talking about the notorious credit card fees. We talk about that all the time. The Conservative government is happy to rely on a voluntary code of conduct for these companies, which means that we have to rely on the good faith of these companies. That very rarely translates into concrete results.

The measures the NDP is proposing are the result of consultations with the small and medium-sized businesses that come to see us in our constituencies and in Ottawa. They come to see the NDP members and the members from all the other parties to tell us that this code of conduct is not working.

This is a concrete way of minimizing the burden that would not require major changes and that the government could implement very quickly. It would put substantial shares of profits into the pockets of small and medium-sized business, which in turn would contribute to job creation and economic growth in our regions and our communities.

There is also the question of the different employment insurance schemes. Here again, we saw a ridiculous proposal from the government. It proposed astronomical spending to create very few jobs, while at the same time dipping into the employment insurance fund to finance this measure, as the Liberals did before the Conservatives.

The employment insurance fund belongs to the employees and employers. Spending those funds in such a cavalier manner for the sake of good headlines on the eve of an election is not a very intelligent approach. They tell us that this bill is a step in the right direction, when all it does is give more powers to the President of the Treasury Board.

Government Orders

I will repeat what some of my colleagues have already said. We can no longer trust in the Conservatives' approach. We have a plan for small and medium-sized businesses. When I interact with entrepreneurs, because I participate regularly in the activities of the chambers of commerce in my constituency, they tell me that they fully support that approach. We are going to continue to fight for it in the House.

• (1700)

We cannot support an approach that so far has not worked and has not produced the desired results. That is why we put forward our proposals.

[*English*]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the member made a good point when he talked about the importance of regulations, whether they be health and safety or environmental regulations. Health, safety and the environment are important reasons why we have regulations.

Many regulations complement Canada's ability to export products. We spend a lot of time talking in this place about small businesses. Regulations with respect to the quality of our food products enable us to export much more. There is no doubt that regulations are of great value.

My question for the member relates to the literally tens of thousands of regulations. Surely to goodness the member would acknowledge that at least one regulation has become somewhat dated. From what I understand, the small business community in Canada has tentatively looked at the legislation and has said that it is not perfect. It is far from perfect. The member said that he supported the bill at second reading to try to get some amendments made to it.

The bill is a small step and one we are not overly encouraged about. Why would the member oppose the bill if it is at the very least a small step that small business seems to like?

Mr. Matthew Dubé: Mr. Speaker, the member is absolutely right. We could definitely do a lot to alleviate some of the burden on small and medium-sized businesses.

There are some important regulations. The problem we have is that when we talk about safety, security or those good regulations, for lack of a better way of putting it, we have to regulate intelligently. There is no reason to trust the Conservatives. The President of the Treasury Board up to this point has not proven himself able to appropriately deal with more power.

The best example in the legislation is the one-for-one rule where one rule is removed for every new rule. We are being asked as legislators to take it on blind faith that the one-for-one rule will be applied appropriately when there is no guarantee that the government will not touch rules and regulations as it has done in the past, whether it was with respect to rail safety or food safety, issues that affect our everyday lives. No small or medium-sized business, no constituent of mine and definitely no constituent of any member of the House would see us get rid of those rules and regulations.

We definitely agree that something needs to be done about regulations. However, we will not find the proper solutions by letting the President of the Treasury Board go nuts on this. We will find the

proper solutions by putting forward concrete proposals that will really alleviate the burden on small and medium-sized businesses in our country.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Djaouida Sellah (Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague and almost-neighbour from Chambly—Borduas.

I know that he works hard, since I have seen him first-hand, and I thank him for his relevant and logical speech.

In their 2014 budget, the Conservatives acknowledged that the transaction fees imposed on Canadian businesses were among the highest in the world and they promised to take action.

The result is that credit card companies only have to take measures on a voluntary basis. We have learned over the years that the Conservatives love self-regulation and allowing businesses to implement their own measures.

This shows that the Conservatives do not plan on standing up for SMEs and Canadian consumers when it could be detrimental to Bay Street interests.

The NDP called for the creation of an ombudsman to regulate the credit card fees that card issuers charge merchants.

Why does my colleague think that the Conservatives will not accept that suggestion?

• (1705)

Mr. Matthew Dubé: Mr. Speaker, as I said in my speech, it would be extremely simple to require credit card companies to eliminate these absurd fees charged to small and medium-sized businesses. It would not take any time, it would not cost much, and an incredible amount of money could be saved. Instead of going into the pockets of the credit card companies, this money would go back to our small and medium-sized businesses and, therefore, to our communities. That is the NDP's vision and that is what we are suggesting.

[*English*]

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is with great honour that I stand here to represent the people of Timmins—James Bay.

We are dealing with yet another Conservative game of shadow boxing; that the Conservatives actually understand the economy. It is fascinating that they are talking about helping small business when they cannot even bring a budget into the House because they have stripped the fiscal capacity of the country to the bone. They were going to allow people, through their income-splitting scheme, to claim it even though it had not passed in law. Everything was dependent in their world view on the high oil prices. The government has banked the entire economy, like a drunken gambler, on the roulette wheel of commodities, not understanding that commodities go up and down. A balanced national economy can withstand those. We have done this in Canada for the last 150 years, but we have had a government that has been completely unbalanced.

Government Orders

We saw all the members from the 401 area stand again and again and praise the tar sands, while the manufacturing sector was going down the toilet. Now the Conservatives have suddenly discovered the manufacturing sector.

We are talking about red tape and this chimera the Conservatives have created, that they will slay the red dragon of red tape.

It reminds me of H.L. Mencken. I am sure he is probably glad he is not alive to see that group in action. He said that for every complex problem, there was an answer that was clear and simple and was wrong. We could probably use that to define the Conservative Party over the last hundred years, but definitely under the current government.

Let us look at the issue that for every new regulation we will strip an old regulation. It sounds so simplistic, but what it speaks to is incompetence, the incompetence of the ministers in the various departments who are not overseeing the regulations right now. They think the Muskoka minister is somehow going to be able to handle the thousands and thousands of regulations, and we should trust him to cut through this.

Folks back home will remember that the Muskoka minister was the man who took \$50 million in border infrastructure money, when he had only won by 14 votes, and blew it on pork barrel projects of zero significance. Then when he was asked for the paperwork, he claimed there was none. He took taxpayer money, spent it on the gazebos, the sunken boats, the lighthouses, where there are no waterways, created a fake lake, even though we had no need for one, and then said that he did not have any paperwork, which was not true. It was false. There was lots of paperwork. He made the paperwork up himself out of his constituency office and he ran it through the municipalities.

He misrepresented the spending of money. However, under the government, that kind of malfeasance and incompetence is not punished; it is celebrated. He was given the job of being the oversight for all government spending based on that behaviour.

Do not get me wrong, getting rid of red tape that is meaningless is sometimes very important. I live in the little mining town of Cobalt. Our neighbour is Haileybury where all the mine managers live. It had on the books for many years that it was against the law to walk in the streets of Haileybury with a lunch pail. That was to keep the miners from coming and using the local watering holes in Haileybury. That law was never used and it sat on the law books in the municipality for decades and decades. Most Canadians did not realize it until Paul Soles pointed it out on *This is the Law* in the 1970s. Maybe they got rid of it then. We should get rid of those kinds of regulations.

We would believe that if we had a government where we had ministers who were actually competent and took responsibility, they would be overseeing their departments regularly to see what kind of red tape was no longer needed, such as what has become redundant and where there are two regulations that are working at cross purposes. However, they are not interested in that. They are interested in creating these sideshow chimeras to take attention from the fact that they have mismanaged the economy substantially.

It seems the Conservatives have put their poor finance minister in a bag and have him hidden away. He cannot explain why he cannot add up the money, because he was counting on the high oil prices. Now they are saying that they are going to help small business. We know that is not true.

● (1710)

Let us look at the Conservatives' idea of red tape. Red tape is a particular buzzword for the neocons. They love this. They use red tape all the time, but they never like to talk about the effects of the red tape.

For example, it was under Mike Harris, their great guru, that they were going to privatize Ontario Hydro, which helped create the Province of Ontario as an industrial powerhouse. However, Mike Harris had it in his head that it was brilliant idea to privatize it. He blew it so badly that we are still picking up the pieces. Perhaps the only people on the planet who could mismanage a hydro resource worse than Mike Harris are the Kathleen Wynne Liberals.

We can talk to any senior citizen in the Province of Ontario on the mismanagement of hydro under the present Liberals. It is so corrupt that they spent \$1 billion moving two gas plants to save three lazy Liberals their seats. Imagine what a billion dollars would do for the Ontario health economy. There was the privatization guru.

Let us remember 2008, the horrific listeriosis outbreak. How many people died in that outbreak? I believe it was 22 people with 57 confirmed cases. From the internal reports, we learned that the Canadian Food and Inspection Agency, under the government, was being told that it was no longer going to be ensuring the safety of the plants. That was red tape. The government was going to allow the companies to look after themselves, and people died.

Speaking of incompetence, what did the agriculture minister have to say to families who died because the government chose to trust the cattle and beef giants over public safety? He had lots of jokes to make about listeriosis, he thought it was funny. We remember what Conservatives did with their cutting of the red tape.

We have seen debate after debate in the House. I remember in previous Parliaments, when Bill Blaikie was here, there was a brilliant idea, which came from the Liberals originally, to let the rail companies police themselves. We were told that we did not need the oversight, that we could trust the rail companies. A cheesy little rail company running past Montreal and not following all the rules caused a huge rail disaster in Lac-Mégantic and people died because of the lack of oversight. That was the kind of stuff Conservatives were praising, getting rid of red tape.

The Transportation Safety Board came out with its report on Lac-Mégantic and expressed its deep concern about the need for government to have oversight. Speaking of incompetence, the member for Essex was out there blowing off the need for safety, blowing off the need for the report and then saying that he had not even bothered to read the report. People died because of these decisions and he had not bothered to read the report. We know what Conservatives think of red tape.

Government Orders

Some of the newer neocons have their sense of history which begins in 2008 or 2011. I remember when they were talking about the deregulation of the banks when Citibank was the future and Canada could not compete with all our little banks. We were the economic backwater. That was the scheme the Liberals were totally into at the time. We would allow banks to make investments, allow them to take our savings and speculate on the market because that was the way the world was going.

I remember how members were laughing at the NDP, the nanny state NDP, afraid to compete. We were saying that we needed regulations for the banks to protect people's savings. That is a fundamental principle. We stopped the deregulation. When the rest of the world that had followed the neocon-neoliberal route went down the economic toilet, it was staggering to see Jim Flaherty standing and talking about how glad he was that we had regulation. The Conservatives ridiculed regulation as needless red tape, but it saved our economy at the time.

What is some of the other red tape the Conservatives hate? They get backbenchers to stand on their hind legs and beat their chests about the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. That is red tape to them. The Supreme Court is more red tape. God, they hate the Supreme Court ensuring the rule of law interferes with everything.

• (1715)

We have a justice minister who is so incompetent. Speaking of the incompetence of this world, this man has had more recalls of legislation than Ford had with the Pinto. He ignores the legal reviews of legislation, brings it into the House time and time again, and is told it will not pass a charter challenge at the Supreme Court. He bangs his head against the Supreme Court and then is outraged when it says it will not pass a charter challenge and he has to return it. One would think he would be chastened. In the private sector, he would probably be gone if he had that many recalls, but no. Conservatives stand, beat their chests, and go on about that outrageous Supreme Court defending the rule of law.

I see my friend has just entered the chamber, Mr. Enemy of Red Tape, who is going to allow new anti-terrorism measures and all manner of control to CSIS with no oversight, because it is red tape that is protecting the private rights of Canadian citizens, this needless red tape. That is staggering. Conservatives say not to worry, the oversight body is already able to do the job, the oversight body that the Prime Minister appointed, Arthur Porter. Is he still in a Panamanian jail for gun running, money laundering, or fraud? He was a friend of the Prime Minister. He is just one of the many criminals with whom the Prime Minister has chosen to hang around.

Mr. Carol Hughes: Bruce Carson.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Mr. Speaker, Bruce Carson is another well-known criminal.

Arthur Porter was the man who the Conservatives say was able to oversee CSIS, as they allow it all manner of extra rules that have not been in place before. This is not to say that we do not necessarily need more tools to go after terrorism, but we need the rule of law. To them, that is needless red tape.

Who else was overseeing CSIS? It was the northern gateway lobbyist. What was the lobbyist's name? Chuck Strahl. Chuck Strahl

gets parachuted in because he is a party favourite and does not tell anybody he is an Enbridge lobbyist. They have northern gateway, so all the Conservatives are standing and denouncing these terrorists, who as far as I could tell were just ordinary citizens of British Columbia. Was Chuck Strahl getting briefed on the northern gateway, the supposed threat, while he was overseeing CSIS? These are questions. This is the government's idea of red tape.

Getting back to this bill, we see Conservatives stand to speak about red tape all the time, but they do not deliver. I ran a small business for 10 years, and one of the biggest issues of red tape I had to deal with was the Conservatives' beauty of GST-HST, where they had moved the burden from the large corporate bodies down to individuals and small companies. I know that as the economy is tanking and people are trying to get back into the workplace and find other work, HST has to be collected starting at \$30,000. That was the rule back in the 1990s.

If a man has lost his job or his wife is wanting to get back into the workforce to do some consulting, hairdressing, web design, or the husband wants to do web design, these are micro businesses that can be grown into small business that may start to employ people, but they have to start paying the HST at \$30,000. People really cannot do much at \$30,000. I know people who told me they wanted to start small businesses, but if they were only making \$32,000 or \$33,000, the administrative burden of dealing with the HST actually was not worth it. It simply was not worth going back into the workforce to do that.

A reasonable government would raise the minimum on HST, say, to \$50,000 over 20 years, from the 1990s to today. That would be a reasonable move. People could get themselves established. They could find out whether their home project could become viable, whether it is making stained glass, crocheting, or whatever, and then a small business gets established.

With the New Democrats' idea of helping small business, one of the big issues we have been pushing is credit card fees. Talk about needless impediments to small business. Ask any small business owner, such as a taxi cab driver or someone running a small restaurant, about the credit card fees. We will never see the Conservatives deal with this.

Not to speak ill of the dead, but I remember when Jim Flaherty stood and said he was going to go to the banks and deal with all of this. He came back like a chastened altar boy. He was just going to leave it to them.

Government Orders

• (1720)

This is where regulation is important. These sectors of the economy have to be regulated because, if basic rules are not in place, people get ripped off. Government needs to ensure regulation on the credit cards. One of the other things was that they deregulated cable and phone rates. We have among the highest cellphone rates in the world, but they believe that, if they just leave it to business, it will do it. We believe that certain regulations are important, to protect the market and to protect the ability of consumers to have fair play.

In terms of supporting small business, we would say in a time of economic uncertainty, when the Conservatives have literally bet the entire Canadian house on Fort Mac, that we need to ensure that small business can innovate and do its job. Let us drop the tax rate from 11% to 10% to 9%, because we know this money would go directly back into the economy.

Small business reinvests that money all the time, whereas the current government put in large corporate across-the-board tax cuts, believing the theory of trickle-down. We know the only real thing that does trickle down in economics, and it is not money. The Conservatives cut that tax rate on the large corporations, and any economist will say that we have dead money. It is money that the large corporations have taken out, that they are giving in CEO bonuses or putting offshore, that they are not reinvesting. If the Conservatives are going to work with business, they should offer an incentive for innovation. An innovation tax credit makes sense. What we are dealing with here is a bill that would offer nothing to small business, except the false image that they are going to deal with the needless regulations.

I think back to when I was documenting the life of people in my region in terms of the hard-rock mining industry. If they go underground in Stobie Mine in Sudbury, or go underground in Timmins, wherever they walk there will be signs that say not to put one's hands here or not to stand there. An old miner said to me one day that every one of those signs and regulations was paid for in blood. They would only put up a sign telling them not to do something if someone had been seriously injured, not just once but usually two or three or four times, or killed. Those regulations were important. We saw in the mining sector again and again this effort of self-regulation. Allowing companies to do it does not work. There are certain regulations that are important.

How do we deal with the issues of meaningless red tape, contradictory red tape, red tape that has become redundant as the years go on? I would put it back to my colleagues on the government side that this is where they have to ensure a standard that the ministers are going to meet. That is ministerial responsibility. It used to be in the ministerial code. They quietly took out ministerial responsibility. I find that staggering. It is as if they did not want to be on the hook for promoting incompetence. If they are competent, then they will be overseeing their department and regularly bringing forward recommendations of where regulations need to be removed and replaced with ones that work.

What we are dealing with here is just another shadow bill. It is shadow boxing with the economy, when the real issue we are facing is that the Conservatives have stripped the fiscal capacity of this country to the bare bone. The Conservatives do not know what the

numbers are. We are getting contradictory numbers in terms of this budget: if they are going to be doing cuts, if they are going to be going into the contingency fund. The Conservatives do not seem to know. They are playing games with the economy, which is not the kind of message for a G7 nation to send.

At a time when we are seeing increasing economic uncertainty in Canada's west, we need to be able to tell small business people that we are going to work with them to kick-start the economy so we can balance the economy and get off this one-industry-only obsession and ensure we have a diversified economy. That is where the New Democrats are coming down on the issue. We would drop the small-business tax rate from 11% to 10% to 9%. The New Democrats would ensure that, when business people make a capital investment, they can write it off quicker. That would help manufacturing.

Some of these ideas have been in previous budgets. The Conservatives and the Liberals have had similar things in the past. However, they have given them up; they are not interested and they have moved on. We say these are the kinds of incentives that we need now, at a time of economic uncertainty.

I am, as always, proud to represent the people of Timmins—James Bay, but less proud to have to deal with bills that simply do not address the needs of Canadians.

• (1725)

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, the member's speech was wide ranging and occasionally touched on the subject of the bill.

I was particularly interested in the Arthur Porter questions, and although they may have been asked rhetorically, I thought I would answer them.

Yes, the person trusted by the Conservatives to take care of intelligence oversight is still in a Panamanian jail. Yes, he is still an officer of the Privy Council.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Mr. Speaker, that was an editorial interjection that I do not mind.

How is it, in God's name, that Arthur Porter could be a member of the Privy Council? How is it? However, of course one is used to hanging out with criminals, like Bruce Carson, a convicted felon.

Ladies and gentlemen back home should ask themselves how a convicted fraud artist could get past all the security checks to be the Prime Minister's inner adviser. The Prime Minister likes hanging out with crooks.

He appointed Patrick Brazeau, and there were red flags all over Patrick Brazeau when he was appointed. Everybody knew this was not going to end well. It was Kory Teneycke who said that all these partisan ankle-biters were attacking a great man like Patrick Brazeau. They loved Patrick Brazeau. They threw their arms around him. They used to get him out at all their fundraisers, and then suddenly he was toxic. With Mike Duffy it was the same thing.

Government Orders

Arthur Porter, of all people; he is in a Panamanian jail. He could actually still call up his buddy the Prime Minister to ask for a secret security briefing as a member of the Privy Council.

This is the kind of madhouse show that the Conservatives are running over there.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth (Kitchener Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I know that the opposition, particularly the Leader of the Opposition, finds that it now wants to be best friends to small business.

I have a note that the Canadian Federation of Independent Business said:

The federal government is showing tremendous leadership in implementing its ambitious red tape reforms.

I would like to hear from the member opposite about whether he agrees with the Canadian Federation of Independent Business on the government's efforts in wrestling red tape to the ground.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Mr. Speaker, it is amazing that my colleagues have to redact so much of what their witnesses say.

The member should have actually read the full statement from Canadian Federation of Independent Business, about its concern about the hiring tax credit, which the New Democrats are supporting, and which it is not. If the member wants to stand up and promote a bill that is smaller than a fig leaf when it comes to economic credibility and economic defence, he may.

The real issue is that the federation agrees with New Democrats on the issue of the small business hiring tax credit. This is the issue at hand.

My hon. colleagues can stand up there and say whatever they want, but the fact is that they have bet the bank on the tar sands and they blew it. The Prime Minister made a promise that we were going to be this economic super power and he was going to force the pipelines through and cut all the environmental protection.

What did the government get out of that? It got zero, because when the law was not followed and when the proper regulations were not used, the government did not build trust. If there is no trust from members of the Canadian public, they will not allow these super projects. After eight long years of bluster, the Conservatives have blown it.

• (1730)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, there has been a lot of discussion about small business and what is in the best interest of small business.

To highlight that fact, we did have the opportunity last fall to get engaged on different forms of tax credits. One of the issues that the Liberal Party espoused back then was the idea of the EI premium exemption, and I made reference to this earlier. It would have generated tens of thousands of jobs in all regions of our country.

It is something that is consistent with the fact that the Liberal Party has recognized the valuable role that small businesses play.

When we talk about the legislation we are looking at today, as has been pointed out, the small business community does recognize it

has some value in terms of supporting it. Therefore, at least in part, we in the Liberal Party do see it as a relatively small step.

The government could have done a whole lot more. I cite the EI premium exemption as a minor example that would have had a much more profound and positive impact.

Why would the NDP support this bill in second reading and then, when it comes to third reading, oppose it, when in fact the small business community recognizes that there is some value to passing it?

Mr. Charlie Angus: Mr. Speaker, my hon. colleague is correct on one part of it. It is a typical Liberal plan to use the EI fund for any of its hijinks games.

The EI fund is an insurance fund. It belongs to the people who pay into it. It does not belong to the Liberals' smoke doctors in the backroom who are always trying to come up with some shiny bauble.

We looked at it, we brought it to committee, and we realized it was just a dumb idea.

It is not nearly as vicious, though, as the \$57 billion that the Liberals took out of EI. They used the EI fund, they stripped it bare, and they called that an example of Paul Martin's great visionary economics. Now they want to come around with this idea that this was going to create tens of thousands of jobs. It is such a fiction, and it is an unfair fiction when in some parts of this country, seven out of 10 people who pay into EI are not able to get their own insurance money back. The Liberal Party would take their insurance money, the money that they paid into EI, and use it for their schemes to promote the Liberal leader, the member for Papineau. That is unconscionable.

We will always stand up to defend the rights of people to have the money they put in. Just like their pension, just like their EI, these are things to be protected, not to be played with.

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusksing, NDP): Mr. Speaker, with regard to red tape, the public service of Canada has basically indicated that when regulations need to be changed, it has the opportunity to change them. The format is already there. It is not about removing regulations from environment or removing them from health and safety. Those need to be protected.

However, when we are looking at red tape, I think it is extremely important to look at how the Conservatives have put so much red tape on the Building Canada fund that it is very difficult for small communities to access those funds.

I know the member has a lot of small communities in his constituency, just as there are in Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusksing, and I am sure that he could talk about the red tape that they have to go through to try to get a pittance of the money that is available.

● (1735)

Mr. Charlie Angus: Mr. Speaker, that is an excellent example of the sort of monkey funhouse mirror that we see with the Conservatives. From a distance, they say they are going to clear red tape and make government simpler, yet when people try to use government programs, they find that working their way through them is exceedingly complicated and arcane. The Building Canada fund is an excellent example. I remember working for the Algonquin Nation before I was elected, dealing with small hiring projects for young people, and the burden of following through every single week was actually not worth the value of the grant for hiring people, because we had to do so much reporting. Although these were fairly simple projects, this is a government obsession. The Conservatives are not making things simpler; they are actually making things harder.

We can ask any veteran how easy it was to access services when they were being turned away, or we can ask how easy it is for people to get a disability tax credit or benefit. It is a straightforward thing, and they are being turned away.

The Conservatives are very interested in what they believe is reducing red tape, so if it is Suncor, the Conservatives will strip all the rules that they need to get it through. However, if a veteran needs access or a single mother is looking to get basic support for her child, they will jump through hoop after hoop. When a municipality is filling out these forms, we hear about it all the time. That is the meaningless red tape that we should be targeting.

The Deputy Speaker: Is the House ready for the question?

Some hon. members: Question.

The Deputy Speaker: The question is on the motion.

Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: On division.

The Deputy Speaker: I declare the motion carried on division. (Motion agreed to, bill read the third time and passed)

The Deputy Speaker: The government House leader is rising on a point.

Hon. Peter Van Loan: Mr. Speaker, I do not think that it is the case that you can simply declare it on division if it is not the view of the House that it was on division and the House is not consenting to it.

The Deputy Speaker: To the government House leader, although it sounds almost as though this is an appeal of my ruling, I heard “on division”. No one stood up. There was only one person who stood up on this side that I saw, so my determination is that it passed on division.

That is my determination. Does the government House leader wish to rise on another point? If not, the member for Burlington is rising on a point.

Mr. Mike Wallace: Mr. Speaker, I think you will find, if you ask for it, unanimous consent to see the clock at 5:52 p.m. to allow for the bells to ring for us to begin the vote tonight.

Business of Supply

● (1740)

The Deputy Speaker: Does the member have unanimous consent to see the clock at 5:52 p.m.?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

* * *

[*Translation*]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR FISHERIES INVESTMENT FUND

The House resumed from February 2 consideration of the motion.

The Deputy Speaker: The House will now proceed to the taking of the deferred recorded division on the motion of the hon. member for St. John's South—Mount Pearl relating to the business of supply.

Call in the members.

● (1815)

[*English*]

(The House divided on the motion, which was negated on the following division:)

(*Division No. 320*)

YEAS

Members

Andrews	Angus
Atamanenko	Aubin
Ayala	Bélanger
Bellavance	Bennett
Bevington	Blanchette
Blanchette-Lamothe	Boivin
Boulerice	Boutin-Sweet
Brahmi	Brison
Brosseau	Caron
Cash	Charlton
Chicoine	Chisholm
Choquette	Christopherson
Cleary	Comartin
Côté	Cotler
Crowder	Cullen
Cuzner	Davies (Vancouver Kingsway)
Davies (Vancouver East)	Day
Dewar	Dion
Dionne Labelle	Donnelly
Doré Lefebvre	Dubé
Dubourg	Duncan (Etobicoke North)
Dusseau	Easter
Eyking	Freeland
Freeman	Fry
Gameau	Genest
Giguère	Goodale
Gravelle	Grogulé
Harris (Scarborough Southwest)	Harris (St. John's East)
Hsu	Hughes
Hyer	Julian
Kellway	Lamoureux
Lapointe	Latendresse
Laverdière	LeBlanc (Beauséjour)
LeBlanc (LaSalle—Émard)	Leslie
Liu	MacAulay
Mai	Marston
Masse	Mathysen
May	McCallum
McGuinty	McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood)
Michaud	Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue)
Morin (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord)	Morin (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine)
Morin (Laurentides—Labelle)	Morin (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot)
Mourani	Mulcair
Nantel	Nash
Nicholls	Nunez-Melo

Private Members' Business

Papillon	Péclet
Perreault	Plamondon
Quach	Rafferty
Rankin	Rathgeber
Regan	Rousseau
Scarpaleggia	Scott
Sellah	Sgro
Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor)	
Sims (Newton—North Delta)	
Sitsabaesan	St-Denis
Stewart	Sullivan
Toone	Tremblay
Trudeau	Turmel
Valeriotte	Vaughan— 116

NAYS

Members

Ablonczy	Adams
Adler	Aglukkaq
Albas	Albrecht
Alexander	Allen (Tobique—Mactaquac)
Allison	Ambler
Ambrose	Anders
Anderson	Armstrong
Aspin	Baird
Barlow	Bateman
Benoit	Bergen
Bezan	Blaney
Block	Boughen
Braid	Breitkreuz
Brown (Newmarket—Aurora)	Brown (Barrie)
Bruinooge	Butt
Calandra	Calkins
Cannan	Carmichael
Carrie	Chisu
Chong	Clarke
Clement	Crockett
Daniel	Davidson
Dechert	Dreeschen
Duncan (Vancouver Island North)	Dykstra
Eglinski	Falk
Fantino	Fast
Findlay (Delta—Richmond East)	Fletcher
Galipeau	Gallant
Gill	Glover
Goguen	Goldring
Goodyear	Gosal
Gourde	Grewal
Harper	Harris (Cariboo—Prince George)
Hawn	Hayes
Hillyer	Hoback
Holder	James
Kamp (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge—Mission)	Keddy (South Shore—St. Margaret's)
Kennedy (Calgary Southeast)	Kent
Kerr	Komarnicki
Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings)	Lake
Lauzon	Lebel
Leef	Leitch
Lemieux	Leung
Lizon	Lobb
Lukiwski	Lunney
MacKay (Central Nova)	MacKenzie
Maguire	Mayes
McColeman	McLeod
Menegakis	Miller
Moore (Port Moody—Westwood—Port Coquitlam)	
Moore (Fundy Royal)	
Norlock	Oliver
O'Neill Gordon	Opitz
Paradis	Payne
Perkins	Poillievre
Preston	Raït
Rajotte	Reid
Rempel	Richards
Rickford	Saxton
Schellenberger	Shea
Shipley	Shory
Smith	Sopuck
Sorenson	Stanton
Strahl	Sweet
Tilson	Toet
Trost	Trottier

Truppe	Uppal
Valcourt	Van Kesteren
Van Loan	Wallace
Warawa	Warkentin
Watson	Weston (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country)
Weston (Saint John)	
Williamson	Wilks
Woodworth	Wong
Young (Oakville)	Yelich
Yurdiga	Young (Vancouver South)
	Zimmer— 148

PAIRED

Nil

The Speaker: I declare the motion defeated.

* * *

VICTIMS BILL OF RIGHTS ACT

BILL C-32—NOTICE OF TIME ALLOCATION MOTION

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I must advise that an agreement has not been reached under the provisions of Standing Orders 78(1) or 78(2) concerning the proceedings at report stage and third reading of Bill C-32, an act to enact the Canadian victims bill of rights and to amend certain Acts

Under the provisions of Standing Order 78(3), I give notice that a minister of the crown will propose at the next sitting a motion to allot a specific number of days or hours for the consideration and disposal of proceedings at those stages.

This important bill, the victims bill of rights act, has already been debated eight different days in the House. This motion will ensure a ninth and a tenth day.

● (1820)

The Speaker: It being 6:20 p.m., the House will now proceed to the consideration of private members' business as listed on today's order paper.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

[English]

REFORM ACT, 2014

The House proceeded to the consideration of Bill C-586, an act to amend the Canada Elections Act and the Parliament of Canada Act (candidacy and caucus reforms), as reported (with amendments) from the committee.

Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC) moved that Bill, as amended, be concurred in.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The question is on the motion. Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): When shall the bill be read the third time? By leave, now?

Private Members' Business

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. Michael Chong moved that the bill be read a third time and passed.

He said: Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise today to debate Bill C-586, the reform act.

I would first like to thank the members of the procedure and House affairs committee for their work on this bill with respect to all the witnesses they heard from and all the testimony they received. In particular, I want to thank the chair of that committee, the member for Elgin—Middlesex—London, for helping shepherd the bill through committee before the Christmas adjournment and reporting it back to the House as soon as possible after we resumed sitting in January. Therefore, I thank all members of the committee for their work in that regard.

As was mentioned at report stage, the bill has been amended. However, I put it to the House that the bill remains true to the principles upon which it was based when I originally introduced it last April.

• (1825)

[*Translation*]

The amended bill incorporates the same principles as the original. It makes it possible to give the responsibility for nominations back to the riding associations; it stipulates that caucuses must vote to choose their chair and to expel members; and it sets out the rules that a caucus must follow for a leadership review.

[*English*]

The bill in front of us, as amended, does keep to the principles of the original bill.

There has been much debate about the bill and the amendments to it. To those who would say that the bill should not have been amended, I say this. The bill, as amended, is not perfect but it is still very good. In this case, if not amended, the bill would not pass the House. The important point for people to know is that in this case perfection would have been the enemy of the good, because it is clear, and I think all members of the House will acknowledge, that had the bill not been amended it would not have any chance of passage through the House of Commons or the Senate. As it stands before us today, as amended, the bill has a good chance of being passed through the House, through the Senate, and becoming law before the dissolution of Parliament and the next general election.

I would like to take some time to dwell on what the amended bill would do. For the first time in 45 years, since October 1970, the bill would remove the statutory requirement that party leaders approve party candidates in general elections. It would also mandate that after each general election, each House of Commons caucus, as its first item of business, would vote on the rules that govern that party caucus. In other words, after the next general election, MPs will be given the vote in respect of their role as elected members of caucus in this Parliament. With that vote, elected MPs can choose to empower themselves or choose to give that power to party leaders. If the bill becomes law, our first item of official business when we first meet as party caucuses will be to vote either to adopt, reject, or

modify four sets of rules that will govern party caucuses, the first being the election and removal of the caucus chair, the second being the expulsion or readmission of caucus members, the third being the review and removal of the party leader, and the fourth being the election of the interim leader.

Throughout the life of this Parliament there have been examples of these rules being utilized in the last four years. However, they have never been clear in their exercise and seem largely based on circumstance rather than clear guidelines and clearly defined rules.

The bill would be a significant change from the status quo in removing a party leader's veto in the Canada Elections Act, which has been in place since October 1970, and the empowerment of caucuses to decide, as their first order of business after each and every general election, how they will structure and govern themselves.

I would like to dwell a bit on why I believe this legislation, as amended, is so important.

It is clear that we have a problem in Ottawa. We have a problem in Parliament. We have a problem in the House of Commons. This should not be news to anyone. The fact of the matter is that over the last number of decades, barrels of ink have been spilled documenting this problem. The problem quite simply is the following.

There has been a change in our Westminster parliamentary system of government, a change away from a legislature and a House of Commons that was empowered by Robert Baldwin and Louis-Hippolyte La Fontaine, a change away from the principles of responsible government that the Governor in Council was not accountable back to colonial masters in London but rather to an elected legislature in this House of Commons.

Those rule changes have created a fundamental problem, and that fundamental problem is the centralization of power in party leaders. This problem is not the result of any one party or any one leader. There is plenty of blame to spread around in this regard. It is not a problem that has been in the making in recent years, or even the last decade. This problem has been decades in the making. I referenced October 1970. It was one little change innocently taken in that year that amended the Canada Elections Act and gave party leaders the unprecedented authority to approve party candidates in general elections. Today, to my knowledge, there is no other western democracy where party leaders by law have the power to approve or to veto party candidates. It is an astounding power that we have given to party leaders, and this is just one of a myriad of examples of changes to our system that have taken place and created this problem of centralization.

As I mentioned, we have come a long way from the loose fish of Sir John A. Macdonald's era, the loose fish that he referred to in referencing his fellow elected members of Parliament in the legislatures post-1867.

Private Members' Business

Party leaders themselves have acknowledged this problem of the centralization of power. John Turner, a former prime minister, at the most recent Liberal policy convention talked about the need to remove the statutory veto power of party leaders over party candidates. He supported a resolution on the floor of the convention. That resolution did not pass but he spoke strongly in favour of removing that statutory power.

Preston Manning is another party leader who has long advocated for democratic reforms to this place. Leaders like Paul Martin campaigned in 2004 on addressing the democratic deficit and Joe Clark long talked about the need to respect the parliamentary process in the House of Commons. Former MPs, like the former occupant of that chair, former Speaker Peter Milliken, have spoken in favour of the reforms in the reform act.

As I mentioned, despite all the barrels of ink spilled on documenting this problem, all of the columnists who have written about this problem, all of the academics like Donald Savoie or Ned Franks, all of the political parties that have promised change, little if anything has happened. The time has come to act. We must act because Canadians are becoming increasingly disillusioned with the state of our democratic institutions.

This bill is so important because if we look at the prosperity that we have inherited, if we look at the stability of our society, if we look at the justice in our society, if we look at the social outcomes, they are not an accident. I say this because if we look around the world today, the societies that are the most prosperous, the most just, the most stable, the societies with the best outcomes, are all democracies, and that is no accident.

The very foundation of all this prosperity and stability is our democratic institutions of government. If we are going to preserve this prosperity, if we are going to sustain it against the rise of semi-totalitarian states like China, against the rise of energy powerhouses like Russia, against the rise of many other developing economies, it will start with reinvigorating the foundations of our society.

At the heart of these democratic institutions is a series of checks and balances on power.

● (1830)

I read an op-ed piece by Stewart Prest, who is a graduate student at the University of British Columbia. I want to quote him, because what he said is so succinct and important as to why this bill should be supported. He said:

Politics is not simply about the pursuit and exercise of power; it is about its regulation. Democracy is as concerned with the presence of effective checks on the use of political power as with the occasional elections that determine who wields it.

That is why this bill is important. It is because, at its heart, it proposes to strengthen the checks and balances in our system of government. It proposes to rebalance power between elected MPs and party leaders.

Recently in the media there has been talk about the need to strengthen parliamentary oversight of the security and intelligence apparatus in this country, and I agree. We need strengthened oversight of these institutions of state that are going to surveil and monitor terrorist activities, but strengthened oversight starts with the reform act. Standing committees cannot be providing proper

oversight of government institutions of state in respect of surveillance and security if those parliamentary standing committees are being controlled, through the whips' lists, by party leaders. There cannot be proper parliamentary oversight if the membership and chairs of those committees are appointed through the whips' lists by the party leaders.

If we want to have proper parliamentary oversight, as many have suggested, as they do in the United Kingdom through its standing committee system, there needs to be the secret ballot election of committee members and the secret ballot election of committee chairs. Then there will be truly independent legislative standing committees that will provide that check and balance on the power of the state.

However, to move to that system of secret ballots for committee chairs and committee members, we need to rebalance power between the party leader and the party caucus, and that is why this bill is so very important.

On this 800th anniversary of the Magna Carta, on the eve of a springtime when the House is very likely to adopt Bill C-51, the anti-terrorism act, which I support, on the eve of the dissolution of Parliament and a general election, when we will be adding another 30 MPs to the House of Commons, we need to restore the balance of power between elected MPs and the party leader.

I encourage all members to support this bill at its report stage and third reading vote, with their colleagues in the Senate, so that we can ensure that this bill not only passes the House and the Senate but becomes law before the dissolution of Parliament and the next general election.

● (1835)

Mr. Craig Scott (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague from Wellington—Halton Hills for what is becoming the end of a marathon on this bill and for the leadership he has shown.

I have a simple and fairly pointed question, which is this. One of the amendments that has gone through committee and is now part of the package is that, when a caucus meets after an election and votes on the rules, the rules will now be binding, which will mean that we cannot go back on those rules for the entire Parliament, until dissolved. There is something ironic about that, because the whole framework has now been made non-mandatory with respect to parties having to choose the rules or not. However, it is a ratchet; if the NDP caucus chooses a rule that is not one of the ones on the menu, and three years later says that it was a mistake and wants to improve it, make it more “Chong-like”, it cannot do that.

What would the member say about the insertion of that requirement to create a ratchet so that all parties would now be bound not to change these rules for four years? It strikes me as a rather odd insertion in the bill.

Hon. Michael Chong: Mr. Speaker, I will simply respond by saying that I am looking at the bill as a whole package. The bill has a number of amendments in it, and I support the bill as amended, including the provision the member opposite has referenced.

Private Members' Business

At the end of day, as I said at the outset, perfection in this regard was the enemy of the good, and the bill would not have passed in its original form. That was clear. We now have a chance of passing this bill through the House of Commons and the Senate before the next election. With these amendments, I believe we have secured the support necessary to do exactly that.

Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Wind-sor, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to commend the hon. member for his work on the bill. As my colleague pointed out, the marathon session we have been in about the rules and how we deal with them and what is possible under this legislation has certainly been a worthwhile one.

What is possible to achieve that balance between members of Parliament and leaders of the party? We have a free vote on this. I personally liked the bill before. I could have dealt with small changes, but we have some major changes here, and that is fine too.

This may be an unrelated question. The member has been a champion of reforming question period. Will he continue, in the same spirit, with those changes as well?

• (1840)

Hon. Michael Chong: Mr. Speaker, I believe that all good things will flow from this reform act if it is adopted by the House and the Senate. I believe strongly that if we can put the bill into force, into law, that a number of other constructive changes to the chamber will take place, changes such as the reform of question period to make it more meaningful and more empowering for individual members but also changes to the standing committee system that will assure greater independence for legislative standing committees to hold the government to account.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate the member on getting this far with a bill this ambitious. It has been a great pleasure working with him as the minister responsible for the subject material. The product he has put together, in combination with the committee, which also deserves congratulations, is commendable.

In particular, the member was criticized for trying to impose by law rules on parties and caucuses, but he retorted that the law already imposed a rule that gave leaders a legal veto over candidacies. That provision, paragraph 67(4)(c), came into effect in 1970.

The member is known for his knowledge of parliamentary history. The Prime Minister has said that he is prepared to support the repeal of that section, in other words, to remove his own legal veto over party candidacies. To the hon. member's knowledge, is he the first sitting prime minister to support the removal of the legal veto for party leaders?

Hon. Michael Chong: Mr. Speaker, to my knowledge, the Prime Minister is the first sitting prime minister to support the removal of this statutory veto, so I am very happy that the Prime Minister is supporting the bill. I hope that with his support, the bill will have a speedy passage through the upper chamber, the Senate of Canada. It is important to note, for senators watching this debate, that the Prime Minister does support the bill.

I would also add that in the long run, there are a number of other reforms that are necessary for political parties. They are quasi public

institutions, as the member knows, and ultimately, we need to bring further reforms to democratize parties and to bring them out of the shadows, into the open, with greater accountability and greater transparency, for they are publicly funded institutions.

Mr. Craig Scott (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would simply like to address where we might go in the future with respect to Bill C-586. By that I mean, once it hopefully gets to the Senate and becomes law before dissolution of this Parliament, what could a future Parliament want to do to improve it?

Where these comments are coming from is that in committee the NDP would have preferred to see considerably bolstered transparency within the new model that the bill represents. The new bill would require after each election that each House of Commons caucus, as its first order of business effectively, vote on each of the following four rules. These are rules that are written in some detail in our colleague's bill. First is the review and removal of the party leader. Second is the election of an interim leader, if in fact the leader has been removed. Third is the election and removal of caucus chairs. Fourth is the expulsion and readmission to caucus of a caucus member. After each election, that is what is to take place.

It has become an optional model rule system as opposed to a mandatory system, so each party would look at the rule and say whether it wants it or not. It would then have to report to the Speaker what its decision was on each of those rules, yes or no.

I will come back to that basic framework in a second. However, I did want to also note one of the other things that has changed in the bill. It was just the subject of the exchange between the minister and our colleague. Paragraph 67(4)(c) of the Canada Elections Act says the leader of the party must sign the papers of candidates in order for them to run in the name of the party. That rule would now be changed. It would now be a person designated by each registered political party. It is very important to know that it again creates an optional rule. Each party would decide for itself.

However, it is also important to note that—not to go too far into nirvana as the minister of state wanted to—it would no longer mandate and make only the leader of the party responsible for that signature, but it would not prohibit it. Therefore, it would still be possible for a party to say it would ask the party leader to do the signature. That would not be fully in the spirit of the change, but it would be fully within the law. I want to make sure that we do not get too carried away with the accolades being directed in the direction of the Prime Minister by the minister.

Private Members' Business

With respect to the system that would be put in place by the bill, the optional model rule system, I have said on several occasions—including in the House at second reading when the issue was knowing in advance that our colleague wanted to see these changes—that a spotlighting role for making sure parties take responsibility for at least deciding on each of these rules would be welcome, and it could actually have a beneficial follow-on impact in other areas in terms of how we try to produce a bit of transparency without over-regulation. We can see how that could work in a few other areas as well.

I firmly believe that the transparency function of spotlighting could be beneficial, saying at least a party has to decide and be accountable for a decision once it has decided to reject the model rule, not the mandatory rule that is in the act. That said, I do feel that our colleague was basically put in a position to maybe concede a bit too much on the transparency front. Therefore, in committee, we did move several amendments to make things more transparent. I am here to signal that, when the time comes in a future Parliament, I certainly will be pushing for strengthening the transparency parts of the bill.

Let me go through the five amendments we would have liked to have seen. The first is that at the moment the amended bill that is before us requires the chief electoral officer to be informed by each party, effectively 25 days from polling day, about which person is responsible for signing off on candidates.

● (1845)

We would like to have seen that within a month after each election, every party must designate which institutional position has that function, so that for the next three to four years everybody knows where the rubber hits the road, who actually has that function, rather than it being potentially up in the air until right into the election and then, lo and behold, the system says that the party must say who the person is.

Obviously, it is compatible that once the institutional actors are designated, then 25 days before polling day they will know who is occupying that position and then further inform the Chief Electoral Officer. We would very much have liked to have seen that change for greater transparency and for, I would say, a bit more pressure on parties to ensure that the person or persons chosen to make the candidate endorsement decisions are appropriate in an evolving democracy.

The second amendment is that at the moment, in the amended bill we have before us, each party is to tell the Speaker whether it has adopted each one of these four rules, but there is no specification that this must be in writing. It could easily be verbal, and obviously that could mean standing in the House and it would be recorded by *Hansard*, but there is no requirement even for that. It could be quite an informal conveying of this information, at least by the language of the bill. We wanted to ensure that it was in writing so that the beginning of the paper trail could be set up, which itself could then turn into greater transparency through one or two of the other amendments we had suggested, which is to ensure that when the decisions are made, the media and the public are in a position to know they have been made.

The third amendment is that at the moment it is now written to say whether the party did or did not adopt the model rule. Did the party adopt the rule that says there must be a caucus chair elected after the election, and then re-elected after the next election? The NDP is probably going to vote against that rule because we elect our caucus chair every year. We also have a rule that says there must be gender equity so that at least one of the chair or the deputy chair must be a woman. We will have no choice but to vote against it, but we will have a rule. However, there is nothing in the bill to say the party must report to the Speaker what rule it uses instead of the one that it has rejected. From a transparency perspective, I would like to see this changed in the future, so that not only does the party report yes or no, but it says what the rule is.

The fourth amendment is that the Speaker receives this information, but then what does he or she do with it. There is no specification in the bill that the Speaker has to do anything in particular, such as stand in the House and announce it or whatever. At minimum, and perhaps even more important than standing in the House and announcing what the Speaker has heard from each party, is to have a tailored accessible website where each party's decision is recorded, where journalists and the informed public know where to go and where the spotlighting effect can be increased by virtue of the recording on the website of where each party stands. That would of course be enhanced if each party also has to say what rule it has adopted in place of the one it may have rejected.

The final amendment goes back to the question I asked my colleague earlier. There is something extremely ironic in that a lot of pressure was put to change the model from binding rules to an optional-rules approach, a model-rules approach, yet when push comes to shove, layered on top of this through the government's efforts is a rule that says once a party's members have voted, they cannot vote again. Each party is locked into its vote, and it is binding on the party until the dissolution of Parliament. There cannot be any revisiting.

If the members learn through all kinds of pressure from society that they took the wrong decision and, let us say, the Conservative Party votes not to have a rule electing its caucus chair, for four years the Conservatives are stuck with that rule. No amount of agitation within the Conservative caucus will allow that rule to change. I found that to be a particularly odd insertion and almost ironic in light of the fact that the whole bill is organized around the optional nature of the rules, yet once a party has chosen which rule to take, it is bound to it. I would certainly want that to be removed in a future Parliament as well.

This is a bill I personally will be supporting. I have been supporting it from the beginning, and I will be recommending the same to my colleagues.

● (1850)

Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as we have said before, we have spent a long time on this. This has been more than about passing a law. It has been an actual grand national discussion on parliamentary reform, one that I welcome.

Private Members' Business

Everybody here should welcome it, whether they vote for this or not. It is something that opened our eyes to many things. Many Canadians have asked me about this in my role as critic for democratic reform. They always ask me what brought this on and how bad is it. I said that it was bad when it started in 1970. As the mover of the bill pointed out, in 1970 the signature of a leader was required. That has caused angst in backrooms and front rooms, in all political parties, for quite some time. Former prime minister John Turner made mention of that. It was a very valid point.

In the very beginning, some people said that it may have been overly prescriptive, to the point where it quashed the rights of a political party to decide itself who their leader would be and that its rights were diminished as a result of this legislation.

I thought that was being a little excessive. Some people wanted to amend it so it would be less so, and it has been amended to a great degree. There is that option at the very beginning, once Parliament reconvenes.

I share some of the concerns of my colleague from the NDP about the fact that beyond that one vote after an election, we have the same process where we do, by secret ballot, elect our chairs. There is some concern there, but not too much. The process is that we have a secret ballot to elect the caucus chair. That is a great concept, and I agree with that.

There was not only a movement and discussion here, it was also discussed through social media. Just a short time ago, there was a tweet from TheReformAct. A Twitter account was set up around this, and that fuelled a discussion. I enjoy the comments on this, whether people were talking about the stage the bill was at or what was being debated. It was very illustrative, and I congratulate the authors of this for doing so.

I will go back to some of the comments from my colleague, the mover of this bill, as amended. The amendments remain true to the principles of this bill in many instances, which is why I recommended to the leader from the beginning that we should have a free vote on this.

Although some people might not think this is a dramatic change, if the parties do not elect to do the things that are recommended in this bill, then people will ask what is the point of all this. There is a point to this.

It is not just about the legality. It is not about the written rule on the legislation paper itself. This is a narrative, the spirit of which is parliamentary reform. I am going to quote the mover of the bill once more. He talked about the balance of MPs and leaders. He said that perfection was the enemy of the good.

People watch us on television. A lot of people tell me that they try to watch, but that we get bogged down in details about this and that subamendment, and so on and so forth. I agree.

As one person once noted, and I cannot remember who said this but it is a good quote, that law-making is like sausage-making. People like to eat sausages but they certainly do not want to know how it is made.

In this particular case, despite all the details we have brought out, the fundamental debate was about a balance achieved and the

importance of the House that we are in right now. On the prominence of the House of Commons, it is less prominent than it once was among the public. When television was introduced here many years ago, back in the 1970s, it was supposed to shed a light on what went on here, because it is the most powerful institution in the country. Over that time, it has not.

● (1855)

I assume that people back then talked about what happened in the House of Commons a lot more than they do today. One of the reasons is because of the things that this bill is trying to change.

The member earlier mentioned that the cabinet is no longer responsible to our colonial fathers but to the legislators here, and the executive power that resides in here as well is answerable to this institution. We battle over certain bills time and time again over that very issue, but a lot of people in the public are not aware of this right now. What this debate has done is bring it out before the public for them to see how the House operates and, more importantly, how the role of the House has been diminished, as well as see who chooses us to come here, how we behave once we are here, and how a lot of the conventions that we have here are codified as well.

We have the Standing Orders. These are the large books that we have, which we call Standing Orders, but a lot of the other stuff is based on convention. In other words, things that we have done in the past and are now accustomed to are not codified, but we practise them now because we have in the past.

I mentioned the reform of question period in my question for the member, and I hope that it comes up again. This is my own personal opinion, but in the spirit of parliamentarians here, I like to put my personal opinion on the record. Question period desperately needs to be reformed. The rules of question period are not as much codified as they are a tradition.

We have a list, which the whips provide, and we go down the list for 45 minutes. It is the same for statements by members, which precede question period for 15 minutes. Where is the flexibility by which we can rise in the House and ask about our own riding or own area of expertise, or announce something that has happened in our riding based on that?

There was a kerfuffle earlier last year about that, based on the subject matter, but the debate was such that the public started to take notice. They started to take notice by saying that they always thought that in the House of Commons, once someone is elected, they can pretty much stand up at any time and be recognized by the Speaker. Well, that is not always the case. Really, the only time is when they call for questions and comments after a debate. Other than that, it is according to a list that is provided.

In some cases, that is fine. If there is a debate, there is the minister and the critic, and others fall into line, depending on their interests.

Private Members' Business

Quite frankly, though, sometimes we should consider the fact that we need to be far more flexible in the House. It is the spirit of this motion to do that, so I want to applaud the member for doing this and for the changes that were made, such as replacing the party leader in paragraph 67(4)(c) with a person to be designated by each registered political party. Before, it was problematic. I again congratulate the member, because he listened to some of the concerns, even from our own party, about the fact that we would have a person in the riding, and only that person. Now we could designate a person that we desire. That was accepted, if not by the vast majority of our party, at least by the majority, who said that it would be fine and that we would do that following the election.

There is also the review and removal of the party leader. That is something that we can elect to do after the election. There is the election of the interim leader and the election and removal of the caucus chair, as I mentioned earlier, as well as the expulsion and readmission of a caucus member.

That is more codified than it ever was before, and it is overdue. Hopefully, we can keep changing it—not drastically, but so that when something comes up in the future, what we can do as a Parliament is change certain rules here, maybe even some of the things that were brought up by the member and the critic for the NDP. Some of them were valid.

That is the point of this whole debate. The narrative is that in 1970, they brought in a rule that they felt was necessary, but it was incredibly restrictive. Although some people think that this private member's bill is overly prescriptive, the narrative is one that is sound and just, and I respect the member for bringing this in.

This is a free vote, but I am proud to say that as the member of Parliament for Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor, I will enthusiastically support it on third reading.

• (1900)

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am so pleased to stand today and speak on my friend's bill, Bill C-586.

Before I get to my specific comments, I want to thank the member for Wellington—Halton Hills for his hard work. I know that this has not been easy to do, and sometimes it was a case of friend against friend discussing the bill. However, he brought dedication, spirit, and collaboration to the endeavour, which is not always shown in this place. When we do take the time to listen to the views of others, we sometimes get it right, or, as the member has said, it is perhaps not perfect, but we do take steps to get there. The hon. member has shown an extraordinary openness to discuss and, some might say, compromise, but at least he worked together with others here in the House. That certainly helped the bill make it through committee.

I will begin my comments with a brief outline of how we have arrived at this point.

The first iteration of the bill was introduced late 2013. After consultation with colleagues and many discussions among ourselves, and not even with the member sometimes, the member for Wellington—Halton Hills introduced a modified version of the bill in the spring of 2014.

Since April, many in the House have reviewed, considered, and discussed the revised bill. In its original form, the bill would have made substantial changes to the Westminster system of governance, which needed to be carefully considered. I personally spent a lot of time talking to the member for Wellington—Halton Hills and others. We talked about proposed changes, and through the summer I realized that while I might not like the bill entirely, boy there was some good stuff in it, as the member said, and so we had to work to get it here.

My colleague, the member for Wellington—Halton Hills, worked with members on both sides of the House to improve the bill, and in September he announced further changes. It was also announced that political parties would remain in charge of their own nomination rules and have freedom to choose who approves candidates, which is such a large step. I do not think members recognize how large a step that is. This would allow caucuses to determine whether they wanted to opt in or opt out of some of these processes.

I think there may be some initial fears about some of the changes that have been suggested, but as the member has said, we cannot reach for the stars without taking a couple of steps forward, which is exactly how this would happen. We cannot have it all at once, but we will never finish the trip if we do not take the first steps.

I was pleased to see some of the further changes. I listened intently to the debate in the House at second reading, and then the bill came to committee. It is the changes that were made at the procedure and House affairs committee that I will focus the rest of my comments on.

As the chair of the committee, I have been there a long time, and the rules of this place, as the member for Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor said, sometimes get in the way. People do not understand why a rule is there and why a member cannot just stand up and do something about it.

I thank the member for Toronto—Danforth for his great help at committee on this, but as he said, the procedures are what run this place, and if we write the right rules the place will run better, and if we write bad rules it will not. The member for Wellington—Halton Hills has it somewhere nearer to right, I might chance to say. However, as the chair of the committee, I must take a non-partisan role throughout all of the points I have discussed so far. When the bill gets to committee, I must help the committee move it as we can. Personally, I had some great thoughts as to what could be done, but we had to let it get there, and I thank the member for the kind comments about the work the committee did.

I will talk about some of the rules in the bill.

Regarding the role of the party leader to endorse candidates, as I said, it is a huge step forward when we can designate the person who would do that. If we take out of the law the provision that it is the party leader who endorses candidates, will that be a great change? We will see. As each party grows into the system, we will find out.

Private Members' Business

•(1905)

As I said, section 67(4)(c) of the Canada Elections Act currently requires candidates to have the signed approval of their party leader. That could now change, and we expressed that we hope it will.

A number of commentators have pointed out that the nomination contests represent the most fundamental element of our democratic system; that is, the people back home choose who is going to run to represent them back home. It is important that sometimes the party stays out of the way on that. This bill would help do that.

The original version of Bill C-586 would have amended the Canada Elections Act to dictate a more elaborate process, but we have now got it to where each party can choose its own and, through a democratic procedure, make that happen. I think it is important that we have that freedom.

This led to an important debate in the House about how to uphold the independence of parties and their right to decide how to function as private organizations and, in fact, function differently from other parties. I think the internal workings of parties need to have that type of flexibility.

As amended by the procedure and House affairs committee, the requirement for the party leader's signature would be replaced with a more open requirement of the signature of a person or persons authorized by the political party to endorse prospective candidates.

Those are just words on a piece of paper, but I find them to be extremely significant in this place. When we can change the rules to make the place work better, change party rules to make parties work better, we have accomplished something.

It would also remove the presumption that only the party leader has the ultimate power to endorse candidates while, at the same time, recognizing the right of parties to tailor their process to meet the unique needs of that party. Large, small, national in scope, or not national in scope, all of these things can now be taken into consideration. We would have that flexibility when we pass this bill that we did not have the moment before.

At committee, we also discussed caucus members and party leaders. The other key aspects of Bill C-586 are the provisions for the removal and the re-admission of caucus members and the removal of party leaders. These were discussions and parts of the bill.

Unlike the role the party leader plays in endorsing prospective candidates, the rules and procedures of party caucuses have never been set out in standard. There is not something we could point to and say, "That is what they are."

In fact, we are ploughing some new ground here, certainly, in this Parliament, giving those options for a caucus to meet immediately after election and decide what rules it would be run by in the election of caucus leaders and the election of how to admit caucus members or dismiss caucus members.

Again, having spent some time in this place, I know these are extremely large decisions. We may look back on this day and say, "I remember when we allowed ourselves to have the freedom to do exactly that."

Parties must have the freedom to organize themselves as they see fit. Again, what works for one party may not always work well for the other. However, the bill from the member for Wellington—Halton Hills would allow that freedom between those parties.

I believe there are important changes in the reform act.

I have spent a great deal of time working with a great group of people at the procedure and House affairs committee, moving things forward that are hard to do, but sometimes they are not as rewarding as I find the bill today from the member for Wellington—Halton Hills is, and would be, going forward. We have accomplished something here and I am proud to be able to do it. I am proud, now, to be able to stand in the House, remove my non-partisan hat that I have to wear at committee in order to make things happen functionally, and say that I will be standing to support this bill and I hope all other members will.

•(1910)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Before we go to resuming debate and the hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, I will let him know that there are about eight and one-half minutes remaining in this first hour allocated for debate on the question, so he will not have the complete 10 minutes. I will just let him know that and he can judge his time accordingly.

The hon. parliamentary secretary.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am glad you told me about the time constraints on my presentation, because you know me well and my history in this place. I sometimes find it difficult to clear my throat in less than eight and a half minutes, but I appreciate the heads-up on that.

It is a pleasure for me, honestly, to stand here and speak to Bill C-586, the bill now known as the reform act, brought forward by my colleague from Wellington—Halton Hills.

I must first congratulate my colleague, as I have done before, and I mean this quite sincerely. Any time any person in this place brings forward an initiative to improve the functioning of this place or to try to improve the functioning of our democratic process, that individual should be applauded. I applaud my colleague for bringing forward this legislation, which has sparked more discussion than any other private member's bill I can recall, and I have been here for close to 11 years. That speaks to the impact the contents of the bill will have on average, or at least typical, Canadians.

When the bill was first introduced, prior to the amendments, I received phone calls, letters, and emails from people, not only within my riding but throughout western Canada, encouraging me, in some cases, to support the bill. Some would merely query me as to how I would be reacting and whether I would be voting for or against the bill and asking for my rationale for the vote I would be undertaking.

I cannot recall another private member's bill having that much impact, causing so much discussion, and creating so much attention. On that alone, I sincerely congratulate the member, because if nothing else, he has brought to the attention of a lot of Canadians what private members can do, what members commonly known as backbenchers can do.

Private Members' Business

There is so much criticism of our democratic process. There is so much criticism these days about how this Chamber operates, and that criticism is usually targeted toward centralization and party leaders, or in some cases, the centre, having too much influence over how members operate and vote and over what they say in this place.

To have a private member's bill that has sparked so much discussion and interest throughout Canada speaks to the fact that individual members who are not in cabinet, who are not in leadership roles in opposition parties, have the ability to enact positive change. More than anything else, that is the benefit this legislation will have, and that will be the legacy of the member for Wellington—Halton Hills. The member has demonstrated quite clearly to members within this place and to members of the general public that the power of one exists, that the power of individual members, whether or not they are in cabinet or in leadership roles, is still absolute. I will not go further than that.

This is a powerful piece of legislation the member has brought forward. It speaks volumes about the ability of individual members and what they can do if they have an idea that would improve the functioning of this place and democracy. I hope more members take this into account when considering private member's bills they may want to bring forward in the future. Kudos to my colleague.

When the bill was originally brought forward by the member, I had some concerns. My primary concern was that in its original form, caucuses would have the ability not only to cause a leadership review to take place but to determine the fate of a leader. I had great difficulty with that. My point then, and still is today, was that if party memberships elect a leader, they should have the ability to get rid of a leader or to at least review and vote on whether they want that leader to continue. That was my primary concern. The amendments brought forward by my colleague are certainly measures I can support now.

● (1915)

I was very taken by my colleague's words when he said that perfection is sometimes the enemy of the good. What he was actually saying is that he has discovered and has worked toward the art of the possible. I think my colleague is quite correct. In its original form, I do not believe the bill would have passed Parliament, but there is so much good in the original bill and this revision that it should pass Parliament.

I will point out a couple of things in the bill that, in my personal view, are excellent. One is the ability of caucuses, if they choose to adopt the suggestions contained in Bill C-586, to vote for the caucus chair. I have long held that belief. I believe that as members we should have the ability to determine whom we wish to see in that chair representing us. I think that is an excellent suggestion, one I will wholeheartedly support and encourage my colleagues to support.

The other point that I think is extremely well-intended and makes for a very, very solid bill is the ability of caucus members to determine if one of their caucus colleagues should either be expelled or re-admitted to caucus. I think every party in this place has had members of their caucuses who have left, sometimes for different reasons.

Looking at my colleagues across the floor in the official opposition, since this Parliament was first elected in 2011, there have been six members of the NDP who have left their caucus, sometimes voluntarily, and perhaps sometimes with a little encouragement, shall we say.

In our party, we have had a number of examples as well, but the point is that many times there are issues that we have within caucus. Those issues in large part remain private, but if they were serious enough to the point where caucus members themselves believed there should at least be a discussion on whether the admissibility of a caucus member should be in question, they should have the right to do so.

I do not believe that it should be the unilateral right of a leader to make those determinations. Certainly, the opinion of party leaders will play a great role in that determination, but ultimately I believe that members of Parliament in all caucuses have the intelligence and the ability to make that determination themselves.

I have been in caucuses where we have seen caucus members leave. I have also been in caucuses where I have personally known that some of those members would like to have been re-admitted, but there was no method for me or other caucus members to have a say in that process. The bill deals with that, and I think that is a very, very positive aspect of it.

I will just say in conclusion that while I agree with my colleague and my friend that the bill may not be perfect, it is a step in the right direction, and I strongly encourage all of my colleagues throughout the House to support the bill because, as my colleague quite correctly pointed out, it is perhaps the first step in an ongoing series of reforms that will improve the functioning of this place. If that is the case, then his legacy will be forever enshrined as one of the great movers of democracy in our country.

● (1920)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Should he wish, the hon. parliamentary secretary will have a minute and a half remaining in the time provided when the House next resumes debate on the question.

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

Pursuant to Standing Order 30(7), the House will now proceed to the consideration of Bill C-518 under private members' business.

* * *

PROTECTING TAXPAYERS AND REVOKING PENSIONS OF CONVICTED POLITICIANS ACT

The House resumed from January 26 consideration of Bill C-518, An Act to amend the Members of Parliament Retiring Allowances Act (withdrawal allowance), as reported with amendment from the committee, and of the motions in Group No. 1.

Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Wind-sor, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise to talk about reform. We are talking about reform in many ways today.

Private Members' Business

I want to thank the mover of this bill again for providing the information he provided and I want to thank everyone involved in this particular debate.

Liberals believe all members of both Houses must uphold the law and that those who violate it cannot be allowed to profit from their misdeeds. In this particular situation, when we started to talk about this bill, we wanted to talk about a public example, as it were. There was a lot of consternation as to whether we were going to look at this and accept in principle what it says about pensions, what people earn, whether people who violate the law should lose their pensions, whether a lot more people will suffer as a result of that individual being caught, so on and so forth.

When the conversation came around to this particular bill, the discussion was about how the situation in the House is different from the real world situation. It is different in the sense that we are parliamentarians, different in the sense that we are representatives, and different in the sense that we have to set an example for the population.

I want to thank many for their opinions on this issue. We have gone back and forth, and it has been spirited debate, for the most part.

We know that the bill would add a clause to the Member of Parliament Retiring Allowances Act to take into account a situation of a senator or a member of Parliament being convicted of an offence that arose out of conduct that occurred while that individual was in office. It would do this by using the same mechanism that is already in place for politicians who become disqualified for their offices. If MPs or senators are kicked out of their chamber, they currently lose their pensions, of course, but if members resign beforehand, they get to keep their pensions. We saw that happen some time ago, in the case of a member of the Senate.

The purpose of the bill is to close this particular loophole. The bill would cancel the pension of any MP or senator convicted of any indictable offence committed in whole or in part while in office. Now amendments have been put forward as well.

Throughout the committee process, we looked at many amendments. There were some deep conversations, certainly, not only with the mover of the bill but with all sides of the House and all parties represented here, or certainly the three in committee.

It was suggested that the bill be amended by limiting the scope of the bill to a conviction of an indictable offence with a maximum sentence of no less than five years. In addition, it would have to be one of the following: bribery of officers, defrauding the government, contractors subscribing to election fraud, breach of trust by a public officer, perjury, contrary evidence with intent to mislead, fabricating evidence, obstructing justice with dissuasion, theft of over \$5,000, drawing up documents without authority, obtaining, et cetera, based on forged documents, falsification of books and documents, a false return by public officer, and secret commissions.

What was absent at the time were changes related to Canada Elections Act violations. We talked about that as well, and it was contested around that time regarding a particular member. That is all I will say about that right now, because I do not want to talk about that particular situation and that member, who is no longer here. I

knew that person quite well. Despite the offences being talked about, I have a deep respect for that individual and for the work that he has done. He was a hard worker, despite what happened. I will leave it at that.

It would apply future convictions on politicians, including for past malfeasance. The bill includes a section clarifying that the changes contained in the bill would apply with respect to any person who is or was a member of the Senate or the House of Commons who is convicted after the date the bill was introduced, which takes us to June 3, 2013.

The bill would strip the pensions of many people that people watching this broadcast right now would know all too well. Senators or former senators were involved in a lot of this. I am assuming that the genesis of this particular bill dated back to that time when we talked about malfeasance, and so on and so forth. That situation continues, so I will not comment on that at this point.

• (1925)

We are not dealing with the particulars of that situation regarding the senators or former members of Parliament. We have to look at the parameters by which we look at the behaviour of members of Parliament and senators and how in the future punishment must be laid in light of these offences.

Therefore, my understanding of this is that all contributions, plus interest, are to be returned to the particular member and in this situation that means they no longer are vested within our pension system. As I said before, many people made comparisons with the private sector, but the comparison is not one that is just, despite the narrative.

I understand many would like to have a level playing field, but this is the House of Commons. I do not think the level playing field applies here. We set the best example we can put forward as representatives in the House, representatives of each and every riding, currently 308 and after the next election 338. By doing so, we have to be exemplary in all manners of our behaviour and especially for many of the offences cited within the bill.

In the details of some of the offences of what members were indicted on, whether it was the maximum offence out there, there were deep conversations about that. The amendments have the maximum for the offence.

It is not just in the House of Commons, but there are many jurisdictions across the country that are doing much the same. In 2013, the Nova Scotia legislature passed Bill 80, which strips the pensions of any lawmaker convicted of a crime for which the maximum punishment is imprisonment for not less than five years. It is running in the same vein as this legislation. The start date was May 6, 2013, which was when the bill was tabled at the provincial legislature, which is similar again. The result in June 2013 was an independent MLA lost his pension after pleading guilty to fraud and breach of trust charges arising from an expense scandal. The member had collected tax dollars after filing 10 false expense claims in 2008-09. Today he is not eligible to receive that pension. This is very similar. I am sure there are certain differences, but minute I am sure.

Private Members' Business

Statutes in both Alberta and New Brunswick provide that the government may withhold certain sums payable as retiring allowances to a member of the legislature in cases of indebtedness. These statutes do not however make explicit reference to garnishment or termination of a pension due to a criminal conviction, although the way things are going and if the bill passes, as well as what is happening in Nova Scotia, I am sure other legislatures across the country may follow suit. Maybe the mover of the bill could shed some light on that. It would be interesting.

However, this has been a lively discussion. Some people have said that maybe this is too onerous, but personally, and even as a critic, I do not think it is. As sitting members of the House, we have that responsibility to act in the best interests of the public. If the public wants us to behave as such, then we have to be punished if the offence that is so egregious for the public to accept.

I thank the member for this. After this stage of the bill, I hope further discussion will be had it. However, I will be supporting the bill.

● (1930)

Mr. John Williamson (New Brunswick Southwest, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague from Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor. His explanation of the bill was both fair-minded and quite elegant. He did a good job explaining both the bill and also the rationale to hold parliamentarians to a higher standard because of the privileged position we hold in this House. The member has given me a few more minutes to address some other points. I am not going to explain what is in the bill, since he has done such a wonderful job already.

The bill does focus on some two dozen Criminal Code violations. These are all indictable offences, meaning they are serious crimes that members of this House or the other place would have to commit and be found guilty of in a court of law before a pension were revoked. That is an important part of this bill because it would take these decisions out of a political theatre and put them into a court of law where, because these are serious matters, those decisions should rest.

There is one aspect of the bill that I would like to address, and some points that I have heard in the first hour of debate and that have come up in discussions with colleagues here and elsewhere.

The first measure is that there remains in this bill some measure of partial retroactivity. Initially when I tabled this bill in June 2013, I suggested that convictions be retroactive from that date forward. In the committee, that was modified and the modification is acceptable so that the crime itself could have happened at any time before this bill, should it receive royal assent, came into effect, but the conviction would now have to happen on or after that date. Going forward, if this bill became law, it would still apply to malfeasance that occurred in the past. That is a good compromise, and I understand the reasons for that were dealing with potential court challenges. That was an amendment that I thought was wise and good.

This bill, after discussion over the last 20 months, does have and I hope it will have support from both sides of the House. When I first tabled the bill, I had suggested a floor of two years, that the maximum sentence be two or more years. However, upon

consultation with members on both sides of the House at the first debate, I suggested that be moved to five years, within the Criminal Code and an indictable offence. In working with both sides of the House, trying to find a bill that would accomplish its objective—which, at the end of the day, was to penalize members who broke trust with taxpayers, members who through illegal activities misplaced or misused tax dollars—the bill was further refined in committee, with amendments I suggested in committee, to focus on violations like breach of trust, fraud, theft, and forgery, aspects that have to do directly with how we spend and use tax dollars in this place. Our role as legislators is to come here and decide on behalf of Canadians how tax dollars are going to be spent.

I will give one good example of why an across-the-board five-year threshold posed some challenge. I say this respectfully mostly for members in the official opposition who believe the bill has been weakened because of these changes. When we are at home in our riding, we drive around a lot. If we were to ever hit someone with our vehicle and kill him or her, the punishment is up to a five-year prison term. The point of this bill was never to capture someone or to have someone revoke or lose a pension through an error or momentary lapse of judgment; it was for deliberate theft of tax dollars.

● (1935)

To have an across-the-board blanket meant that a member in this House, because of a terrible accident, a tragedy and a crime but not something that was intentional, could very well be in a position of losing a parliamentary pension.

That is the rationale for focusing on the two dozen or so provisions in this bill that focus on infractions that deal directly with our duties as parliamentarians.

Recently a number of amendments have come forward from the official opposition that I must confess I disagree with. In fact, I actually thought it was the will of this House, as I was proposing these changes, to focus the scope of this bill on our actual duties. I can say that, because on December 10, 2013, the member for Burnaby—New Westminster, when I suggested raising it to a threshold of five years, said:

However, as the member has already indicated, we would be looking and seeking amendments to change it to five years for a criminal offence and we have seen, I think, from the member, some willingness to compromise on that. That is welcome.

I went back through the debates we had in this House on this bill to be sure I understood the mood of the room. Member after member, from both sides, had suggested or debated or told this House that in fact we wanted to be careful, that we did not want to inappropriately strip a member of a pension for a violation that was not related to his or her duties. It was only as one of our colleagues found himself in violation of the Canada Elections Act that suddenly the debate became about widening it. This is a problem, because as we look at legislation, we have to be somewhat consistent in our approach.

Private Members' Business

I have correspondence from the Leader of the Opposition, who talks about our former colleague, Dean Del Mastro, who was found guilty of breaking the Canada Elections Act. The Leader of the Opposition said that this former member would have lost his whole pension under the restrictions of the Nova Scotia law, which states that any MLA convicted of a crime with a maximum sentence of five years or more in jail will lose the right to a full pension.

This is actually false, because this former member, while he was found guilty of a provision under the Canada Elections Act, was actually found guilty of a crime with a maximum penalty of one year. It did not reach the threshold, in my original bill, of two years. It does not reach the threshold of the penalty of the Nova Scotia law, nor did it ever reach the threshold of this bill, at five years. That is simply not true.

It is important, because the mood of this House was such that we wanted to focus on our duties as legislators and on the appropriation and disbursement of tax dollars.

Where are we? We have a bill today that has gone through several hours of debate, has gone through committee, and has had several changes to it proposed, which I think, by and large, have strengthened it.

I will not be supporting the amendments put forward by the official opposition, because I think they attempt to, at the last minute, the 11th hour, open this bill up in a manner that not even the Nova Scotia bill, which the NDP cites as the standard, does. In fact, they would endanger the likelihood of this bill passing the House, because it was both government members and opposition members who urged me throughout the process to be very focused in this bill and to go after penalties that are in line with our duties as parliamentarians.

Twenty months later, we have this bill before us, and I hope it will receive support on both sides of the House. I believe it will receive support on both sides of the House, and I urge members to support it so we can get it off to the Senate. I hope to see it become law before Parliament is dissolved in advance of the next election.

• (1940)

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskasing, NDP): Mr. Speaker, this is certainly an interesting bill that we are debating tonight given the fact that we have a government that has consistently said it is about transparency and accountability.

I will quote the Prime Minister, who has said, "...bend the rules, you will be punished; break the law, you will be charged; abuse the public trust, you will go to prison."

When looking at this bill, we have to take into consideration its intent and how we can best ensure that when we are elected or appointed as parliamentarians or senators, there is protection for the public trust.

This bill is similar to one moved by the NDP in Nova Scotia, as my colleague from New Brunswick Southwest mentioned a while ago. That bill received royal assent on May 10, 2013. There are some differences between the bills. The Nova Scotia law targets MLAs who have been convicted of an offence punishable by imprisonment for a maximum of no less than five years. It also provides that any

entitlement of a former spouse or a court ordered restitution may be deducted from the MLA's pension.

The bill before us was tabled in the middle of the Senate scandal that was subject to raging debate in the House of Commons, a scandal in which many Conservative senators were under scrutiny for claiming expenses they were not entitled to. This has severely tarnished the Conservative Party's claim that it is the most ethical and transparent government Canada has ever seen. Indeed, we look at this, we see that it is an issue of ethical and transparent government. Just to go back a bit, we can look at some of the issues that have come forward from that. We just have to look at Carolyn Stewart-Olsen, the former Conservative spokesperson turned senator, who had to repay inappropriate living expenses. We had Mike Duffy being ordered to pay back more than \$90,000 for false living expenses and claiming per diems while on vacation. Pamela Wallin was ordered to pay back more than \$100,000 for improper claims. We have also seen Liberal senators who have had to make repayments.

When looking at what has transpired since the Liberal sponsorship scandal, there really is not much difference in terms of transparency and accountability on this side of the House. Therefore, when bills such as this come forward, we think they look great but we have to scour through them to see what the hidden agenda is or how we can work with the Conservatives to make the bill functional.

During the analysis of the bill in committee, the Conservative Party changed the provisions that determined when a senator or MP's pension would be revoked by removing any retroactivity in the application of the bill and proposing an exhaustive list of Criminal Code offences that would trigger the removal of the pension instead.

Experts had hesitations regarding this approach, noting that the choice of including some offences and not others did not make sense, particularly the fact that offences under the Elections Act were not included. The Conservatives refused to accept an amendment that would have revoked the pension of the former parliamentary secretary to the Prime Minister, as mentioned a while ago. We know that the Prime Minister stood in the House and defended that member over and over again until the member was found guilty of breaking the Elections Act.

While the bill clearly aims at punishing the Conservative and Liberal senators who have abused taxpayers' money, Canadians are more and more convinced that the solution to the unelected, unaccountable, and under-investigated Senate is to abolish it, pure and simple.

So much has been going on in the House with respect to accountability and ethics that we really have to look at the whole. We have to look at what happens at committees as well.

Adjournment Motion

●(1945)

We used to see committees as a place where we could count on people doing the heavy lifting for Parliament. It was said that although the chamber could appear to be a partisan mess, the committees were where sleeves were actually rolled up and petty differences were set aside, while some common good was served. That notion and those outcomes have been replaced by sideshow antics and committees are now a place where democracy rarely happens. By using their majority to go in camera, the Conservatives are actually gaining every aspect of committees and then telling Canadians, with a straight face, that this is what they voted for.

There was a comment from one of the committee chairs at the time, the member for Winnipeg Centre. The Conservatives had voted to go in camera and he wanted to ensure we were not. As he was suspending the meeting he said the following. “while we clear the room of the Canadian public and go under the black shroud of secrecy once again”. That is how he ended that session of the committee in order to go in camera. Canadians need to know the truth. Therefore, when we are looking at this bill, it is important to look at all aspects.

Let me reiterate what the bill would do.

Bill C-518 would remove the privileges of retiring allowances or compensation allowances of former members of the Senate or House of Commons if they have been convicted of certain offences under the Criminal Code, and that is a great thing. The member of Parliament or senator convicted then receives an amount equivalent to the contributions he or she paid for his or her pension, as well as the accumulated interest on those contributions. They get what they put into it, but they do not get the rest.

Following an amendment in committee, the member of Parliament or senator must now have committed certain offences in the Criminal Code that are listed in the bill. The Conservatives have also removed the retroactivity of the bill, meaning that Bill C-518 will only apply to senators and MPs that lose their position once the bill becomes law.

Experts have warned against the use of a list of offences because it could be applied in a broad spectrum, for example, if an MP has been a public servant, and also because it does not include many offences to other laws that are relevant to an MP's or senator's function, such as the Canada Elections Act, the Income Tax Act and the Parliament of Canada Act. We found a solution to this problem, but the Conservatives simply chose to ignore it.

We make proposals. We try to work with the Conservatives and the Liberals to try to find that common ground where we can have bills that are functional and that mean something.

The changes that were introduced to the bill by the Conservatives in committee will exclude the offences. That is the part we want to ensure we emphasize. Too many laws that are relevant to the function of the MP or senator will be excluded. They were not able to justify why they refused the amendments brought forward by the NDP. It was a good amendment. By doing this, the Conservatives will allow the former parliamentary secretary to the Prime Minister, Dean Del Mastro, to keep his pension even though he was found guilty of electoral fraud. That is the important piece.

Although the member across had mentioned the fact that it had to do with our duties, when we are running for an election, that is part of our duties as we are moving forward. That is how we get elected.

We can talk about a lot of the misgivings on the Conservative side. Peter Penashue was one of them. He was found to be in contravention of how much money he was allowed to spend during the election. It actually had given him a hand up over other candidates because there was much more money spent on that side. We have a list of those where we have a lot of misgivings on the Conservative side.

At the end of the day, we need to ensure that the laws we put in place will protect the public's interest when it comes to accountability and ethics as we take our positions in the House of Commons or in the Senate.

●(1950)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Is the House ready for the question?

Some hon. members: Question.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The question is on Motion No. 1. A vote on this motion also applies to Motion No. 2.

Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): All those in favour of the motion will please say yea.

Some hon. members: Yea.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): All those opposed will please say nay.

Some hon. members: Nay.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): In my opinion, the nays have it.

And five or more members having risen:

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Pursuant to Standing Order 98, a recorded division stands deferred until Wednesday, February 4, 2015, immediately before the time provided for private members' business.

ADJOURNMENT MOTION

A motion to adjourn the House under Standing Order 38 deemed to have been moved.

Adjournment Motion

• (1955)

[Translation]

EMPLOYMENT

Mr. Jonathan Tremblay (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the youth unemployment rate is very worrisome. It has never been this high.

There is currently a youth employment crisis in Canada. It is a crisis that the government refuses to acknowledge, just as it refuses to acknowledge its abysmal job creation record. The youth unemployment rate reached its highest level in April 2008, before the recession. The official unemployment rate was then 11.8%. In September 2011, the youth unemployment rate reached 14%. Today, it is approaching 16%. That is about double the Quebec rate, which is around 7.6%. Canada's unemployment rate is 6.6%

However, programs such as skills link, which directly supports youth facing barriers to employment, are being dismantled by the Minister of Employment. Despite a youth unemployment rate of 16%, the minister tolerates the intolerable, that is, never-ending delays and broken partnerships with solid organizations with a proven track record, but whose future is now in jeopardy.

Does the minister not realize that leading organizations in our communities are waiting for him to take action, and also that his lack of action is hurting youth in need who could get help finding a job with well-established projects under the skills link program if only they were able to get the nod?

Is that the government's plan, to deliberately leave these young people out in the cold, people who need a little helping hand to improve their quality of life and take charge in order to find or keep a job? The Conservatives have already abandoned the regions and now they are abandoning our youth.

Young people are waiting for a nod from the government to contribute to the economy of their region. They are waiting for a nod to discover the dignity and pride that comes from getting a job. Will the minister give them the nod?

On November 25, 2014, I was asking the minister in this House about some problems related to the skills link program. To provide some background, my question on November 25 was about shedding some light on why the many applications for subsidies under the skills link program have been gathering dust for over a year. It took 18 months for a simple acknowledgement of receipt, while other integration projects were rejected entirely.

In my question for the minister, I asked him specifically why the youth employment centres in the Quebec City region all had their applications rejected. Their applications to implement a social and occupational integration program, a project that Service Canada has been a partner to for 10 years, were rejected out of hand.

Will the minister say that the projects were rejected for lack of funding? That would be too easy. There is more to it than that. When the program no longer has any funding, officials know it. However, in this case, the officials are being shut out and no longer understand what is happening with the program. The skills link program was working and was helping young people find employment.

I also met with young participants in the Chantiers urbains program, a project run by the Quebec City youth employment centre. I was touched by their stories and surprised at the ingenuity with which the staff carry out social and occupational integration projects while providing support to these young people to help them succeed.

The minister must take into account the efforts made by employment and training organizations to provide young people with a unique experience and a launch pad to success.

Twenty-two organizations, including 14 in Quebec, have contacted their MP to find out whether they could expect any funding soon. Most of them have been taking part in the program for many years. Some of these partnerships have been in place for eight or 10 years, and this is the first time they have faced such delays.

When will the minister take action?

• (2000)

[English]

Mr. Scott Armstrong (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Employment and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the claim by the member opposite that our government is not adequately supporting young Canadians could not be further from the truth. I think he is simply not aware of all of the programs, initiatives, and resources our government offers to young Canadians to help connect them to available jobs and employers who are looking for young people to fill jobs all across this country but are having difficulty finding young people with the skills they need to fill those positions.

I am actually quite happy to elaborate a little about all our government has done to get the facts straight on this important issue and make sure that jobs are available for young Canadians and that young Canadians have the training they need to apply for those existing jobs.

Through our skills agenda, we are ensuring that Canadians have the skills they need to apply for in-demand jobs. This is exactly true for young Canadians. I am sure my colleague on the other side of the House has seen the work our government has done to help young Canadians plan and pay for their post-secondary education.

My colleague may even remember the significant investments in apprenticeships we announced in last year's budget. We introduced the new Canada apprentice loan. This provides apprentices, registered in Red Seal trades, with access to interest-free loans to help ease the financial burden of upgrading their craft, which of course started accepting applicants last month. The Canada apprentice loan has already been successful across the country, and we are seeing a lot of uptake with people applying for this support.

In regard to youth employment, we are moving on many fronts. The government also provides a variety of youth employment programs to help all young Canadians, not only apprentices, make informed career choices and develop the skills, experience, and knowledge they need to secure a good job in our rapidly changing job market.

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For example, I am sure the hon. member is aware of our youth employment strategy, \$300 million. Unfortunately, his party has consistently voted against it. I am sure he knows that, through several programs, our government provides skills development and work experience for at-risk youth, summer students, and recent post-secondary graduates. It is clear from the number of applicants we see each year that the skills-linked programs are a huge success.

In November, the member opposite asked about employment centres in general for his riding. I might remind the member that we informed him at that point that, if he has specific questions on specific applications for people in his riding, he should please bring them to us outside the House and we will gladly look into them for him.

Our goal is to fund high-quality projects that meet community needs. However, we receive many quality proposals, and not all could be selected with available funding.

In economic action plan 2014, we announced our intent to improve the youth employment strategy and align it with the evolving realities of the job market, and to ensure better outcomes for Canadians and better value for taxpayers.

The summer works experience program provides summer job opportunities for secondary and post-secondary students. This program is an important part of our youth employment strategy.

I ask the member across the aisle that, when we bring these programs forward, when we bring these key investments, which will match young people in this country to available jobs and match employers who have positions with highly skilled young people who are trained to do those jobs, he and his party support those initiatives that we put forward for funding, if he is truly interested in improving the opportunities for young people in this country.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jonathan Tremblay: Mr. Speaker, it is a shame because I was talking about the skills link program, but in his answer, he talked about everything but that program.

I recently found out that the Charlevoix chamber of commerce has also been waiting nine months for an answer about a project that was supposed to start in September 2014. I am not talking about a project that nobody in the department knew about. On the contrary, this is about years of partnership, tangible results and an 80% youth employment retention rate. What more could the minister want?

Despite the fact that the minister has been aware of the problems with the skills link program for months—nearly a year, actually—he has not done anything about it. The system is broken. We see that clearly on the ground. The program has been dismantled and the program officers have been muzzled.

I would love to hear the minister explain why these many problems exist. Has he lost control of his department, or is he coming up with a new version of the program that will do even more harm to worker training organizations?

● (2005)

[*English*]

Mr. Scott Armstrong: Mr. Speaker, it is quite the contrary. We have been over this with the member opposite before. He simply needs to look at the facts when it comes to what this government is doing to support youth employment in Canada.

Our government offers a wide range of youth employment programs and services that will help young Canadians make a successful transition to the labour market. They range from financial assistance to work experience, career information, and job search tools, so once again, I strongly encourage my hon. colleague opposite to get all the information available on these resources, programs, and initiatives so that he can better support young constituents in his riding as they make the move from school to work.

In the meantime, our government will continue to invest in young Canadians, connect them with available jobs across the country, and make sure they have the skills needed to apply for those jobs and have the labour market information needed to know where to apply.

I can only hope that the member opposite, who seems to be so concerned about youth employment, will actually support the initiatives our government brings forward in this year's budget so that young people in this country can get the jobs that are available to them.

RAIL TRANSPORTATION

Mr. Mike Sullivan (York South—Weston, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Transportation Safety Board is charged with investigating accidents and making recommendations to the government on how to prevent them in the future. The Auditor General is charged with ensuring that the government is providing the services it should and that resources are being spent effectively.

Last year the Auditor General put forward a scathing review of Transport Canada's ability to properly assess and police the railways' safety management systems. He noted, among other things, that Transport Canada had not managed to perform most of the planned audits of the safety management systems. Only 26% over a three-year period, ending before Lac-Mégantic, of the audits were actually performed by Transport Canada.

For its part, the Transportation Safety Board, in its report on the Lac-Mégantic disaster, was also highly critical of the oversight of MMA by Transport Canada. The report said:

...Transport Canada's regional office in Quebec had identified MMA as a company with an elevated level of risk that required more frequent inspections. ...

In addition, although MMA had developed a safety management system in 2002, Transport Canada's regional office in Quebec did not audit it until 2010—even though this is Transport Canada's responsibility, and despite clear indications (via inspections) that the company's safety management system was not effective. Transport Canada Headquarters in Ottawa, meanwhile, did not effectively monitor the Region's activities. As a result, it was not aware of any weaknesses in oversight of regional railways in Quebec, and it did not intervene.

With all of these problems with Transport Canada happening, it is a wonder that the current government actually acted by cutting Transport Canada's budgets for rail and dangerous goods safety by at least 20%. The minister might try to claim that these are merely back office positions, but the facts tell a different story.

According to a story in *Business News Network*, just in December, 15% of the jobs in Transport Canada's dangerous goods and rail safety divisions are open across the country, and eight of 19 engineering positions within the dangerous goods division in the Ottawa region headquarters are unfilled. That is almost 50%. A position for the manager of dangerous goods inspection in the rail safety division is vacant. Nationally the vacancies include a superintendent of gas containment and several specialists on containment means for dangerous cargo. The records show that more than 30 positions in the dangerous goods and rail safety divisions have been vacant since 2009. Some resulted from 2012 budget cuts that forced four senior engineers into retirement.

However, Transport Canada is projecting further reductions to its workforce under government efforts to eliminate the federal deficit. It estimates the budget will shrink from \$1.7 billion to \$950 million within three years, including about \$600,000 in cuts to the rail safety and dangerous goods divisions.

"It seems the importance of this role [of qualified engineers] was not taken into consideration when cost-cutting measures were implemented at Transport Canada", said Debi Daviau, president of the Professional Institute of the Public Service Canada labour union that represents the engineers.

Transport Canada also publishes a watch list, and that watch list identified four items in rail safety that needed immediate attention, two of which have been on the Conservative government's watch list for the past five years. TSB found two significant recommendations for the rail sector that are now over five years old and have had no action.

One is that there are no video or voice recorders on trains. The TSB has been regularly demanding them; the Conservative government has been regularly ignoring this demand. Airplanes have managed to do it for decades, so it is not reinventing the wheel, but the problem persists.

The other recommendation is action to prevent missed signals. Most other countries on the planet have some form of positive train control on trains in their jurisdiction. Canada has simply just ignored the problem, and we will continue until there is another major disaster like Lac-Mégantic unless the government steps in and does something.

● (2010)

Mr. Jeff Watson (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will deliver some remarks on the question asked during question period on the matter of the sharing of risk assessments between Transport Canada and municipalities.

The Minister of Transport, as we know, has asked railway companies to complete risk assessments that identify population density along their key routes used in the transportation of dangerous goods. On April 23, 2014, under the authority of the Railway Safety Act, the minister issued an emergency directive to all railway

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companies requiring the implementation of key operating practices, including speed restrictions for certain trains carrying dangerous goods, increased inspection requirements, and the completion of risk assessments.

Specific to risk assessments, the emergency directive requires companies to determine the level of risk associated with each route carrying 10,000 or more loaded tank cars of dangerous goods per year. Those risk assessments must do the following: first, identify safety and security risks associated with that route, including the volume of goods moved on that route, the class of track on that route, the maintenance schedule of the track on that route, the curvature and grade of the track on that route, environmentally sensitive or significant areas along that route, the population density along that route, the emergency response capability along that route, and the areas of high consequence along the route; second, identify and compare alternative routes for safety and security; and third, factor potential or future railway operational changes, such as new customers moving goods subject to an emergency response assistance plan under the Transportation of Dangerous Goods Act, or municipal changes due to population growth, for routing restrictions. Transport Canada officials are reviewing risk assessments submitted by railway companies and will continue to review them on an ongoing basis.

On the question of transparency, Transport Canada cannot publicly release railway risk assessments without permission from the railway companies. The risk assessments were produced by the railway companies and may contain sensitive commercial, financial, or technical information. I point the member to section 20 of the Access to Information Act, under which the Government of Canada cannot disclose records that contain financial, commercial, scientific, or technical information that is confidential information supplied to a government institution by a third party.

Following the tragic derailment in Lac-Mégantic, however, Transport Canada committed to sharing with communities Transport Canada information related to potential railway risks. Specifically, the department committed to sharing all notices, and notice and orders pertaining to engineering matters, including blocked crossings, with the municipality or other organized district that may be affected by an identified threat or immediate threat to safe railway operations.

As of October 29, 2014, copies of notices, and notice and orders are being sent to the most senior official of the municipality or other organized district. I can assure the member that Transport Canada continues to work together with municipalities and railways to promote safety in all Canadian communities.

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Mr. Mike Sullivan: Mr. Speaker, in answer to the specific points raised by my colleague opposite, the risk assessments that were performed were actually requested by the government and, therefore, those risk assessments should be in the public interest and viewable by the public, at least by the members of Parliament who have been called upon to keep the public safe.

I do not accept that when a railway company is asked to provide a risk assessment, the disclosure of that information is somehow going to prejudice its operation. That cannot contain information that is vital to the operation of the railroad in a financial or otherwise prejudicial way. That information is in fact vital to the operation of the households and communities through which the train runs.

I disagree quite vehemently with the member's assertion that somehow this information demanded by the government is somehow protected and kept secret by the railroads and, therefore, has to be kept secret by Transport Canada. Transport Canada has an obligation to keep Canadians safe and allow Canadians to observe what risks there are in Transport Canada's operations in respect of the safety of our nation's rail system.

• (2015)

Mr. Jeff Watson: Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for his intervention, but it is not about the opinion of the member of Parliament. There are legal experts who look at these matters to ensure that governments comply with laws that are on the books.

I point the member back to section 20 of the Access to Information Act, which imposes certain obligations on the government that must be respected, whether or not some in the government or some in Parliament may feel that they would love this information to be out there in full measure.

I think the member knows that were the government to release information that is not supposed to be released, it could potentially have the ability to alter markets. That is why budgets are kept under wraps, for example. It is because of the ability of the information contained within to move markets.

We have dealings with companies on an ongoing basis that cannot always be divulged. There are legitimate legal reasons why that is the case. I encourage the member to go back to the Access to Information Act, look at section 20, and understand the government's situation in this regard.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The motion to adjourn the House is deemed to have been adopted. Accordingly the House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 2 p.m. pursuant to Standing Order 24(1).

(The House adjourned at 8:16 p.m.)

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