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Monday, February 10, 2014

—

Speaker: The Honourable Andrew Scheer

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Monday, February 10, 2014

The House met at 11 a.m.

Prayers

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

● (1105)

[English]

SUPPORTING NON-PARTISAN AGENTS OF PARLIAMENT ACT

The House resumed from November 20, 2013 consideration of the motion that Bill C-520, An Act supporting non-partisan agents of Parliament, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is with pleasure that I rise to speak to Bill C-520 this morning.

I find it most interesting that we have a Conservative member introducing legislation on issues surrounding oaths, if I can put it that way, that would have our commissioners or agents of Parliament be more transparent. We see that coming from the Conservatives. If there is a need for us to bring in legislation, I suggest that the member might want to consider legislation that would demonstrate more respect for those same official parliamentary agents that the government tends to want to attack. That is something I will focus some attention on in my comments today because Elections Canada and the Chief Electoral Officer are under attack by the Conservative majority government.

On the one hand we have a bill that is trying to say we should have the Chief Electoral Officer proclaim himself or herself as a completely neutral body that would not be politically engaged, in essence, attacking the integrity of our agents of Parliament. I do not see the merit in this bill and why there is the need for it. What offends me is the fact that it is coming today, at a time when we have the majority Conservative government bringing in time allocation on a piece of legislation that is going to have a profound negative impact overall on elections in Canada.

I would like to emphasize the degree to which I am making reference to this. Last week, I was in the procedures and House affairs committee. We had the Chief Electoral Officer, Mr. Mayrand, there. It was interesting to sit in my position, opposite the government, and watch the government verbally attack the Chief Electoral Officer. I found it interesting to compare that to the general

behaviour of the government toward Elections Canada. It is consistent. It feels that it has the right to intimidate Elections Canada, which is an agent of this Parliament. That is something that Bill C-520 is trying to deal with, but in a reverse way.

On the one hand, in this legislation we have the Chief Electoral Officer, in an apolitical fashion, trying to improve the quality of our elections. The Chief Electoral Officer has brought forward ideas on how that could be done. For example, with the robocalls incident, Elections Canada brought forward recommendations on how that could be dealt with. Instead of demonstrating respect for Elections Canada, the government did the absolute opposite. It not only did not listen to what Elections Canada, an agent of Parliament, had to say, it changed the legislation to make it even more difficult for Elections Canada to be effective in regard to the Chief—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Order, please. The hon. Minister of State for Western Economic Diversification is rising on a point of order.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Mr. Speaker, I look forward to a spirited debate on Bill C-23, the fair elections act, I believe in under an hour. I would ask my colleague to entertain us with some relevancy to this particular piece of legislation.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The hon. minister makes a point with respect to relevance. It is pertinent, of course, and it is part of the Standing Orders. I would remind all hon. members that in the course of their 10 minutes for comments, members have a great deal of freedom as to how they might connect various ideas to the questions before the House. I do see that the member is in fact tying those ideas together, and I know that he will get around to the point before we finish the end of the 10 minutes.

The hon. member for Winnipeg North.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate your comments.

I can appreciate why the Conservative member would be sensitive in terms of what is being said, which is to know exactly what Bill C-520 is proposing to do. It is talking about the parliamentary agents of this House. It is challenging those agents in a way that speaks to the integrity of those offices.

On the one hand the government is trying to say that it wants more integrity in its offices, in a backhanded way, by bringing in this legislation. On the other hand we have a government that demonstrates a lack of respect for those very agents that this legislation is trying to deal with. That is true. In order to demonstrate that truth, I am using a very specific example, that being Elections Canada, which is a topical issue today.

Private Members' Business

The member who stood on a point of order said the Conservatives are interested in hearing what I have to say about the elections act that they have introduced. That is not true either. They brought in time allocation to prevent members from being able to speak on that piece of legislation. It is being forced through after only a couple of days of debate, which is somewhat shameful in itself.

Before the interruption, I was suggesting to the House that we have to have confidence and faith in our agents of Parliament and we should be able to demonstrate that. The bill that is being proposed by the member is an underhanded way of suggesting that there is something wrong with our current agents of Parliament. That is not the case.

We in the Liberal Party, and I also suspect members of the New Democratic Party, have faith in our institutions, in our agents of Parliament. We look to the government to demonstrate more respect for those offices.

I was at the meeting where reference was made to the Chief Electoral Officer and saw first-hand how the Conservative government treats the independent office of Elections Canada, something Canadians have seen indirectly through media reports. The government needs to demonstrate a whole lot more goodwill. The way to do that is by ensuring that the agents are part of the process and that respect is demonstrated toward them. How does one do that? When election laws are changed, there is a responsibility to work with our parliamentary agents, in this case the Chief Electoral Officer. There is a responsibility to listen to what he or she has to say about election laws. That is something the government did not do; it did not have any form of consultation.

Therefore, when we look at Bill C-520, what the government is doing, through a backbench member of Parliament, is demonstrating a lack of respect for the positions we have that are important to all of Canada, whether that is the Chief Electoral Officer, the Auditor General, the Commissioner of Official Languages, the Privacy Commissioner, the Information Commissioner, the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner, the Commissioner of Lobbying, or the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner, all of whom play a critical role in the functioning of our democracy in Canada. We challenge the government to demonstrate more respect for those offices.

• (1110)

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have this opportunity to rise in support of Bill C-520, an act supporting non-partisan agents of Parliament.

The principle of the political impartiality of the public service, agents and officers of Parliament, is a fundamental element of our system of government and ensures that Canadians and parliamentarians benefit from the non-partisan delivery of services.

Agents of Parliament and their employees are given the important mandate to perform non-partisan duties in Parliament. The public has a right to know whether or not the agents, or those who work in their offices, have engaged in political activities.

The bill before us will help protect the institution of Parliament and bring more transparency and accountability into our political process. Bill C-520 is consistent with our government's long-

standing commitment to increasing accountability and transparency, which is why our government is pleased to support it.

The bill provides that anyone applying to work in the office of an agent of Parliament would be required to disclose partisan political activities dating back 10 years.

Agents of Parliament and those who work in their offices must declare whether they intend to occupy a politically partisan position while continuing to occupy the position of agent of Parliament or work in the office of such an agent. They would also be required to make a written declaration that they will fulfill their duties in a non-partisan manner. The disclosures would be posted online, for transparency.

The bill would also allow any member of the Senate or the House of Commons to request that an agent of Parliament investigate allegations of partisan activity by the agent's staff.

The bill would apply to the Auditor General, the Chief Electoral Officer, the Commissioner of Official Languages, the Privacy Commissioner, the Information Commissioner, the Senate Ethics Officer, the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner, the Commissioner of Lobbying, the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner, as well as the staff employed under each agent of Parliament.

We know that a high degree of transparency makes government more accountable. That is why we have been working to make more information available to Canadians. By proactively making information available, it becomes accessible to anyone who may be interested, and this allows the public and parliamentarians to hold the government to account.

Allow me to speak to a number of the initiatives that our government has taken toward greater transparency. In April, the President of the Treasury Board unveiled the expenditure database, a searchable online database that for the first time ever consolidates all information on government spending in one place. We are talking about everything from spending on government programs to operational spending on things like personnel and equipment. What this means for Canadians is that they would have a more complete picture of how taxpayer money is spent. We, as parliamentarians, are now better equipped to do our jobs, which is to analyze, assess, and consider government expenditures.

We all know how difficult and time-consuming it can be to go through numerous and complex financial documents to try to get a whole-of-government picture of what is being spent and where. Now, with a few simple clicks, users can find out in one place what every department and agency is spending on items such as transfer payments to provinces.

This is in addition to the measures that our government has already taken to improve financial reporting and support parliamentary scrutiny of estimates and supply.

These measures include the following: one, publishing quarterly financial reports; two, posting financial datasets on the Treasury Board Secretariat website and the open data portal; and, three, making ongoing improvements to the form and content of reports on plans and priorities and departmental performance reports.

Our government believes that being accountable to taxpayers means being transparent about how their money is being spent.

• (1115)

That is why the President of the Treasury Board took steps just this past September to ensure that information disclosed about public service contracts is not only accessible but easy to understand. The new measures ensure that more detailed information is published on contracts for services, such as professional services and management consultant contracts. For example, rather than simply providing a generic description of the awarded contract, such as “management consulting contract”, a more detailed explanation of the type of work and context is now required.

We have been working hard to improve the flow of information through the access to information system. We have made incredibly large and major strides in ensuring that Canadians have access to government information, and we have set records when it comes to their requests. Approximately 6 million pages were released to the public last year. This is a record number and a record to be proud of, quite honestly. The number of requests that the government dealt with increased by 27% as well. That is another record. That is an increase of over 10,000 requests.

We are also more efficient. The turnaround rate for the government is one of the fastest in history. Our government is meeting Canadian expectations on access to information by being faster and by doing more.

The numbers are right there. Thanks to the Conservative government, our government of the day, Canadians are getting more, better, and faster access than ever before. That is what delivering on promises looks like.

We are also opening Government of Canada records. We have taken measures to post online 3 million pages of archived government records that were previously restricted. That is all new. Clearly, our government takes action to promote accountability in government and to ensure that the powers entrusted in all of us by our citizens are being exercised in the public interest.

The bill before us today would continue in that tradition by providing enhanced transparency and accountability for parliamentarians, who must have confidence that the work of agents of Parliament is impartial. We support the intent of this bill. Our government supports it, and I support it.

I thank the member for his presentation of this bill for our consideration, to ensure that nothing in this bill will diminish the effectiveness of the tools already in place to protect the impartiality of the public service.

• (1120)

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is a great honour to speak in this chamber, representing the people of Timmins—James Bay.

I am a strong believer in the Westminster system of government. I believe that it is a good system of government and that it could be one of the best in the world. However, we are seeing a continual undermining of the Westminster tradition by the current Conservative government.

Private Members' Business

Bill C-520 is called an act to support the non-partisan officers of Parliament, but anybody back home knows that in the Orwellian language of the current Conservative government, the opposite is involved.

In listening to the Conservatives here this morning, we have heard them talk about accountability and transparency. What they mean is accountability for everybody else and transparency for everybody else but secrecy for them and loopholes for their friends.

The bill is brought forward by the member for York Centre, who is now famous for his attempt to turn the most historic and sacred site of Judaism into a photo op for his re-election. Here is a man who is telling us it is all about making sure the systems of Parliament are able to do their job. However, it means that this backbencher would set up a system where the people whose job it is to investigate Parliament would now be investigated, not by Parliament but by the members of the governing party. There is a provision in the bill that would allow any backbench Conservative or any senator to demand an investigation of the Auditor General or the Lobbying Commissioner.

It is interesting that the Lobbying Commissioner has no power to investigate Conservative senators. It does not matter how many junkets they fly on, how many corporate boards they sit on, or how many times big oil takes average Conservative senators out to Hy's Steakhouse and wines and dines them. The Lobbying Commissioner has no ability to investigate a senator; a senator is protected. However, a senator would be able to demand an investigation of the Lobbying Commissioner. That is the intent of the bill.

The Ethics Commissioner has no ability to investigate whether Nigel Wright and Mike Duffy were involved in an illegal \$90,000 payout, which is now being investigated by the RCMP. Why? It is because the Ethics Commissioner has no ability to touch Mike Duffy. However, with the proposed legislation, Mike Duffy could have demanded an investigation of the Ethics Commissioner.

Members might not realize it, but over in the supposed upper chamber, they actually do have an Ethics Commissioner. She is probably the quietest person in Ottawa, as she actually needs permission from her own senators to investigate. Therefore, if we are looking at the involvement of senators Tkachuk, LeBreton, Stewart Olsen, and Gerstein in this illegal cover-up, well, we cannot ask the Ethics Commissioner over in the Senate to investigate whether or not all those key people in the Conservative Party were involved in illegal activities, because she actually needs their permission to investigate. She has to beg the senators before she is allowed to launch an investigation.

However, Senator Gerstein, the bagman for the Conservative Party, and Senator Tkachuk, who is accused of telling Pamela Wallin to whitewash her calendar, so the RCMP would not find out, would have the power to demand an investigation into anything the ethics officer does. That is the world the Conservative government is bringing us into.

Private Members' Business

This is now a country where we see a supposedly stand-alone, non-partisan institution like Canada Revenue Agency being put to use investigating charities. Why is it investigating charities? It is because the Conservatives will use the levers of government against any charity that has the nerve to stand up and speak about the petro-state.

We have Canada's spy agency overseen by Chuck Strahl. A cabinet minister who stepped out and became an Enbridge lobbyist got appointed as the head of the spy agency. I guess it is a step up. The last guy the Conservatives had in charge of the spy agency was Arthur Porter. Is he not now hiding out in a Panama jail having been caught for money laundering and issues of gun running and fraud? This is the man who the Prime Minister of this country thought should oversee the spy agency, so I guess Chuck Strahl was a step up.

However, Chuck Strahl is working for Enbridge. Now the spy agency gets its orders from the National Energy Board to spy on Enbridge's enemies. They had a secure briefing, and the luncheon for the secure briefing with the National Energy Board and Canada's spy agency was actually sponsored and paid for by Enbridge.

• (1125)

This is the kind of insider access we are seeing now, and the government thought there were no problems with that.

Now other officers of Parliament could be investigated. The government could go after the Commissioner of Lobbying.

Let us look at the issue of the Privacy Commissioner. The Privacy Commissioner has an international reputation. She has taken on big data. She has asked for tools to be able to keep up, but the government does not want that. When the government lost the personal data of 500,000 Canadians, what was its response? It sat on it.

If we are to be accountable to Canadians, and if we find out that personal information has been either lost or stolen, the first thing we should do is alert those people, to protect them from identity theft and fraud. It is not so with the Conservative government. Its objective is to protect hapless ministers. It sat on the loss of information for over a month.

The New Democratic Party asked the Privacy Commissioner to investigate other breaches. We found out that over one million Canadians have had their data stolen, hacked, or lost, and of all those cases, only 10% were reported by the government to the commissioner. The Conservatives do not care if personal data is being stolen, because they do not want their ministers to look bad.

The next time the New Democratic Party asks the commissioner to investigate why data is being lost and why senior citizens' financial information may have been stolen under the government's watch, the government would be able to demand an investigation into the officer of Parliament whose job is to protect Canadians, just like what the member from York did and made himself famous.

With respect to access to information, we hear gibberish from the other side about all the data sets that the member for Parry Sound—Muskoka is handing out. The Access to Information Commissioner has talked about ministerial offices becoming black holes of

information. She cannot touch the information. When the member for Parry Sound—Muskoka took \$50 million in border infrastructure money—money that could have kept guns and drugs out of the country—and spent it on trinkets in his riding, he could say there was no paper trail, because he knew the access to information officer did not have the power to demand the paperwork that we knew was there.

Canada was a world leader in terms of access to information. Canada set the benchmark. Since the Conservatives have taken office, Canada has dropped to 41st place, to 51st place, and now we are at 55th place in the world. Angola and Colombia are further ahead.

What would the government do in response? It would make it possible to demand an investigation into the access to information commissioner should he or she put any heat on a government agency.

I could go on about Elections Canada. The government did not consult with Elections Canada. The Conservative government is a government of serial cheaters. Who did it hear from? The government heard from all the Conservative members who are under investigation for electoral crimes and misdemeanours, and they are the ones who have decided that the electoral officer will no longer be allowed anywhere near the ice to protect Canadians.

At the end of the day, this legislation is about undermining the fundamental pillars that support democratic accountability in this country. This legislation would allow backbenchers and senators to protect their own interests by attacking the officers whose job is to stand up for Canadians, to ensure accountability, to ensure transparency, and to stop the insiders, the well-heeled, and the big boys sitting in the back room from misrepresenting and undermining democracy in this country.

We in the NDP will be opposing this legislation.

• (1130)

Mr. Rick Norlock (Northumberland—Quinte West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is indeed a pleasure today to speak to Bill C-520.

The bill is in line with other measures our government has brought forward to eliminate conflict of interest and to strengthen transparency and accountability in Canada's public institutions. I believe that everyone who thinks as I do, which is that we must always fight to strengthen and protect our parliamentary democracy, should be in favour of it.

Allow me a few moments to go over the content of this bill.

Bill C-520 would require every person who applies for a job in the office of an agent of Parliament to make a declaration stating whether in the last 10 years before applying for that job he or she had occupied specific political partisan positions.

Private Members' Business

The bill would also require anyone who works in such an office, as well as the agents of Parliament themselves, to make a declaration if they intend to occupy a politically partisan position while continuing to be an agent of Parliament or to work in such an office. The bill would also require that these declarations be posted on a website of the office of the agent of Parliament in question. In addition, the bill would require an agent of Parliament and those who work for him to provide a written undertaking that they will conduct themselves in a non-partisan manner in fulfilling their official duties.

This is a good bill, because it would uphold Canada's most noble parliamentary traditions. It proposes to avoid conflicts of interest that are likely to arise or would be perceived to have arisen between partisan activities and the official duties and responsibilities of an agent of Parliament or his or her staff. It would achieve this by supplementing all other applicable, relevant laws that seek to ensure the same thing, and not by detracting from or replacing these other laws.

Non-partisanship is a well-recognized principle in our modern public service and is expected of all public servants. Agents of Parliament, however, play a particularly important role in government oversight. These agents and their staff must work in a visibly non-partisan way to maintain the confidence of parliamentarians and Canadians, so it is even more important that these public servants be seen as not having any political affiliations. To this end, the public service disclosure provisions in the bill are meant to provide enhanced transparency and accountability.

Let me add that the values expressed in this bill are consistent with the focus on transparency and accountability we have committed to since being elected to office in 2006. As members will remember, the first thing we did upon coming into power was put in place measures to ensure greater accountability and transparency in our public institutions. We introduced the Federal Accountability Act and its accompanying action plan. The act and action plan provide Canadians with assurance that the power entrusted in government officials is being exercised fairly and in the public interest, and they provide for serious consequences in cases of proven wrongdoing. The result was substantial changes to some 45 federal statutes as well as amendments to more than 100 others touching virtually every part of government and beyond.

There are many examples of such measures, but certainly one that affected us directly was the new lobbying regulations that came into force in September 2010. As members know, lobbying is communication by an individual who is paid to communicate with a designated public officer-holder on behalf of a person or organization in relation to the development, introduction, or amendment of a bill, resolution, regulation, policy, or program; the awarding of a grant, contribution or any other financial benefit; and, in the case of a consultant lobbyist, the awarding of any contract or the arranging of a meeting with a public office-holder. The activity is not illegal, but abuses of it are, and such abuses are clearly counter to our democratic values. That is why we brought in legislation to regulate it.

• (1135)

As a result, today, to avoid conflict of interest, the act ensures that parliamentarians and their senior staff are subject to certain

prohibitions on lobbying as well to requirements for reporting it. The Lobbying Act has been a good thing for the integrity of Parliament, just as this bill being considered today would be a good thing for the integrity of Parliament.

This bill is also in line with the democratic and professional principles of the broader public service. This is expressed in the "Values and Ethics Code for the Public Sector". The code requires that public servants carry out their duties in accordance with legislation, policies, and directives in a non-partisan, impartial manner. Indeed, agents and employees must sign offers of employment stating that they will abide by the code, and transgressions of the code can result in penalties up to and including dismissal.

Finally, let me add that Bill C-520 is consistent with the commitment to impartiality articulated in Part 7 of the Public Service Employment Act. The act places responsibilities on public servants, deputy heads, and the Public Service Commission to uphold the non-partisan character of the public service. This bill would carry forward the tradition of upholding the finest principles of democratic government in Canada. Its focus on impartiality and the appearance of impartiality in the offices of agents of Parliament would ensure that parliamentarians and Canadians could be confident in the neutrality of the executive and legislative branches of our public service.

To sum up, our government is steadfastly committed to bolstering the political neutrality of the public service. We understand that agents of Parliament and their staff must work in a non-partisan way to maintain the confidence of Canadians and parliamentarians. Our values and ethics code and the provisions of the Public Service Employment Act are helping to protect their impartiality. This bill is designed to supplement and add transparency to the existing rules and regulations.

In economic action plan 2013, we committed to reviewing and updating public service processes and systems to ensure that the public service would continue to serve Canadians well. Bill C-520 is the latest step in this fine Canadian tradition, and I am asking that all members support this bill and all it stands for.

• (1140)

Mrs. Patricia Davidson (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise today to give my support to Bill C-520, An Act supporting non-partisan agents of Parliament. I would like to thank my colleague, the member for York Centre, for introducing this private member's bill.

The purpose of this bill is to help ensure that conflicts of interest do not compromise the trust Canadians have in their parliamentary institutions or prevent these institutions from functioning as they were meant to. In other words, the bill is meant to ensure a non-partisan public service.

A non-partisan public service is one in which appointments are based on merit and are free of influential political influence. It is one in which public servants perform their duties, and are seen to perform their duties, in a politically impartial manner.

Private Members' Business

To this end, Bill C-520 is designed to prevent conflicts of interest that may arise or are perceived to arise between partisan activities and the official duties and responsibilities of an agent of Parliament or any person who works for an agent of Parliament.

Specifically, the bill would require every person who applies for a position in the office of an agent of Parliament to make a declaration with respect to past engagement in politically partisan positions. This declaration would state whether, in the 10 years before applying for that position, the person had occupied certain specified politically partisan positions.

In the case of persons who work in the office of an agent of Parliament and the agents themselves, a declaration would state whether they intend to occupy a politically partisan position while continuing to occupy the position of agent of Parliament or to work in the office of such an agent. The declarations would be posted on the website of the office of the relevant agent of Parliament.

In addition, the bill would require an agent of Parliament and the persons who work in his or her office to provide a written undertaking that they will conduct themselves in a non-partisan manner in fulfilling the official duties and responsibilities of their positions. What is more, the bill would provide for the examination of alleged partisan conduct.

Non-partisanship is certainly expected of all public servants, but agents of Parliament play a particularly vital role in government oversight. Agents of Parliament, such as the Auditor General, the Commissioner of Official Languages, and the Information Commissioner are a unique group of independent, statutory officers who serve to scrutinize the activity of government. They report directly to Parliament rather than to the government or an individual minister, and as such, they exist to serve Parliament in relation to Parliament's oversight role. Agents normally produce a report to Parliament to account for their own activities, and their institutional heads are typically appointed through special resolutions of the House of Commons and the Senate.

Given the close relationship between agents of Parliament and their employees with parliamentarians, it is critical that in carrying out their duties, they are independent of political affiliation. Bill C-520 seeks to ensure that independence. Indeed, the political impartiality of the public service is one of the foundation stones of our system of democracy. It is a time-honoured tradition that has served us well for some 100 years.

Today, almost a century later, Canadians expect a lot of their public service. They expect the government to pursue policies and programs that take into account and are responsive to public priorities. They expect the government to operate in an open, transparent, and accountable manner.

Through legislation, we strengthened the powers of the Auditor General, toughened the Office of the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner, reformed political party financing, dramatically tightened lobbying rules, and beefed up auditing and accountability within government departments. As a result, Canada now has one of the most accountable and transparent systems of governance in the entire world, and this is something Canadians are rightly proud of.

As part of this regime, the values and ethics code and the provisions in the Public Service Employment Act protect the impartiality of the public service and agents of Parliament.

• (1145)

However, accountability and transparency in public institutions are things we can never take for granted.

That is why Bill C-520 is so important. It would add transparency to the existing regime. It would not only continue to toughen rules and uphold our culture of accountability, but it would also highlight our government's ongoing commitment to ensure that these values continue into the future.

In addition, Bill C-520 would be consistent with our commitment in budget 2013 to review and update public services processes and systems to ensure that the public service continues to serve Canadians well.

It would be consistent with the government's focus on transparency and accountability in the management of public assets, and it would also reflect the value of public service impartiality.

Our government fully supports the bill's intent to augment the existing regime in ensuring that agents of Parliament and their employees do not engage in political activities that conflict with, or are seen to conflict with, their official duties and conduct.

We believe it would be in line with the values that have served this country well in the past, and would position the public service to serve Canadians well in the future.

We will support the bill and call upon parliamentarians to join with us to ensure that Canadians have the government they need to succeed in a competitive world.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Resuming debate?

Accordingly, I invite the hon. member for York Centre for his five-minute right of reply.

Mr. Mark Adler (York Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to first of all thank my colleagues from the government side for their support of my private member's bill, Bill C-520, An Act supporting non-partisan agents of Parliament.

I was a bit taken aback by the comments by the member for Timmins—James Bay. This is a member of Parliament who talked about George Orwell. Orwell would be very proud today to have heard the speech by the member for Timmins—James Bay. If it were not for transparency, we would not know that the member was held in violation of the Canada Elections Act in 2008 for keeping his election bank account open through the 2011 election, a clear violation of elections law.

If it were not for transparency, we also would not know that he is a member of Parliament who went to his constituents before the 2011 election and said he would be supporting the long gun registry, but when he was elected and came to Parliament and had the chance to vote on it, he voted to keep the long gun registry. I suspect that his constituents will have time to deal with him in the forthcoming year.

It is with great pride that I rise today to respond to a number of the remarks that have been made and to ask for the support of the House in consideration of Bill C-520. As many members from the government have said, this bill is another step in our government's proposal for creating more transparency and more accountability within the machinery of government, within the public administration.

It began in 2006 with the Federal Accountability Act. As a government, we also made deputy ministers accounting officers, which means they have to go before parliamentary committees and account for the spending in their departments. We brought in the Public Servants Disclosure Protection Act, which made it easier for public employees to disclose wrongdoing. It was our government that brought forward the Conflict of Interest Act and created the offices of the lobbying and ethics commissioners. We have extended access to information, making record numbers of documents available to the public, to the media, and to members of Parliament.

What is consistent, however, among all of these is that the opposition voted against every single one of them, which just goes to prove that accountability and transparency are of no interest to the opposition members. We, however, differ. We believe that the public has a right to know and that we, as a government, have an obligation to make as much known, as much public, and as much transparent as possible. That is why people sent us here as the majority government, and we are fulfilling the wishes of the Canadian people in making more transparent and more accountability available to them.

We will not be deterred from that task the public has given us. We are opening up the windows of government. We are letting fresh air in. We have to ask why is the opposition saying transparency and accountability is bad? That is a subject that hopefully will come up during committee hearings, when they can more fully answer, but from my perspective, transparency and accountability are great things. Bill C-520 makes a wonderful effort to move the ball forward in making government more accountable and more transparent.

I will not go into the details of the various sections of the bill. I see I have one more minute left to speak. We as a government, and I as a member of the governing party, with the support of my colleagues on the governing side and we hope with as many members of the opposition side as we can muster, that the opposition can see fit to release themselves from the shackles of their own partisanship and vote with us, to open the windows, because I know in their heart of hearts they believe in transparency and accountability.

Louis Brandeis said that nothing disinfects like sunlight. It is so important that we open those windows and let the light in, so that we can be more transparent and more accountable to the Canadian people.

• (1150)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The question is on the motion. Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

Government Orders

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 yeas have it.

And five or more members having risen:

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Pursuant to Standing Order 93, the division stands deferred until Wednesday, February 12, 2014, immediately before the time provided for private members' business.

SUSPENSION OF SITTING

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): It being 11:53, the House will stand suspended until the normal hour for government orders at 12 noon.

(The sitting of the House was suspended at 11:53)

SITTING RESUMED

(The House resumed at 12 p.m.)

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

• (1200)
[English]

FAIR ELECTIONS ACT

The House resumed from February 7 consideration of the motion that Bill C-23, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act and other Acts and to make consequential amendments to certain Acts, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims (Newton—North Delta, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I do not really want to say that it is a pleasure, but I am really pleased that I have the privilege to speak out very strongly against the bill that we are debating here today, Bill C-23, an act to amend the Canada Elections Act and other Acts and to make consequential amendments to certain Acts.

When we take a look at this piece of reform, it is something that the House has been waiting a long time for. Ever since 2011, as long as I have been here as an MP, we have heard over and over again that the government was about to bring forward amendments to the Canada Elections Act in order to improve accountability, transparency, and so on. What a big disappointment, then, when this bill was tabled.

First of all, let us take a look at the process. A bill that is many pages in number and not without insignificant changes is tabled, and before debate has even started, there is already a move from my colleagues across the way to shut down debate.

Government Orders

We suggested that the bill, after its first reading, should go to committee stage so that all parties could work on something this significant in a non-partisan way and come up with something that works for all Canadians. However, the Conservative government shut it down.

We then started the debate in the House. Before two speakers had finished their speeches, we had a motion. What a surprise. We had a motion to shut down the debate.

I am so proud to be a Canadian. I am so proud that I live in a country that has a parliamentary democracy, but right now, I fear that our parliamentary democracy is at risk. We cannot take those kinds of comments lightly. It takes a lot for me to say that.

The reason I say that parliamentary democracy is at risk is that there is a role for parliamentarians. When a bill is produced, parliamentarians representing ridings right across this huge and diverse country get to take part in a debate and put forward their perspectives. These perspectives are the ones they hear from their constituents, as well as those that they have garnered from their own experiences.

However, once again, the Conservative government has a lot to hide. When a government tries to shut down debate, it has something to hide. Once again, the Conservative government has moved time allocation. It seems so ironic that the very bill that purports to address parliamentary democracy and the elections of parliamentarians is where the government chose to use this tactic of shutting down debate. It is just so wrong.

Not only is it wrong, let us also look at the timing of this bill that we have been waiting months and years for. When did the government decide to table it? It decided to table the bill during Olympics week. One would think it would be enough with people preoccupied with watching and supporting our athletes at Sochi. That was not enough of a cover, so the government needed the time allocation, the Olympics, and the budget a few days later, to absolutely suppress debate of critical issues.

It is, as I hear my colleagues saying, very disturbing. More than disturbing, this is a deliberate act by a government that speaks about accountability and transparency. Now that it has a majority, it feels that it does not have to be transparent or accountable. Now, we are seeing the arrogance of the majority, trying to push through legislation without giving parliamentarians the chance they need to debate the issue.

• (1205)

I have many colleagues in my caucus who are very disturbed that they will not get the time to speak, that they will not get to put forward their perspectives on what is absolutely flawed in the bill.

I want to get down to the content of the bill. First, let me say that there are some minor improvements in the bill. We are not saying everything in the bill is bad, but these minor improvements are buried in a fundamentally flawed bill. For example, we are delighted that there would more advance polling days, which could help to increase voter turnout. The bill also helps to modernize the online voter registration system by indirectly allowing e-signatures, which is a good thing, but on the other hand the bill also has a number of flaws, and I want to get to a few of those.

First, I do not know what the government has against the Chief Electoral Officer. Over the last few years I have been impressed by how he has been doing his job in a non-partisan way. However, my colleagues across the way do not like that, so they are removing power from the Chief Electoral Officer instead of increasing the powers of his office, and they are making an unnecessary separation between Elections Canada and the commissioner.

Once again, the Conservatives have absolutely no evidence that the Electoral Officer has been anything but non-partisan. Just because the Electoral Officer found some misdeeds by colleagues across the way and some technical difficulties with things that were being done by members in the House, it does not mean he is not doing his job. He should not be punished personally and his reputation put at stake, but neither should his office have its power limited because my colleagues across the way are too scared about what it could mean for the future if his office retains its powers and who do not want that kind of oversight of their actions.

The other part of the bill I find most disturbing is that it makes voting more complex for our most vulnerable Canadians. This is a form of voter suppression that reminds us of what we have seen south of the border. I never thought I would see it in Canada. We have the kind of policies being put forward in the bill that would absolutely disenfranchise our most vulnerable, including the low income, transients, and our youth. All of this is very disturbing at a time when we should be engaging more people in a debate and the electoral process. We have a government that is absolutely suppressing the voters who might have the most complaints against its policies and who are very disturbed by how they are being marginalized more and more.

The bill also makes it difficult by changing some of the political financing rules in ways that absolutely favour my colleagues across the way. The bill does not actually increase a person's tax rebate. I did not really hear a clamouring anywhere in the country to the effect, "Please allow us to give more to the political process because we want to". It is a cash grab by the Conservative Party. All of this will benefit that party.

• (1210)

In other parts of the bill the Conservatives are trying to clarify what is already there. The act already states it is wrong to commit fraud, yet now we are having that being spelled out again. I have some concerns about that. Is this a cover up so they can then go out and say that this provision did not really exist? Let me assure the House that it did exist.

This is a travesty and I urge my colleagues to take their time and that we be given the time to be parliamentarians and to debate important bills.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Just before we get to questions and comments, I would just remind hon. members that we are on 5-minutes questions and comments, so if members could keep their interventions brief we will have more time for others to participate.

Questions and comments. The hon. Minister of State for Democratic Reform.

Government Orders

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member complained that the fair elections act removes vouching as a form of identification. However, she did not address the serious problems that Elections Canada's own commissioned report found with vouching. It found that 25% of cases of vouching had an irregularity. It has been argued by some that these irregularities have been just small paperwork errors that had no impact on the substance of the vote.

I have the wording of the Neufeld report right here, a report commissioned by Elections Canada. The report cites the findings of a judge in the Ontario Superior Court decision on the riding of Etobicoke Centre. The judge found that "...27 cases involved serious errors within the application of identity vouching procedures." In fact, 27 votes had to be invalidated in that tight race because of vouching.

The Supreme Court ultimately overturned that decision, but the fact that a superior court thought the vouching provisions had such serious irregularities that it had to overturn votes should raise concerns for all. Why does the member not agree?

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims: Mr. Speaker, every one of us in the House wants to make sure that people who are eligible to vote, vote. However, the system and the changes introduced by the government will actually prevent people from voting.

I hear a lot about 25%, but I also know that there were many technical difficulties that had very little to do with vouching. There are other ways that we can fix the problem where there are errors, maybe with more training for the staff that are hired. They could be looking at the vouching system and putting some protocols in place.

My Conservative colleagues across the way talk about encouraging more people to participate. However, this bill would actually prevent a growing percentage of our citizens from voting.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, my question for the member is in regard to Elections Canada. It is seen as an independent election agency, known throughout the world, with an immense amount of credibility. It understands our election laws. It understands where it is vulnerable and where the changes need to occur. What I find quite upsetting, and I believe many Canadians would find somewhat disturbing, is that the Government of Canada did not see fit to work in any real capacity with Elections Canada by accepting, for example, a number of its recommendations to improve the quality of our election laws here in Canada.

We believe it was ultimately a huge mistake for the government to ignore Elections Canada. Would the member like to comment on that fact?

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims: Mr. Speaker, that is nothing new with this government. We all know that the Conservatives have an allergy to data, science, and informed advice. In this case, I was not surprised when I heard that the elections officer had not actually seen the legislation or had been given any chance to participate, except for a summary meeting in the summer, without any legislation in front before him.

Once again, the government is showing that this is not about fixing elections and making things more democratic. This is about its

own ideological agenda. This is about voter suppression and to cover-up and avoid accountability.

• (1215)

Mr. Dennis Bevington (Western Arctic, NDP): Mr. Speaker, when it comes to the question of vouching, there were 100,000 in the last election. That works out to less than 350 per riding. Quite clearly, as portrayed here, the evidence was that the discrepancies found in the one test riding were not strong enough to stand up in the Supreme Court. We are going to take 100,000 people out of the election system. What does my colleague think about that?

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims: Mr. Speaker, it illustrates that while the government has said that the bill is about increasing electoral engagement, it is all about voter suppression and keeping the vote out of the hands of the most vulnerable in our Canadian society.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as the member of Parliament for Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, it is a privilege to rise in the House and participate in this debate on a bill that would contribute to the integrity of the democratic process in Canada.

I congratulate the Minister of State for Democratic Reform for the excellent job he is doing. Our minister has demonstrated with this legislation that he is listening to Canadians, and it is a pleasure to work with such a knowledgeable and hard-working member of our Conservative government.

The Canada Elections Act reforms that the Minister of State for Democratic Reform has presented to Canadians are well thought out and reasonable. I have listened very carefully to the criticisms of the opposition and have yet to hear a valid point that gives me pause for consideration. Canadians have complete confidence in the minister. If substantive reasons are presented that would improve the fair elections act, our government welcomes the input.

By way of today's discussion, I intend to focus on the proposed amendments in Bill C-23 that would remove the Commissioner of Canada Elections from the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer and place that individual in the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions. While this step is absolutely necessary, I draw the following sequence of events to the attention of the minister as a caution with regard to the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions.

In practice, I encourage all parliamentarians to share their election experiences as a means to give the voice of practicality to our proceedings in the House. The minister has done this by making some very practical recommendations to improve the way elections are run in Canada.

While we as parliamentarians try to do our best when we propose legislation, accounting for every scenario is a difficult challenge. In the aftermath of the 2011 general election, my office was contacted by outraged voters regarding the blatant political activity conducted by the law firm McCann, Sheppard. The law firm received a political patronage appointment to be the federal crown agent for Renfrew County when Chrétien was in power. The recommendation to appoint this law firm came from the Liberal candidate I defeated in the 37th general election while he was an MP. This defeated candidate, whom I handily beat, ran again in the 2011 election.

Government Orders

A member of the McCann, Sheppard law firm acted as the official agent for the defeated candidate in the 2011 election. The law office prominently displayed a sign on its front lawn for the defeated candidate. In the election return, the law office address is even identified as the campaign office, and it charged the campaign \$5,000 for miscellaneous expenses.

The Terms and Conditions of Fixed-Term Agreements of Agents of the Public Prosecution Service of Canada that are signed by all agents are clear. Under section 3.9 of that agreement, agents are prohibited from political activity, specifically being an official agent, with penalty of suspension or termination. They are required to inform their agent supervisor without delay of any involvement or proposed involvement in political activities.

The law firm of McCann, Sheppard had been acting in the capacity of official agent for over a year, as the defeated candidate had declared well before the dropping of the writ and was actively campaigning.

I wrote the Director of Public Prosecutions to relay the concerns of my outraged voters, asking why the law firm of McCann, Sheppard had not been suspended or terminated as agents of the crown. I then found out that a very flawed process had taken place, resulting in the five-year reappointment of McCann to the position of federal crown agent for Renfrew County. This was done even though the Director of Public Prosecutions had been made aware of the blatant partisan political activity in the office where the crown prosecutor works.

Making matters worse, lawyers in Renfrew Country who would have applied for the position of federal crown attorney were denied a fair opportunity to apply for the position of crown agent.

• (1220)

When I wrote the Director of Public Prosecutions, I reminded him of his own words in the annual report:

Prosecutors must be of absolute integrity, above all suspicion of favouritism....

To the detriment of the administration of justice in Canada, the Director of Public Prosecutions failed to do the right thing and terminate the McCann, Sheppard practice as crown agents. Once McCann, Sheppard admitted their guilt, which the Director of Public Prosecutions confirmed to me in writing, it should have been case closed. The decision to reappoint McCann was wrong.

Members of Parliament can rightly ask where the accountability of the Director of Public Prosecutions is. Any reasonable individual can see the clear conflict of interest in this case.

Unfortunately, there is no guarantee that a performance audit by the Auditor General on the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions would have identified problems with how agents are hired, which is what was suggested as the next course of action.

I outlined the bare details of this case for several reasons.

Members of the Public Prosecution Service prosecute, on behalf of Elections Canada, the offences of election law. How are Canadians going to have confidence in the administration of justice, knowing that political partisans are able to conduct political witch hunts after an election?

It also begs the observation that it seems that Conservatives are held to a different standard by Elections Canada than other political parties. This was made very clear by my colleague, the member for Selkirk—Interlake. I was shocked, as I believe most fair-minded Canadians were, when, earlier in this debate, he shared with the House his experience with Elections Canada.

I know what it means to be the object of a political vendetta. That was the case after a previous election campaign when, under bullying from an employee in Chrétien's office during his time as prime minister, Elections Canada was pressured to conduct an inquisition into my election campaign. Under Jean Chrétien, the Liberals pushed the line of what is considered fair game for partisan politics. Adscam, the sponsorship scandal, is evidence of that. Canadians may never know if the \$40 million in taxpayer money that was handed out in brown envelopes to Liberals will ever be found.

Prior to 2006, the Commissioner of Elections was responsible for both investigations and prosecutions. The then Commissioner of Elections made no effort to prove political pressure was not a factor, as he was asked to prove. This only results in the consequence of bringing that office into disrepute in the eyes of the public, which is what happens every time something like that occurs.

Using the Canada Elections Act to try to subvert the will of Canadians over whom they elect is an old trick of those who do not respect the democratic process. Had the Commissioner of Elections been independent of Elections Canada at that time, as our Conservative government is proposing in Bill C-23, the commissioner would have had the independence to say “no” to political partisan persecution, if he had the integrity to do so.

• (1225)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault (Sherbrooke, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have this opportunity to ask my colleague a question.

For most of her speech, the hon. member talked about problems she has encountered that she has not been able to resolve. I do not believe that the bill currently before the House will solve those problems.

Like many of her colleagues, she appears to see malice everywhere and imagine conspiracies plotted against the Conservatives all across Canada. I really have to wonder whether the bill will indeed offer any solutions to the problems she raised.

[*English*]

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Mr. Speaker, I draw the member's attention to the independent commissioner, who would have sharper teeth, a longer reach, and a freer hand.

Government Orders

The fair elections act would empower law enforcement with sharper teeth, a longer reach, and a freer hand. Sharper teeth would mean stiffer penalties for existing offences; a longer reach would mean empowering the commissioner with more than a dozen new offences to combat big money, rogue calls, and fraudulent voting; finally, a freer hand would mean the commissioner would have full independence, with control of his or her staff in investigations, and a fixed term of seven years so he or she could not be fired without cause.

Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Wind-sor, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I think a very pointed question is required here.

The member alluded earlier to the singling out of the Conservative Party of Canada by Elections Canada. My first question for her needs a simple answer, a yes or no. Are the Conservatives targeted by Elections Canada unfairly?

Second, the member is talking about trying to achieve neutrality for Elections Canada. I am not sure “neutral”, or perhaps even “neutered”, is the right word in this particular situation, because the Chief Electoral Officer was in the media this weekend talking about how this is a step back for democracy.

First, yes or no, are the Conservatives targeted unfairly? Second, why is the Chief Electoral Officer so wrong?

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Mr. Speaker, it is ironic that in the past the agents of Parliament have appealed for more oversight from all parliamentarians. However, who watches the watchdogs?

That was the question we asked after the 2011 election, particularly after the former privacy commissioner, George Radwanski, resigned in disgrace after management problems were investigated by the Auditor General. Security of tenure, meaning that an agent of Parliament cannot be removed without the approval of both the House of Commons and the Senate, while important to the independence of an agent of Parliament to do his or her job, must be thoroughly thought out. Substituting one abuse with the potential for a different kind of abuse is no solution.

Hon. Gary Goodyear (Minister of State (Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario), CPC): Mr. Speaker, interestingly enough, one of my volunteers on my campaign of 2011 got a letter from Elections Canada threatening to put him in prison because he mistakenly opened our bank account two days early. We recently got a letter stating that someone had overcontributed to my campaign. As a result of contributing to a number of campaigns, a small error was made, and we need to keep elections fair, as the letter stated. Therefore, we had to find this individual and repay him \$200. Interestingly enough, it was the same week Elections Canada decided to ignore the hundreds of thousands of dollars in leadership donations that we all deemed to be illegal.

Elections Canada lets the Liberals off, yet threatens to put my volunteers in prison. I wonder if the member can comment on that fairness.

• (1230)

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Mr. Speaker, it may be more appropriate for the Commissioner of Canada Elections to be appointed by the Minister for Democratic Reform or Parliament, rather than have the

appointment left to the Director of Public Prosecutions, but I leave that consideration for the minister and this House.

When our Conservative government brought in the Federal Accountability Act, one of the steps we took was the elimination of the appointment of federal crown agents as partisan political appointees. A problem is that a number of Chrétien-era partisan political appointees may still be corrupting the system. Changes that we would implement through Bill C-23 are intended to prevent the abuses of the past that the minister speaks of.

Under the current legislation, the chief returning officer and the Commissioner of Canada Elections are under the same roof. Prosecutions happen in consultation with the Director of Public Prosecutions. Our amendments in Bill C-23 would make the Commissioner of Canada Elections independent of the Chief Electoral Officer and the Director of Public Prosecutions.

[Translation]

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent—Cartierville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we cannot forget the context in which we are debating Bill C-23, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act and other Acts and to make consequential amendments to certain Acts, here in the House.

This bill comes after a long wait. It took the government two long years to introduce this bill, as though it cost the government a great deal to do so. This long wait was then followed by a suspicious haste to rush the bill through, to speed up the parliamentary process, as though the government had something to hide. It wants to rush through a 252-page bill that has to do with electoral democracy.

The current context also includes the fact that the Prime Minister has chosen a Minister of State for Democratic Reform, the minister sponsoring this bill, who just happens to be the member who has attacked Elections Canada, an honourable and essential institution, more than anyone else in the history of Canada. This is a member who has spent the past few years defending the indefensible every time the Conservative Party has been involved in shady schemes. This is a minister who, in just the last few days, has accused Elections Canada of bias, without any evidence whatsoever. This is a minister who falsely said that he had consulted the Chief Electoral Officer on this bill, forcing the Chief Electoral Officer to set the record straight.

This bill comes at a time when the ethics of this government and the Conservatives Party are being called into question by many troubling facts.

[English]

We remember the in-and-out scandal, when the Conservative Party, having finally admitted to election overspending and to submitting inflated election returns, had no choice but to pay the maximum fine under the Elections Act.

We remember the Peter Penashue scandal, when the former Conservative minister had to resign his seat due to wide-scale election overspending.

We know that Conservative MPs from Saint Boniface and Selkirk—Interlake both entered into a compliance agreement with Elections Canada.

Government Orders

We know that the MP for Peterborough was kicked out of the Conservative caucus and is facing charges under the Elections Act.

We remember the worst of these scandals, the fraudulent election robocalls scandal, where Federal Court Judge Richard Mosley noted that electoral fraud did occur during the 41st general election. Justice Mosley stated:

I am satisfied, however, that the most likely source of the information used to make the misleading calls was the CIMS database maintained and controlled by the [Conservative Party of Canada].

[Translation]

Let us look at that scandal for a moment. According to the Federal Court, the Conservative Party database was the most likely source of the fraudulent calls that were made to mislead voters and keep them from voting in the 2011 election.

What should an honest political party do under such circumstances? It should alert the police so that it can be determined who, in the party or otherwise, used the database for fraudulent purposes.

If the party does not do that, if the Conservatives do not do that, is it because someone in the party already knows the truth and does not want it to come to light?

The Conservative Party has stood in the way of the search for the truth in this sordid affair. Under the pretext that the judge had not determined with 100% certainty that the Conservative Party database had indeed been misused, the party declared itself innocent and refused to launch any kind of investigation. The party does not really seem to want to find out what happened.

What is worse, the Conservatives' election workers completely refused to speak with investigators about the mystery fraudulent telephone calls in Guelph. Too bad if the guilty parties, the fraudsters, are still at large. Too bad, or all the better, if the Conservative war room's real goal is to protect those who are guilty. The party clearly wanted to protect them or it would have acted differently.

That is why we are legitimately suspicious about the government and the Conservative Party, which is finally coming forward with a bill that set out the rules that this government would like to see govern the next federal election in the fall of 2015.

If the government wants to dispel the suspicion surrounding its electoral honesty, why does the minister's bill ignore the main recommendation made by the Chief Electoral Officer, which received strong support from the Commissioner of Canada Elections, namely to facilitate investigations and the ability to uncover election fraud?

This is what that recommendation says:

● (1235)

[English]

In order to make the enforcement of the *Canada Elections Act* more effective, it is recommended that the Commissioner of Canada Elections be given the power to apply to a judge for an order to compel any person to provide information that is relevant to an investigation. ...the inability to compel testimony is one of the most significant obstacles to effective enforcement of the Act. The Chief Electoral Officer strongly recommends that this power be given to the Commissioner to facilitate and accelerate the manner in which allegations are investigated. [...]

The Commissioner of Canada Elections strongly supports this recommendation.

[Translation]

The minister rejected this recommendation and is refusing to give the commissioner the power to apply to a judge for an order to compel any persons to provide information that is relevant to an investigation. Why? Is the minister satisfied with the current situation? Is he trying to protect reluctant witnesses? Is he pleased or reassured that proper investigations are being impeded today, as was described in the 2012-13 annual report of the Commissioner of Canada Elections? The following is a quote from the report:

[English]

...investigators often face reluctant witnesses. Frequently, key individuals will simply refuse to be interviewed or they will initially accept, only to later decline. In some cases, they will participate in interviews but will provide only partial information and incomplete answers, often citing a faulty recollection of events or the inability to retrieve key documents. In other cases, a potential witness will profess a complete willingness to cooperate, but the process will take time – resulting in information being provided slowly and in an incomplete fashion.

Under the legislative regime as it currently exists, potential witnesses (e.g. candidates, official agents, representatives of political parties) do not have any obligation to cooperate with or assist investigators.

[Translation]

In a CBC interview on February 8, this past weekend, the Chief Electoral Officer said that the investigation into fraudulent calls was impeded by the fact that it was difficult to obtain witnesses' co-operation:

[English]

Many people [in that investigation] refused to talk to the commissioner even if they were not suspects. I'm afraid to say this is happening more and more in files investigated by the commissioner.

He is constantly confronted with this obstacle.

[Translation]

Can the minister confirm that his bill protects witnesses who refuse to co-operate with the justice system? Why is there this protection? Is this related to the robocall scandal?

● (1240)

[English]

Indeed, the bill would eliminate the limitation period for offences that require intent. That means that the commissioner can go back in time to catch deliberate lawbreakers. However, the Conservatives refuse to give the Commissioner of Canada Elections the authority to go to a judge to compel testimony from witnesses to election crimes. Is it because it would blow open the robocalls investigations?

The minister argues that witnesses are already required to testify in court once formal allegations have been made, but everybody can see the problem with this argument. If the Commissioner of Canada Elections cannot get witnesses to co-operate during the investigation phase, the crucial step during which evidence is sought, how can the commissioner obtain the evidence required to make such formal allegations? The minister points out that the commissioner can already seek a warrant to obtain documents from a judge, but what the commissioner needs, as much or more than documents, is witness co-operation.

Government Orders

The minister says that his bill introduces a new penalty for those who obstruct an investigation or provide inaccurate information to investigators. However, obstructing is not the same thing as refusing to speak or co-operate. The minister very craftily straddles that line.

Furthermore, the minister states that the elections commissioner currently has all of the same investigatory powers as police officers. However, what the Chief Electoral Officer or the Commissioner of Canada Elections are asking for is a power that the police do not have but the Commissioner of Competition already has, and that is the power to apply to a judge for an order to compel any person to provide information that is relevant to an investigation. The question the minister must answer is, why does his bill not provide the Commissioner of Canada Elections with the power already held by the Commissioner of Competition under section 11 of the Competition Act? Will the minister answer this simple question?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): I will answer the simple question, Mr. Speaker. The power that the hon. member is asking for is a power that police officers do not have, even when they are investigating far more heinous crimes than the alleged offences that the member across has listed.

My question to him, though, is about the issue of illegal loans. Elections Canada has already said that Liberal leadership contenders in the 2006 leadership race are not in compliance with the act because they have refused to pay back hundreds of thousands of dollars in loans that became illegal donations. That by itself is not an offence. However, if Liberal leadership candidates used those loans to deliberately evade donation limits, that would be an offence under the existing Canada Elections Act.

Has the member been contacted by the Commissioner of Canada Elections as part of an investigation into whether leadership contenders in the race, during which he was a candidate, deliberately used loans to evade donation limits?

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Mr. Speaker, I would say to my hon. colleague that I completely co-operate with Elections Canada. However, I am sorry that it is not possible to say the same about him. He is always fighting Elections Canada. There has never been an MP in the history of Canada who has fought Elections Canada more than the current minister of democratic reform.

I am very disappointed that the minister did not answer my simple question, which I will repeat. Why does his bill not provide the Commissioner of Canada Elections with the power already held by the Commissioner of Competition under section 11 of the Competition Act? Why did he not do that?

I am sure the minister is aware that New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Alberta, Yukon, and many other countries, gave the ability to election officials to directly compel testimony.

What our Chief Electoral Officer is asking for is not the power to compel but the authority to ask a judge to compel reluctant witnesses. Why is the minister afraid to put that in his bill? It is a very simple question.

● (1245)

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault (Sherbrooke, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his speech on Bill C-23. I would like to ask him a very specific question about a point that he did not have time to talk about. That will let him talk about it a little.

The bill runs the risk of affecting voting in Canada, because it completely eliminates Elections Canada's educational mandate. Between elections, Elections Canada was able to conduct campaigns to raise awareness, especially among young people, of their right to vote. During the elections, Elections Canada also did election simulations. That was all part of Elections Canada's educational mandate, which allowed it to use resources to make people aware of their duty to vote.

The bill seems to exclude all that. Elections Canada will concentrate only on certain things. Everything else, including its educational mandate, will be eliminated.

What does he think of that? How will this impact voting in Canada?

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Mr. Speaker, this kind of thing makes absolutely no sense. Over the weekend, the Chief Electoral Officer said that he was not aware of this kind of thing happening anywhere else in the world. Nowhere else in the world is there a law prohibiting the organization responsible for elections from promoting elections to the public.

The minister claims that this is our job, as members of Parliament. The problem is that MPs and candidates are so busy winning elections that, aside from the last day, when we remind everyone to participate in democracy, we do not spend much time encouraging people to vote. Unfortunately, I must say that some parties run very negative campaigns. The sociology of voting shows that negative campaigns and personal attacks discourage many voters from going to the polls.

We need Elections Canada to take a lead role on this.

[English]

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure for me to stand in this place today and speak in favour of Bill C-23, the fair elections act, for a number of reasons. We finally have a governance model that would give Canadians even more confidence that elections are being run in a fair manner, but there are also provisions in Bill C-23 that would seriously impede those who wish to perpetrate election fraud by bringing down stricter penalties and even jail time in some cases for those fraudsters who want to try to unduly affect the outcome of an election.

Before I talk about specific elements within the bill, I do want to spend a few moments of my time dispelling some of the myths that have been propagated by members of the opposition, particularly the members of the NDP.

Without question, it is fair to say that the NDP has absolutely no credibility when it comes to presenting opposition to this bill. Let me give two examples.

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The first example is that, the day the Minister of State (Democratic Reform) introduced Bill C-23 in Parliament, the member for Toronto—Danforth, who is also the democratic reform critic for the NDP, went outside this chamber and said that he and the entire NDP caucus would be opposing Bill C-23, but he had to admit that he had not read the bill.

The fair elections act is a comprehensive analysis, and it presents quite specific proposals on how to make the Elections Act stronger and fairer for all Canadians. However, the member for Toronto—Danforth, who is the point person on the NDP side to criticize any democratic reform initiatives, had not read the bill. He is a former law professor at Osgoode Hall Law School. I wonder whether or not that member, when he was teaching law to his students, would advocate that type of approach: to disagree with testimony in a legal proceeding without reading the testimony, or oppose contracts without reading the contracts. Of course he would not. However, that is the approach the New Democrats always take. They are simply not credible.

There is even one more hypocritical example I will point out, which is laughable, and every time I think about this I have to break out in laughter. That is the position the NDP takes with respect to the time allocation on Bill C-23.

In debate, the NDP continually states that five days of debate is not long enough to debate this bill and that somehow our government is trying to suppress the democratic rights of parliamentarians to adequately debate legislation. That is the position it has taken. I heard the member for Newton—North Delta making that very argument at the start of this debate. On Friday afternoon, I heard the member for Vancouver East advance that same argument.

The hypocritical nature of that argument is that, the day after this bill was introduced in Parliament, the aforementioned member for Toronto—Danforth, the democratic reform critic for the NDP, stood in this place and presented a motion to limit debate to five hours and then send it to committee. How can the New Democrats argue that five hours of debate is proper and good but five days of debate is somehow suppressing democracy? It is so hypocritical and so over the top that it is laughable, yet every NDP speaker who has stood up in this place makes and advances that argument. The NDP has no credibility on this issue whatsoever.

If we may, let us turn our attention to a couple of elements within the bill that illustrate why this is a good bill and a governance model that we should have had long ago in this country.

The first provision I want to speak to is the fact that, when this bill is finally given royal assent and becomes law, the Commissioner of Elections will have the tools at his disposal and the independence to properly conduct investigations of election violations. For some reason, the members of the opposition seem to think this is a bad thing. However, here is the current situation. This is why it is untenable as it stands right now.

• (1250)

Currently, both the Commissioner of Elections and the Director of Public Prosecutions answer to the Chief Electoral Officer. That is untenable as it, in effect, makes the Chief Electoral Officer the judge, jury, and prosecutor of all flagrant allegations of abuse, either real or

imagined, and that simply cannot be allowed to continue. The Commissioner of Elections, by gaining total independence, then would have the ability to independently and impartially conduct investigations.

Frankly, any Canadian would be able to make or lodge complaints with the Commissioner of Elections, suggesting that investigations occur if they feel a violation has occurred, but they would be conducted independently of the Chief Electoral Officer. That is a good thing. One would think that the Chief Electoral Officer would welcome that because it demonstrates clearly to Canadians that his office is independent and the Commissioner of Elections, a separate arm, is independent as well. Unfortunately, it appears neither the Chief Electoral Officer nor members of the opposition feel that is an appropriate distinction. It is certainly one that I feel is appropriate.

Let me point out what the bill also would do. It would ensure that the democratic will of Canadians is respected. I point again to a recent example we have seen and talked about in the last few days, where the member for Selkirk—Interlake was subject to a lot of criticism by members of the opposition and in the media. Frankly, some accused the member of cheating in the 2011 election—

An hon. member: Unbelievable.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: It was unbelievable, as one of my colleagues pointed out, because he did nothing wrong. There was an accounting dispute between the member and Elections Canada, one that was finally resolved in favour of the member. The overarching argument was that Elections Canada claimed the member had overspent in the 2011 election by tens of thousands of dollars. When the final resolution came to pass, it was agreed upon by Elections Canada that overspending was less than \$500. That is what the member for Selkirk—Interlake had claimed all along. In other words, the member was right and Elections Canada was wrong, but the egregious part of all of this is that Elections Canada sent a letter to the Speaker of the House stating that because, in its opinion, the member had overspent in the 2011 campaign, that the member should not be allowed to sit or vote in this place.

Elections Canada did not have to do that. First, it was inappropriate at the very least. Second, Elections Canada should have at least allowed a full examination of all evidence, and if the member wanted to go to court for a decision, Elections Canada should have allowed the resolution to take place through the courts. That was not the case, but with this bill now it would be. So it respects the will of Canadians; the tens of thousands of people who voted for the member would not then be subject to the type of fear that their duly elected member would be removed from this place and would not be able to represent their views.

The bill addresses that. It would allow that any disputes between Elections Canada and a sitting member would have to be resolved completely, even if that meant going to court, before the draconian measure of trying to impose the severe sanction of removing the member from a seat would take place. That is called fairness, and that is why the bill is presented to the House. It is to make elections fairer for all Canadians but, at the same time, to impose strong sanctions against those who may wish to abuse the rights of Canadians in an election.

I look forward to more debate on this matter, and I very much look forward to this being presented before the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs in short order, so we can begin to conduct an in-depth examination of this very, very fine piece of legislation.

• (1255)

Mr. Dennis Bevington (Western Arctic, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my question deals with the whole process that I have seen in the years I have been in Parliament.

First, we started with this photo ID bill in 2007. Through that, many people in my riding lost their ability to vote. That happened. In Nunavut, it was an epidemic. Now, we are getting to a point where we would take away the vouchers.

It is really an insane situation for people in rural communities, where the returning officer will know the people coming into the voting booth, but will not allow them to vote because they do not have the proper identification papers, and now they would not be able to use someone else to vouch for them.

How would this work for my constituents? What is the government doing to the people in rural and remote locations across the country? They are people who have a right to vote in this country. Why is the government doing this to them?

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, again, an NDP member is trying to point out what he considers to be flaws within the legislation, yet the New Democrats were the ones who tried to curb the debate on this very matter.

Specifically to his point, everyone who wants to come in to vote has an obligation to prove they are eligible to do so. That is a fundamental tenet of our democracy. To say there would be hardship on Canadians, perhaps because they live in rural or remote areas, is absolutely ludicrous. It is preposterous.

There would be 39 different pieces of identification that one could present. That number, again, is 39. Is the member suggesting that people in his riding would not be able to come up with at least one of those 39 pieces of identification to prove who they are and their residence? That is absolute hogwash.

Mr. Scott Simms (Bonaville—Gander—Grand Falls—Windor, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I think what was alluded to earlier about putting it to committee quickly is a rather disingenuous argument, because what they are saying is to put it to committee before we have a vote at second reading and before we accept it in principle. I am sure the member knows this.

I have a great deal of respect for the gentleman, and he has been here a very long time. I think he knows that what was proposed as a way of broadening the debate of this bill would have allowed all sorts of amendments that would not be allowed if we voted at second reading.

I really do not think I have to repeat this for anybody who has been here in the House longer than I, and I have been here for close to ten years.

The member talked about the member for Selkirk—Interlake, who has the ability to prove himself. I appreciate that, but Helena Guergis, the member for Peterborough, and another member over

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here were each levied judgment to leave caucus before they had the chance to defend themselves. It is a little disingenuous.

• (1300)

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, I am not sure if there was a question there. Let me just point out to my friend and colleague across the way that the arguments I was pointing out that the NDP had been making in this place have been hypocritical. Members of his own caucus freely admit that.

As a matter of fact, the member for Beauséjour, the House Leader of the Liberal Party, actually has a nickname for the NDP. He calls the NDP “the sanctimony brigade”. It is a very apt nickname, because the NDP will take this holier-than-thou attitude above any piece of legislation that our government brings forward. It tries to point out that it is the only custodian to make sure Canadians are represented well in the House.

The sanctimony brigade is alive and well in the benches opposite.

Hon. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I briefly wanted to get my colleague to talk about the power of the Commissioner of Elections to act independently. Our campaigns in 2004-2006 were the victims of pretty extensive election fraud, to the point where a lawyer bragged on the Internet and in email about how many times he had got to vote for my opponent by going from poll to poll with voter ID cards that, of course, were not his.

There were massive vouching problems and massive fraudulent registration problems. We fixed it in 2006, because we knew about it.

Could my hon. friend comment, just based on that one experience that I and others have had, on the importance of making sure that the Commissioner of Elections is independent, so that he can operate and do something about those kinds of situations?

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, it is absolutely true. If we are to have confidence in the electoral system, we have to have not only impartiality but the independence of officers. Right now there is no independence. The Commissioner of Canada Elections reports to the Chief Electoral Officer. As I said a few moments ago, that means, in effect, that the Chief Electoral Officer is not only the judge and the jury but the prosecutor. It is untenable. We simply cannot have that.

We want to have confidence that the Commissioner of Canada Elections will not only be truly independent and impartial but will have the authority and the tools at his disposal to make sure that if infractions occur in any election, as my colleague pointed out occurred in his riding back in 2004-05, penalties will be severe and sanctions will be imposed, and we will put an end to the wrongdoing.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to join in the debate. Might I begin, first, by commenting on the remarks of the Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, the member for Regina—Lumsden—Lake Centre, whom I work with very closely on PROC. It had a previous review of these actual laws, not a lot of which seems to have found its way into the Conservatives' bill, I might add.

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I want to raise the notion of the Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons saying that the official opposition is being hypocritical. I find it most disturbing that this is an hon. member, in terms of the way he conducts himself at committee, who seems to care about his reputation. He cares about what people think of him, yet he is prepared to stand in the House and actually mislead the House and Canadians when he makes the specious argument that we were trying to cut debate.

It is quite the contrary. My friend from the Liberal caucus was on his feet recently making the same point, and it is true. If we exercise the right, under the rules, to send a bill, on first reading, directly to committee, it is an opportunity for members to work together on the bill at committee before we get to second reading debate and vote. That is for the simple reason that by the time we get to a second reading vote, for the most part the caucuses are determining where they are going on these issues. They have to make a fundamental decision about whether they will vote for or against. It is that stark.

During my time at Queen's Park, we brought in a rule that allowed a reference from first reading for the very reason that it is a good way to go when the whole House wants to work together in a sincere effort to work on a bill. By referring it right after first reading, we send it to the place where we actually sit down, roll up our sleeves, and get some work done.

We were trying to send it with that frame of mind, before we got to where we are now, which is with everybody in their respective corners.

I will comment on that process versus what has happened in the past in this House and in this country. However, I want to be absolutely crystal clear that the Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons is misleading this House and Canadians when he says that we tried to end debate.

• (1305)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): I just caution the hon. member. As has been the convention in this place, the use of the term “misleading”, especially if it is imputing motivation on the part of another hon. member, can get very close to references of being unparliamentary language.

I have not heard anything unparliamentary yet, but I would caution him. He is very, very close, and perhaps he might want to think about that in the course of his comments.

The hon. member for Hamilton Centre.

Mr. David Christopherson: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate that. I was expecting the cautionary note. Quite frankly, I was getting as close as I could to the line in terms of language I could use to refute the language of hypocrisy that, unfortunately, is allowed in this place. That is a word that should not be allowed in this place, but the hon. member used it, and I wanted to refute it without crossing the line. I appreciate that you told me I did not cross it, Mr. Speaker, although, of course, I would have apologized immediately if you had called on me to do that. I wanted to clear the air on that.

If the Conservatives continue that argument, we will continue to give the government a civics lesson on how this place actually works. The hon. member should be concerned about his reputation, because there are enough Canadians who know the truth to know

that this is just games. This bill, this issue, our election laws, deserve better than just games.

What we are talking about here is a 244-page bill. In the past, the government of the day, when it wanted to make changes to the elections laws, first consulted with the Chief Electoral Officer, which this government did not do. One “Hi, how are you? Nice to meet you” meeting does not constitute consultation on bringing in a 244-page bill that completely revamps the way we hold elections in this country. That is not consultation.

In the past, the government would not only consult with the Chief Electoral Officer—this is pretty shocking in a Conservative House of Commons—but would actually talk to the other parties. Why did they talk to the other parties?

We have the Olympics going on right now. One of the first things they do before hitting the ice or the snow is decide what the rules are going to be. Then they make sure that everyone affected by those rules gets an opportunity to have a say. In the absence of that, one does not have an electoral system that is supported by all the participants in the system. This is not rocket science.

I have to say something, just in passing, about the minister who introduced the bill. I know the minister well. I have worked with him for years and years. He is very smart. He is a good guy. I like the minister. However, let us be honest. He is probably the most partisan attack dog the Conservatives have ever had over there. That is saying a lot, given the role the foreign affairs minister played before. That is quite an accomplishment. They took the most super-hyperpartisan person in their entire caucus and gave him what is supposedly the most statesperson-like role in the House, which is to bring these kinds of rule changes into our elections act. Right off the bat, that was the person who was asked to carry the bill in the name of the government. The government did not even talk to the Chief Electoral Officer. Give me a break. There is no partisanship in this at all? Let us find out.

The government members have been saying that the reason they support shutting down debate in this place, and a number of them have said it, even today, is that they are going to send it to committee, because that is where House of Commons work gets done. That does not justify it totally, in our view. However, if that is the position of the government members, then something certainly needs to happen at committee that would give people some confidence that they really meant it when they were standing here.

The official opposition brought forward a very reasonable motion, with no games, no politics. The cards are all on the table. In fact, our motion on how the committee should deal with this actually states the day we would begin clause-by-clause. It would be May 1 of this year. It is not our intention to delay or obstruct in any way the ability to pass this law and have these new rules in effect for the next election. That is not our objective. What we are asking for is to use the months of March and April to travel the country to give people an opportunity to have their say.

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● (1310)

My friend, the member for Western Arctic, stood and said on the vouching issue that it would impact his members. The minister stood and said that this is not true. I live in Hamilton. How do I know? It makes a whole lot of sense that we would go there and give people an opportunity. It is a huge country. It is almost a continent in and of itself. We have such different environments for voting procedures because of where people live, the weather, and distances. We have all the urban issues they have in any G7 country that holds elections.

For all of those reasons, what I would like to hear from the government is that it is prepared to give us countrywide public hearings. Allow people to come and make their cases and to send submissions to the committee.

We would spend two months to give Canadians and experts an opportunity to have their say. We would start here in Ottawa with experts and the minister giving us a briefing on all the details. Then we would go out across the country to find out what the issues were. We would then come back and have another few days in Ottawa to bring back some of those people to put to them what we had heard and found.

We commit that no later than May 1, if this motion passes at committee, we would begin clause-by-clause, knowing that the government majority is going to carry the day. That is fine. It has a majority, and it will win the vote. It will win every vote on every amendment. However, we need this time. If the government is truly honest about wanting to give Canadians their say on this 244-page document that changes the fundamental foundation of our democracy, our election laws, then at the very least, Canadians should be given an opportunity to have a say. This law belongs to them, not to the Conservative government.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, of course, all Canadians who want to testify will be welcome to make submissions to the committee, and those submissions will be considered by the members of that committee.

I want to address one important section of the fair elections act, clause 7, which would amend section 18 of the Canada Elections Act, to do the following:

The Chief Electoral Officer may provide the public...with information on...:

(d) how an elector may establish their identity and residence in order to vote, including the pieces of identification that they may use to that end;

Members of the opposition have said that it is not necessary to require that of the CEO of Elections Canada. Most people, according to the opposition, already know what they need. We found out today that the member for Western Arctic, who is an experienced member of Parliament, does not even know what is required for identification. He suggested that photo identification is required. In fact, that is absolutely not the case.

Does the NDP member not agree that it is necessary to legislate that Elections Canada inform all electors, including the member for Western Arctic, about which 39 pieces of ID are acceptable when people vote?

● (1315)

Mr. David Christopherson: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate that the minister was in the House and listened to my remarks and made some comments. I thank him for that.

I want to pick up on his comment about the fact that people can make submissions. He threw it out there. What does the hon. minister mean when he says “submissions”? Does that mean people can only send in written submissions? Is it going to be a paper exercise? I did not hear the member stand in his place and say that he would commit his government to public hearings so that Canadians, the people who own this law, could have their say on this law. That is what was missing in his answer. That is what we want to hear.

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would be interested in hearing my colleague from the NDP speak about some of the points raised by the hon. member for Saint-Laurent—Cartierville.

Section 11 of the Competition Act gives the director of competition the power to compel witnesses, or the power to get authority from a judge to compel witnesses, in the course of an investigation. It is not after a charge is laid but in the course of an investigation. That is the power Elections Canada has been looking for that the government has refused to put in, and it has refused to answer a direct question.

Who should have sharper teeth, a freer hand, and whatever the other buzzword is: someone investigating price-fixing or someone investigating election fraud? That is my question for the hon. member.

Mr. David Christopherson: Mr. Speaker, I understand the issue that the member is raising. Everyone is raising good points. They are all good issues. That is the point.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Even me.

Mr. David Christopherson: I heard the minister just say “Even me.” Even the minister had a good question.

The point is that there are different answers and different interpretations, and that is why what matters right now in the dying moments of this debate is to get a commitment from the government that this is not just going to get buried in a committee, stuffed away in some kind of secret or in camera meeting for three or four days, to then pop out again and come back to the House, where closure is moved again and the bill rammed through.

That cannot happen. However, I am not yet hearing anyone from the government committing to giving Canadians their say on their election law.

Mr. Claude Gravelle (Nickel Belt, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have several questions for the member, one in particular.

The Conservatives have a track record of breaking election rules. I will just remind the member of a few.

I have a whole book of election frauds by the Conservatives, for example, the member for Peterborough; the member for Saint Boniface; the member for Selkirk—Interlake; and there was Peter Penashue, remember him; and there were robocalls, and there was Mount Royal, and in-and-out scandals, and the list goes on.

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I would like the hon. member for Hamilton Centre to tell the House if the Conservatives are changing the rules of the election law to make it easier for them to get away with this?

Mr. David Christopherson: Mr. Speaker, one of our colleagues actually said that given the fact the government has a whole list of serial cheaters, it would make all the sense in the world to make sure that we give people an opportunity to have their say.

The government has had its run-ins with Elections Canada. We know how it feels about public agents and public servants speaking words it does not like. We remember what happened to the nuclear watchdog: gone. The government practically vilified the PBO, Kevin Page, because it did not like what he had to say and so it went after him.

We believe that part of the motivation here is that the government does not like Chief Electoral Officer Mayrand. Why does the government not like him? It is because he is doing his job. I think Canadians will be very interested to hear what Mr. Mayrand has to say about this bill when we finally get it in front of committee.

• (1320)

Mr. James Rajotte (Edmonton—Leduc, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is my pleasure to take part in this debate. I will not presume to be as eloquent or as passionate as the previous two speakers, but I will do my best to speak on Bill C-23, known as the fair elections act. It is a bill I strongly support.

At the start, I want to commend the minister who has introduced and is shepherding the bill through the House of Commons. I think he has done an outstanding job in presenting the details and facts of the bill, which respond, frankly, to many of the recommendations of the Chief Electoral Officer and others in addressing the deficiencies of our electoral system in Canada.

However, we should all note on both sides of the House that we have one of the best electoral systems in the world here in Canada. We should be very proud of it, but we should never shy away from making improvements to it. I want to recognize the minister's work in this area as someone who gave one of the most impressive presentations to our caucus that I have seen in years, and I speak here as a member who has been here for over 13 years.

I want to return to the substance of the bill. As I mentioned, there are many issues that do need to be addressed. Frankly, this very comprehensive bill would do and implement 38 of the Chief Electoral Officer's past recommendations. I would like to go through them in detail.

I would caution members on both sides to stick to the substance of the bill. I know there are a lot of charges at Elections Canada, and I emphasize that they are "charges". We should leave them to be investigated, but as legislators we should stick to the text of the bill itself.

First of all, the bill would protect voters from rogue calls and impersonation with a mandatory public registry for mass calling, prison time for impersonating elections officials, and increased penalties for deceiving people out of their votes. All of these issues, such as impersonating elections officials and voter suppression, are addressed and taken very seriously in this proposed legislation.

I speak as someone who has been a candidate in five elections. My local election officials with Elections Canada have done an outstanding job, with some 90% and more being volunteers. They do an excellent job and need all the help they can get, and this proposed legislation would do that.

This bill deals with the so-called robocalls issue, involving the impersonation of others using these types of technologies. However, it should be noted that these types of technologies can be used legitimately if, obviously, the person calling identifies themselves and the purpose of the call. Many members of Parliament on both sides use them to do electronic town halls, as I have done. It is a very good method, but I obviously identify who I am, why I am calling, and engage citizens in that way. The bill would deal with impersonation, the first item I want to emphasize.

Second, the bill would give law enforcement sharper teeth, a longer reach, and a freer hand. It would allow the commissioner to seek tougher penalties for existing offences and empower the commissioner with more than a dozen new offences to combat big money, rogue calls, and fraudulent voting. A freer hand means that the commissioner would have full independence with control of his or her staff in investigations and a fixed term of seven years so he or she cannot be fired without cause.

The bill would crack down on voter fraud by prohibiting the use of vouching and voter information cards as replacement for acceptable ID, something one would presume the opposition would strongly support.

Studies commissioned by Elections Canada demonstrate mass irregularities in the use of vouching and high rates of inaccuracy on voter information cards. It is important to note, as the minister just pointed out in response to a question by the member opposite, that voters would still have 39 forms of authorized ID to choose from to prove their identity and residence. In order to ensure that election results are legitimate, especially in ridings where the vote is very close, I think it is entirely reasonable for us to require voters to present ID to show they are in fact eligible voters, as the parliamentary secretary to the House leader pointed out earlier.

Next, the bill would make rules easy to follow for all. Since the last election, the commissioner has had to sign 15 different compliance agreements with those who have breached elections law, some due to honest mistakes. Members of all parties have noted that the rules can be unclear. Complicated rules bring unintentional breaches and intimidate everyday people from taking part in democracy. That is why the fair elections act would make the rules for elections clearer, more predictable, and easier to follow.

Parties would have the right to advance rulings and interpretations from Elections Canada within 45 days of a request, a service similar to one provided by the Canada Revenue Agency. Elections Canada would also be required to keep a registry of interpretations and provide for consultations with notice to parties before changing them.

•(1325)

This is important and here I will point to someone who has been my official agent for a number of elections and the financial agent for the electoral district association in-between elections. He is a very reputable chartered accountant with Deloitte and Touche in Edmonton. He says that one of the things that is challenging as an official agent is that there are some grey areas. When he is not exactly certain what the rules are, he contacts Elections Canada and asks what exactly the rule is, and they always err on the side of caution. However, this is something that this legislation would help improve, by ensuring that all electoral district associations in all ridings across the country have one set of very clear and consistent interpretations.

We all have to recognize as members of Parliament that we may have an office manager, a campaign manager, and some people who may receive compensation. They do not in my campaign's case, as our official agents are typically volunteers. I am very fortunate to have someone who is very qualified, but these people are typically volunteers and need very simple, clear, and consistent rules so they know exactly what they are doing and can be sure they are following all the rules and regulations.

This legislation would also allow small donations and keep big money out. One of the changes we made as a government that I am most proud of was to ensure that corporations and unions and organizations would not control political parties. Individual donations are set to a maximum amount. That is one of the biggest changes that our government has made. Obviously, the previous government made some changes along those lines with Bill C-24, but our government made some further changes to ensure that citizens themselves would be the ones who controlled elections. As we all know, special-interest money can sometimes drown out the voices of everyday citizens. That is why this act would ban the use of loans to evade donation rules. It would also allow parties to better fund democratic outreach, with small and reasonable increases in spending limits while imposing tougher audits and penalties to enforce those limits. It would let small donors contribute more to democracy through the front door in a very transparent way, and block illegal big money from sneaking in the back door. The modest adjustments in the donation limit, up to \$1,500 from the current \$1,200, and election spending limits of 5% would let parties raise their own funds to reach out to Canadians. A total ban on union and corporate money would remain in place, as I mentioned earlier.

It would also respect democratic results. Members of Parliament and the Chief Electoral Officer sometimes disagree on an MP's election expense. This has happened in the past and will happen in the future for people from all parties. When that happens, the Canada Elections Act provides that the MP can no longer sit or vote in the House of Commons until the expense return is changed to the CEO's satisfaction. However, the removal of a democratically elected MP reverses the decision of tens of thousands of voters. The fair elections act would allow an MP to present the disputed case in the courts and to have judges quickly rule on it before the CEO seeks the MP's suspension. Again, this is a very fair, reasonable change that the minister is seeking to make.

Next, it would uphold free speech. The Supreme Court has unanimously ruled that the ban on premature transmission of

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election results infringes on freedom of expression. I can say as a westerner that it is interesting to be in Alberta waiting for the election results when various people are testing that, especially via social media today. The fair elections act would repeal this ban and uphold free speech.

It would provide better customer service for voters by focusing Elections Canada advertising on the basics of voting: where, when, and what ID to bring. Also, the fair elections act would explicitly require Elections Canada to inform disabled voters of the extra help available to them to vote. The act would also establish an extra day of advance polling. The proposed change would give Canadians access to four advance polling days: the 10th, 9th, 8th and 7th days before an election. This is one thing that I have supported very strongly and asked to be included in this legislation, because, depending on when the election is held, in our constituency I have an area where there are a lot of people who are working in and out of the country and in and out of the constituency. I have a very high seasonal population, especially in the Nisku area. So it is important to allow Canadians as much time as possible and as much access to voting as possible. We in Edmonton—Leduc have one of the highest advance polling numbers across the country. This follows along the lines of encouraging more people to vote.

I hear some of the comments and criticisms that the bill may be used in a partisan way. Absolutely not. In fact, I encourage Canadians and parliamentarians to read the bill and see what it is. Expanding the number of hours and days of voting is explicitly designed to increase the percentage of people who vote. Ensuring that we get as much information as possible out to people so that they know when and where they ought to vote is designed explicitly to allow more voters to have more opportunity to vote.

•(1330)

Another thing we would be doing along these lines is reducing congestion at the polls. The fair elections act proposes a number of practical changes that should make the voting process more efficient. It would streamline the process for appointing election officers and providing for additional resources for Elections Canada. It would allow for additional election officers to be appointed to ease the congestion of polling stations, which has been a problem in the past.

My time is up. I look forward to questions from my colleagues.

Mr. Dennis Bevington (Western Arctic, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague from across for his thoughtful presentation on the bill.

My concern is to get people out to vote. That should be the primary concern for us all.

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With the changes proposed by the bill, the Chief Electoral Officer would not be allowed to promote voting in this country. We would move away from a voucher system, which worked for 100,000 people in the last election. There would be changes made to the voter identification system of 2007. We would have a situation of declining voters in our system.

Why does the hon. member think that reducing the number of people voting would be a good thing for Canadians?

Mr. James Rajotte: Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for the question. It allows me the opportunity to clarify that the legislation would in fact do the opposite.

If we look at the access to four advance polling days, the tenth, ninth, eighth, and seventh days before an election, we add more days to voting, obviously we want to encourage more opportunities for Canadians to vote. That is the first thing.

Second, he mentioned the Chief Electoral Officer. The Chief Electoral Officer would provide the public with information on how to be a candidate; how an elector may have his or her name added to a list of electors; how an elector may have corrections made to information respecting his or her name on the list; how an elector may vote under section 127, and the times, dates and locations for voting; how an elector may establish his or her identity and residence in order to vote—as the minister mentioned, there are over 30 pieces of identification that voters could present to ensure they are an eligible voter—and measures for assisting electors with disabilities to access a polling station or an advance polling station in order to mark a ballot.

Every single one of these measures is designed to increase the opportunity for Canadians to cast their ballot. The bill is designed, on balance, to provide more opportunities for Canadians to vote.

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to come back to the powers that are given to Elections Canada to investigate election fraud.

One of the powers that Elections Canada has been seeking, which is absent, is the power to get judicial authority to compel the co-operation of witnesses, under oath, during the course of an investigation. This is a power that the director of competitions has in section 11 of the Competition Act.

My question for the member is, why is it that someone investigating price fixing has greater investigative powers than the current government is prepared to give to Elections Canada in investigating electoral fraud?

Mr. James Rajotte: Mr. Speaker, I suspect this will be active point of debate at the committee stage. I, frankly, have reservations about granting the power, but I look forward to a full debate on it at committee.

We have to keep in mind that the bill would have tougher criminal penalties for election offences. There would be a whole series of penalties and increased offences under this legislation, which I think the member would support.

With respect to the specific question he is raising, I would have concerns about granting those powers. Also, in reference to a

previous speaker, the committee is master of its domain; it can choose to study the bill for however long it wants.

However, I assume that would be one of the most actively debated clauses in that committee.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it was great to hear my colleague's speech. He is one of the most esteemed chairs of standing committees in this House.

I wonder if he might tell the House, if he had a witness who made multiple recommendations and over 30 of them were adopted in a piece of legislation, would he would call that a good step forward in consultation?

● (1335)

Mr. James Rajotte: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the chair of the Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology. I had the pleasure of voting for him last week. I cast my ballot strongly in favour of him. He was unanimously selected, which shows that he is respected by all members on that committee.

I would agree wholeheartedly. We do reports from the finance committee all the time. We are looking forward to seeing how many of the recommendations from our prebudget report make it into the budget tomorrow. If 38 recommendations from our committee were to make it, we as committee members would be overjoyed.

I do not know the present Chief Electoral Officer as well as I knew the last one, Jean-Pierre Kingsley, who is a friend of mine, and who gave the minister an A minus for his work in this area. I would hope that the Chief Electoral Officer would say, "Mission accomplished. He has done an excellent job in terms of presenting recommendations, and this government and the minister have done an excellent job in terms of adopting his recommendations".

[Translation]

Mr. Jamie Nicholls (Vaudreuil—Soulanges, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives claim that Bill C-23 will enable citizens to take democracy into their own hands.

However, several measures in the bill will do the exact opposite, since they put citizens—or at least certain groups of citizens—on the margins of democracy.

Under the existing act, voters who have a hard time providing proof of address on voting day, such as aboriginal people living on reserve, students who live far from home, seniors who live in residences and the homeless, can use their voter card as proof of identification. That will change with this bill.

Right now, if someone who has the right to vote does not have valid identification, he can ask a friend or relative to confirm his identity under oath. The government wants to change that. Thousands of voters used this vouching system to vote in the last election. This method of identification is strictly enforced and helps ensure that everyone who has the right to vote is able to do so.

Bill C-23 seeks to put an end to that. The Conservatives' bill would put an end to the vouching system and, as a result, voter cards would no longer be accepted as a form of identification. With these amendments, the Conservatives are going to complicate the voting process for many Canadians who might find it difficult to obtain the pieces of identification they need to vote.

The Conservatives are saying that these measures are designed to reduce the risk of fraud. My question is this: can my colleagues opposite prove that there is a real problem of electoral fraud with the vouching system? Do they have any evidence? The answer is simple. They cannot prove it because there is no real electoral fraud problem with the current system.

In addition, there is no indication that the system is broken. Fraud may occasionally take place, but it is not a major problem right now. As my colleague from Vancouver East said in this debate, fraud exists, but we already have a system in place to combat it and the system works well.

That makes me wonder about the real reason behind the government's decision to make these changes to the rules. The answer is troubling. With these measures, the Conservatives are trying to reduce the participation of certain categories of voters.

According to the Chief Electoral Officer, if the government puts an end to the vouching system, over 100,000 voters might not be able to vote in the next federal election. One hundred thousand people. That is an entire riding. My riding has about 105,000 voters. With this new system, the equivalent of an entire riding would not have the right to vote. The majority of those people are aboriginal people who live on reserves. This is a real affront to democracy.

[English]

• (1340)

This bill is a threat to democracy. I am making my appeal directly to you.

The Prime Minister is often said to be an incrementalist. The viewers who are watching this at home may ask what incrementalism is. It means to make small changes. There is a big goal or vision at the end of the road and small changes are made toward that big goal. We have to ask what those small changes are and what the big goal is that the Prime Minister is going after. What are we inching toward? What is it that the Prime Minister wants to achieve, what goal? The answer is troubling because it looks like the Prime Minister is trying to reduce democratic privilege in this country.

Mr. Speaker, my appeal is directly to you because we are debating this under time allocation. I have said before when the motion for time allocation has come up that it was used three times in the first 70 years of Canadian history. From the beginning of this Confederation until 1956, it was used three times. It was used for a specific purpose, that being matters of urgency.

The first time it was used was during the First World War. They needed these things done quickly because it was a wartime regime, and sometimes people need to do things quickly during a war.

In 1956, when Speaker Beaudoin invoked closure during the pipeline debate, there was an urgent reason. It is questionable whether it was truly urgent, but there was a deadline for an

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agreement between TransCanada Pipelines and the Canadian government. There was also the need to consider the steel supply and the construction season. It was a question of urgency.

As I pointed out earlier in this debate, there is no urgency to changing our electoral system. There is no reason that closure should have been invoked.

My appeal is to you, Mr. Speaker. I ask you to listen to me. This has to stop. This use of closure has to stop during debates. You, Mr. Speaker, are the one who upholds the traditions in the House. It is up to you to uphold the traditions of this fine place, this House of Commons, which means the House of the common people. Your role is not just one of timekeeper; it is to uphold the traditions of this House.

This being the House of the common people, our role here as MPs is to debate legislation and to get to the bottom of legislation and its purpose. Whether our role is to debate whether it is perfected or whether we can craft a better bill, invoking time allocation impedes our privilege as members to properly debate this bill.

This is a large bill. It is a big bill. There are a lot of pages in it. Anyone can read it, but we have many pieces of legislation to review. Government members often accuse us of not even reading a bill; I am sure that there are a lot of members in the government party who have not read the bill either.

I ask the question: what is the rush? Why can we not have a proper debate about this bill? What are we inching toward?

It troubles me greatly that we have limited the debate in here, that we have limited the consultation with Canadians outside the House, and that we are passing a bill that would reform our electoral system. This bill would reform the way that elections are done and the way that the public franchise is done.

We have to look at this bill properly. We have to go over the clauses that are not good and improve them. We have to get rid of the horrible clauses and make the good clauses even better and even more powerful.

We are often asked what the Prime Minister is going toward. I can see, from my time in the House, that the Prime Minister is inching toward a system of trickle-down economics whereby we end up with a plutocracy in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. The Prime Minister now wants to give us trickle-down elections in which only the well off can vote. The ones who are more disenfranchised, because of poverty and their living situations, will not be able to participate in elections.

As a result of trickle-down economics and trickle-down elections, we will receive a trickle-down democracy. It will be a democracy for fewer people to achieve fewer aims and offer fewer services, and as a country, we will suffer.

Mr. Speaker, I am making a direct appeal to you. You are the guardian of the traditions of this House and, in effect, of our democracy. I implore you to please stop allowing the use of closure during debates on bills that are not of urgency. We are not in a war.

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On this side, at least, we do not feel that we are at war with anyone. Perhaps someone on the government side feels that they are at war with poor people, aboriginal people, or democracy. Perhaps they are afraid that they will have difficulty getting re-elected in the next election. Certainly with the policies that they are bringing in, their favour with the Canadian people is going down every day, so I understand why they are fearful.

However, as representatives in the House of Commons, we have a duty to uphold our Canadian democracy. I implore you, Mr. Speaker, and I ask for your assistance. Stop allowing the Conservatives to use the tactics that have been used during the drafting of this legislation, putting in poison pills and invoking the use of closure in debates.

• (1345)

Hon. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened with interest to a speech that had nothing to do with the content of the bill, but that is okay. It is the member's prerogative.

I have three very specific questions for my colleague.

First, does he think the voter ID cards should be an allowable form of identification by themselves, considering that Canada Post drops off bundles of voter ID cards in apartment buildings, for example, as came to light in our elections?

Second, how many people does he think one person should be able to vouch for? There was massive evidence, speaking personally, of busloads being vouched for continually, until we stopped that practice.

Third, he talks about 100,000 people not being able to get to vote, most of those on first nations. Does he understand that a first nations status card is in fact one of the 39 forms of ID?

Mr. Jamie Nicholls: Mr. Speaker, status cards are more and more difficult to get. The steps people have to go through to get one are increasingly difficult, so there are people on reserves who might not necessarily have a status card or not have a current status card.

In terms of the busloads the member talks about, I can imagine a seniors centre bringing a busload of people to vote and I can imagine the person who runs the seniors centre actually knowing everyone in that centre. To me it would be acceptable if a nurse looking after all these people came and vouched for them.

As for the third question, we really have to go through the bill and debate it properly. Could the member refer to the specific section or give me the specific proof and table it in the House that lots of identification is dropped off at apartment buildings?

Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it has been over a year now since the Conservative government pulled the first draft of this bill off the table, I suspect because there were clauses in it that frightened Conservatives themselves.

I am speaking specifically to wishes expressed by Elections Canada to have teeth in the bill, teeth to be able to compel testimony and demand the production of documents whenever there have been violations of the bill, particularly in the case of violations similar to those in over 200 ridings in Canada where people were deceived by someone purporting to be from Elections Canada, someone who had use of the Conservative membership lists.

I am wondering if the hon. member could speculate on why there are no teeth in the bill that would give Elections Canada the opportunity to find the culprits, convict them, and punish them.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jamie Nicholls: Mr. Speaker, the investigators were responsible for uncovering how the CIMS database was used to carry out election fraud in the form of robocalls. I can understand why the Conservative Party might be reluctant to give the bill any teeth; that would give the investigators the tools they need to catch fraudsters. There is nothing in this whole big bill that gives the Chief Electoral Officer the right tools to catch fraudsters.

• (1350)

[*English*]

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am privileged to represent the great riding of Vancouver Kingsway where, after constituents witnessed their elected member cross the floor to sit on the other side within two weeks of being elected in 2006, there was an explosion of anger in my riding and a real commitment to the democratic process.

The people in my riding are commenting on the bill before us. The first thing they say to me is that it is highly ironic that in debating a bill that purports to deal with our democratic structure, we are doing so within the confines of closure. They find that quite ironic.

The people in my riding think the most pressing problems about elections are the systematic violations of our election laws. We are quite proud of our democracy in Canada. We have one of the best and cleanest systems in the world, and Canadians want us to keep it that way.

Are there sufficient provisions in the bill to send a clear message to candidates across this land that candidates cannot overspend on limits, that they cannot mislead voters, that they cannot violate the Elections Act or they will face the full force of the elections law to make sure that Canadians know that their elections are clean—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): We have run out of time.

The hon. member for Vaudreuil-Soulanges may provide a short response, please.

Mr. Jamie Nicholls: Mr. Speaker, the short answer is no.

I think this law makes things more vague in terms of spending limits. It does not get to the heart of the problem. I do not think, in its present form, that this legislation does that.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Before we go to resuming debate with the hon. member for Ottawa—Orléans, I will let him know that we have about eight minutes remaining in the time allocated for his remarks.

The hon. member for Ottawa—Orléans.

Mr. Royal Galipeau (Ottawa—Orléans, CPC): Mr. Speaker, first I would like to take the time that you have generously given to me to say two words that we do not hear often enough in this chamber: “thank you”.

[Translation]

It is with humility that I would like to thank the members of Parliament and the House of Commons staff for all their kind words of encouragement over the past few weeks and months.

[English]

I wish to say a very special thank you to the members for Barrie, Brant, Burlington, Don Valley East, Kitchener—Conestoga—right here behind me—Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, Mississauga South, Okanagan—Shuswap, Sarnia—Lambton, my seatmate, Saskatoon—Humboldt, Scarborough Centre, Stormont—Dundas—South Gengarry, Vancouver South, Willowdale, and Winnipeg South Centre, and to the very dedicated vice-chair of the veterans affairs committee for carrying my duty in this chamber and in committee.

[Translation]

Also, thank you to the citizens of Orleans and my friends and family for their visits, their encouraging words and their prayers. Their support and assistance has helped me to feel better and to get better. I thank them from the bottom of my heart.

[English]

Even in the most difficult times, I made an effort to be in this House and to vote, as it is our duty to do. Voting is a fundamental Canadian right. It is a symbol of our identity. It is the oxygen that keeps our democracy alive.

[Translation]

In many countries, much blood has been spilled and many diplomatic efforts have been made to establish democracy and the right to vote. It is our way of saying yes or saying no to the type of society that we want to build. Canada is a model of modern democracy around the world.

[English]

Developing democracies call on Canadians when they want to ensure that their elections are free and fair. Our sense of duty and our expertise give us international credibility in election monitoring.

[Translation]

Between 2009 and 2013, the Canadian International Development Agency, with the assistance of CANADEM, deployed more than 800 Canadian election observers in bilateral missions and 30 multilateral missions in more than 20 countries.

[English]

These observers went to Haiti, Afghanistan, Ukraine, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Senegal, and many other nations.

• (1355)

[Translation]

Because I participated in one of these missions, I have a keen interest in this subject.

[English]

In 2004, I was assigned by CANADEM to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe to co-chair a team of international observers during the rerun of the second round of the

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presidential elections in Ukraine. The other co-chair was a Swiss engineer. We were sent to Dnipropetrovsk.

It was an exhilarating experience. I was able to see first-hand that Canada is synonymous with democracy and freedom. However, that which does not evolve is doomed to disappear. We can continue to be proud. We can continue to improve things.

[Translation]

We will continue to be a model of democracy around the world only if we allow democracy to evolve. The separation of powers is a basic component of our system.

[English]

Consistent with separating the administration of the law and its enforcement, the fair elections act proposes that the commissioner be under the authority of the Director of Public Prosecutions.

[Translation]

In a hockey game, would we ask the owner of the Ottawa Senators to referee a game between the Sens and the Canadiens?

[English]

Our Minister of State for Democratic Reform said it well: the referee should not be wearing a team jersey.

Canada's government, which I support in this House, proposes that greater independence be given to the person with the power to conduct investigations and enforce the law.

[Translation]

The fair elections act will make our legislation more stringent, clearer and easier to follow.

[English]

It would protect Canadian voters from fraudulent and misleading calls by setting up a mandatory public registry. We want to establish a new public registry for mass calling.

Telephone service providers involved in voter contact calling services, and any individual or group that uses these providers would have to register with the CRTC.

[Translation]

We also propose that the fines for preventing or trying to prevent someone from voting be 10 times higher. Under this legislation, anyone convicted of impersonating an election official would face a jail term. These penalties would be more severe for individuals who deceive people out of their votes.

[English]

According to the Neufeld report, identity vouching procedures are complicated and have a 25% error rate. That is one in four. This problem is threatening our democracy, and we must take action, and so we propose to put an end to vouching.

[Translation]

The fair elections act would also require Elections Canada to tell Canadians which pieces of identification will be accepted at the polling station so that they know what to bring with them.

*Statements by Members**[English]*

Thirty-nine different pieces of ID can be used to prove a voter's identity.

[Translation]

In addition, the voter information card would no longer be considered valid identification.

[English]

Elections Canada must also inform voters which pieces of ID are valid and would be accepted at the polling station. These cards contain incorrect information one out of six times.

[Translation]

The show *Infoman* highlighted the problems with voter information cards during a segment called the "Elections Canada two-for-one special".

[English]

To prevent the more powerful elements in our society from drowning out citizens' voices, we would ban the use of loans to sidestep donation regulations.

Some people have used unpaid loans to evade donation limits and make larger donations.

● (1400)

[Translation]

As elected representatives, we must stay clear of this type of pressure.

[English]

That is why we insist on standardized and transparent reporting for political loans.

In addition, candidates and political parties that have exceeded the ceiling on election expenses, would see their reimbursements reduced, and we would maintain a total ban on loans by unions and businesses.

[Translation]

I am pleased to say that Marc Mayrand, the current Chief Electoral Officer, lives in Orleans, as does his predecessor, Jean-Pierre Kingsley.

[English]

While Mr. Mayrand does not seem to support this brilliant bill produced by the Minister of State for Democratic Reform, his predecessor appears to. Mr. Kingsley gave it an A minus, indicating that it is a good bill.

When I received an A minus, I did not ask for a rewrite—

[Translation]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The member's time has expired. The hon. member for Ottawa—Orléans will have two minutes to wrap up his speech when the House resumes debate on this motion.

We will now proceed with statements by members.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS*[English]***THE ECONOMY**

Mr. Bruce Hyer (Thunder Bay—Superior North, GP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives like to talk about job creation and economic prosperity, but let us look at the facts under Conservative rule. Unemployment has increased by 9%, and youth unemployment is double the national rate. Canada was 20th in the OECD for job creation from 2007 to 2012, and real economic growth per capita is the lowest in—wait for it—78 years. The number of consecutive Conservative deficits is six, and the number of deficit targets hit by the finance minister is zero. Personal debt for the average Canadian has increased 26%, and the increase in the national debt, over \$123 billion, is a 25% increase.

It is budget time and the finance minister will be saying the words "jobs" and "the economy" a lot. Yeah, right.

* * *

WINTER OLYMPIC GAMES

Mr. Ted Falk (Provencher, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to take this opportunity to recognize and congratulate the three Olympians from my riding of Provencher who are currently participating in the Sochi games.

I want to congratulate Megan Imrie, who placed 31st in her first biathlon event of the games yesterday, the 7.5-kilometre sprint. I would also like to wish all the best to Jocelyne Larocque and Bailey Bram of the Canadian women's Olympic hockey team. We are all very proud of these young women for their hard work and dedication as they compete for our country against the best athletes in the world.

I would also like to take a moment to recognize the families for their hard work and tireless support that helped make their children's Olympic dreams come true. Without their dedicated support, their children's success would not be possible.

I would like to wish Megan, Jocelyne, and Bailey all the best as they continue to compete in Sochi. Canadians from across the country will be cheering for them.

* * *

*[Translation]***SMALL BUSINESS**

Mr. François Lapointe (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, NDP): Mr. Speaker, for over a year now, the NDP has been campaigning to lower the excessive transaction fees that credit card companies charge small retailers.

I have had the opportunity to meet with dozens of entrepreneurs from Chaudière-Appalaches, who all agree that the problem with these fees is that they cut into the profitability of their businesses.

In its most recent ruling, the Competition Tribunal dismissed the complaint filed by the Commissioner of Competition on this matter. It said that “the proper solution to the concerns raised by the Commissioner is a regulatory framework” and that this framework should be developed as soon as possible.

Let us hope that the four elected Conservative members from the Chaudière-Appalaches region, including three ministers, will have reminded their colleague, the Minister of Finance, that not only the business associations, but also a tribunal are calling for immediate action.

I would love to see the Conservatives make a liar out of me, but I fear that budget 2014, which is being brought down tomorrow, will be another disappointment for the small retailers.

In 2015, the NDP will form a government that will not hesitate to regulate, when needed, to better protect small business.

* * *

[English]

ELECTRICITY

Hon. Steven Fletcher (Charleswood—St. James—Assiniboia, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Manitoba is blessed with an abundance of cheap, clean hydroelectric power.

In Ontario, Saskatchewan, and Alberta, electricity is often generated using carbon-emitting fossil fuels. If Alberta utilized a few thousand megawatts of power from Manitoba, it could significantly reduce Alberta's carbon footprint and help with the case for Keystone XL. The distance from Alberta's oil fields to the hydro dams in Manitoba is approximately the same distance as the existing transmission lines that go from the Nelson River to Winnipeg.

Therefore, we know that technology for the transmission of power at these distances already exists. Perhaps infrastructure funds could be found for projects of this type of regional significance. Manitoba power generation could assist in the further development of the Ring of Fire in northwestern Ontario. When it comes to power, we have to look outside the provincial boxes.

* * *

● (1405)

[Translation]

YVES RYAN

Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg (Bourassa, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is with emotion that I pay tribute to Yves Ryan, a great man who has just passed away.

He dedicated his life to Montreal North, first as a journalist and then as its mayor for 38 years. He was elected 10 times, six of those by acclamation.

I knew Mr. Ryan because my family settled in Montreal North when we arrived in Canada. I voted for him and am now proud to represent him, as Bourassa includes Montreal North.

Statements by Members

There is no question that Yves Ryan worked hard, knew his constituents and was a stringent manager, but he was also an ardent defender of Canada.

I offer my deepest condolences to his wife, Huguette Labrecque, his children and grandchildren, as well as all those mourning this loss. On behalf of all of us from Montreal North, I wish to thank Mr. Ryan for everything he accomplished. May he rest in peace, knowing that his was a job well done.

* * *

WINTER OLYMPIC GAMES

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lotbinière—Chutes-de-la-Chaudière, CPC): Mr. Speaker, across the country, Canadians are thrilled and are coming together to encourage our 221 athletes in Sochi and to share the Olympic dream.

Congratulations to our current medallists: snowboarder Marc McMorris, bronze; the members of Canada's figure skating team, silver; Charles Hamelin, gold in short track speed skating; and sisters Justine and Chloé Dufour-Lapointe, gold and silver in freestyle moguls skiing. I also want to commend the many extraordinary performances by all the Canadian athletes, who have truly outdone themselves.

As our beloved Roch Voisine wrote and sings—accompanied by the Montreal Symphony Orchestra, no less—our athletes are “living out their dreams”, and it is an honour for our government to support high-level sport and allow them to do just that.

* * *

[English]

WINTER OLYMPIC GAMES

Mr. Matthew Dubé (Chambly—Borduas, NDP): Mr. Speaker, what a weekend for Canada to kick off these Olympics. Canada has already won several medals and it is getting hard to keep up, maybe even more as we speak.

I join my colleagues in the House to congratulate Mark McMorris, Justine Dufour-Lapointe, Chloé Dufour-Lapointe, Tessa Virtue and Scott Moir, Patrick Chan, Kaetlyn Osmond, Eric Radford, Kevin Reynolds, Kirsten Moore-Towers, Dylan Moscovitch, Meagan Duhamel, Charles Hamelin, and maybe more as we speak. What a group of athletes.

[Translation]

Just this morning, Charles Hamelin gave us another thrilling performance when he won gold in the 1,500-metre speed skating event. Once again, what a memorable moment. However, I just have to mention the extraordinary story of the Dufour-Lapointe sisters, who have been so dynamic that they have captured the hearts not only of Quebeckers and Canadians, but people all over the world. Two sisters appearing on the podium together is historic, but it also reminds us that behind every athlete and every Olympic performance are some extraordinary people. Congratulations to everyone.

[English]

Let us keep at it, Team Canada!

*Statements by Members***RETIREMENT CONGRATULATIONS**

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it gives me great pleasure to rise and recognize Mayor Jack Wilson of Laurentian Valley Township.

Mayor Wilson has the distinction of being one of only four elected politicians in Ontario to have held office for 50 years or more. This year, after 50 years, 18 years on council and 33 as mayor, Jack has decided it is time to retire.

Jack Wilson is my mayor, and as a fellow ratepayer I appreciate the steady hand Jack has had as mayor and as a Renfrew County councillor. To quote Jack, “I always tried to use common sense. I am a farmer and I tried to run things like I tried to run my farm—if it ain't broke, you don't fix it”. Jack used the same common sense he used on the farm to run our municipality.

Jack was named acting warden for Renfrew County for 2014 in recognition of his years of service, and for being a true gentleman, by his fellow county councillors.

On behalf of the residents of Laurentian Valley and Renfrew County, I would like to thank Jack and Evelyn for 50 years of service.

* * *

POLAND

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon (Mississauga East—Cooksville, CPC): Mr. Speaker, 74 years ago today, following the invasion of Poland in September 1939, the Soviet regime started mass deportations of Polish citizens from invaded territories, deep into Russia.

The first victims of deportations were the Polish military, prisoners of war resulting from resistance to the September invasion.

Soon, the arrests, deportations, and murders were extended to government officials, politicians, civil servants, members of the intelligentsia, scientists, and any others deemed threats to the Soviet state.

Then, deportations were extended to families. About 1.8 million Polish men, women, and children were forcibly removed and placed in labour camps, deep in Siberia, where they faced hard physical labour and miserable living conditions. Over 700,000 died of cold, starvation, physical fatigue, and disease.

The accounts of daily life and loss in the harsh gulag are the personal histories that, to date, have largely been missing, lost, and underreported. It is my wish that this crime of Soviet Communism is brought to light and remembered.

* * *

● (1410)

CANADIAN HUMAN RIGHTS ACT

Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today marks three years since Bill C-389 was adopted by the previous minority Parliament.

The bill would have filled a significant gap in our human rights legislation by providing equal rights and equal protection under the law to transsexual, transgendered, and gender variant Canadians.

Unfortunately the Senate failed to deal with Bill C-389 before the election. After the 2011 election, I was privileged to pick up the work of Bill Siksay, the former member of Parliament for Burnaby—Douglas.

My private member's bill, Bill C-279, passed the House with support from all parties on March 20, 2013.

Unfortunately, three years after Canada's elected representatives first acted and nearly one year after the House again endorsed equal rights for all, trans-Canadians are still waiting for full equality.

Last June, the Senate justice committee completed hearings on the bill and approved it without amendment. Today, I am calling on the unelected Senate to act quickly to honour the will of the House.

Trans-Canadians continue to face high levels of discrimination and violence on a daily basis. There is no time and no excuse for further delay.

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TAXATION

Mr. Lawrence Toet (Elmwood—Transcona, CPC): Mr. Speaker, there are individuals who go to extraordinary lengths to avoid paying their fair share of taxes. They got away with it under the Liberals, but our government has made it clear that we will crack down on tax cheats. We have introduced more than 75 measures to close tax loopholes. Economic action plan 2013 introduced several measures that give the CRA new tools to go after tax cheats. For example, the Minister of National Revenue recently announced the launch of the offshore tax informant program, which provides incentives for vital information on offshore tax schemes.

Tax cheats are feeling the pressure. This is evidenced by the fact that voluntary disclosures to the CRA have nearly quadrupled under this government.

If the NDP and Liberals are serious about their commitment to middle-class Canadians, they will stop opposing all our efforts and join us in protecting honest taxpayers.

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[Translation]

SOCIAL HOUSING

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet (Hochelaga, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise again today to speak about housing and homelessness, because unless the NDP raises the issue, no one else will.

Between 2006 and 2013, more than 45,000 housing units were affected by the end of long-term social housing agreements. This means that an additional 45,000 households may perhaps be wondering whether they are going to feed their families or pay their rent this month.

If we let this happen, social housing will lose \$1.7 billion in funding by 2030. Motion No. 450 would stop this hemorrhaging. To eliminate poverty we must start by ensuring that everyone has a roof over their heads. The Conservatives have moved the focus of the HPS to housing while maintaining that they are looking after housing and homelessness. At the same time, they have eliminated a range of services that tackle homelessness. We need housing and services.

The budget will be tabled tomorrow, and I hope that the government will finally listen to reason.

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[English]

FIREARMS

Mr. Blaine Calkins (Wetaskiwin, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canadian firearms owners know that only the Conservative Party will stand up for their rights.

The leader of the Liberal Party has already mused that he would bring back the wasteful and ineffective long gun registry should he ever get the chance.

Shockingly, we have now learned that the Liberal Party has a plan to confiscate rifles and shotguns from law-abiding Canadian firearms owners. At its next convention, the Liberal Party will be discussing the best way of “reducing the number of firearms in Canada”. This shows that the Liberal Party has not moved beyond the days when former Liberal justice minister Allan Rock said only the police and military should possess firearms.

Let me assure the House and all Canadians that, unlike the Liberals, a Conservative government will never engage in a scheme to confiscate firearms from law-abiding Canadians. We will always work to develop common-sense firearms policies that benefit hunters, farmers, and sport shooters. If the Liberal leader wants my guns, he can pry them from my cold dead hands.

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● (1415)

WINTER OLYMPIC GAMES

Ms. Judy Foote (Random—Burin—St. George's, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise to congratulate Team Canada on winning the silver medal in the figure skating team event at the 2014 Olympic Winter Games in Sochi. Among the nine-member team was Kaetlyn Osmond, who is from Marystown in my riding of Random—Burin—St. George's. This weekend I joined in the excitement at St. Gabriel's Hall in Marystown with Kaetlyn's family, friends, and fans to watch her outstanding performance in the short program.

As a two-time Canadian champion, Kaetlyn continues to show the world she is a world-class figure skater. She placed eighth at the 2013 World Figure Skating Championships in London, Ontario, and now she can add an Olympic silver medal to her growing list of accomplishments.

People in the entire province of Newfoundland and Labrador and many throughout the country, including in Alberta where she trains, look forward to cheering Kaetlyn on as she contends for another

podium finish, this time in the ladies' individual competition on February 19 and 20.

I ask all members to join me in congratulating Kaetlyn and her teammates on their silver win and letting them know how proud we are of them as they continue to compete in Sochi.

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ETHICS

Ms. Joan Crockatt (Calgary Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today is a big anniversary but not one that the Liberals will be talking about. It is one that my constituents in Calgary Centre are talking about: that is, the 10th anniversary of the Liberal sponsorship scandal. The sponsorship scandal exposed a culture of corruption through successive Liberal governments, and I am sure it is a big part of the reason it is the third-place party in this House today.

The first action of our Conservative government was to pass the Federal Accountability Act, bringing in the toughest accountability measures in Canadian history. Last week we introduced the fair elections act, which would build on this record so Canadians can feel confident in their elections. The fair elections act would ensure that no big money from special interest groups has a place in Canadian elections. It would also impose tougher audits and penalties on those who exceed spending limits.

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DEMOCRATIC REFORM

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, over the weekend, the Chief Electoral Officer was the latest to speak out against the Conservative's unfair elections act. He said, “...my reading of the act is that I can no longer speak about democracy in this country”.

This is unprecedented. The unfair elections act would undermine Elections Canada's ability to ensure a level playing field. Canada would be the only democratic country where the independent oversight body is told to keep its mouth shut about people's voting rights.

Well, this is not surprising from the party that pled guilty to the in-and-out scandal, in which numerous Conservative cabinet ministers have been under investigation for breaking the law; and voter suppression in 2011 was traced back to the Conservative data base.

Canadians deserve accountability and fairness when it comes to their voting rights. Instead, they are shutting down debate and ramming through changes that will help them and their friends in 2015. Well, guess what? The New Democrats will be there to stop them.

*Oral Questions***THE ECONOMY**

Mr. James Rajotte (Edmonton—Leduc, CPC): Mr. Speaker, despite a fragile global recovery, our Conservative government has a very strong record of carefully managing our finances. In fact, the IMF says we have the best fiscal position in the G7 and the lowest debt burden by far of any other G7 country. Canadians understand how important this is. They understand the importance of living within their means and they expect their government to do the same.

Today, I met with someone from CIVIX, a national charitable organization with a mission to grow young Canadians into engaged, committed, and active citizens. They conducted a poll, along with Harris/Decima, and found that a strong majority, 81%, of students believe that the federal government should place a high priority on reducing the debt as much as possible.

This is good news. It shows that when it comes to the economy, the high school students of Canada agree with the approach of the Minister of Finance and the Conservative government, a government that has navigated Canada through the global downturn. We continue to create jobs and growth while keeping taxes low, and the students will be assured that we will balance the budget in 2015.

ORAL QUESTIONS

[English]

CONSUMER PROTECTION

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Actually, Mr. Speaker, those students were wondering when the government was going to do something about reducing their debts.

Canada's largest reporting agency has just given us the figures. There has been a 9% increase in the debt of Canadians in the last 12 months. We are up to \$1.4 trillion. That is why the OECD reminds us that Canadian families are the most indebted in the world.

When is the government going to do anything about ATM fees and sky-high credit card interest rates?

• (1420)

Hon. Kevin Sorenson (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, every year the NDP comes with certain demands. It is usually a day or two before the budget is brought down. Each time the NDP's demands are that we pick the pockets of Canadians. This government is more concerned about putting money back into the pockets of Canadians.

We have long spoken of consumer and household debt. We understand that interest rates inevitably will go up. We would remind Canadians to make certain that they keep their households in the black, as our government is going to keep this book in the black.

[Translation]

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, while the Minister of Finance was buying new shoes, I was wearing Phentex slippers in the Saint-Colomban home of Véronique Chiasson.

Her mother lent me the slippers. Véronique is going through the same thing many other young Canadian families are going through.

She and her husband work hard; they slave away. They want help from the government for themselves and their three children.

When will the government lower ATM fees and put an end to usurious credit card interest rates in Canada?

[English]

Hon. Kevin Sorenson (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government has provided record support for low-income Canadians. For example, we have lowered the taxes 160 times in Canada. The average family of four now has \$3,400 more in its pockets each year. In fact, we have removed one million low-income Canadians from the tax rolls altogether.

Every time we have made any movement, this government—I mean, this opposition party—has voted against this government's initiatives.

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DEMOCRATIC REFORM

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am always encouraged when there is some lucidity on the front benches of the Conservatives. "This NDP government"—it sounds so good. We can hardly wait.

[Translation]

The Conservatives' electoral "deform" bill will be bad for voter participation. Two out of three young people—65%—between the ages of 18 and 25 did not bother to vote last time around. Most of those who did vote used their voter information card. That will be illegal next time.

How can criminalizing a practice that helps people vote be good for democracy?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, one in six of those cards contains an error, so they are not a secure piece of identification. However, there are 39 other ways for people to identify themselves, including student cards, which is something students have, obviously.

We will also require Elections Canada to do a better job of informing people, especially students, about acceptable pieces of identification.

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, even he cannot prevent us from celebrating Alexandre Bilodeau's gold and Mikaël Kingsbury's silver.

[English]

The Conservatives' unfair election act would put a gag order on the Chief Electoral Officer. That includes scrapping the student vote program, which has engaged 500,000 Canadian young people and promotes the importance of voting. When we know that 65% of young people did not bother to vote last time around, we know how important this is.

Since when is teaching kids about the importance of voting a partisan issue?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, half of young people were not even aware that they could vote before election day. If they were working or studying on the day the vote was held, they did not have a chance to cast a ballot. The fair elections act would require Elections Canada to better inform young people of all of the voting opportunities available to them. Furthermore, a quarter of non-voting youth said they were not aware of where, when, or how to cast a ballot, and those were some of the reasons that they did not vote.

The fair elections act would ensure they have all that information so that they can participate in democracy.

• (1425)

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in the last election it was the Chief Electoral Officer who warned Canadians about voter suppression through the Conservatives' voter-suppression robocalls. The Federal Court has concluded that the Conservative database was in fact the source of those calls. However, under the Conservatives' new gag order, the CEO would not be allowed to talk to Canadians about anything except when, where, and how to vote.

Why do the Conservatives want to stop Elections Canada from telling? Why do they want to stop Canadians from learning about their voter fraud?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition could not be further from the truth. In fact, the fair elections act would change section 18 of the Canada Elections Act to shift the advertising function of Elections Canada towards the basics of voting: where, when, and what ID to bring.

In other sections in the existing Canada Elections Act, sections 533, 534, 535, and others, not only is the CEO allowed to speak, but he is required to speak, through reports to Parliament and testimony before a parliamentary committee, which automatically become public. That would remain the case with the fair elections act.

* * *

[Translation]

THE BUDGET

Hon. John McCallum (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in last year's budget, the Conservatives imposed tariffs that raised the cost of everything, from wigs for cancer patients to baby carriages. They also introduced a bogus job training program that went nowhere, because the provinces were being treated unfairly.

Will the government fix those two mistakes in tomorrow's budget?
[English]

Hon. Kevin Sorenson (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, again, it is a bit rich for the Liberal Party of Canada to criticize our government's record on job creation. Again, like the other opposition party, Liberals have voted against every job creation measure that this government has brought forward.

We froze the EI rates to provide certainty and flexibility to workers and employers. We cut taxes for manufacturers so they could purchase new equipment and invest back in their own

businesses. We have provided \$70 billion in job creation infrastructure.

The budget is tomorrow. I would encourage that member to have patience until tomorrow.

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INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Wascana, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Conservative job creation last year was the worst since the recession. There are nearly a quarter of a million more jobless Canadians today than when the recession began. Young Canadians have 262,000 fewer jobs. In the face of that crisis, will the government accept provincial offers to fix the nonexistent jobs grant? Will it improve access to all categories of post-secondary education and training? And will it fill the \$3-billion hole it created in the build Canada fund for municipal infrastructure?

Hon. Kevin Sorenson (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, all through and across this country, we have heard from Canadians that they want us to continue on the program to help create jobs and to build this economy. Even though the global economy remains fragile, especially in the United States and Europe, our economic policies have helped to protect Canada. There have been over one million net new jobs created since July 2009. Of those jobs, 85% are full-time jobs, and over 80% of them are in the private sector.

The IMF and the OECD say that Canada has a plan and it is working.

* * *

EMPLOYMENT

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Wascana, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, middle-class Canadians are worried about jobs and financial uncertainty. Their incomes are stagnant but household debt is away up. Most do not have retirement security. Most do not think they can afford post-secondary education for their kids. Their children may not have the opportunity to do as well as they did.

To relieve some of the pressure, will the Conservatives eliminate the tariff taxes it imposed last year on consumer goods, tariffs not paid by foreigners but by middle-class Canadians? Will they reduce their job-killing burden of higher EI payroll taxes?

• (1430)

Hon. Kevin Sorenson (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, 160 times this government has lowered taxes. Every time, the opposition parties have voted against them. We have frozen the EI premiums, the payroll tax. The opposition voted against it. With regard to tax cuts for manufacturers, the opposition voted against it.

Oral Questions

The budget comes tomorrow. I would encourage the opposition to wait until tomorrow. It will find that this budget will help create jobs, bring us to balance in 2015, and it will keep our taxes low.

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THE BUDGET

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP): Mr. Speaker, tens of thousands of Canadians are dropping out of the labour force. Over 20,000 gave up the search for work in January alone. Nearly 300,000 more Canadians are unemployed now than before the recession.

Will the government use tomorrow's budget to help Canadians get back to work? Will it increase the hiring tax credit for small businesses and restore the ecoENERGY retrofit program? Will it help Canadians?

Hon. Kevin Sorenson (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, under the action taken by our Conservative government, Canada will continue to have one of the lowest unemployment rates in the G7 and one of the lowest youth unemployment rates in the G7.

In fact, since 2006, our government has helped put 2.1 million young Canadians back to work through job training and skills development. Despite this action, we recognize that more can be done. We look forward to the budget tomorrow.

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP): Mr. Speaker, far too many Canadians are giving up on the Conservative government because it is not creating enough jobs.

Over 1.3 million Canadians are still out of work and are struggling to pay their bills. This is taking a toll on our economy. Conservatives might be happy to ignore this, but the IMF has raised serious concerns about the impact of skyrocketing household debt, now at \$1.4 trillion, and the impact this has on our economic performance.

Will the government take action in tomorrow's budget to make life more affordable for middle-class Canadians? Will it crack down on payday lenders? Will it ensure that people have access to a low-interest rate credit card?

Hon. Kevin Sorenson (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, we clearly do not want Canadians to be overextended. We have cautioned Canadians repeatedly that interest rates are at an all-time low and will inevitably increase. Our priority is to ensure that Canadians can make informed financial decisions.

She quoted the IMF. Let me quote from the report:

The Canadian economy strengthened in 2013.... Economic growth is expected to accelerate....

It also went on to say:

Executive Directors commended the authorities for their continued sound macroeconomic and financial sector management.

We have had a long-term plan. The long-term plan is working—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques.

[Translation]

EMPLOYMENT

Mr. Guy Caron (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, NDP): Mr. Speaker, for nine years, consumers have been waiting for real action and young people have been abandoned by the Conservatives.

I would like the Minister of State for Social Development to set her notes aside and understand that 280,000 jobs for young people have been lost since the last recession and that less than 10% of those jobs have been recovered. Over the past year, 67,000 young Canadians have lost a full-time job.

What measures have the Conservatives proposed or will they propose to create jobs for young people in the private sector, particularly in small and medium-size businesses?

[English]

Hon. Candice Bergen (Minister of State (Social Development), CPC): Mr. Speaker, our economic action plan and our government are delivering real results for young Canadians. We have our youth employment strategy, which includes skills link, career focus, and paid internships. Every time we propose these pieces of legislation, the opposition votes against them.

We will not be deterred by that. We are proud of what our young people are doing in Canada. We know that we can do better. We are going to support them and see them be the best young Canadians that we have.

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[Translation]

DEMOCRATIC REFORM

Ms. Nycole Turmel (Hull—Aylmer, NDP): Mr. Speaker, on the weekend, the Chief Electoral Officer said:

My reading of the act is that I can no longer speak about democracy in this country.

That is essentially what the bill says. The Chief Electoral Officer will be forbidden from discussing topics that have not been pre-approved by the Conservatives.

How will muzzling the Chief Electoral Officer promote voter turnout?

● (1435)

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, the question is based on misinformation.

Firstly, the changes we are making to section 17 of the Canada Elections Act will shift Elections Canada's ads to more practical notions such as how, where and when to vote. That is the information that Canadians need, young Canadians in particular. Secondly, the Chief Electoral Officer will continue to be obliged to speak before Parliament and before committees.

Oral Questions

Ms. Nicole Turmel (Hull—Aylmer, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in reality, the new bill limits what information the Chief Electoral Officer can provide the public on four topics: how to become a candidate, how to add one's name to the voters list, the location and date of the vote, and the identification that is required for voting. The bill would even make it illegal for the Chief Electoral Officer to participate in a media scrum like the one he spoke to as he was leaving the Parliamentary committee on Thursday.

Why have the Conservatives added this clause, which violates the basic principles of freedom of expression?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, the NDP members have not read the Canada Elections Act. Sections 533, 534 and 535 already require the Chief Electoral Officer to testify and submit a report before Parliament, which automatically becomes public. These sections are not being changed in any way in the Fair Elections Act.

[English]

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives are tilting the playing field to their advantage. Their removal of the ability to take an oath and vouch at the polls would impact some groups more than others.

The Chief Electoral Officer said, “Groups that come to mind are aboriginals, young people, even seniors who...have increasing difficulty producing proper ID documents”.

Experts are warning that these changes are likely unconstitutional.

Why does the minister want to make changes that would make it harder to vote and that are likely unconstitutional?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, in fact, the member is wrong. Twenty-five per cent of cases where vouching was used resulted in irregularities, according to Elections Canada's own reports. The same reports said that the irregularities were serious in nature.

In fact, the Ontario Superior Court invalidated some votes as a result of the irregularities related to vouching. Now the fact that the Supreme Court later overturned that ruling does not change the fact that it is very serious when any judge has to invalidate votes because of vouching irregularities.

There would continue to be 39 acceptable pieces of ID, and Elections Canada would be required to inform Canadians what they are.

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the minister has to stop playing fast and loose with the facts and start answering questions.

The minister knows full well that the 25% statistic for vouching while voting has nothing to do with fraud. It refers to the fact that “the tick [box] confirming that vouching was required was not checked”.

Does the minister really think that unchecked tick boxes are the biggest dangers that our voting system faces, and does he really feel this justifies making it harder for Canadians to exercise their right to vote?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, here is what I really think. I think that Elections Canada's own report should be listened to. Here is what it says:

Averaged across 308 ridings, elections officials made over 500 serious administrative errors per electoral district on Election Day.

Obviously, this is unacceptable. Aside from legal concerns, public trust in proper administration of the electoral process is at serious risk if these error rates are not addressed.

That is Elections Canada's own report. That is what I am listening to when we make these laws.

Mr. Craig Scott (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the government is shutting down debate on legislation that changes the way elections are run in this country. It is shutting down debate—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order, please. Order.

The government side will have an opportunity to respond to the question when the member for Toronto—Danforth has finished putting it.

Until then, I would ask them to come to order.

The hon. member for Toronto—Danforth.

Mr. Craig Scott: Mr. Speaker, the government is trying to shut down debate on legislation that would change the way elections are run in this country.

It is shutting down debate on a bill that is supposed to combat electoral fraud but that instead would target Elections Canada and ordinary Canadian voters. It would also give Conservatives an unfair advantage.

Would the government at least allow Canadians to have their say on it? Will it support the NDP's proposal for cross-country hearings on Bill C-23, the unfair elections act?

● (1440)

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member does not want any debate at all. In fact, he declared his opposition to the bill before he even read a single word of it. But that being said, all Canadians will be able to have their voice heard. We encourage them to make submissions to the committee and the committee can decide which witnesses it wants to hear from right across the country.

I will be listening to Elections Canada's own report, which said on the issue of vouching, “Too frequently, the errors are so serious that the courts would judge them to be ‘irregularities’ that violate the legal provisions that establish an elector's entitlement to vote”. Some 25% of cases have irregularities. That is too high. We are going to protect Canadians against fraud.

[Translation]

Mr. Craig Scott (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the government promised legislation a year and a half ago. It has introduced a bill that is quite likely unconstitutional and that could prevent tens of thousands of people from voting. Why does the government not hold public hearings across the country to ensure that this bill is tailor-made for Canadians and not for the Conservatives?

Oral Questions

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, the parliamentary committee will obviously be able to hear testimony from Canadians from all regions of Canada. That is still the case and will be for these discussions. At the same time, we will protect the integrity of the vote by preventing methods that have shown a high rate of error and giving more powers to the commissioner to enforce the law.

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[English]

THE BUDGET

Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Finance should be using the budget to finally make significant investments in a stronger middle class. Instead, he appears to be using it to bully and advance his own political vendettas against the Province of Ontario. While the minister has never hidden his disdain for the Government of Ontario, it is Ontarians who are now facing a \$641-million cut in transfer payments with no funding to help bridge the shortfall.

Ontarians have always paid their fair share, so why is the Minister of Finance now trying to balance the books on their backs?

Hon. Kevin Sorenson (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, federal support for Ontario has increased by 76% since our government took office in 2006. Federal support will total \$19.1 billion in 2014-15, a whopping \$8.3-billion increase from under the previous Liberal government. After years of inaction by the previous Liberal government, our Conservative government took real action to support Ontario.

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, last year the Conservative budget delivered a fake jobs grant, cut services to veterans, and slashed the government's shaky infrastructure commitment. It also attacked the middle class by increasing payroll taxes and added new fees on everyday items that we all use, like shampoo, deodorant, blankets, and toothbrushes. Economic growth is down again. Job creation is clearly stagnant and Canadians are tired of ads promising much and delivering nothing.

What will we expect in tomorrow's budget? More attacks on middle-class Canadians or what?

Hon. Kevin Sorenson (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, thanks to the economic action plan Canada has enjoyed the strongest economic performance among all G7 countries, with over one million net new jobs created since the peak of the recession, and 85% of those are full-time jobs and 80% of those are in the private sector. These are high-paying jobs. The IMF and the OECD both project that Canada will have among the strongest growth in the G7 in the years ahead. We have a strong plan. We will hear more about that plan tomorrow.

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[Translation]

INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent—Cartierville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the parliamentary secretary is wrong. Fourteen OECD countries have done better than we have at combatting unemployment.

The cornerstone of last year's budget was supposed to be matching jobs with job seekers. However, instead of investing in this priority, the government chose to cut \$300 million from the provinces in its budget and then asked them to contribute \$300 million to a program it concocted without them. Then the government wasted millions of dollars of taxpayers' money on propaganda to make people think this program existed. What will the government do to fix this boondoggle?

● (1445)

Hon. Jason Kenney (Minister of Employment and Social Development and Minister for Multiculturalism, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is rather strange to hear that the Liberal Party is against job training programs that lead to jobs.

The principle of the Canada job grant program is to guarantee jobs for people who receive training and to increase private sector investment in worker training.

That makes sense, and that is why the majority of Canadian business groups strongly support the Canada job grant program.

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TAXATION

Mr. Murray Rankin (Victoria, NDP): Mr. Speaker, instead of encouraging job creation, the Conservatives have chosen to use the budget to attack charities. Their goal is clear: muzzle those who do not share their opinion.

It was under this government that Montreal's Mafia boss got a \$400,000 cheque from the Canada Revenue Agency while he was in prison. That is Conservative incompetence at its best.

Will they let charities do their work?

[English]

Hon. Kerry-Lynne D. Findlay (Minister of National Revenue, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the only issue is whether these organizations are respecting the law.

As a former president of the West Coast Environmental Law association, the member for Victoria knows that the rules regarding charities and political activities are long-standing.

The rules have to be respected. CRA audits occur at arm's length, free of political interference. The CRA is doing its job.

Mr. Murray Rankin (Victoria, NDP): Mr. Speaker, first opponents of the Enbridge northern gateway pipeline, like me, were called radicals. Now we are called terrorists.

The fact is, billions of dollars in tax revenues are being lost each year to tax havens, but instead of giving the CRA the resources it needs to fight tax cheats, the government is too busy trying to intimidate people who do not agree with them.

Why is the minister going after charities and letting tax cheats off the hook?

Hon. Kerry-Lynne D. Findlay (Minister of National Revenue, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I repeat, the only issue here is whether these organizations are respecting the law. The laws on political activity for charities have been very long-standing, as the member for Victoria, as an environmental lawyer, knows.

The economic action plan gave increased tools to us to look at enforcing those rules. That is exactly what we are doing. We have improved transparency by requiring more detail on political activity from charities.

The CRA, I repeat, is doing its job.

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AIR TRANSPORTATION

Mr. Glenn Thibeault (Sudbury, NDP): Mr. Speaker, let us look at a problem that is facing Canadians that the Conservative government will not tackle.

According to the Canadian Transportation Agency, complaints against Canadian airlines are up, way up. Overbooking, poor communication, and flight disruptions, the details are enough to make anyone angry.

The government promised to put consumers first, but actions speak louder than words. When will the government stand up for travellers and finally introduce an air passengers' bill of rights?

Hon. Lisa Raitt (Minister of Transport, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the answer to that question is that we did so in 2008.

Under Flight Rights Canada, passengers have a right to information on flight times. They have a right to take the flights they paid for. They have a right to punctuality and they have a right to have their luggage given to them quickly.

We enforce these through the Canadian Transportation Agency. It is good to see that consumers know about their rights and indeed are utilizing the process they need to use in order to enforce these rights.

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, does the minister not really remember? I will refresh her memory.

On the Sunday before the throne speech in the fall, her colleague from British Columbia was on all of the talk shows, all of the political shows, promising, wait for it, an airline passengers' bill of rights.

When it was not in the throne speech, we asked the minister about it. What did she say? We should not believe rumours. Is that really what she thinks about her colleague?

• (1450)

Hon. Lisa Raitt (Minister of Transport, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I guess I should ask the Leader of the Opposition, is it a rumour that they plan implementing a \$20 billion carbon tax on Canadian passengers, or is that something they are backing away from—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order, order. The hon. member for Prince Albert.

Oral Questions

THE BUDGET

Mr. Randy Hoback (Prince Albert, CPC): Mr. Speaker, CIVIX, along with Harris-Decima, has just released the results of thousands of budget consultations with high school students all across Canada.

A strong majority, some 81% of students, believe that the federal government should place a high priority on reducing the debt as much as possible. They understand the importance of living within their means and expect government to do the same.

Can the Minister of State for Finance please tell the House that the government is reducing the federal debt?

Hon. Kevin Sorenson (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for Prince Albert for that good question.

Unlike the Liberals who want us to recklessly increase taxes, spending, and debt, this government agrees with Canadian youth that the budget must and will be balanced. Economic action plan 2014 will pave the way to balance the budget in 2015 while continuing to create quality jobs, to lower costs for consumers, and to foster continued economic growth.

I am pleased to see that high school students understand the importance of living within one's means. It is a shame the concept is lost on the leader of the Liberal Party of Canada.

* * *

CANADA POST

Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Blacklock's reports that it has unearthed secret plans by Canada Post to find ways to diversify its operations through such things as financial services, a far cry from their current plan to raise prices and make devastating cuts to services.

Can the Minister of Transport tell us if these diversification plans were referred to cabinet, and if so, were they simply dismissed by the Conservatives?

Hon. Lisa Raitt (Minister of Transport, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the reality is that Canadians are choosing more and more not to send mail by the traditional methods, because we are in a digital era and email, of course, is the way in which people are doing business today.

Canada Post has come up a plan to combat what they are facing in terms of the erosion of letter mail, and has put its five-point plan forward. We support it.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives have a report detailing options that could ensure Canada Post's survival.

However, that report was never made public. What is worse, the crown corporation and its 23 executives—who are paid \$10 million—have even denied ever having done this research. In addition, 701 of the 811 pages of the report have been redacted, hidden, blacked out.

Oral Questions

Does the minister not think that all that research should be made public so that we can assess every option together in order to avoid cutting 8,000 jobs and eliminating home delivery?

[English]

Hon. Lisa Raitt (Minister of Transport, CPC): Mr. Speaker, since 1981 Canada Post has had a mandate to operate on a self-sustaining basis. It has recognized in the past number of years, and indeed going into the future, that it will not have enough business to remain self-sufficient. As a result, it has developed a five-point plan. Those are the points Canada Post will be implementing, and we do support these in government.

* * *

[Translation]

CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothé (Pierrefonds—Dollard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the citizenship bill introduced by the Conservatives would concentrate more power in the hands of the minister.

These include important powers, such as the power to grant and revoke citizenship. Giving the minister these powers opens the door to arbitrary, non-transparent and partisan decision-making.

The Conservatives are saying that the Chief Electoral Officer should not wear a team jersey.

Why, then, are the Conservatives prepared to give the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration the power to be both judge and jury?

• (1455)

Hon. Chris Alexander (Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, CPC): Mr. Speaker, under our new citizenship bill, any revocation of citizenship would be subject to the highest standards and criteria.

The real question we are asking ourselves on this side of the House is this: would the NDP agree that some people have abused the citizenship program, that there have been some cases of fraud in relation to residency in Canada and that the RCMP is currently investigating 3,000 cases linked to this kind of fraud? Would the NDP agree that this problem exists and that we need a solution? So far, we have received no response to that.

[English]

Mr. Andrew Cash (Davenport, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we do not need a lecture on citizenship from a government that welcomed with open arms a convicted felon by the name of Conrad Black.

This is the same government that nearly doubled processing time for citizenship applications, and family reunification delays get longer and longer. Now it wants to concentrate more power in the hands of the minister, giving unilateral power over citizenship.

Will the minister agree to actually bring real reform to Canada's citizenship laws, not just more power for himself? Will he work with us to fix Canada's citizenship laws?

Hon. Chris Alexander (Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canada's citizenship programs have not been reformed in a thoroughgoing way since 1977, since the failed Liberal project that put citizenship on an unreliable foundation was

brought into being. We are going to work to bring processing times down below one year in only 18 months and we are going to work to deal with the issues of terrorists, of fraud, of people who join terrorist groups abroad and have dual nationality. We do not think those people deserve Canadian citizenship, and most Canadians agree with us.

* * *

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (St. Paul's, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, last month the minister said there was no gap in funding for first nations students. Friday the Prime Minister admitted the government was wrong. However, first nations students now find out they will have to wait at least another two years for the equality of opportunity they deserve. First nations should not have to wait one more day.

Will the government commit to immediately closing the funding gap for first nations students in tomorrow's budget?

Hon. Bernard Valcourt (Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I can assure the member that I heard her call for a 4% escalator to the funds we have announced, and I regret that we will not accept the Liberal position. We will keep the escalator at 4.5%.

* * *

41ST GENERAL ELECTION

Mr. Scott Simms (Bonaville—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, according to the Federal Court, three years ago someone used a Conservative database to tell voters their polling stations had moved to fictitious locations, but only one charge has been laid as a result. Elections Canada has not been able to compel witness testimony. Elections Canada says that the investigation has been hampered because the Conservatives will not give it the tools it needs to get witness co-operation.

Why do the Conservatives not want to know who used their own database to commit electoral fraud?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, the question was about the powers of the existing election commissioner. Let us clarify.

First of all, he can compel testimony before the courts after charges are laid through something called a subpoena. He can compel documents by seeking a warrant from a judge, and all of his powers of investigation are the same as those of police officers investigating the most heinous of crimes.

Furthermore, under the fair elections act he would have sharper teeth, a longer reach, and a freer hand, including total independence so that he can make his own decisions about investigations and staffing, and he will not be able to be fired without cause.

PUBLIC SAFETY

Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, NDP): Mr. Speaker, building safer communities should be a priority for any government, but in yet another example of Conservative mismanagement, Conservatives are cutting the 45-year-old program that allows first nations to police their own communities in partnership with the RCMP. This terminates a vital front-line service for many remote reserves where the nearest RCMP detachment is often several communities away.

My question is simple. Will the government reverse this ill-advised and dangerous decision to terminate the first nations constable program?

Hon. Steven Blaney (Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I can assure the member that this government is committed to providing our first nations with very professional, first-quality service to communities. That is why we have renewed our agreement for five years. All the money that was oriented to other programs that were not effective in meeting their targets will go into first nations first-quality service policing.

• (1500)

[Translation]

Ms. Rosane Doré Lefebvre (Alfred-Pellan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives refuse to hold an inquiry into missing and murdered aboriginal women and are also cutting the budgets for aboriginal policing. Things are not going to improve.

Essential services that ensure the safety of often remote aboriginal communities will suffer because of the Conservatives' electoral promises. These people are not just responsible for safety in these communities—they are often the first responders as well.

How can the Conservatives justify cuts that affect the safety of first nations communities?

Hon. Steven Blaney (Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, CPC): Mr. Speaker, let us be very clear. All amounts allocated to first nations' policing will be used to provide professional services.

We treat first nations like equals, just like all Canadians. That is why our government has ensured that women's rights in aboriginal communities are recognized just like the rights of all other women. Unfortunately, we did not have the NDP's support to do so.

[English]

Mr. Brad Butt (Mississauga—Streetsville, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our Conservative government is committed to keeping illicit drugs off the streets and getting help for those who are addicted. Recently we learned about a troubling new development in Vancouver. The newest hot seller in vending machines is not candy; it is crack pipes for a quarter. There have been more than 22,000 crack pipes sold since the launch of this misguided initiative.

My constituents believe police should be enforcing the law and taking drug accessories off the streets. Could the Minister of Public Safety tell the House what the government's position is on these so-called crack pipe vending machines?

Hon. Steven Blaney (Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our position is crystal clear, and

Oral Questions

I thank the member for Mississauga—Streetsville for his concern for vulnerable people and caring for safer communities.

Unlike the Liberals and the NDP, we do not believe that handing out heroin and needles to people who are suffering from addiction is a solution. We believe in helping them, in making them stop using dangerous drugs and keeping drugs off our streets.

* * *

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Hon. Geoff Regan (Halifax West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Halifax's Phillip Wood is a 92-year-old veteran of World War II and the Korean conflict. In a recent letter to the editor, he called the decision to close the veterans offices "one more unfeeling and ruthless action".

Like many others, Mr. Wood believes the government is cutting critical services so it can offer goodies in time for the next election. When the government tables the budget tomorrow, will it listen to Mr. Wood, reopen those offices, and start treating our veterans with respect?

Hon. Julian Fantino (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are treating our veterans with respect. I am proud of our government's demonstrated support for our veterans and their families. This support includes over 650 points of service to assist veterans; home visits by registered nurses or case managers; grass cutting, snow clearing, and home cleaning; 17 operational stress injury clinics; 24 integrative personnel support centres; and much more.

The list can go on and on, but throughout, the opposition parties have never supported us in many of these initiatives.

* * *

[Translation]

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the humanitarian situation in the Central African Republic and in southern Sudan is truly very serious and the UN's calls for action are increasing. However, Canada has not yet responded to the most recent call for urgent action.

Last year, nearly \$300 million in international aid was not disbursed.

Given this situation, will the minister use the funds at his disposal to help people who have enormous needs, or will he leave the money in the bank once again?

Hon. Christian Paradis (Minister of International Development and Minister for La Francophonie, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are very much aware of the situation in the Central African Republic and that is why, in 2013, Canada provided more than \$6.9 million in humanitarian aid, which makes Canada one of the most generous donors.

Oral Questions

In December 2013, an additional \$5 million was allocated to help stabilize the situation, because we know that there is a security crisis.

We have taken action on all fronts and we will continue to closely monitor the situation.

* * *

● (1505)

[English]

NATIONAL DEFENCE

Mr. Rick Norlock (Northumberland—Quinte West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member for Ottawa Centre took time away from his own riding responsibilities yesterday to join a group of career protesters who oppose the expansion of CFB Trenton. Clearly, the opposition does not support job creation and economic growth.

Could the minister inform the House of the impact the CFB expansion will have in terms of economic prosperity for the citizens of Quinte West?

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the hon. member for Northumberland—Quinte West for that excellent question.

In May 2010, the municipal council of Quinte West unanimously adopted a resolution supporting the acquisition of all lands required for the relocation of the Joint Task Force. With hundreds of families moving to the region, this project will inject millions of dollars into the local economy and boost local business. Most importantly, it will give our special operations forces the resources they need to get the job done for Canadians.

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, this weekend I met with an 86-year-old farmer and his supporters. His name is Frank Meyers. The Department of National Defence is going to take away his farm, his land. This land has been with his family since before Confederation.

Although the law may allow the government to do it, Mr. Meyers' land is precious to the history of our country, to our farmland, and to making sure we have food security.

Are the Conservatives going to just take this land away from an 86-year-old farmer and turn their backs on this man and his community, yes or no? Otherwise, are they going to reconsider what I think is an ill-fated, not very wise decision?

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Mr. Meyers will be fairly compensated and will be allowed to continue to live in his home, which has been specifically exempted from that process.

I appreciate that this is not the member's constituency, but if it were, he would probably be aware that this process has the unanimous consent of the local council, which wants to support our men and women in uniform who need these facilities. This is why it has widespread support in that area.

[Translation]

INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS

Mr. Jean-François Fortin (Haute-Gaspésie—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia, BQ): Mr. Speaker, after announcing with no prior consultation a job training program that—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

[English]

The Speaker: Order. The question was asked, and it was answered. We are moving on to the next one. If members have follow-up questions, they can try to get recognized by the Chair in a supplementary, but not by just yelling across the aisle.

The hon. member for Haute-Gaspésie—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-François Fortin: Mr. Speaker, after announcing with no prior consultation a job training program that torpedoed all the efforts previously made by Quebec, and after spending millions of dollars on useless advertising for a job training program that no one wants in Quebec, the Minister of Employment and Social Development has now moved on to a new chapter in which he disappears from the negotiations and no longer returns calls.

Can the minister reassure us that he is still on the job and promise he will get back to the Quebec minister, who is still waiting for a call?

Hon. Jason Kenney (Minister of Employment and Social Development and Minister for Multiculturalism, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have had some good discussions on the issue with my Quebec counterpart, Ms. De Courcy. We both agree that the goal is to ensure that employers are more involved in job training. I have noted the success of Quebec's labour market partners commission and I look forward to continuing discussions with Ms. De Courcy on how to achieve the objective of the Canada job grant program while acknowledging the success of the program in Quebec.

* * *

[English]

THE ECONOMY

Mr. Bruce Hyer (Thunder Bay—Superior North, GP): Mr. Speaker, let us look at some facts of life under the Minister of Finance: unemployment is up 9%, youth unemployment is even worse, real economic growth per capita is the lowest since the Great Depression, and personal and national debt are both up by over 25%.

Will the Minister of Finance who wrecked Ontario's economy resign before he totally destroys Canada's economy?

Hon. Kevin Sorenson (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, every year the opposition party comes and the opposition party asks. Today, unfortunately, this member has come only with accusations, personal in nature, against our Minister of Finance.

We have the longest-serving finance minister in the G7. We have the best finance minister in the world, and tomorrow he will bring down a budget that will help grow our economy, will help create jobs, and will bring us to balance in 2015.

* * *

● (1510)

DEMOCRATIC REFORM

Mr. Brent Rathgeber (Edmonton—St. Albert, Ind.): Mr. Speaker, 98% of Canadians choose not to join political parties, yet political parties have the exclusive right to raise money and issue generous tax credit receipts outside of an election period. Moreover, a candidate aligned with a party can transfer an electoral surplus to a riding association and is eligible for a 50% reimbursement for all qualified election expenses. These are all advantages that are statutorily not available to independent candidates.

Does the Minister of State for Democratic Reform not believe that the fair elections act should contain some actual fairness for the 98% of Canadians not associated with a political party?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, the provisions that the member describes are features of the existing Canada Elections Act. They are not new provisions created by the fair elections act.

I note that he has made some suggestions and I invite him to bring them to me for my consideration. He might also consider sending them on to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, which is responsible for studying the matter.

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

[English]

COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

HUMAN RESOURCES, SKILLS AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE STATUS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Mr. Phil McColeman (Brant, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the second report of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities, entitled “Engaging Experience: Opportunities for Older Persons in the Workforce”.

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims (Newton—North Delta, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to comment on the tabling of the report on older workers in the workplace. I and my New Democrat colleagues on the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities believe that older workers deserve every opportunity to find fulfilling and gainful employment and to retire in dignity, if they so choose.

The report fails to address important challenges facing Canadian workers as they approach retirement, such as financial insecurity, inadequate savings, and discrimination in the workplace due to their ages. It was these shortcomings that led to my submission of a supplementary report to include six recommendations, including that the federal government increase the GIS to eliminate poverty among seniors.

Routine Proceedings

FINANCE

Mr. James Rajotte (Edmonton—Leduc, CPC): Mr. Speaker, following the usual friendly and amicable consultations among all the parties, I believe you will find unanimous consent for the following motion:

That the Second Report of the Standing Committee on Finance presented to the House on December 4, 2013, be amended by replacing recommendation 24 with the following:

That as Canada is one of four Group of Seven countries without a national dementia and Alzheimer's strategy, the federal government move expeditiously on the creation and implementation of such a strategy.

The Speaker: Does the hon. member have the unanimous consent of the House to propose the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Speaker: The House has heard the terms of the motion. Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to)

* * *

PETITIONS

IMPAIRED DRIVING

Mr. Dave MacKenzie (Oxford, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have the pleasure to present a petition from the people in my riding concerning the tragic death of a family member. This petition requests that when a fatal accident occurs, the driver who caused the accident resulting in the fatality be checked for alcohol consumption and drug use at the time and that the driver's cellphone be confiscated to be checked for text messages that were being written or sent at the time of the accident.

● (1515)

LYME DISEASE

Mr. Craig Scott (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is my privilege to present this petition from Toronto—Danforth residents who are supporting the passage of the member for Saanich—Gulf Islands' bill, Bill C-442, the national Lyme disease strategy act, which would convene a national conference to deal with this under-treated and under-recognized disease in Canada.

I would also like to mention that one of the signatories is David Leggett, a long-time sufferer of this disease, who has led the education campaign among Canadians.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have the privilege of presenting a petition from a number of islanders who are concerned about high volume hydraulic fracturing. They believe that the Government of Canada should study high-volume hydraulic fracturing and its potential impacts on drinking water resources, air quality, human health, and the health of aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems.

Routine Proceedings

ABORTION

Mr. Blaine Calkins (Wetaskiwin, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have a petition here signed by a number of my constituents and people from all over Alberta. They call upon our Parliament to do the following: whereas Canada is the only nation in the western world and in the company of China and North Korea without any laws restricting abortion, and whereas Canada's Supreme Court has said it is Parliament's responsibility to enact abortion legislation, the petitioners are calling upon Parliament to change that as quickly as possible.

[Translation]

VIA RAIL

Mr. François Lapointe (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, NDP): Mr. Speaker, although it makes me a little sad, it is my honour to rise in the House once again to share a few more signatures added to a petition that has already been signed by 20,000 people, many of them Acadians and New Brunswickers. Here are their words:

CONSIDERING THAT rail service cuts in northern New Brunswick would have a serious and detrimental effect on the economy of that region and the viability of several businesses, and;

CONSIDERING THAT rail service is one of the safest, most environmentally-friendly and economical means of transportation;

WE, THE UNDERSIGNED, implore [now they have to implore] the government of Canada to undertake all measures to reinstate daily, round-trip VIA Rail passenger service between Montreal, QC, and Halifax, NS, through the cities of Campbellton, NB, Bathurst, NB, and Miramichi, NB.

It makes me sad to table this petition today.

The Speaker: I really have to remind the hon. member that it is against the Standing Orders to read petitions. Next time, I hope he will summarize it.

The hon. member for Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine

Mr. Philip Toone (Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I too am very sad that I have here in my hands a petition signed by people from northern New Brunswick and eastern Quebec. They want better VIA Rail service, not what the Conservatives are suggesting, which is the total elimination of VIA Rail service.

[English]

ELECTIONS CANADA

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have a petition from 25 friends and neighbours from St. Thomas and the area on Canada's voting system.

[Translation]

VIA RAIL

Ms. Charmaine Borg (Terrebonne—Blainville, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today I am presenting a petition signed by New Brunswickers. Together, we have collected over 24,000 signatures. People are very worried because cuts to rail services will have major repercussions on their communities. They are asking the Government of Canada to take all necessary measures to restore VIA Rail's daily services.

[English]

MINING INDUSTRY

Mrs. Patricia Davidson (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to present a petition from constituents who are requesting the creation of a legislated ombudsman mechanism for responsible mining.

[Translation]

GATINEAU PARK

Ms. Nycole Turmel (Hull—Aylmer, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I also have a petition from many people in my riding who are calling for legislation to protect Gatineau Park. The park is in my riding, but it is also visited by hundreds of people from across the country. Right now, there is no legislation protecting it. I hope to have the support of this government to pass a law protecting Gatineau Park.

[English]

LYME DISEASE

Mr. Bruce Hyer (Thunder Bay—Superior North, GP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to present a petition on behalf of many Canadians, including those from Thunder Bay—Superior North, who support Bill C-442, an act respecting a national Lyme disease strategy, introduced by the member for Saanich—Gulf Islands.

Lyme disease is serious. A growing number of Canadians will soon be living in areas at risk of Lyme disease due to climate change and global warming. This bill would lead to a national strategy.

● (1520)

[Translation]

VIA RAIL

Mr. Robert Aubin (Trois-Rivières, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am joining all those people from New Brunswick, eastern Quebec and Haute-Mauricie who are sending a clear message to this government that VIA Rail services must be restored to provide for economic development in those regions as well as a greener mode of transportation.

[English]

IMPAIRED DRIVING

Mr. Jim Hillyer (Lethbridge, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am presenting a petition signed by Albertans who call upon the Government of Canada to increase drinking and driving offences sentences to vehicular manslaughter and other increases and to consider drunk driving a more serious offence.

[Translation]

PUBLIC TRANSIT

Mr. Jamie Nicholls (Vaudreuil—Soulanges, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour of presenting two petitions in the House.

The first is about the fact that Canada is the only OECD country that does not have a public transit strategy. This petition calls on the government to develop a public transit strategy.

[English]

VIA RAIL

Mr. Jamie Nicholls (Vaudreuil—Soulanges, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the second petition is from more than 24,000 people from New Brunswick who are asking for the re-establishment of daily rail service by VIA Rail. The petitioners call upon the government to make sure that certain communities in New Brunswick are served by VIA Rail.

PENSIONS

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today I table a petition that I am sure my constituents would want the Prime Minister to be aware of. The petitioners believe that people should be able to continue to have the option of retiring at the age of 65 and that the government should not in any way diminish the importance and value of Canada's three major seniors programs: OAS, GIS, and CPP.

[Translation]

CANADA POST

Mr. Pierre Jacob (Brome—Missisquoi, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today I am presenting a petition on the cuts to Canada Post. For two years I have been hearing people around my riding talk about their growing concern over these cuts to services. The post offices are vitally important to the towns and villages, and home delivery is still an essential service to a number of people, particularly seniors and people with reduced mobility. This petition asks that the government work with the opposition on finding ways to make Canada Post profitable without eliminating jobs and services to the public.

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet (Hochelaga, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I too have in my hands a petition that concerns Canada Post. It is very easy to get people to sign it. In fact, they are coming to see us to sign petitions about Canada Post.

This time, roughly 200 people from British Columbia are calling on Canada Post to stop reducing services to the public by closing post offices one after the other, for example. They are also calling for real public consultations in order to come up with an updated mail delivery service that adequately meets the needs of the public.

VIA RAIL

Mr. Tarik Brahmi (Saint-Jean, NDP): Mr. Speaker, as a faithful and regular VIA Rail passenger between Ottawa and Montreal, I also am pleased to present a petition signed by people from eastern Quebec and New Brunswick. They are urging the federal government not to close the section of railway between Quebec and Halifax and to do everything in its power to maintain that VIA Rail route.

PUBLIC TRANSIT

Mr. Pierre Nantel (Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I represent the people of Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher. They also dream of seeing Canada create an integrated policy on public transit. I would therefore like to present a petition signed by 35 people.

Speaker's Ruling

[English]

QUESTIONS ON THE ORDER PAPER

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

The Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

* * *

POINTS OF ORDER

FAIR ELECTIONS ACT—SPEAKER'S RULING

The Speaker: I am now prepared to rule on the point of order raised on February 6, 2014, by the hon. House leader for the official opposition, regarding the form of Bill C-23, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act and other Acts and to make consequential amendments to certain Acts.

[Translation]

I would like to thank the hon. House leader for the official opposition for having raised this matter, as well as the hon. leader of the government in the House of Commons and the member for Abitibi—Témiscamingue for their comments.

[English]

The opposition House leader claimed that a significant error had occurred in the tabling and the drafting of the bill, namely that there was contradictory information provided in the French and English versions of the summary of the bill. More specifically, he explained that the notion of exemption, though central to that section of the summary, was absent in the French version.

[Translation]

In claiming that the bill is, therefore, in imperfect form, the House Leader for the Official Opposition invoked *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, second edition, which states on page 728 that:

In the past, the Speaker has directed that the order for second reading of certain bills be discharged, when it was discovered that they were not in their final form and were therefore not ready to be introduced.

● (1525)

[English]

As well, he noted that Standing Order 68(3) states that, “No bill may be introduced either in blank or in an imperfect shape” and asserted that the correction of errors on websites or through reprints of bills does not remedy such cases.

The hon. government House leader countered that the summary of a bill is not, in fact, considered to be a part of a bill and, thus, even grievous errors in the summary would not constitute grounds to find a bill to be in improper form. He cited precedents to demonstrate that previous Speakers had withdrawn bills only when they were not finalized or even drafted, and he noted that, on May 17, 1956, Speaker Beaudoin determined that a bill has to have blanks to be considered to be in imperfect form.

Government Orders

The hon. government House leader also noted that the wording was correct in both the version now before the House and in the version found on the Internet.

[Translation]

In drawing the attention of the House to the inconsistency found in the summary of the advance copy of the bill, the opposition House leader has reminded us all of the importance of proper drafting. This is recognized in *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, second edition, on page 720, which states:

The enactment of a statute by Parliament is the final step in a long process that starts with the proposal, preparation and drafting of a bill. The drafting of a bill is a vital stage in this process—one which challenges the decision makers and drafters to take carefully into account certain constraints, since a failure to abide by these may have negative consequences in relation to the eventual interpretation and application of the law and to the proper functioning of the legislative process.

[English]

It is therefore comforting to know that members take their responsibility seriously and scrutinize the bills that come before the House.

Having said that, I must inform the House that in the official version of the bill, the one printed and found on our website, the concept of exemption has not been omitted. In other words, the inconsistency the opposition House leader noticed has been caught and corrected in the version of which the House is officially seized. On that basis, it would seem that the issue has been resolved.

But, I also want to take the time to add that the summary of a bill is not, per se, considered part of a bill. This is quite clear in *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, second edition, on page 733:

The summary is a comprehensive and usually brief recapitulation of the substance of a bill. It offers “a clear, factual, non-partisan summary of the purpose of the bill and its main provisions”. The purpose of the summary is to contribute to a better understanding of the contents of the bill, of which it is not a part.

In addition, procedural authorities and precedents have provided us with a clear understanding of what constitutes an incomplete bill. O'Brien and Bosc, on page 728, states:

A bill in blank or in an imperfect shape is a bill which has only a title, or the drafting of which has not been completed.

In the present circumstances, the Chair is satisfied that Bill C-23, an act to amend the Canada Elections Act and other acts and to make consequential amendments to certain acts, is in proper form.

[Translation]

I thank all hon. members for their attention and I trust the references provided will assist members as they proceed to study the bill as it wends its way through the legislative process.

* * *

[English]

REPORT OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS AND NORTHERN DEVELOPMENT

BILL C-15—SPEAKER'S RULING

The Speaker: It has been brought to my attention that a clerical error has been found in the report to the House on Bill C-15, an act to replace the Northwest Territories Act to implement certain

provisions of the Northwest Territories Lands and Resources Devolution Agreement and to repeal or make amendments to the Territorial Lands Act, the Northwest Territories Waters Act, the Mackenzie Valley Resource Management Act, other acts and certain orders and regulations.

[Translation]

A consequential amendment that was adopted by the committee was omitted from the report to the House and the reprint of the bill. The report to the House should have indicated that Bill C-15, clause 2, be amended by replacing line 20 on page 32 with the following:

80. Subsections 4(3) and (4) are repealed 10 years

• (1530)

[English]

Therefore, I am directing that a corrigendum to the report be prepared to reflect this decision of the committee.

In addition, I am ordering the reprint of the bill also be corrected.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[Translation]

FAIR ELECTIONS ACT

The House resumed consideration of the motion that Bill C-23, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act and other Acts and to make consequential amendments to certain Acts, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

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 am pleased to rise today to speak in support of Bill C-23, the fair elections act.

The bill proposes a substantial reform of many basic aspects of our elections act. Moreover, it contains measures aimed at giving investigators more powers, measures to protect voters from rogue calls, measures aimed at protecting politicians from the corrupting influence of big money, measures to combat election fraud and measures to ensure predictable application in line with the rules in the elections act. These are very important measures.

However, today I would like to highlight the aspects of the bill that provide better service to voters. As we are all aware, there has been a significant drop in voter turnout in the last 30 years. This is a serious problem that could threaten our democracy.

In fact, the legitimacy of our democracy depends on the fact that Canadians choose their government through free and fair elections. We must try to stop the drop in voter turnout and encourage people to vote so that we can protect our democracy.

I am pleased to see that the government has answered the call with this bill and that it is proposing measures designed to increase access to voting. Indeed, one measure in the fair elections act adds another day to advance polling: the eighth day before polling day, a Sunday. This will make for a continuous block of advance polling days, from Friday to Monday in the week before the election. The measure will lead to real results.

Studies done by universities and by Elections Canada show that the most common reason that people do not vote is that they do not have an opportunity to go to a polling station. Our modern lifestyle is increasingly hectic and it is often difficult to find the time to vote. During the 2011 election, more than 2 million Canadians exercised their right to vote at advance polling stations. This clearly shows that, if people are given the opportunity to vote, they will do so.

I am also pleased to see that the fair elections act proposes measures designed to eliminate congestion at polling stations. When voters come to polling stations, the very least we can do is to make sure that they can vote quickly and efficiently. I note that the bill follows up on a recommendation in the Chief Electoral Officer's report after the 40th general election. It provides for the appointment of additional election officers in order to reduce congestion at polling stations.

At the risk of repeating myself, everything must be done so that the voting process at polling stations moves quickly. More election officers in busy polling stations will make for a better voting process.

I also understand that election officers at polling stations will be able to spend more time serving voters, since the bill will eliminate the need to swear in candidates' representatives at each polling station they are responsible for in an electoral district.

With fewer oaths to administer, election officers will be able to let voters cast ballots more quickly, without interruptions. Furthermore, the bill will require candidates, parties and riding associations to submit the names of individuals who have the skills required to perform the duties of election officers earlier in the electoral period.

Right now, the names must be submitted no later than the 17th day before polling day, but in future they will need to be submitted a week earlier, no later than the 24th day before polling day.

This reform is important, because those people can be trained earlier and will have more time for their training. A better trained election officer will be able to make sure that the voting process is more efficient and quicker.

• (1535)

I am sure that a more efficient voting process will enable voters to cast ballots despite the pressures of their daily obligations.

Finally, I am happy to see that the fair elections act will require the Chief Electoral Officer to focus his communications on voters in order to provide them with the information they need to be able to vote. The Chief Electoral Officer will be required to provide information on how to vote, including the times, dates and locations for voting.

The Chief Electoral Office will also be required to provide voters with disabilities with information on the measures designed to help

them exercise their right to vote. Everyone with special needs must know about the help that is available to them.

The fair elections act emphasizes the importance of making this information accessible to voters.

To conclude, I would once again like to voice my support for Bill C-23. The fair elections act will ensure that voters are better served when they go to the polling stations.

Given that the first duty of any Canadian citizen is to exercise their right to vote, and for all the reasons mentioned earlier, I urge my colleagues on both sides of the House to support Bill C-23 at second reading.

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault (Sherbrooke, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. member for his speech. He elaborated on various measures included in the bill, but seems to have avoided a few of them.

For that reason, I would like to ask a question about one of the measures, namely the fact that election spending will not include money raised when a third party is hired to fundraise from existing donors who have donated more than \$20 over the previous five years. If the bill is passed as-is, collecting funds from those donors during an election campaign will not be included as part of election campaign spending.

Generally speaking, legislators will try to address an issue by proposing amendments to an existing law. I am wondering what the issue was here and why the Conservatives are proposing these amendments, which would mean that funds raised through existing donors would be excluded from election campaign spending.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Mr. Speaker, this measure will allow every candidate from every party to focus on the election campaign with the funding required to do so.

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is interesting to note that both the Chief Electoral Officer and the commissioner both asked for the authority to compel evidence by going through a judge. This is not a big ask. There are a number of provinces that have that ability, and their independent elections officers do not have to go through a judge.

The question I have for the government is this. Given the importance of this issue, allowing Elections Canada and the commissioner to compel testimony would have gone a long way in resolving many of the outstanding issues we have today in areas such as robocalling and so forth. Why did the government completely ignore that recommendation?

[Translation]

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. member for his question. I invite him to work with the parliamentary committee, with the government, on this issue in order to find a solution.

Government Orders

• (1540)

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask my colleague a supplementary question. Another measure in this bill increases donations that can be made to a registered political party from \$1,200 to \$1,500. Candidates will be able to contribute up to \$5,000 to their own campaign, up from \$2,200. That amount goes as high as \$25,000 for leadership races.

I would like to ask my colleague what motivated this change, this increase in donations that can be made to political parties. In the various jurisdictions, the current trend is to lower those amounts, particularly in Quebec, where my colleague's riding is located. Generally speaking, donations to political parties are being lowered to minimize the chances that candidates and political parties will be influenced.

Why did they increase contribution limits while most other jurisdictions are currently lowering them?

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his very interesting question.

Our bill will eliminate cash loans to candidates for party leadership races and under other circumstances. We are talking huge amounts of money. Increasing the contribution limit for Canadian citizens from \$1,200 to \$1,500 may offset that.

I would like to point out that candidates nominated at the last minute do not always have time to raise enough money to kick off an election campaign.

Once we raise the limit for all candidates, they will be able to work and run an honest election campaign that is fair to other candidates in the same riding.

[English]

Ms. Joyce Murray (Vancouver Quadra, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to make a few comments about Bill C-23, which is before the House, unfortunately, for far too short a time for debate, thanks to the closure motion put forward yet again by the government.

Conservatives are acting as though issues of democracy and the very way we elect our representatives in Canada are not important issues. They are acting as though the kind of detail and complexity of a bill of over 200 pages can be commented on, debated, and discussed in literally a few hours. Unfortunately, that is symbolic of the cynicism that underpins the bill and some of the very concerning elements that are in it.

I would like to start by talking about the importance of democracy to Canadian citizens. I was reminded of that in my constituency of Vancouver Quadra, not just this past weekend, where I had organized several events to engage with voters, but the previous weekend, where I had organized a town hall on the subject of democracy. One might think this is a topic for academics or a handful of people who are interested in theories around our electoral system and political framework in Canada, our democracy. In fact, at the town hall that I hosted 10 days ago, 200 people turned out. We were not able to fit everyone in; we were not able to provide chairs for everyone.

What I heard again and again, and what I have been hearing in Vancouver Quadra, is that this is one of the key concerns that voters

have today about the direction the Conservative government and Conservative Prime Minister are taking Canada. There are many other concerns as well. There are the kinds of breaches of trust with Canadian citizens when environmental regulatory frameworks are virtually eliminated with the stroke of the pen, in a way that is misrepresented to the public. I could list many of the changes that the Conservatives have made, including to the Navigable Waters Protection Act, the Environmental Assessment Act, and others.

That is a concern to people in Vancouver Quadra. There are also issues around immigration policy. There are issues around access to employment insurance. There are issues around government spending on advertising that crosses the line into partisan advertising. This is advertising done to advantage the Conservative Party and Conservative government, but using taxpayer dollars. There is a huge range of issues that concern people in my constituency in Vancouver Quadra. However, underpinning those is the erosion of democracy. That is what I hear about time and time again.

For example, the government cancelled the mandatory long form census, with a supposed explanation that there was an invasion of privacy, while at the same time the government brushed off concerns around the collection of metadata and the tracking of people's movements through their devices that are using Wi-Fi. The government brushed off concerns of that invasion of privacy, an invasion that the Ontario Privacy Commissioner Ann Cavoukian considers to be very dangerous for the future of our democracy and takes Canada down a totalitarian path.

It is these concerns about democracy that I hear again and again.

• (1545)

The other changes being made are also being made in a way that is anti-democratic. The more we shrink our democratic principles in Canada, or the more the Conservative government shrinks access to true, open, and accountable democracy, the more it is able to rush through omnibus budget bills that have major policy changes embedded in them without the ability of members of Parliament to adequately debate them, and without adequate public consultation or respect for the concerns of the public.

Bill C-23 is focused on the issue of democracy and, unfortunately, is a further erosion of our democracy. Bill C-23 is an opportunity for the government to strengthen some of the fundamentals of our democracy through our electoral processes, in a way that would be non-partisan and could be respected and appreciated by Canadians. It could begin to reverse the increasing reputation of the Conservatives for their dictatorial and highly partisan actions on behalf of their voters and to the detriment of our democracy. This is an opportunity to address that distressing tendency of the government, and it has failed to take it.

I want to confirm that there are several minor provisions in the bill that the Liberals do support.

[Translation]

In a unanimous ruling, the Supreme Court of Canada found that the ban on transmitting election results before polls close infringes on freedom of speech. The fair elections act will repeal that ban and ensure respect for freedom of speech.

[English]

Having a limit on early election results is not practical, and eliminating that necessity is a positive.

[Translation]

The bill also provides an extra day of advance polling. This change will give Canadians four days to vote in advance polls.

[English]

Having one more early advance voting day is positive. Again, it is minor.

[Translation]

For almost two years now, the Conservatives have been promising a bill to reform the Canada Elections Act. Instead, they have torpedoed reform by gutting the enforcement provisions.

• (1550)

[English]

That is damning. The Chief Electoral Officer, who was appointed by the Conservative government itself, has called the bill an affront to democracy. That is a very strong statement, by someone who is not given to partisan statements. Canadian citizens need to stand up and take notice. It is an affront to democracy, rushed through by the Conservative government to reinforce its benefit and partisan gain.

What are some of the principles we need to consider here?

First is voter participation, which is important in a democracy, and access for all Canadians to the right to vote. Second is respecting the rules; in other words, no cheating. For that, we need effective compliance and enforcement. Third is non-partisan party input.

This bill has undermined all of the principles I have just mentioned. It is intending to suppress voters by making it more difficult for 4% of Canadians who have the right to vote but may not have the kind of photo ID that would be necessary. It would marginalize remote first nations reserve residents, the poorest Canadians, and seniors who no longer have a driver's licence and might not have a passport. This bill is making these things worse.

On the topic of respecting the rules and no cheating, I have a laundry list, which I will not be able to get to, of all of the cheating that has been done by the Conservative Party and its members. This would be an opportunity to plug the loopholes.

Bill C-23 is going to make compliance and enforcement much more difficult. It makes it much more partisan.

It is a shocking and shameful bill that the government is putting forward. I would call it the “voter suppression with impunity” bill. We need to see changes to this bill at committee.

Ms. Roxanne James (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, CPC): Mr.

Government Orders

Speaker, I listened to the member's speech, and I am a little shocked that the Liberal Party would call this bill “voter suppression”.

If the member is referring to the requirements that voters should be Canadian, should live within the riding they are voting in, and that they should vote only once, then so be it.

I want to talk about the Liberal Party for just a moment, and the statistics of elections in the past. My riding is Scarborough Centre. In 2007, the Conservative government brought in a bill that disallowed people who had only the white voter card from voting. We have heard stories about people just picking the cards up in apartment buildings and voting.

I want to make a point. In Scarborough Centre, in 2006, before that legislation and, after the legislation, in 2008, the actual Liberal vote in Scarborough Centre dropped by over 5,000 votes. In Scarborough—Agincourt, it dropped by 5,000 votes; in Scarborough—Guildwood, it dropped by almost 4,000 votes; in Scarborough Southwest, it dropped by over 4,000; and in Scarborough—Rouge River, which was rampant with allegations of fraud in the last election in 2011, in the 2008 election, after we implemented legislation to stop voter fraud, the Liberal Party vote dropped by over 6,000.

I just want to bring this to the attention of the Liberal Party. When the member talks about allegations of fraud or things like that going on, it is the Liberal Party that is probably the most concerned about this legislation because in fact, proven by historical records, it is their party that is being fraudulently supported.

Ms. Joyce Murray: Mr. Speaker, the member has just pointed out that the Liberal Party vote has dropped. There is actually a direct connection with the kind of anti-democratic, hostile, negative, and untrue attack ads the Conservative Party has been pioneering on Liberal Party leaders between elections.

This is another aspect that shows a lack of principle by the Conservative Party. I would also like to mention that in my riding of Vancouver Quadra, I was aware, a few days before the election, that calls were coming in to those constituents who had been identified by the Conservative callers as Liberal voters.

These constituents were receiving harassing phone calls late at night and on weekends by people identifying themselves as Liberal callers, but when we checked those call numbers, we found that they were from a call centre in the United States that was later found to be tied to the very fraudulent voter suppression calls made through the Conservative Party database.

• (1555)

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Nantel (Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate my colleague from Vancouver Quadra on her speech.

I doubt that there is anyone in a better position than we in the House to get more information on what people think about spending limits for leadership races.

Government Orders

Ms. Joyce Murray: Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for his comments. I also thank him for remembering that I ran for leadership of the Liberal Party of Canada.

That gave me the opportunity to hear from Canadians across the country, and I talked to them. Their concerns about what has happened to our democracy matter to me.

[English]

What is more, we have a Prime Minister who has referred to Elections Canada, a neutral, non-partisan agency charged with making sure our elections are fair, as being, in his own words:

“The jackasses at Elections Canada are out of control”.

This, as he aimed to fundraise, on the back of his dismissive comments about our public servants who were charged with ensuring fair and free elections.

Elections Canada has been attempting to do just that, in a laundry list of election violations, and it is now being punished by the Conservative government in an effort to provide an advantage to themselves and to reduce the percentage of the public who vote by marginalizing those who need help the most.

Mr. Paul Calandra (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and for Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is interesting to hear the Liberals talk about this bill in light of the member before me mentioning that ensuring a fair election is something that the Liberals are afraid of, that because we brought forward a bill that would ensure a fair election, would see leadership candidates being responsible for the debts they incur, and would bring in limits with respect to leadership contests, that is somehow a disadvantage to the Liberal Party.

Imagine that, a bill that would make elections fairer, make it easier for Canadians to vote, and would give them more access to polling stations is somehow something that the Liberal Party is terrified of. The fact that they are in third place in the House of Commons, I guess, must be the fault of Elections Canada and not the fault of their terrible policies and decisions they made when they were in government.

More specific to the bill, there has been a lot of discussion on a number of its aspects. Some of the debate has been good and some not so good. I note that some 16 New Democrats and 16 Liberals have already spoken to this bill. Many have mentioned vouching and voter identification. I will get to that in a second, but I first want to talk about the process of elections and why it was important for us to bring forward change.

We know that members opposite, from both parties, including the government, all knew that some changes had to be made to the Canada Elections Act. That goes without saying. We have, of course, been consulting for a long time. The Minister of State (Democratic Reform) and the Minister of State (Multiculturalism) have been working very hard on this, and we have brought forward a very comprehensive bill.

One thing we had to do was look at the people who have been charged with undertaking elections. I listened to the Chief Electoral Officer yesterday on TV and he said something I believe to be true. He said that Canada is a very large, very diverse country, and that

voting in a country of this size has a lot of challenges. I would say one of the most important functions we have for preserving our democracy is making sure that elections are done fairly and that Canadians can have confidence in the fact that the people who have voted are the right people and that those votes reflect the population.

After the 41st general election, Elections Canada sought some advice from the people who actually work for it, in a series of post-mortem sessions with returning officers. This is a result of Elections Canada talking to all returning officers in all of the 308 ridings across this country. On page 10 of the report, it states:

ROs identified that there is a need to give out more information to electors; for example, there are not enough outreach activities and communications about where the RO office is located and on the voting process.

They suggest taking out ads explaining that advance polls would be busier. They suggest that ads should be taken out to tell people how to vote, what identification is required, the special balloting process. They are saying that the process of holding an election is something that these returning officers—and, again, I refer everybody to page 10 of the report—thought was something Elections Canada could have done a better job of in helping to organize an election across such a vast land.

I will also go to page 17 of that same report, which talks a bit about the problem that some of the returning officers had at advance polls. It states that:

A high voter turnout was a reality for most ROs, significant enough that there were many complaints about wait times. To improve the flow when it is busy, ROs suggest putting a single signature line on the list of electors....

It appears that having electors write too much information was causing a dilemma.

Those two items, I think, speak to the fact that the people who were placed on the ground to make sure our elections are done fairly were experiencing problems of congestion, of people not knowing where to vote, when to vote, and what identification was needed in order to vote. The returning officers suggested that should be the role that Elections Canada should focus on, going forward, if it wants to make the process of elections better.

● (1600)

I note that in the bill brought forward by the Minister of State for Democratic Reform, we took that advice from the returning officers and put it right into the legislation, re-focusing the mandate of Elections Canada so that it can focus on what its own employees said is a priority: getting people to vote and making sure elections run smoothly.

When we talk about why the vote is not where we would like it to be and why there has been a decline in voter participation, clearly, one reason has to be that Canadians do not always find it easy to vote. That has to be one of the problems. We are seeing that when we add advance polls, more Canadians use them. The bill would add another day of voting, making it easier for Canadians to vote, so having a fourth day of advance polling, we think, will help to get more Canadians out to the polls.

Government Orders

Ultimately, I find it passing ridiculous that the opposition parties are suggesting the reason Canadians are not voting is that Elections Canada is not placing an ad in the paper, explaining to them or trying to energize them to vote, because that is our job. It is the job of parties and candidates to get people to vote, to energize them to vote.

I cannot imagine anybody would miss the fact that there is an election going on. There are signs everywhere, and the media, every night, follows around all three campaigns on TV. There is advertising, phone calls are made, and literature is delivered at doors. People are knocking on doors.

Elections Canada does some work with respect to telling people how to vote and where to vote. The voter cards explain to people where their poll is. I cannot imagine people not understanding that an election is taking place, but I think what they get upset about is that when they go to vote, it is a difficult process. They have to wait in line. The bill would put more resources in hand to make sure it is done fairly.

With respect to vouching, I would refer all members of the House to page 25 of the bill. Of course there are 39 pieces of identification that are acceptable with respect to proving an address, but the bill also goes further to say, on page 25, in both French and English:

(3.1) If the address contained in the piece or pieces of identification provided under subsection (2) does not prove the elector's residence but is consistent with information related to the elector that appears on the list of electors, the elector's residence is deemed to have been proven.

That gives everybody the opportunity to make sure they cast a ballot.

However, is there a burden of proof? Absolutely. I cannot imagine that Canadians would accept that we should just completely drop the demands for identification and say that anybody can vote. That would be inappropriate. At the same time, we are expecting that Canadians have identification, but in instances there is still, according to the bill on page 25, in French and English, an opportunity for Canadians to cast a ballot.

It goes even further. We heard a lot about robocalls, and not just during elections. The riding of the member for Guelph was singled out and charged with respect to robocalls, and I think all Canadians have accepted that all parties have to do a better job of making sure that we do this fairly.

That is why the CRTC would be maintaining a registry. They would maintain scripts and recordings so that Canadians and the Elections Commissioner would have access to information if an investigation is required.

In summary, we would be letting Elections Canada do what it needs to do to be the actual guardians of elections in this country: to focus on voting, to focus on the process, and at the same time, we would be giving the Elections Commissioner the power he needs to make sure that voting is done fairly and that nobody breaks the rules. When people do break the rules, the new act would give the Commissioner the tools he needs to enforce the Elections Act in a way that we have not seen in a long time.

I do hope all members will take a moment to read the bill and reflect on that before they cast their ballot.

●(1605)

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault (Sherbrooke, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to ask my colleague a question on a very specific point he made in his speech.

I am referring to the elimination of Election Canada's mandate to educate Canadians by raising awareness about their duty and right to vote. Anyone who follows question period even a little bit knows that the Parliamentary Secretary has two daughters who are still minors.

I wonder whether he thinks it is right that Elections Canada can no longer go to the schools to teach young people that they have a right to vote and that they can exercise that right when they are 18.

Does he think that there is no benefit to running these awareness campaigns between elections and not necessarily during the election period? Elections Canada had an educational component to its mandate that helped make people aware of their right to vote.

[English]

Mr. Paul Calandra: Mr. Speaker, I think our schools also have the opportunity and the responsibility to teach our students why it is important to vote. That is why on Remembrance Day every year we take the time out to honour the veterans who guaranteed and fought to make sure we have the right to vote.

Getting back to reality, when asked about the process of election—and here I would request the member to take a look at this—the returning officers themselves on pages 10 and 17 identified the fact that the process of voting is what Elections Canada needed to look at moving forward. How to vote, where to vote, the identification needed, when the advance polls would be, the special ballots, and the location of the returning officer were things they felt would help improve elections and make the process of voting easier.

We reflected upon that and what the Chief Electoral Officer said, including as recently as yesterday, about the difficulty of holding elections in this country. We have put that in the bill and have guaranteed it moving forward. I think Canadians can have confidence that all elections moving forward will continue to be fair.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I believe it is very important that we recognize that the proposed legislation before us has in fact fallen short and that the government has dropped the ball on this.

The government can talk all it wants inside the chamber on what it believes about this particular bill. However, I would challenge the Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister. Would the member take me up on an offer to go outside Ottawa, whether Winnipeg or Toronto or anywhere else he chooses, to debate this proposed legislation with no time allocation as the government has done with the current bill, where we can talk about the good, the bad, and the shortcomings of the legislation? I would welcome the opportunity.

Would the parliamentary secretary be prepared to debate this legislation outside Ottawa with someone like me and justify his government's position on it?

Government Orders

• (1610)

Mr. Paul Calandra: Mr. Speaker, with all due respect to the member of Parliament from Manitoba, I tend to focus on my riding and my community, speaking to my constituents and hearing what they have to say.

The process, of course, will continue not only through debate here but also at the procedure and House affairs committee where it will be given another thorough vetting. The committee will hear witnesses and the bill will come back to the House for more debate.

I note that only six members of the Liberal Party have taken the opportunity to speak on the bill, and for the most part they have talked about why they lost an election over the last number of years as opposed to actually focusing on what is in the bill.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, does the parliamentary secretary agree with the provision in proposed legislation mandating that an additional early voting day fall on a Sunday? If it were the last election, that would have been Easter Sunday. Does that bother him at all?

Mr. Paul Calandra: Mr. Speaker, under the new proposed legislation there would be four opportunities for voting in advance polls. One extra day, I think, would help make sure that more Canadians have the opportunity to vote.

On Easter Sunday, I will be in church with my family, as will a lot of other people. I suppose there will be a lot of Canadians who are not in church on Easter Sunday. We are a very diverse country. That is why we are adding an extra day so that all Canadians have access to four additional days to vote, not including of course other opportunities for Canadians to vote by special ballot.

I think that is good news for Canadians and good news for democracy, and I hope the hon. member will take a look at that and support it.

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I feel privileged to stand today to speak to Bill C-23. I am going to go back in history a little and talk about my background.

I had parents who were good enough to speak at the dining room table about things like elections, so my six brothers and sisters and I learned about elections that way. We learned from them the importance and duty of Canadians to go vote when it was time to vote. Sometimes we talked about the issues, even before we were old enough to know some of them. I had that ability in my past life. Then I became a small business person who had a very busy life. Twenty-four hours a day 7 days a week I worried about a business I had to run. However, I am proud to say I do not remember ever missing an election: municipal, provincial, or federal, because my parents had instilled in me the duty of Canadians to vote.

Long before politics I never thought about the actual running of elections. I never thought about the rules that are there to make sure Canadians vote fairly and accurately. I did not think of them, but I certainly went to polling booths, gave them my name, showed my ID, received a ballot, and made my choice based on the work that the parties or the candidates had done during an election.

Fast forward now through a whole pile of life to 10 years ago when I decided I would become a candidate. I became a little more

interested in what was happening with elections: how elections were run, what Elections Canada did, who made sure people got to the polling stations, who generated the lists, and who made the rules as to what days we could or could not vote. I still ran into some of my peers, small business owners and other very busy people, who would have loved to have more time, who wanted to exercise their duty as Canadians to vote, but sometimes the hockey practice or a scout meeting got in the way. We know how that is: life gets busy and that happens.

Move forward now into this Parliament. I have been here almost 10 years. Now, as the chair of the procedure and House affairs committee for a good number of years, five I think, I have been dealing with Elections Canada during that time. I now know more about elections and Elections Canada than I care to know. After each election, the Chief Electoral Officer writes a report and sends it back to Parliament. The procedure and House affairs committee gets to review it and from that comes up with elections legislation. The Chief Electoral Officer is one of the people from whom we get most of our ideas for changes to the legislation. We certainly have had many discussions at committee.

It is a fun committee. I see some of the members here in the House today. We tend to get a lot done, but elections are one of the things we are responsible for. We tend to work on a good, consensus basis without a great deal of argument. We have had many witnesses over those times looking at the Chief Electoral Officer's report and other pieces in our discussions about elections. We have had many briefs come to us from those witnesses. This is where this piece of legislation has come from. It has come from answering those questions.

I am going to say something from a business point of view. First, if I am trying to attract more customers, as a business person I need to first find out why customers are not coming to my business and where else they are going. We have done the same thing with elections. If people are not going out to vote, let us find out why and then we will know where to go to find those people.

As the speaker before me said, why a person votes, why they are making that urgent visit to the voting booth, has to do with the parties. It has to do with the candidates. However, the who, what, when, and where the polling station is, what time it is open, and how many of them there are is set by Elections Canada. Most non-voters told Elections Canada in a survey that practical reasons were what prevented them from voting in 2011. Travelling was cited by 17%, as they were away from home. Work or school scheduling accounted for 13%. Also, being too busy was cited by 10%, and lack of information was mentioned by 7%. That is just to name a few.

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● (1615)

Over the past several elections there has been a steady rise in the proportion of electors identifying everyday life issues as the main reason for not voting, and a steady decline for political reasons. That is according to Elections Canada, the “Report on the Evaluations of the 41st General Election of May 2, 2011” by the Chief Electoral Officer, which we have discussed thoroughly at committee.

Better customer service will remove some of these practical issues, some of the reasons like, “I can't make it because it's the middle of hockey practice, it's the middle of my business meeting and I had to stay at work”.

We are offering more voting days. During the 2011 general election, more than two million Canadians cast their ballot on an advance poll day. Two million Canadians took into account the fact they were not going to be able to be there for voting day and went to an advance poll. We are adding an extra advance poll on the seventh day. So the tenth, the ninth, the eighth, and the seventh days before election day will now all be advance poll days, the seventh being a Sunday.

My pastor knows where I should be on Sundays but he also knew that I operated a business seven days a week and that sometimes I was not always able to be there, which also opens up the opportunity that afternoon of my going to an advance poll. That in itself offers something to the percentage of people that I said, from a customer service point of view, were not able to find a day to vote.

Let us go from attracting those customers to the poll to the point of view of my being a business person trying to attract more people to our business. In that case, the other step I would take is to tell them where I was. I would tell them what time my business was open. I would tell them when I was available to give them the service they were looking for. That is all we are asking of the Chief Electoral Officer and Elections Canada, to please tell people where and when they can vote. Please tell Canadians how many days are available to vote and that, by special ballot, it is almost the whole 35 days of an election. There will now be five advance polls days plus a full day of election day voting at each of the other polls.

This is a tough business to run with 308 ridings across this country, soon to be 338, and about 200 polling stations in each of those ridings. Imagine turning that on and off from an Elections Canada point of view. I admire its ability to turn that type of service on and off and the way it is done, but let us use our time to tell the people of Canada when and where they can vote. Let us as politicians, as members of parties or not, give the reasons why people want to go to the polls. It is up to Elections Canada to tell them when and where. It is up to us to get them there and tell them why.

I will recap quickly. It is about customer service. There are many other parts of the bill that I know, when it gets to committee, the committee will be happy to deal with and talk about. We will have a great discussion. We will certainly see lots of lots of witnesses. In summary, I just wanted to talk about the customer service side of an election and the customer service side of Elections Canada.

● (1620)

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Aubin (Trois-Rivières, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I listened carefully to my colleague's speech. I admit that I find the comparison a bit clumsy. Obviously all the comparisons are a bit clumsy, but here the hon. member was talking about customer service as it relates to a civic right, that of voting to determine who will lead the country. I think that one important thing that has not been mentioned is the fact that a large part of the population does not vote because they have become quite cynical about politicians and politics. That is what we should be focusing on.

However, Bill C-23 before us today is something that will help fuel this cynicism. Once they see such measures as increasing the annual contribution ceiling, those who feel that elections are bought will wonder whether there is any point in voting, given that the elections are bought by those with the means to do so, in any case. What we must do—and Bill C-23 does not do—is show each and every Canadian how very important their right to vote is. By eliminating the prerogatives of the Chief Electoral Officer, this bill would reduce the opportunities for education.

How is the right to vote a customer service? It is civic right. I would like the hon. member to explain that one to me. It seems that the comparison does not hold water.

[English]

Mr. Joe Preston: Mr. Speaker, I will share with the member opposite that we will agree to disagree, if that is the case.

The civic right is a civic duty. It is the duty of voters to know where they need to vote and when they need to vote. It is the duty of the political parties to convince people who they should vote for and that it is time to do it.

The cynicism comes when the rules are weakened or are used in a way that is arguably incorrect. We set the rules in place so that people know what to expect when they go to vote, what they need to have with them when they approach the voting station, and what to expect when they get to the voting station. That is how we remove the cynicism.

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, this member would be in a unique position to answer this question, given his experience in business and politics.

One of the offences covered under the Competition Act is deceptive telemarketing. One of the powers afforded to the director of competition under the Competition Act is the power to compel witnesses to testify, under oath, before a charge is laid. A complaint of the Chief Electoral Officer is that he was ill-equipped to do the robocalls investigation, which was deceptive telemarketing in a political context, if you will, because he did not have that power.

As someone who has had experience in business and in politics, would the hon. member explain why the director of competition has greater tools to investigate deceptive telemarketing practices than Elections Canada does?

● (1625)

Mr. Joe Preston: Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for his question and the kind words that I think he said about me.

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The real answer is that this piece of legislation moves the covering of robocalls, of using telephone devices in an election campaign, to the people who do that best. As a business person and a politician, I look to the experts in the field. In this case, we have gone to the experts in the field who have said that the CRTC is the right place to be monitoring people who are using telephone communications.

We have it right. We have the experts on the job. They have already found them. They were able to by monitoring the use of telephone communications in both election and non-election times. I believe a member of this House, from Guelph, was even found guilty by them for what he did during the last campaign.

[Translation]

The Deputy Speaker: Order. It is my duty pursuant to Standing Order 38 to inform the House that the question to be raised tonight at the time of adjournment is as follows: the hon. member for Québec, Search and Rescue.

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault (Sherbrooke, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise in the House today to speak to Bill C-23, which was introduced last Tuesday. The bill is 242 pages long and was introduced less than a week ago. Today is the last day for debate at second reading of this bill.

As I said, the bill was introduced seven days ago, including the weekend. Of course, there is no debate in the House on the weekend. This 242-page bill was introduced less than seven days ago. The second reading vote is already happening this evening, as though we the members have had enough time to carefully analyze the bill and debate it here in the House. The bill will very soon be sent to committee. Members first saw this 242-page bill about a week and a half ago. The whole process has been very quick.

This is not the first time this has happened. In fact, since the Conservatives won a majority, this is unfortunately what has happened with every bill they introduce in the House.

It is interesting to know the background of the minister who introduced Bill C-23. The minister of state was one of the biggest defenders of the recent in and out scandal. He was the most partisan member and staunchly defended electoral fraud, as revealed by the Elections Canada investigation. Today, the same member is introducing electoral reform. It is a little clearer why he is so familiar with the elections act. He was the one who defended his party when it circumvented this very act. We understand why he knows it so well. His party acted very much against this act.

The minister of state also has a long history of attacks against Elections Canada. The Conservative Party is still conducting a vendetta against Elections Canada. It seems that Elections Canada is the Conservatives' arch-enemy. When anyone says the words "Elections Canada", the Conservatives blanch and wonder what will happen. Will Elections Canada attack in the night to prevent the Conservatives from forming the government next time? Elections Canada is a completely independent entity. As soon as someone dares utter a criticism, however mild, the Conservatives see them as an enemy of the nation. As soon as anyone criticizes the Conservative government, even for a single second, that person becomes an arch-enemy. It is clear to the Conservatives that that person belongs to another political party and is engaging in

hyperpartisanship. However, we know very well that Elections Canada is an independent entity. We do not have to prove that today.

The bill contains many measures, but I will not have time to talk about each one. I will talk about those that most surprised me when I read the bill. Some of my colleagues mentioned that there will be no more vouching at polling stations. A voter can get on the list of electors the day of the election. In fact, a voter can go to a polling station with a witness or voucher who can prove that the voter does live in that riding.

Furthermore, if the bill passes—which is not yet the case—the voter card will be refused. Voters receive this card in their mailbox and can use it when they go to vote. Voters also have to show a document as proof of identity. The Conservatives tend to forget that a voter cannot vote with just the red and white card.

● (1630)

A voter may have this card and present it to the person at the table at the entrance. When he or she goes to the polling station, the voter must also show a piece of identification that has the same name as that found on the voter card. That is how we prove our identity. It is not just the card that allows a person to vote, as some Conservatives seem to have been saying during today's debate.

In my view, this will prevent or certainly deter many people from exercising their right to vote. It will make it more difficult for voters, especially young people, to exercise their right to vote.

Students in Sherbrooke are a perfect example. It depends on when the election takes place. Let us take the example of a September election. Students are just arriving on campus and, for many of them, it is their first semester at university. Naturally, their primary residence is their parents' home, in a city other than Sherbrooke.

They have just arrived to start their studies, they may not have proof of residency and the election is being held in September. It is possible to use a hydro or telephone bill, or tenant or automobile insurance, or something else. It is possible to show proof of residency to Elections Canada, which designates 39 pieces of identification that can be shown in order to vote.

If the government eliminates the possibility of having someone vouch for you and using the voter card, many young people who want to vote will be unable to do so, including young people in Sherbrooke. They will not be at home, at their primary residence, at their parents' house. They will be in Sherbrooke, on campus, and will have no way of voting unless they return home.

If a communications student at the Université de Sherbrooke, whose primary residence is in Chicoutimi, wants to vote, the only option he would have would be to go home, a seven-hour drive from the university. This kind of situation may be rare, because I know that there is a good communications program in the Saguenay region. I think we can all imagine that this student will not end up voting on election day, since he will not make a 14-hour return trip to go vote, especially if he was not able to travel for advance polling either.

Many young people will not be able to exercise their right to vote, even though I am sure that everyone here in this House wants young people to be able to vote. The same goes for other members of society who are at a disadvantage with this bill, such as the homeless. How will they be able to vote? We have heard a lot about aboriginal people. People who live on reserves do not always have the necessary pieces of identification. This will prevent them from exercising their right to vote.

In asking questions of my colleagues earlier, I also commented about the fact that the government wants to keep big money out of politics. However, I feel that the opposite is going to happen with this bill. The bill is going against the current trends we are seeing everywhere in various jurisdictions, including Quebec, where the limit for political party donations is being reduced. The opposite is happening in the bill we are debating today.

The government wants to increase the limit for donations to political parties, which goes against the current tendency to try and eliminate the influence of money in politics as much as possible. Saying that the bill will keep big money out of politics is completely at odds with the measures included in the bill, measures that increase parties' election expenses and the donations that parties can receive. I do not understand why the government says "big money out of politics", when the measures in the bill run counter to that statement.

I will oppose this bill at second reading, like most of my colleagues, I hope. At the very least, if the bill makes it to committee, I hope we will be able to improve it. However, at this stage, I will vote against it.

• (1635)

[English]

Hon. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have a couple of points on my colleague's assessment of the students' ability to vote. He said that if they had just arrived, they would not have a student ID and that they would be stuck at the university. I would suggest that their photo ID cards from home would be just as useless, because that is not where they would be living at the time.

The member talked about the students having to drive home for several hours and so on. I would remind him, in case he does not know, that people do not have to wait until election day or the advance poll days. As soon as Elections Canada is set up in a riding, a person can go and vote any day during the entire writ process. Most students would probably go home at some point during that time. They know when the election is, so there really is no excuse for not finding time to do that.

Apart from that, the member talked about vouching a lot. I have been the victim of fraudulent vouching, but that is okay.

I have a couple of questions for the member. Does he consider big money to be a 5% increase in campaign expenses, which are obviously going up all the time? Does he consider big money to be a \$300 increase in a personal donation, which still eliminates unions and so on? As well, how many people does he think one person should be able to vouch for during an election?

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: Mr. Speaker, there were a lot of questions there. I think I counted five.

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Indeed, students will still have the opportunity to vote, but these measures will complicate the voting process and make it more difficult. I am not saying that it will be impossible for students in Sherbrooke to vote. However, the measures will be more complicated than they were in 2011. That was simply an observation on my part.

We hear the term "big money" being thrown around in the debate on this bill. I am not saying that the amounts of money are considered big money, but the current trend is to reduce or eliminate these contributions as much as possible.

For example, Quebec reduced the limit for political contributions to \$100, if I am not mistaken. That is how you eliminate big money: by reducing contribution limits, not by increasing them.

It is inconsistent to say something and then do something else that has the complete opposite effect.

[English]

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the comments from my colleague. Certainly many of us have some very significant concerns about a piece of legislation that is really coming forward to solve some of the current problems that the government has. They are not necessarily problems that the rest of us have.

When we deal with the issue of multicultural communities, which we all have, one of my concerns is the ability to make sure that they are communicated to fairly and accurately. Restricting Elections Canada as to the extent of what it can do is really going to hamper those opportunities.

Whose role is it to make sure that communications are given to the voters in a fair, accurate, honest way? Is it not Elections Canada's right to do that?

• (1640)

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for her question about Elections Canada's educational mandate, something that I did not have the chance to discuss in my speech.

Between elections, Elections Canada had the right to educate the Canadian public on their right to vote. It will no longer be allowed to engage in any kind of public education, in particular for students.

In 2011, about 500,000 high school students under the age of 18 were able to participate in a simulated election. The vote was simulated, with the same candidates who were running in their own ridings, to show what the right to vote involves.

As a result of this new measure, Elections Canada will no longer be able to run this campaign in schools. Why? I have no idea. The government will have to speak to that.

Furthermore, Canada's democracy week will also be eliminated. We will no longer be able to educate Canadians on the right to vote. In conclusion, I invite all members to ponder this issue. I do not have the answer.

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Should the government in power, regardless of the party, be amending the Canada Elections Act, something that could end up benefiting that party?

[English]

Ms. Eve Adams (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Health, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is my great honour to speak to Bill C-23, the fair elections act.

It is remarkable that I should find myself here in this hallowed chamber speaking to this very bill. As many people know, my parents hail from eastern Europe and greatly suffered under Communist regimes. It is difficult to imagine, but within one generation they lived an onerous lifestyle, one in which they could not simply go to the local coffee shop and have an open discussion about local politics. It was forbidden to disagree with the local administration. People worried that their careers would be hampered. It was an era when jealous colleagues or even people's in-laws could report them for fictitious reasons to the secret police. It was a terrible way to live.

They were fortunate enough to come to Canada. Deeply entrenched in my brothers and me is an immense love for the democracy that we enjoy in this nation, as well as a true passion for politics, for elections, and for the concept that we can disagree openly and say, "I don't agree with this policy. This policy actually hurts me and my family. It hurts my colleagues at work." We can go about in Canada and speak openly about that. We can try to effect change and try and bring about better public policy. They revelled in something as simple as that, and they entrenched a deep love for it because it simply was not available to them. It was not available to millions of people across Europe under Soviet-era tyranny.

Here we are today in very different circumstances. I am an ESL student. As somebody who did not speak English until I first entered school, I now find myself in this chamber debating a piece of legislation. How remarkable is that? How remarkable is it that we are allowed to freely debate this type of legislation?

I want to commend my colleague, the Minister of State for Democratic Reform, who has brought forward a wonderful bill that I believe improves our electoral system. It will bring additional transparency and fairness to the system. He has gone through recent complaints, a number of reports, and the Chief Electoral Officer's recommendations to try to bring about a comprehensive series of recommendations that will address the deficiencies he has found over recent years. I really do need to commend him. It is a sweeping set of improvements to our current electoral system.

I have been involved in politics with many people in this chamber on all sides of the House. A lot of us share a great passion for politics. I started when I was 14, stuffing envelopes and colouring maps. I have been involved in municipal, provincial, and federal campaigns. I have had the great pleasure of working with a number of people on this side of the House and against folks on the other side of the House in these campaigns over the years, and I can say that we are passionate.

Many individuals are rather competitive, but at the end of the day there is no honour and certainly no sport in running in an unfair election. People want to ensure that the election they run in has a fair outcome. It is okay to concede defeat, but we want to make sure that

any defeat occurs because of the failure of the candidate or the party, not because some type of voter fraud took place. That is critical to ensuring the transparency of elections for our voters, those Canadians who take the time to leave their homes, go to a polling station, and stand in line in order to vote and to bring forward the change they are hoping for at the national, provincial, or municipal level.

The bill before us makes a number of changes. Allow me to speak to what I think is one of the best improvements the minister has brought forward, which is enhancing customer service by removing some of the obstacles to voting.

The fact that an additional advance polling day will be added is of immense service.

I come from the GTA, an area where people commute to and from work. They spend their day at work. It takes them the better part of an hour, or even more than an hour, to get home. They prepare a meal for their family. They might throw in a load of laundry. That is pretty much the day. It is now 8 p.m. or 9 p.m. They get up the next morning and do that all over again, just because commuting times are so dramatically long.

Therefore, when we ask individuals to come and vote, it is truly imposing on them. I have been there. I have worked here. I have obviously been a candidate. We see these long line-ups at polling stations. I think everything we can do to minimize the impact and the inconvenience for voters will encourage voting. Nobody wants to be hassled. Nobody enjoys waiting in line. The more we can do to shorten these lines, the better.

● (1645)

This piece of legislation would also allow for more individuals to be hired and for their hiring to take place earlier on so that they are better trained. Many people who show up on polling day have found there is a certain level of confusion. That is certainly not reassuring to voters or to anyone who is a part of the process. We hope for a more professional solution to these things, so I think that is a much-needed improvement to our system.

However, our electoral process must be accessible to all eligible Canadian voters. It needs to be accountable and transparent, yet voter fraud continues to be a problem in our system. Each time someone votes fraudulently, they cancel out the ballot of an honest voter.

Elections Canada has commissioned studies on this subject. Its own study suggests that there are massive irregularities in the use of vouching and high rates of inaccuracy on voter information cards. I know a number of my colleagues have actually spoken to this issue. Certainly members from the Mississauga community have. I can tell members what has happened with those voter information cards and what I have witnessed first-hand happen in my community.

There are a number of high-rises. People move with high frequency in the GTA, and in some areas we have 30% turnover in our communities from one election to the next. People will receive a voter identification card in the mail. Of course, that individual has now moved, so this mail is just dropped in at a high-rise, out on the counter or into the recycling bin, and piles of it accumulate. Individuals will just scoop up all of these voter ID cards and utilize them for purposes that all members in this chamber can certainly guess.

I have also had individuals come forward to me during a campaign, saying, “Hey, I have these additional cards. These people no longer live in my home. Can we send other people to vote?”

While I smirk at the enthusiasm, I am very quick to point out that it would absolutely be inappropriate, unacceptable, and, frankly, against the law, and that it is simply not tolerable.

I think the fact that these voter ID cards would now be eliminated would be a dramatic improvement, and much needed for our system.

Of course, there has been much discussion over the forms of ID that would be acceptable. It is a rather comprehensive list. Over 39 pieces of ID would be acceptable at a voting station, including a library card, which is something that most folks have access to.

The list includes a series of things. It includes utility bills. It includes any correspondence from a school to an individual, so students obviously would be able to come out and vote. It includes student ID cards.

I think the real emphasis here is ensuring that we reach out, engage voters to get them to come to elections, and ensure that they understand how vitally important it is that they actually do cast a ballot. However, at the same time, we do not want to permit individuals to make a mockery of our system, to go about in some nefarious way and cast ballots that are not theirs.

Speaking for myself and, I hope, for all members, what we really ought to do is engage voters. I hope people are passionate when we show up at their door and talk to them about issues of concern.

I am one of these people who love door-knocking. I love to go, whether it is snowing outside, whether it is hot and humid outside, and actually engage with our constituents and hear their priorities. I want to know what they would like me to fight for when I come to Ottawa. It is not about relaying information from Ottawa to the voter; it is about standing up for the values and the priorities of our constituents, the ones who were kind enough to send us here so that we could articulate for them. That really is a priority.

I think it is incumbent upon us all as politicians to engage voters, to encourage them, and to have public policy exciting enough that they are looking forward to coming out to vote for us, actually

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looking forward to showing up, standing in line, and voting for our political party.

I do not want us ceding that to Elections Canada. I think each and every party has to encourage and excite that type of debate. We need to come forward with different initiatives that actually help the average middle-class Canadian family to want to come out and vote so that hopefully this Parliament reflects their values and priorities.

• (1650)

[Translation]

Ms. Laurin Liu (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, NDP): Mr. Speaker, unfortunately, the NDP cannot support this bill, and one of the reasons is that it will prevent thousands of Canadians from exercising their right to vote. Furthermore, it diminishes the Chief Electoral Officer's powers. I read the bill very carefully and I would like to point out a problem I found: the Chief Electoral Officer will have to seek Treasury Board approval before hiring technical experts. As we know, the Chief Electoral Officer occasionally hires external companies to conduct investigations or to write reports. Having to ask for Treasury Board approval means that the government will be interfering in the work of an officer of Parliament, and I see that as problematic.

I would like to ask my hon. colleague why she did not support the NDP motion to give the Commissioner of Canada Elections the power to compel testimony and the ability to order the release of financial documents. That motion would have increased the commissioner's powers, which would have boosted Canadians' confidence in the electoral system. Why did she not support the NDP motion?

[English]

Ms. Eve Adams: Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for that wonderful question.

The bill before us is rather comprehensive. My hon. colleague indicated that it disenfranchises a number of voters. I have looked through this bill rather thoroughly, and it certainly does not do that.

In fact, it seeks to ensure that people can come out and vote. As I indicated, it adds an additional day of advance voting. That will allow far more people to come out and exercise their franchise.

When Elections Canada sought to explain why people are not coming out to vote, it reported the reasons were normal everyday circumstances, such as people being late at work, attending a child's recital, or it not being convenient. With an additional day, more people can come out and vote and affect the electoral outcome.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Chief Electoral Officer and the commissioner had both asked for the authority to ask a judge to compel evidence.

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This is an absolutely critical request of the government, to incorporate it into legislation. The government, for whatever reasons, ultimately denied that particular request. It would have provided substantial teeth for Elections Canada to deal with issues that the government has been challenged on. All one needs to look at is the in-and-out scandal the government was involved in, the robocalls, or Conservative overspending in campaigns.

Why did the government not allow for this particular recommendation, which would have allowed Elections Canada to thoroughly investigate and ensure consequences when election laws are broken?

• (1655)

Ms. Eve Adams: Mr. Speaker, my understanding is that even a police officer is unable to compel evidence. However, once a charge is laid, obviously, the information is to be provided.

The proposed legislation goes further. It says that one cannot thwart an investigation and one cannot provide misinformation. I think the issue is being addressed through this legislation.

However, that was an excellent question. We absolutely want to ensure that everybody does comply with this type of investigation.

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskasing, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the comments. I will indicate that there are some good parts to this bill.

However, there are also some bad parts. The worst part is the fact that it would discourage people from voting. That is exactly what this would do.

If the government were serious about voting, it would ensure that the voucher system were still there. Over the years, the problem with the lineups has not been because people are vouching. It is because people are not on the list, and they are being told to go and vote somewhere else. Some are on a list in an area where they have not lived for many years.

Does the member not think that having the Elections Canada list updated would make more sense? Taking people who are deceased off the list would make even more sense.

Ms. Eve Adams: Mr. Speaker, that is a very important question about vouching. I am from the GTA, and we have certainly seen some interesting shenanigans when it comes to vouching. Many people on this side of the House have been scrutineers, and we have been candidates in those elections. It is rather reasonable to have to come and cast one's ballot and bring some form of ID. As I indicated, there are 39 pieces of ID that would be acceptable.

I certainly have the experience of my family, and it is an honour to be able to cast a ballot. The least we can do to ensure that there is transparency and fairness to the process and that everyone is only voting once is to bring a piece of ID that says we are who we are. It is a pretty simple thing to do. I hope we are not discouraging anyone in any way. There are four opportunities now to come out and vote.

However, the hon. member raises a really good point in saying that there are some great aspects to this bill. I was very much heartened to see that the former chief electoral officer would give this bill an A minus if a master's student had written it. That is high praise indeed.

[Translation]

Ms. Charmaine Borg (Terrebonne—Blainville, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am lucky to have this opportunity to speak to the bill, considering the latest gag order that has been imposed. In fact, there have been so many that I have lost count. Therefore, I am privileged to be able to speak to this bill, since most of my colleagues will unfortunately not have the same opportunity.

I also find it ironic that we are debating a bill that is supposed to improve democracy. Does it really achieve that? I will talk about that in a moment. Imposing a gag order after such a short time for debate makes a mockery of democracy.

I find it even more ironic that we are debating a Conservative bill, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act and other Acts and to make consequential amendments to certain Acts, also known as the fair elections act, when that party has been accused of voter suppression. What is more, charges have been laid against that party in relation to its fundraising campaigns. In fact, the former parliamentary secretary to the Prime Minister, who is supposed to defend ethical issues, was the one charged.

It is indeed very ironic that those who likely do not have the highest marks in ethics are now presenting us with a bill that they think is wonderful and designed to reform democracy and encourage people to vote—while they stand accused of doing exactly the opposite.

I am going to talk about the content of this bill. Many times during question period, my colleagues pointed out the effect that this bill will have on young people's ability to get involved in the electoral system. I claim to have some experience in that area.

When I was at university, for example, I would always ask my friends whether they were going to vote. I saw that most of them were not. I have to emphasize that I was studying political science, an area where students usually engage in the electoral system. But when I talked to them about upcoming elections, they would tell me that it was too complicated. This bill is now going to complicate things even more.

Young people have also told me that they do not know about the voting process. Actually, a significant number of people have never had an opportunity to learn about it. Some school boards in some provinces have civics programs, and that is good. However, those programs are not everywhere. Students who may have done very well in school do not necessarily remember what they learned in their early years as students. It is therefore important to repeat that education.

With this bill, the Conservatives are prohibiting the Chief Electoral Officer from providing that education to students through specific programs. When I was 15, I remember that my high school held mock elections, as part of the chief electoral officer's educational programs.

In those days, all the students became involved. They looked at the different parties and each party's campaign promises, and they went to vote. That first experience made them realize that they would be able to do so in the future. Those were mock elections, of course. The students were not old enough to vote, but they learned about the process of doing so. I have to say that, at my school, the NDP won.

From time to time, I teach politics 101 in my riding, particularly to women, in order to involve people in the electoral process. It is shocking to see how little young people know about who they are voting for. They wonder if they are voting at the municipal, provincial or federal level. They also wonder what each of those levels of government is responsible for. It is quite confusing. At their age, it is a bit embarrassing to raise their hand and ask their neighbour how elections work.

• (1700)

Limiting education hurts our democracy. When 61% of Canadians vote and 65% of young people do not vote, we have to think of ways to encourage a better turnout. I agree that adding a day of advance polling is a good idea. However, registering on election day is becoming more difficult.

It is good to have an extra day of voting, but if voters cannot identify themselves because vouching can no longer be used and the voter identification card has been eliminated, then that extra day does not do us much good. The act of voting in person is being made more difficult. This makes no sense. As parliamentarians, we have a duty to draft bills that make sense.

I just want to point out that during the last election, 100,000 people used the vouching system to vote. They may have been seniors who did not have the energy or were too sick to renew all their identification cards, or even young people who were voting for the first time and were accompanied by their parents as witnesses. Many people need this system, which this bill would abolish. If we take that number, then the government is taking away the right to vote from 100,000 people. It is a fundamental right. We should all be opposed to such a measure.

After the fraudulent calls managed to suppress the vote of some Canadians, the Chief Electoral Officer made some recommendations. Can we do something to correct this system that allowed all that to happen?

This bill does do one little thing. It requires companies that make robocalls to register with the CRTC. That is a good start, but the government forgot to include all of the other recommendations, including the one to give the Chief Electoral Officer the authority to require production of financial documents. I know the parties hire auditors, but that is not the same thing.

The power to compel people to provide information is another thing left out of this bill. That could have fixed a problem or, at the very least, ensured that it never happened again. The government could have put forward these preventive measures to improve the electoral process.

The worst part is that the Chief Electoral Officer was not even consulted, even though that would have been the obvious thing to do. He is the one responsible for studying the elections act and advising candidates. The government did not even consult the expert on the subject before drafting a bill that has a direct impact on people's ability to vote. That is a huge problem. I would urge the Conservatives to go see him. Let us hope that, at the very least, they will be able to make a few amendments to this bill.

I do not have time to talk about all of the problems with this bill because there are so many, but I want to emphasize that the right to

vote is a basic right. We all have a responsibility to oppose bills like Bill C-23, which could take people's right to vote away.

• (1705)

[English]

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon (Mississauga East—Cooksville, CPC):

Mr. Speaker, I have a problem following the logic of the opposition. Members who spoke before, including this member, were complaining about time allocation, but the first thing they did after the motion was to introduce their own motion to go home, to close the debate. I do not understand how this works.

There is a lot of talk about civic rights, but how about civic duties? Do we not have a civic duty toward this country? Do we not have responsibilities?

I go to many citizenship ceremonies. When people who become Canadian citizens raise their right hand and say the oath, part of the oath says "I will respect the laws of Canada and fulfill my duties as a Canadian citizen". It is our duty and right to vote.

I ask the member what she has to say about that.

[Translation]

Ms. Charmaine Borg: Mr. Speaker, it is indeed a privilege to become a Canadian citizen and to vote for the first time. There are celebrations in my riding, too, and I have met many new Canadians. Their smiles when they get their citizenship certificates and when they tell me who they are going to vote for and when they will vote, make it clear just how thrilled they are.

What this bill is telling people is that it will be much more difficult to vote the next time. Voting is a thrill for people who have never voted before, but once they get to the polling station, if they cannot identify themselves, if they do not have all of the right ID, they will be very disappointed. This bill eliminates two identification options.

• (1710)

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we do recognize there are certain measures within the legislation that are positive, but we believe the overall bill being proposed has fallen significantly short and could have done a lot better.

One of the biggest problems we have with the legislation is that the government appears to have ignored what we believe are some important recommendations from Elections Canada.

I ask the member to emphasize the importance of some of Elections Canada's recommendations that it brought forward to the government and how important it is that the government respond by allowing amendments to succeed, to attempt to get support for the legislation into the future.

One of the more significant amendments that would be required, I suspect, is that we need to enhance the investigation procedures. For example, the Province of Manitoba, and other provincial jurisdictions, can demand an investigation and has more authority to investigate. Elections Canada requested to have the power to investigate and to demand information through a judge if the government said no to that.

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The hon. member might want to provide some comment on that issue.

[Translation]

Ms. Charmaine Borg: Mr. Speaker, I will try to be brief. The Conservatives did not even consult the Chief Electoral Officer, so I understand why his recommendations are not part of this. They excluded him from the entire process.

As for enhancing investigation procedures, that is exactly what the NDP proposed in its March 2012 motion, which the House voted on. We felt it was important and we took action. We moved the motion in the House of Commons and everyone voted in favour of it. It is somewhat disappointing to see that the Conservatives are not following through with how they voted.

[English]

Mr. Jay Aspin (Nipissing—Timiskaming, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is my pleasure to rise in the House today to express my support for Bill C-23, the fair elections act, which was introduced by the Minister of State for Democratic Reform. The fair elections act would ensure that everyday citizens are in charge of democracy by putting special interests on the sidelines and rule breakers out of business.

The fair elections act would implement 38 of the Chief Electoral Officer's past recommendations.

One of those changes is the repeal of the prohibition on the transmission of election results. I would like to focus my remarks on this change. The fact that Canada extends over six time zones, representing a time difference of four and a half hours from coast to coast, has an impact on polling hours in Canada and how election results should be released. In the early days of Confederation, the release of election results was not a concern, since communication technology did not allow for the transmission of results during voting hours. This changed with the introduction of telegraphic service.

In the 1930s, parliamentarians reported concerns about eastern results being telegraphed to western parts of the country, and extra newspaper editions being distributed to voters on their way to the polls. At that time, uniform voting hours, 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. local time, were observed across the country, which led to a real-time difference of four hours between the closing of polls in the Maritimes and the closing of polls in British Columbia. In response to these concerns, the Dominion Elections Act, adopted in 1938, prohibited releasing election returns in electoral districts where the vote was ongoing. Accordingly, section 329 of the Canada Elections Act currently prohibits the transmission of election results in electoral districts where voting is ongoing. Anyone who wilfully violates the ban is guilty of an offence and liable on a summary conviction to a fine of up to \$25,000.

Since the ban's implementation, practical and philosophical objections have been raised. From a practical perspective, the ban is difficult to effectively enforce in the age of modern communication technology and social media. Moreover, the ban could have the effect of penalizing Canadians for their normal communication behaviour. Philosophically, the ban is an infringement on freedom of speech.

In 1991, the report of the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, more commonly referred to as the Lortie report, declared the ban obsolete and difficult to enforce, due to the developments in broadcasting and communication technologies such as the telephone and fax machine. As an alternative to the ban, Lortie recommended the adoption of staggered voting hours, highlighting that polls must not be open too early or close too late in any region. Hours were not to be too disruptive for voters or election workers, and conclusive results from Ontario and Quebec, which might be determinative of the election, were not to be known before the close of polls elsewhere in the country.

Parliament adopted staggered voting hours in 1996. This reduced the difference in time between the polls closing on the east and west coasts from four and a half hours to three hours. With these staggered voting hours, there was no longer any time difference between the closing of polls in Ontario, Quebec, and the three prairie provinces. There was only a 30-minute time difference between the closing of polls in central Canada and the Prairies, and the closing of polls in British Columbia. Thirty minutes was not deemed enough time for conclusive results from Alberta to Quebec to be determined and released by the media before later B.C. voters cast their ballots.

As a result of the staggered voting hours, conclusive results from only 32 Atlantic Canada ridings were available to later voters west of New Brunswick. The Lortie report noted that the release of results from the 32 ridings would not constitute a major problem.

● (1715)

At the time the report was released, there were only 295 seats in the House of Commons, meaning that the 32 ridings made up 11% of the seats in the House.

Simply put, staggered voting hours address the underlying rationale for the ban, which is that knowledge of which party will form the government could have an impact on voter behaviour in western Canada.

The ban has also been the subject of litigation. Following the 2000 general election, Mr. Paul Bryan was charged with an offence for having posted results from Atlantic Canada on his website while polls were still open in the rest of Canada. Mr. Bryan challenged his conviction on the basis that the ban was contrary to freedom of expression, guaranteed under our charter. The case was argued before the Supreme Court of Canada, which released its decision in 2007. While the court was unanimous that the ban limited freedom of expression, a majority of the court found the limitation to be reasonably justified, as it promotes voter information parity and public confidence in the electoral system.

Even though the court upheld the validity of the prohibition, Parliament is still free to repeal or alter the ban. One of the majority justices who wrote a set of reasons for the judgment went so far as to note specifically that "...Parliament can of course change its mind. Within constitutional bounds, policy preferences of this sort remain the prerogative of Parliament, not of the courts".

The constitutional validity of the ban is again before the courts. During the 41st general election, the CBC and Bell Media launched a challenge to the ban, arguing that in the era of social media, it no longer promotes information equality.

It is useful to consider the effectiveness of the ban, since the Lortie Commission concluded that the ban was obsolete.

As I have noted, the original purpose of the ban, adopted in 1938, was to prevent western voters from knowing the formation of the government prior to casting their ballots. This justification has been eclipsed by the staggering of voting hours adopted in 1996. This ensures that only election results from Atlantic Canada can be known to late voters west of New Brunswick.

No evidence suggests that voters would lose confidence in the electoral system if these results were communicated to them. This appears to have been confirmed during the 2004 general election, when the Chief Electoral Officer suspended the ban on the premature transmission of election results. The British Columbia Supreme Court, in *R. v. Bryan*, had declared the ban unconstitutional, while the British Columbia Court of Appeal had agreed to hear an appeal. Its judgment upholding the ban would not be rendered until after the election was held. Therefore, the Chief Electoral Officer relied on the existing state of the law and suspended the ban, which allowed media to communicate results from Atlantic Canada to late voters west of New Brunswick.

There is no indication that the results from the 2004 election were tainted by the suspension of the ban. The ban was once again enforced during the 2006, 2008, and 2011 general elections and subsequent by-elections.

In the 2008 general election, there were reports that Yukon's cable provider, Northwestel, prematurely let the east coast telecasts through to the territory's customers.

During the 2009 by-election, Elections Canada asked a newspaper to remove from its website a story that revealed initial results from a constituency, but it did not take measures to prevent discussion of by-election results on Twitter.

In 2011, an error caused the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation to briefly broadcast results from Atlantic Canada 30 minutes before the polls closed in central and western Canada and an hour before the polls closed in British Columbia.

There is other evidence that the ban is often contravened. In a nutshell, with Lortie in mind, the right of Canadians to communicate and engage with one another about elections is essential for Canadian democracy.

● (1720)

A ban on the premature transmission of election results is an unnecessary restriction on freedom of speech in an era when social media and other technologies are widespread. A ban on the early transmission of election results is outdated.

Our government is also following through on its commitment to Canadians to repeal a ban on the premature transmission of electoral results in the fair elections act. This change reflects the ruling of the

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Supreme Court and our government's commitment to uphold every Canadian's right to freedom of speech.

For these reasons, I encourage all members to support the elimination of this provision in the act.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault (Sherbrooke, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to be able to ask my colleague a question. He delivered his speech, but in my opinion, he failed to mention one important point: excluding funds collected by third parties from the election expenses, that is, fundraising among donors who have already donated more than \$20 to a given party. That spending is no longer part of the allowable expenses limit, which is approximately \$85,000 per candidate.

I have to wonder what the reason is for that change. Indeed, there is usually a reason behind a legislative change. Why did the Conservatives decide to make this change to the Canada Elections Act, which means that certain expenses normally included in the election spending limits will no longer be included?

● (1725)

[English]

Mr. Jay Aspin: Mr. Speaker, as I pointed out in my remarks, my particular submission focused on the transmission of election results. That is what my speech was all about.

I agree with the government's position that section 329 of the Canada Elections Act, which currently prohibits the transmission of election results in electoral districts where voting is ongoing, should be repealed. It is unconstitutional.

We would like to ensure Canadians' freedom of speech, even during elections.

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, while I realize that the focus of the hon. member's speech was the transmission of election results, we believe that a serious flaw in this legislation is the failure to answer the call of Elections Canada officials for more power to investigate electoral fraud, and in particular, the power to compel witnesses to testify under oath to aid an investigation.

This is a power that resides with the director of competition in a corporate context. One offence under the Competition Act, strangely enough, is deceptive telemarketing. Presumably, the director of competition can compel someone to testify under oath to aid an investigation for deceptive telemarketing. However, if that deceptive telemarketing is an electoral fraud case, that power is not available. Elections Canada has asked for it, but it is not in the act.

I would have thought that the government would be quite interested in giving additional powers, certainly powers equal to those of the director of competition, to find out who the bad people were who got into its database and participated in the robocall scheme. If that is, in fact, the case, why have these powers not been included in the act?

Mr. Jay Aspin: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member makes an excellent point. That point, among others, will no doubt be debated when this bill gets to second reading. Hopefully that will be sooner rather than later.

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My particular submission tonight was on the submission of electoral results, as I have repeated. We would like to support the clauses in the bill that eliminate that ban, as it would allow for freedom of speech. We believe in freedom of speech, even during elections.

Mr. Murray Rankin (Victoria, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to speak to Bill C-23, the so-called fair elections act, at the second reading stage. I wish to say at the outset that I am strongly opposed to this initiative on both process and substantive grounds, which I would like to address in turn.

On the process side, it is very difficult for me to explain in my riding of Victoria just how a bill of over 240 pages could be introduced on a Tuesday and the Conservative government would seek to invoke time allocation, or closure, on Wednesday, after only two speeches.

There was a 17-month delay from the month the Conservatives committed to table this bill. It was promised for September 2012.

There was no consultation with Elections Canada or with other parties or MPs, which I understand has been the tradition in this place, before this foundation statute, this quasi-constitutional law, came forward. One day a 244-page bill was dropped on the table. Debate was forced to begin the next day.

The government refused to agree to an NDP motion to send the bill to committee after first reading, which would have allowed wholesale changes to the bill, unlike what is going on at present.

Let us not finally forget that, surprise, surprise, this unfair elections act arrived in the House just before the budget comes out and at the same time as Canadians are naturally focused on the Olympics. That is what is really going on. I know that Canadians understand what is going on.

I just met with a number of students at the flame. They presented us with 30,000 signatures on petitions that were gathered in one weekend. Canadians understand what the government is trying to do, and we are not going to let it get away with it, if we possibly can.

The Globe and Mail asks today the question I wish to ask. It is simply this: Why the rush to get this through? Is it because perhaps the Conservatives expect Canadians not to know the content of the bill, so if it is pushed through, they simply will not notice? That is a very serious allegation I am making, and it basically demonstrates something I hoped I never would have in this place, which is utter cynicism about the way the bill has been dealt with.

Again, there were two speeches, then they moved to closure and rushed it through as quickly as they could. Even Canada's national paper understands what is going on. Canadians do too.

The minister of so-called democratic reform, who has been so aggressive at warding off criticism of Conservatives' elections wrongdoing, which were later proven to be well founded, now defends this as a fair and judicious measure. Well, there may be some things in the bill we like, but in typical Conservative fashion, there are many things pushed in there that are going the opposite way a democracy should function.

Let us call a spade a spade. Forget the Orwellian language, the title of the bill. Let us call it what it is. It is an unfair election act. I am going to explain why, on substance, I believe that is the case.

First, we are not dealing with a regular bill. We are dealing with a bill like the Access to Information Act or the Privacy Act, which are essentially quasi-constitutional in nature. These are the foundation rules for how we govern our democracy.

My brilliant colleague from Toronto—Danforth spent many hours pouring over this complicated law. He reckons that there are at least 30 serious deficiencies in it. I only have time to talk about two, but two that I think are quite dramatic. To be talking about this with the closure gun pointed at our heads is simply inexcusable. I am frankly saddened and ashamed to be here in this context.

It is shocking that the Conservative minister for democratic reform failed to consult with the Chief Electoral Officer about these changes and then made misleading statements during question period suggesting that he did.

The new bill would restrict the ability of Elections Canada to communicate with voters, narrowing the legal authority of the Chief Electoral Officer and eliminating provisions that allow Elections Canada to promote voting to “persons and groups most likely to experience difficulties in exercising their democratic rights”. All he can do is tell people who can vote and where to vote. He cannot talk about promoting democracy, which he finds an affront to democracy. I agree with our Chief Electoral Officer. We are fortunate to have officers of Parliament like him and the Information Commissioner and the Privacy Commissioner, who are shielded and can speak their minds on behalf of Canadians. I am proud that he is doing so, as we are today.

● (1730)

To talk about two issues of substance alone, I would like to focus on, first, the weakening of Elections Canada and, second—again calling a spade a spade—the voter suppression mechanisms in the bill.

The minister has been attacking Elections Canada for many years. Shortly after the bill was introduced, he accused it of being biased and “wearing a...jersey” when it comes to prosecuting the Conservatives for rule breaking. The bill clearly attacks Elections Canada, by gutting its powers.

The Chief Electoral Officer had asked for more powers, as did the NDP, including the ability to request financial documents related to the election. The Conservatives have failed to include these measures in the bill.

Rather, the Chief Electoral Officer would be appointed and responsible to Parliament, but the bill would have another agency, the Director of Public Prosecutions, DPP, appointed by the Attorney General and accountable to the government, where the Commissioner of Elections would be housed. We are supposed to be happy about that, I think. Well, no one in the office of Elections Canada is happy about that.

Consider what the Conservatives could have done.

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We have a number of securities commissions around this land. We have the Competition Bureau, which is a federal agency. It is an independent law enforcement agency that ensures Canadian businesses and consumers prosper in a competitive environment. The Supreme Court of Canada has applauded the way in which that agency operates. Why can we not be there now?

I invite people to look at the *Chrysler Canada Ltd. v. Canada* (Competition Tribunal) case, in which the 1992 decision of Mr. Justice Gonthier from the Supreme Court of Canada was complimentary about the way in which that enforcement agency proceeds with both civil and criminal remedies.

We could have had that. We had that before, but now we are supposed to be happy with the changes to weaken Elections Canada by sending the commissioner somewhere else to be accountable to the government. It just does not make sense. I know Canadians will see through this.

What is the key problem with this? It is that the bill refuses to enact perhaps the single most effective measure that would enhance investigations. What is that? It is giving the same powers to compel testimony to the commissioner to investigate; the same safeguards as currently exist for Competition Act investigators.

However, that is not good enough for the Conservatives. It seems to work fine for competition, according to the Supreme Court, but we are supposed to try something different in this bill.

Why? Is it because the Conservatives have a personal vendetta with some of the people at Elections Canada? I will let Canadians decide.

Bill C-23 also ignores that part of the NDP motion that Conservatives voted for in March 2012, which called upon Elections Canada to have the power to request and receive national political party documents to enable Elections Canada to assess whether the Canada Elections Act had been complied with. It is not in the bill.

The second part of the bill's major deficiency is voter suppression. The Conservatives, as Canadians know, have a track record of breaking election laws with their in-and-out scheme, robocalls designed to suppress opposition votes, and rule-breaking overspending by Conservative ministers.

Bill C-23 would also disallow the process of vouching. I am proud to say that one of my constituents, Rose Henry, an aboriginal activist who works with the homeless, went to the British Columbia Court of Appeal to say that it was one of the elements critical to the voting process. The court said that it was a critical part of the voting process and upheld the constitutionality of what she had sought to strike down on the basis, among other things, that vouching was part of the fabric of voting in Canada. However, the Conservatives would take that away.

I invite Rose to go back to the courts and vindicate her rights as a voter, because this time I predict she will win because this proposed law will be found unconstitutional.

This proposed law is a travesty. Canadians are getting to understand it, and I am hoping they will rise and call it what it is: an unfair elections act.

•(1735)

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member suggested that the Director of Public Prosecutions is not independent enough to house, in his office, the Commissioner of Canada Elections. These criticisms mark the first occasion when we have had any suggestion from the opposition that the Director of Public Prosecutions is anything but independent.

In fact, the Director of Public Prosecutions is selected by a committee that includes members of each political party, a representative of the law societies, and two independent public servants from the justice department and the public safety department, after which the appointment has to be approved again by an all-party committee. The DPP can only be removed by a vote of the House of Commons, and the act that provides for his creation explicitly prevents the Attorney General from being, in any way, shape, or form, involved in matters related to the Canada Elections Act.

With all of those multiple layers of independence, why is the member questioning the DPP's ability to do his job?

Mr. Murray Rankin: Mr. Speaker, I do appreciate the minister's intervention. The DPP is indeed shielded, but if it is not broken, why fix it?

We have a Chief Electoral Officer, and the commissioner is part of the game. We have the same things in places with securities commissioners, as well as the Competition Bureau, where investigative powers are there and the experts get together and figure out whether there have been civil or criminal infringements of the laws at issue. The fact is that officers of Parliament represent a model that has worked in this country very effectively. The Privacy Commissioner has a similar kind of enforcement role. There is no reason to change the situation that exists presently.

In fact, it begs the question of why the Conservatives say they have to change the situation. Why has it not worked? Oh, perhaps it has been a bit too aggressive with the Conservative Party. Why is it that we need to change the law? It begs the question that, if it is working well, if it is a model that has been a part of our fabric for years, with independent officers of Parliament like the Chief Electoral Officer, the Privacy Commissioner, and the Competition Bureau, applauded by our Supreme Court of Canada, why is it that we have to change it now?

•(1740)

Mr. Scott Simms (Bonaville—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, that is a valid point. I just want to get to some of the points he is talking about: compelling the witness testimony, in particular. In many cases, the reason why they expressed interest and why they wanted to do this is that, before the charges are laid, it gives them the tools to do that. I know the minister said earlier that the police do not have this power. However, how do they figure that, when they are talking about wiretapping and listening in on conversations and this sort of thing? These are exceptions that are made in order for investigators to get the evidence they need.

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In this particular situation, if we go to section 11 in the Competition Act, we will find the prototype by which this amendment can be made and they can get the tools. In other words, it is one thing to order the referee off the ice, but before they did that they took the whistle from him. That is the problem.

Does my colleague, my friend here, not feel that this is a small but great measure to have an amendment to this particular bill?

Mr. Murray Rankin: Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for the question, and his reference to section 11 of the Competition Act is very apt.

There has been a number of comments after the case of Hunter et al. v. Southam Inc., which dealt with the issues of the constitutionality of the search and seizure provisions of the Competition Act, by noted experts like Neil Finkelstein, who has written about this, citing Mr. Justice Gonthier's aggressive—I can only use that word—reference, in the Chrysler and Competition Tribunal case, to the fact that they have these kinds of powers.

I have to simply repeat: Why would we need to change it now? What is the problem?

The most effective measure that is required in enhancing investigation is giving people the power to compel testimony to the commissioner's investigators. Those constitutional safeguards that I mentioned, that are now in the Competition Act, have been found constitutional. They work. They are aggressive. They get the job done. Why do we need to change?

Mrs. Kelly Block (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Natural Resources, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise in my place today to speak to Bill C-23, the fair elections act.

This legislation would ensure everyday citizens are in charge of democracy by putting special interests on the sidelines and rule breakers out of business. It would also make it harder to break election laws. The bill would close loopholes to big money, impose new penalties on political imposters who make rogue calls, and empower law enforcement.

The fair elections act would protect voters from rogue calls with a mandatory public registry for mass calling, prison time for impersonating election officials, and increased penalties.

The bill would give more independence to the Commissioner of Canada Elections, allowing him or her control over staff and investigations, empowering him or her to seek tougher penalties for existing electoral offences, and providing more than a dozen new offences to combat big money, rogue calls, and fraudulent voting.

This legislation would crack down on voter fraud by prohibiting vouching or voter information cards as acceptable forms of ID; make the rules for elections clearer, predictable and easier to follow; ban the use of loans used to evade donation rules; repeal the ban on premature transmission of election results; and uphold free speech.

Bill C-23 would provide better customer service to voters and establish an extra day of polling.

Finally, in the case of disagreements over election expenses, an MP would be allowed to present the disputed case in the courts and

to have judges quickly rule on it before the CEO seeks the MP's suspension.

What I really want to focus on today is something that I know my colleagues in the House are also concerned about, the way in which Canada's election rules would be enforced.

I would like to run through how the bill would increase the powers and the independence of the Commissioner of Canada Elections and how it would give the commissioner sharper teeth, a longer reach, and a freer hand.

I would remind the House that it is the duty of the commissioner to ensure that the provisions of the Canada Elections Act and the Referendum Act are complied with and enforced.

Let me move quickly to the ways in which the bill would provide the commissioner with sharper teeth to uphold Canada's election laws.

Sharper teeth means tougher penalties for existing offences. Take the penalties for impersonation, providing false information, or obstructing an investigation. These would be new offences with significant penalties: a maximum fine of \$20,000 or imprisonment for up to one year on summary conviction, or a maximum fine of \$50,000 and imprisonment for up to five years on indictment.

Candidates and official agents convicted of this offence would be prohibited from being a member of the House of Commons or holding any office in the nomination of the Crown or of the Governor in Council for seven years.

The maximum fines would also be increased for serious election offences, such as taking a false oath or making a false or erroneous declaration to election officials. For summary conviction, the fines would be increased from \$2,000 to \$20,000, and for indictment, they would be increased from \$5,000 to \$50,000.

In a similar manner, the maximum fines would be increased for a wide range of offences, including failure to appoint an agent or auditor, failure to register as a third party, failure to provide quarterly returns and financial transaction returns, and transmitting advertising during a broadcasting blackout.

The bill before us would also eliminate the limitation period for offences requiring intent. The commissioner would be able to go back further in time to catch deliberate law-breaking.

All members would agree that the provisions of the bill would give the commissioner sharper teeth with which to enforce the current provisions of the Canada Elections Act.

Just as important is the longer reach the bill would give the commissioner. Longer reach means empowering the commissioner with more than a dozen new offences to combat big money, rogue calls, and fraudulent voting.

At the outset, this legislation would make it illegal to impersonate political agents or election officials. This was a recommendation of the preventing deceptive communications report issued by the Chief Electoral Officer.

• (1745)

It would also make it an offence to make false or misleading statements relating to qualifications as an elector or registering as an elector when not qualified. New offences for breaches of the political financing rules have been created as well, including knowingly making indirect loans to a campaign.

As members are aware, this bill would also give the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, the CRTC, the responsibility to administer the new voter contact registry. Under the longer reach provisions of this bill, there would be new penalties relating to non-compliance with the voter contact registry, as well as offences for failing to keep scripts and recordings used in the provision of voter contact calling services. Once again, I think it is clear that in addition to providing the Commissioner of Elections with sharper teeth, Bill C-23 would give him a longer reach.

Finally, let me outline how the bill gives the commissioner a freer hand.

A freer hand means the commissioner would have full independence, with control of his or her staff and investigations, and a fixed term of seven years so that he or she could not be fired without cause.

Under the current system, the commissioner reports directly to the Chief Electoral Officer and relies upon the support and resources of the CEO. The Chief Electoral Officer and the Commissioner of Elections have fundamentally different roles and responsibilities. The former administers an election; the latter enforces the rules. Both are vitally important functions in a democracy, but it makes no sense to have one of these officers report to the other. In fact, it is inappropriate to do so.

That is why, consistent with separating the administration of an election from the enforcement of election law, the fair elections act would house the commissioner within the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions. To ensure the independence of the commissioner, the commissioner's powers and functions would remain the same, but he would make his own staffing decisions and direct his investigations independently of the Director of Public Prosecutions and Elections Canada. As well, all future appointees would hold the position for a non-renewable seven-year fixed term.

While the investigation and prosecution functions would be administratively housed in the same office, the Director of Public Prosecutions would have no role in the commissioner's investigations. To maintain the integrity of the position, those individuals who have previously been a candidate, an employee of a registered party, exempt staff of a minister, or staff of a member of Parliament, or an employee of Elections Canada would not be eligible to be appointed commissioner.

To ensure continuity, the fair elections act proposes that the current Commissioner of Canada Elections remain in his role. This will allow for all current investigations to continue uninterrupted.

Government Orders

Bill C-23 would remove the provision that provides that the Chief Electoral Officer can direct the commissioner to carry out investigations. However, the Chief Electoral Officer would be able to ask the commissioner to investigate an allegation. As well, any Canadian would be able to ask the commissioner to look into irregularities.

Finally, the commissioner would have the ability to initiate his own investigations. The fair elections act would provide the commissioner with all the tools he would need to initiate investigations against all those bound by the Canada Elections Act, including Elections Canada officials, and investigate any matter if he believed there had been a possible violation of the law.

The bill before us would give the Commissioner of Canada Elections a freer hand in enforcing Canada's election laws. The bill before us would both fine-tune existing rules and provide new laws to govern practices that have come to the fore in recent elections.

It also sets out new rules that would provide for the effective enforcement of those rules by giving the Commissioner of Elections sharper teeth, a longer reach, and a freer hand to uphold the integrity of our election system. I hope all hon. members will join me in supporting this bill.

• (1750)

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusksing, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the member's comments. However, when we look at the bill, it is evident that it would discourage people from voting; it is not in place to encourage people to vote.

I wonder if my colleague would comment as to why the Conservatives drafted a piece of legislation without actually speaking to the people who know most about the Canada Elections Act. I think Mr. Mayrand himself indicated that he was not consulted to get his input about the changes that would occur. Will they now talk to him, prior to forcing the legislation through? Will they also ensure that there is public consultation on this bill? The public certainly want to have a say

Will they reinstate the voucher system? It is a system that actually worked. I can tell members that I have had to vouch for people in the past because they did not have proper identification at the time.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Mr. Speaker, before I answer the number of questions that the hon. member asked, I would like to thank the Minister of State for Democratic Reform. I think he has done a tremendous job by introducing a bill of this magnitude. I know him to be someone who would systematically work through the current elections act to see where there are gaps. I truly believe, as he has mentioned, that he did meet with the current CEO of Elections Canada. He also referenced a number of surveys he had reviewed, as well as taking in the concerns of many Canadians and parliamentarians.

In terms of the vouching, and I think that was the last question the member asked, I want to draw the member's attention to the Neufeld report, commissioned by Elections Canada. This report indicated that there were administrative deficiencies at the polls in the 2011 election, that vouching procedures were complex, and that there were irregularities in 25% of cases where vouching was used.

Government Orders

I see that my time is up. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

• (1755)

Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, on the vouching issue, I am assuming that some component of the member's riding is rural. She is nodding, so I guess that is the case.

I have a very rural riding. There are a lot of people, including seniors, first nations, and students, who travel to other parts of the country and who rely on the vouching system.

I understand where she and the minister are coming from about the abuse in the system. I am not naive to the fact that abuse exists within the vouching system. However, we do not throw this entire system out because of that. There are ways around this. We could converse with the officials of Elections Canada to ensure that some system of vouching exists for all of the disenfranchised people in her riding.

Does she not think this is a bit too drastic a way to fix a system? Is this not a big hammer to squash a bug?

Mrs. Kelly Block: Mr. Speaker, the member is absolutely correct; a fairly large portion of my riding is rural.

The process we are in today will see us debate the bill at second reading, and then the bill will be passed on to the committee to take a look at and to hear from witnesses. It is my hope that he will raise this very question at committee, to see what could be done to address some of the barriers that exist for people in rural Canada when it comes to the identification that is needed.

However, we do know that there are still 39 other pieces of identification that a voter would be able to present when they get to the polls to ensure they would be able to cast their vote on election day.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, it is a great pleasure to be able to speak to Bill C-23 today. I want to pause and say that when we have these rushed processes with closure on debate and an abbreviated time to look at a critical bill, it is rare for me to have a speaking opportunity. Therefore, I want to thank the Liberal Party for giving me a speaking slot today. I do not know if I agree with them in every aspect of their objections to this bill, but I agree with many of them.

When I look at what we need in Canada to fix democracy, I remember a clever little ad put together by Fair Vote Canada. Don Ferguson of *Royal Canadian Air Farce*, one of my favourite icons of Canadian comedy, starred in it. He wore a white lab coat and started talking about the serious tragedy of electoral dysfunction in Canada, the failure to perform well when it came to elections.

I will not go down the double entendres that went through that Fair Vote Canada ad, but as members can imagine there were many of them. However, it did bring to mind the need for a prescription to fix an unhealthy system. The ad pointed to the issue of getting rid of first past the post. It is fundamental to fair elections in Canada that election results are then mirrored in the composition of our House of Commons.

We need reform. We need a fair elections act. We need to deal with the unhealthy level of hyper-partisanship, the non-stop attack

ads, and the fact that we have not gotten to the bottom of the robocall scandal of the last election. However, this bill is not it.

A real prescription for a healthy democracy is in our grasp and instead we get this bill that would weaken our electoral system, weaken democracy, and further reduce voter turnout. We had an opportunity to sideline the cynical politics of non-stop attack ads that function as a “deliberate mechanism,” which is the language used by political spin doctors, of voter suppression. The goal of non-stop negative advertising is to reduce voter turnout in the interests of another party.

A lot of things now pass for political prowess, for which anyone who loves democracy should hang their head in shame and be condemned from ever standing for election again. This is not about every party getting out and urging everyone to vote, as we have heard people from across the aisle say all day. Over and over again, we have examples of efforts to do exactly the opposite. I am afraid this bill is in that spirit of reducing voter turnout.

We could have, with this bill, pursued the reforms found in private member's Bill C-559, put forward by the hon. member for Wellington—Halton Hills. That would have led to fairer elections. We could have levelled the playing field for financing so that members of Parliament who come to this place as independents have a fair chance to raise the funds they need to run for re-election. However, we did not.

The ways in which this bill would reduce the potential for a healthy democracy and worsen voter turnout need to be reviewed. Many of my colleagues in this place have given very eloquent, articulate, and full reviews. In particular, I have to give credit and homage to my friend, the hon. member for Toronto—Danforth, whose work on this bill was brilliant.

Let me point out what I would agree with. I may be a minority on this matter, but I do not really think it is a problem to create a commissioner for elections who operates out of the office of public prosecutions. I see that as an independent place. The problem is the government has not given that office any tools. It has not given that officer subpoena powers. What is worse is, for some reason, it has created a “black box” surrounding the work. It would amend the Access to Information Act to remove, from access to information, anything going on in the work of the commissioner for Canada's elections. They would also remove in the Elections Act the requirement to give any information about investigations.

What I also would agree with in this bill is the scheme to deal with the robocalls, to have a way of tracking who buys this kind of automated calling service. That is not bad. I would have voted for that.

Government Orders

However, the bill also includes a big new loophole for the spending of money. It now will not be considered an elections expense to spend money on activities that are considered fundraising for nomination candidates. That is an open door to abuse.

What is the worst part of this bill? This cuts to the core of democracy. This is a charter issue. I turn to a most recent statement by the Supreme Court of Canada on the right of Canadians to vote. It was a decision of October 2012. We are all familiar with it. It is in the name of the current member for Etobicoke Centre, so I will not say the name of the case. However, it was a strong decision written by Mr. Justice Rothstein and Mr. Justice Moldaver.

● (1800)

They had this to say:

The right of every citizen to vote, guaranteed by s. 3 of the Charter, lies at the heart of Canadian democracy.

In this instance, they did not find that those rights had been trampled upon, but that was because a lot of the provisions this bill would remove were in place. Therefore, I think this quote from the Supreme Court is timely and informs us, as my friend, the member for Victoria, recently pointed out, that this bill is probably unconstitutional. The following is what the Supreme Court had to say at the bottom of page 98 of the decision:

Our system strives to treat candidates and voters fairly, both in the conduct of elections and in the resolution of election failures. As we have discussed, the Act seeks to enfranchise all entitled persons,...

A voter can establish Canadian citizenship verbally, by oath.

That cannot happen any more, not with this bill.

The court went on to say:

The goal of accessibility can only be achieved if we are prepared to accept some degree of uncertainty that all who voted were entitled to do so.

The Conservative members of the House and the minister have utterly failed to provide any evidentiary background for the notion that we have a crisis of voter fraud in this country. There is no evidence for the notion that Canadians are covering themselves up through creating false IDs and voting more than once. The crisis in Canadian democracy is not that Canadians are voting more than once, it is that they are voting less than once, and this bill would worsen Canadians' trust in the system and increase cynicism.

As for the treatment of the Chief Electoral Officer, talk about sharper teeth: they are all sharpened in the direction of going after Marc Mayrand. I find this shocking. He is a public servant, he is doing his job, and the job that was being done is now essentially going to be stifled.

When I worked on my last book, which was on the crisis in Canadian democracy ironically, I wanted to try to get to the bottom of why young people were not voting. Where could I find good research that informed that discussion? I found that good research because it was commissioned by Elections Canada. It started to inform political parties what we should do to ensure civic literacy and political understanding from the earliest possible moment.

I think it undermines political responsibility and civic understanding to refer to voters as customers. There is something fundamentally wrong with an Elections Act that talks about

customer service when we are talking about voting. It is a right. It is not shopping, and every Canadian must be allowed to vote.

I cannot tell members how heartbreaking it is to hear from people, particularly young people, who have been turned away at the polls because they found that multiple forms of ID did not work. I remember hearing from a young woman in Dawson City when I was holding a town hall there on democracy. She said that she had tried twice. I asked her if she would keep trying and she said she did not know if there was any point, that they did not want her to vote.

I remember the tears in the eyes of an older man in Pictou County who had voted in his polling station during his 75 years until these new changes were brought in by the current administration and he was denied the right to vote because he could not produce a photo ID. He did not have a driver's licence. His sister in law was working at the polling station, but under the rules she was not allowed to vouch for him because she had not gone there for that purpose. Under this new act, we would see more and more Canadians turned away, disenfranchised by the false notion that we have a crisis in voter fraud. That is not our crisis.

We need to do everything possible to restore faith among the Canadian public in the health of our democratic system, and this bill takes us in the absolute wrong direction. Why would a governing party do this? Why is there such a rush to disenfranchise Canadians? Is there an election coming right away that we do not know about? Do we have to have all these new rules in place for first nations, seniors, young people, the poor, and the groups that advocate for those parts of our society that are more disenfranchised by having to produce government-issued photo IDs? Is that the point?

I am baffled and appalled and deeply shocked and troubled by this bill. The things in it that are good could have been so much better, but the things that are bad are unforgivable in a democracy.

● (1805)

Mr. Paul Calandra (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and for Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened intently to the member's discourse

I noticed though that in the returning officers' post mortem of the 41st general election, they being the people who actually run the elections in each of the 308 ridings across this country, they identified one of the big problems and obstacles to voter turnout being that people did not know where to vote, when to vote, and what ID to bring.

On page 17 of the report they also identified the fact that some of the polling stations were too busy, which discouraged people from voting. They believe that ought to be Elections Canada's primary function in the next election in order to increase turnout. That is what the people who run the elections in 308 ridings across this country said was the biggest obstacle to voter turnout.

Additionally, I draw members' attention to page 25, subsection 143(3), which says, not with respect to vouching but the following:

Government Orders

If the address contained in the piece or pieces of identification provided...does not prove the elector's residence but is consistent with information related to the elector that appears on the list of electors, the elector's residence is deemed to have been proven.

That means that if the ID cannot be proven, the polling officer still has the right to give that person a ballot, not disenfranchising anyone, but making sure the person who votes is the actual person who should be voting. That is—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Order, please. The hon. member for Saanich—Gulf Islands.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Mr. Speaker, regarding this whole notion that we have a problem of proving who a voter is before they vote, again, the Supreme Court has dealt with that.

If we want to ensure that section 3 of the charter is upheld, certain levels of uncertainty must be accepted. They are very minor; we do not have people voting more than once.

How does the hon. parliamentary secretary deal with the fact that people who vote by absentee ballot do not have to produce photo ID?

This whole thing is a nonsense designed to reduce voter turnout.

• (1810)

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault (Sherbrooke, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to put a question to my colleague who just spoke. I wanted to ask her a question about the public education role played by Elections Canada. It is responsible for educating Canadians, especially young people. It is most important that we educate them about their right to vote and how, when they are 18 years old, they can exercise this privilege that we have in Canada. I asked a few questions about this today, but she did not talk about it a lot.

Can she talk about the measure that has been introduced in this bill, which will prevent Elections Canada from engaging in any type of communication other than telling voters when, how and where to vote? This obviously excludes Election Canada's mandate to educate young people in particular about their right to vote. What does she think about this being eliminated by the bill?

Ms. Elizabeth May: Mr. Speaker, I agree completely with the member for Sherbrooke. I only talked about the research functions of the Chief Electoral Officer, but it is also very important—I would even say mandatory and fundamental—to invest in education, especially of our youth.

I hope that when the next election is held, all members and parties in Canada will renew their efforts to make young people aware of the importance of voting.

[English]

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon (Mississauga East—Cooksville, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in the little time I have, I would like to make a few comments.

I am disappointed with the debate taking place here. I listened to the argument across the aisle that when people have to show their ID, it will decrease voter turnout.

We hear a lot about rights. How about duties? We Canadians have a duty to this country. When people who come here from all corners

of the world become Canadians, they are taught and then asked about what is both their right and duty at the same time. The right to vote is a duty to vote. It is our duty, as Canadian citizens, to shape the future of this country. It is not only the job of Elections Canada to make sure that the information gets to people; it is the duty of all of us. For parents, it is the way that they bring up their children.

Young Canadians, years ago, went to fight and died for the democratic rights and privileges we enjoy today in this country. I went to the cemetery in Groesbeek, Holland, last year. I walked and I looked at the headstones. Those boys were as young as 16 and 17.

Today, people are fighting in many places in the world to get the basic democratic right to vote and to have their say. We here in the House are saying that we cannot ask people this and that, but that we have to encourage them. No. We have to make sure that people are brought up in a way so that they love this country and feel and know that the future of Canada is the duty of us all.

We are shaping the future of this country. We do not only have the right. Do not speak only of rights; speak about duties. We all have duties and responsibilities to this great country. Let us never forget that.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): It being 6:15 p.m., pursuant to an order made Thursday, February 6, 2014, it is my duty to interrupt the proceedings and put forthwith every question necessary to dispose of the second reading stage of the bill now before the House.

The question is on the motion. Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): All those in favour of the motion will please say yea.

Some hon. members: Yea.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): All those opposed will please say nay.

Some hon. members: Nay.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): In my opinion the yeas have it.

And five or more members having risen:

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Call in the members.

• (1840)

[Translation]

(The House divided on the motion, which was agreed to on the following division:)

(Division No. 57)

YEAS

Members

Ablonczy
Adler
Albas

Adams
Aglukkaq
Albrecht

Adjournment Proceedings

Alexander	Allen (Tobique—Mactaquac)
Allison	Ambler
Anders	Anderson
Armstrong	Ashfield
Aspin	Bateman
Benoit	Bergen
Bernier	Bezan
Blaney	Block
Boughen	Braid
Breitkreuz	Brown (Leeds—Grenville)
Brown (Newmarket—Aurora)	Brown (Barrie)
Bruinoooge	Butt
Calandra	Calkins
Cannan	Carmichael
Carrie	Chisu
Chong	Clarke
Clement	Crockatt
Davidson	Dechert
Del Mastro	Devolin
Dreeshen	Duncan (Vancouver Island North)
Dykstra	Falk
Fantino	Fast
Findlay (Delta—Richmond East)	Finley (Haldimand—Norfolk)
Flaherty	Fletcher
Galipeau	Gallant
Gill	Goguen
Goldring	Goodyear
Gourde	Grewal
Harris (Cariboo—Prince George)	Hawn
Hayes	Hiebert
Hillyer	Hoback
Holder	James
Kamp (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge—Mission)	Keddy (South Shore—St. Margaret's)
Kenney (Calgary Southeast)	Kent
Komarnicki	Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings)
Lake	Lauzon
Lebel	Leef
Leitch	Lemieux
Leung	Lizon
Lobb	Lukowski
Lunney	MacKay (Central Nova)
MacKenzie	Maguire
Mayes	McColeman
McLeod	Menegakis
Merrifield	Miller
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Nicholson	Norlock
Obhrai	O'Connor
Oliver	O'Neill Gordon
Opitz	O'Toole
Paradis	Payne
Poillievre	Preston
Raitt	Rajotte
Reid	Rempel
Richards	Rickford
Ritz	Saxton
Schellenberger	Seeback
Shea	Shipley
Shory	Smith
Sopuck	Sorenson
Stanton	Storseth
Strahl	Sweet
Tilson	Toet
Trost	Trottier
Truppe	Uppal
Valcourt	Van Kesteren
Van Loan	Vellacott
Wallace	Warkentin
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NAYS

Members

Allen (Welland)
Angus
Aubin
Bélanger

Andrews
Ashton
Ayala
Bennett

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Blanchette	Blanchette-Lamothe
Boivin	Borg
Boulerice	Boutin-Sweet
Brahmi	Brousseau
Caron	Casey
Cash	Charlton
Chicoine	Chisholm
Choquette	Christopherson
Cleary	Comartin
Côté	Crowder
Cullen	Cuzner
Davies (Vancouver Kingsway)	Davies (Vancouver East)
Day	Dewar
Dion	Dionne Labelle
Donnelly	Doré Lefebvre
Dubé	Dubourg
Duncan (Etobicoke North)	Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona)
Dusseau	Easter
Eyking	Foote
Fortin	Freeland
Freeman	Fry
Garrison	Genest
Genest-Jourdain	Giguère
Godin	Goodale
Gravelle	Grogulé
Harris (Scarborough Southwest)	Harris (St. John's East)
Hsu	Hughes
Hyer	Jacob
Jones	Julian
Karygiannis	Lamoureux
Lapointe	Larose
Latendresse	Laverdière
LeBlanc (Beauséjour)	LeBlanc (LaSalle—Émard)
Liu	MacAulay
Mai	Marston
Martin	Masse
Mathysen	May
McCallum	McGuinty
McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood)	Michaud
Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue)	Morin (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord)
Morin (Laurentides—Labelle)	Morin (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot)
Mulcair	Murray
Nantel	Nash
Nicholls	Nunez-Melo
Pacetti	Papillon
Péclet	Perreault
Pilon	Plamondon
Quach	Rafferty
Rankin	Rathgeber
Raynault	Regan
Rousseau	Saganash
Sandhu	Scarpaleggia
Scott	Sellah
Sgro	Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Wind-
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Sims (Newton—North Delta)	Sitsabaiesan
St-Denis	Stewart
Stoffer	Sullivan
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Nil

PAIRED

The Speaker: I declare the motion carried.

Accordingly, the bill stands referred to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

(Bill read the second time and referred to a committee)

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

A motion to adjourn the House under Standing Order 38 deemed to have been moved.

Adjournment Proceedings

● (1845)

[Translation]

SEARCH AND RESCUE

Ms. Annick Papillon (Québec, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am honoured to rise in the House today to speak to the first matter I dealt with at the beginning of my mandate. I am referring to the marine search and rescue centre in Quebec City. As members know, after exerting ongoing pressure on the Conservative government for over two and a half years, we have finally managed to save the marine search and rescue centre in Quebec City. That says a lot.

It says a lot about all the work that has been done. I must thank the people who also pushed the government to reverse its decision to close the marine search and rescue centre in Quebec City. Thirty-five or 37 years ago, this centre was created because the government wanted to have this expertise in Quebec City and because it was the only officially bilingual centre in North America. That is still true today. That is why it is important to keep this centre open.

Unfortunately, a sword of Damocles hung over the centre for two and a half years. It lost people and it lost expertise. At least the sword of Damocles is now no longer there. People can get back to work, without fear that the Conservatives will abolish the centre. That is a step forward. I am very proud of having successfully championed this file, especially because I asked a number of questions about it in the House. I also held a number of press conferences on the subject. I reached out to people in the field.

I still remember a time when all we had was a few resolutions about the issue. People did not know anything about it. Some people in Quebec City were even unaware of the existence of the marine search and rescue centre in Quebec City. By talking about it and meeting people on the ground, we moved forward. We sought out resolutions from a number of municipalities and fishers' associations. Shipowners were also on our side. The Quebec National Assembly unanimously passed two motions on the matter. We had the support of them all.

I would like to salute the extraordinary collaborative work done by the people in the centre and the 35 911 centres in Quebec. They work very hard with the search and rescue centre when emergency calls come in. With them, we achieved this success. As the federal member of Parliament for Québec, I would like to say thank you to them. This is no small success.

I am going to keep talking about it because I never want to go through such a tragic episode again. I never want another sword of Damocles to hang over that centre for no reason.

The file is not closed, quite the opposite. Personally, I would like to know how much the logistics competitions cost. I want to find out about all the competitions held that still did not result in people being found for Trenton. All those logistics exercises were done in order to come to the decision to move the centre from Quebec City. However, they never succeeded in doing so. We know that the money was spent for nothing. It was all for nought, actually. I want to know if the Conservatives know the numbers. Can they give them to us?

● (1850)

[English]

Mr. Randy Kamp (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have the opportunity to respond one more time to the member of Parliament for Québec on the issue of providing marine search and rescue coordination services in both official languages and on the future of the centre in Quebec City.

As I have said before, the safety of mariners is the highest priority of the Canadian Coast Guard, and the Government of Canada recognizes that services must be provided in both official languages equally and at all times.

There is not much more to say other than, as the member has indicated, the Minister of Infrastructure, Communities and Inter-governmental Affairs and the Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec announced on behalf of the government on December 18, 2013, that the Canadian Coast Guard marine rescue sub-centre in Quebec City will be maintained.

Mariners, recreational boaters, and fishers in Quebec and Atlantic Canada will continue to be served by a reliable search and rescue network and rescue missions will continue to be coordinated from the marine rescue sub-centre in Quebec and the joint rescue coordination centre in Halifax.

I will take this opportunity to thank the brave men and women across Canada who work very hard to ensure that search and rescue services are available to people in distress.

[Translation]

Ms. Annick Papillon: Mr. Speaker, a government that turns its back on a problem is a government that refuses to face it. I asked the Conservative member opposite a very clear question. I asked how many thousands of dollars this cost. How much was spent? We call for the transfer from Quebec, we hold competitions, and nothing came of it. We are asking people to work on that. It is not possible. We are talking about thousands, tens of thousands of dollars. Maybe even hundreds of thousands of dollars. I want the numbers. I want a government that will show some backbone, that will be responsible and tell me how much it cost.

On one hand, I know the amount must be fairly high and on the other, I do not want this to happen again. I want it to be shameful that such an amount was spent over two and a half years for a transfer. I do not want this to happen again, and I want the numbers. I want the exact numbers. At the very least I want the government to promise me that it will be responsible and give me the numbers.

[English]

Mr. Randy Kamp: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member seems to have difficulty taking yes for an answer, but let me say again that mariners in distress need to be assured that they can be understood in either official language and have confidence that help is on the way. That is why the decision was taken to maintain the marine rescue sub-centre in Quebec and to enhance the bilingual capacity of search and rescue coordinators at the joint rescue coordination centre in Halifax as well.

Adjournment Proceedings

[*Translation*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The motion to adjourn the House is now deemed to have been adopted.

Accordingly, this House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 10 a. m., pursuant to Standing Order 24(1).

(The House adjourned at 6:54 p.m.)

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