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Chair

Ms. Raymonde Folco

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•(1105)

[Translation]

The Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.)): The Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills Development, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities is meeting today pursuant to the order of reference of November 23rd, 2004, to consider Bill C-23, An Act to establish the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development and to amend and repeal certain related acts.

Our first witness is the minister himself. Mr. Volpe, you would like to speak first, is that so? Very well. Before giving you the floor, I would like to introduce the people accompanying you. They are Mr. Andrew Treusch, Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic Policy and Planning; Ms. Barbara Glover, Director General, Corporate Planning and Accountability; Ms. Michèle René de Cotret, Senior Counsel. Welcome to all of you.

Minister.

Hon. Joseph Volpe (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development) Thank you, Madam Chair.

Before I begin, I would like to thank all the members of this committee for the work they have done on Bill C-5. As I said in my presentation a few weeks ago, this is a very important bill for us, as parliamentarians, and, obviously, as a government. It is very important because it is an initiative that reflects the public's needs and the needs of a group of our fellow citizens who require government assistance in order to achieve a broader objective, which is that of developing the labour force that will be better able to meet the requirements of tomorrow's economy.

I would therefore like to congratulate all the members of this committee.

[English]

Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to speak about Human Resources and Skills Development Canada once again, Madame.

As you know, on December 12, 2003, one year ago, the Prime Minister announced the restructuring of this federal department in order to achieve progress in three areas: one, strengthening Canada's social foundations; two, building the basis for a 21st century economy; and, three, ensuring an ever-enhanced role for Canada in the world. As part of this change, you are already well aware, HRDC

became two new departments: Human Resources and Skills Development, and Social Development Canada.

Human Resources and Skills Development will focus on its core mandate of promoting a highly skilled, mobile workforce and an efficient and inclusive labour market. HRSDC's main programs are: employment insurance; employment programs; workplace skills; learning, and that includes some of the issues you dealt with in the last bill, including the Canada student loan program and the Canada education savings grant; and then finally, labour and homelessness.

Social Development Canada will focus on promoting social well-being and income security for Canadians. SDC has its main programs: benefits for seniors, including those payable under the Canada Pension Plan and the Old Age Security Act; investment in children and families; and persons with disabilities.

Departmental legislation is an important step that will give effect to changes announced December 2003. This legislative change will allow the department to move forward on delivering on our commitments to Canadians and to focus on our responsibilities in the area of labour market, workplace, and lifelong learning. I know that members of this committee will be undertaking a thorough review of this legislation. In fact, this is precisely the type of parliamentary give and take that the government has sought to encourage. I believe all members support this relationship. This is a part of ensuring that Parliament remains relevant at the centre of national debate.

With respect to my department, HRSDC, I take pleasure in leading a department that has an important role to play in the lives of Canadians. I want to stress that each order of government has an important role to play on the issues relevant to HRSDC. The Government of Canada fully understands that respect for provincial jurisdiction is a fundamental principle of our Constitution. I want to be clear that I will continue to respect provincial jurisdiction in the exercise of my duties and my authorities.

In this context it is worth noting that the departmental legislation sets out that "The powers, duties and functions of the Minister extend to and include all matters over which Parliament has jurisdiction". More fundamentally, all legislation, including this bill currently before you, is subordinate to the Constitution Act and to the division of powers.

•(1110)

I also work with a host of other partners, including business, labour unions, aboriginal organizations, training institutions, financial institutions, and sector councils to ensure their needs are represented and addressed. It is by working with and through these partners that the department will achieve its objectives.

I'd like to turn specifically to the bill, if I might, Madam Chair, in which the committee has played such an important role. Parliament is now being asked to pass legislation that sets out the mandate, the purposes, the powers, and the duties of the department and its ministers, because there is more than one, that gives the department a statutory existence.

Let me say that this legislation does not create any new programs or services. Rather, it reflects the machinery of government changes that were announced by the Prime Minister on December 12, 2003.

Let me briefly walk the committee through various portions of the bill, if I might. In part I, the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development serves to articulate clearly the mandate of the Minister for Human Resources and Skills Development and the new department. That mandate, my mandate, relates to "improving the standard of living and quality of life of all Canadians by promoting a highly skilled and mobile workforce and an efficient and inclusive labour market".

This part of the bill also allows for Social Development Canada to provide administrative services on behalf of both departments. Even though we'll be split, if you will, into twin departments, we'll still have responsibility to provide some administrative services. Why? It has a lot to do with administrative efficiencies. As well, the two departments rest on the foundation of a service delivery network across the country that provides seamless, single-window services to Canadians. We want citizens to have uninterrupted services and improved services in the future. This integrated service delivery network under the bill is an important means of achieving this objective.

Under part II, and this relates to the Minister of Labour, is set out the mandate of my colleague, Minister Fontana, related to his labour responsibilities of "promoting safe, healthy, fair, stable, cooperative and productive workplaces". This bill addresses the mandate of the minister. Issues related to the operation of the labour program are governed by other statutes, including the Canada Labour Code.

Part III of the bill, the Canada Employment Insurance Commission, continues the existence of the commission with its powers, its duties, and its functions. As you know, this bill addresses the composition and operations of the commission. Issues specific to the EI program are governed by the Employment Insurance Act.

Part IV of the bill, the protection of personal information, provides for a single code for the protection of personal information. We believe the code will be more effective in the following ways: first, by providing more consistency in the administration of personal information than is currently the case—not that it is poor, but that we're always looking for improvement—given the various statutory and regulatory provisions governing the disclosure of personal information; second, by providing a greater degree of transparency for Canadians resulting from this harmonization; third, by codifying

the current administrative practices for protection of personal information for research purposes; and four, by including an offence provision for knowingly disclosing personal information.

•(1115)

The proposed code represents a commitment by the department to ensure the continued protection of personal information and provides an appropriate balance between the need to protect Canadians' privacy and the use and disclosure of such information for the administration of programs and services.

The final two parts of the draft legislation contain consequential and transitional provisions related to the new departmental legislation.

To conclude, Madam Chair, I want to stress that the legislation respects the announcement of the Prime Minister on December 12, 2003, and supports the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development in focusing on its priorities. This legislation is in fact consistent with the view held by this committee in June of 2000 that "The government should divide HRDC into several more homogeneous and focused structures". That's what this legislation does.

Once again, Madame, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to address the committee.

My officials and I will be happy to address any questions. I know we all share the goal of helping Canadians fulfill their potential so we can continue to ensure our nation's well-being.

Merci.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Volpe, for this very brief but lucid presentation of the bill.

My question to you is, are you able to stay with us for a little while longer so I can ask the civil servants to present their interpretation of the bill, or do you have to go right away, in which case I would allow the committee to ask you questions or address their commentaries to you now? Which do you prefer?

•(1120)

Hon. Joseph Volpe: My preference, Madame—without being presumptuous and arrogant—is to answer questions the committee might wish to ask from a perspective of leadership and to have the technical questions addressed to my officials. I tell you this only because, as you know, we made some changes to our timetable in order to accommodate everyone. Again, if it isn't too arrogant or presumptuous, if we could do this, then I would be allowed to do the other thing I was also supposed to attend to. But I'm in your hands, Madame.

The Chair: Well, that answers my question. So, members, you will address your questions to the minister.

There will be a first round, which will be Mr. Forseth, Madame Gagnon, Mr. Martin, and eventually someone from the Liberal side as well. You have seven minutes.

I wondered, if you agree, if we might make this first round the only round for the minister, after which time he can leave and we can go on to talk to the officials. Is that all right with the committee? I see no problems.

Monsieur Forseth.

Mr. Paul Forseth (New Westminster—Coquitlam, CPC): Thank you very much.

There's the atmosphere around here of President Bush coming to the Hill today, so I'll be direct and to the point.

Why did the government feel it was necessary to include privacy provisions within the legislation establishing HRSDC? We already have a core law for all government and an officer of Parliament to administer it, so why do we need the duplication? I'd like to hear from you for the essential point of why we have the privacy provisions in both of these two bills. There has to be some deeper rationale than just duplicating what the Privacy Commissioner has in enabling legislation. So can you make the case for why this was included?

Hon. Joseph Volpe: Thank you, Mr. Forseth.

Because we're beginning a new piece of legislation with new authorities, one of the things we could not overlook, of course, is our responsibility under privacy. My officials will no doubt tell you later on that they are already in discussions with the Privacy Commissioner and with staff in order to iron out any perceived overlap or any perceived dichotomies.

The basic issue has to do with collecting information for the purposes, as I indicated in my introduction, of more efficient delivery of information and ensuring that any personal information does not go astray. But in order for us to do that, it has to be placed in the hands of the one person who will have to make the decision to either share or not share information, not only within our department but within the Government of Canada.

As you read the bill, you will, I hope, be impressed by the fact that the authority cannot be exercised without consultation with the Privacy Commissioner as a very first step. So there's already an instance—a mechanism, if you will—for ensuring that privacy protections will be there, and even though they're already codified in other instances, as you've rightly noted, we want to make sure the application is most direct in this instance because we're creating new authorities for a new department.

Mr. Paul Forseth: I'll come back to that essential point. There must be some gap or some lack where the central, core legislation doesn't quite meet things. I hear your goodwill and great intentions, and I think Canadians should be reassured on that, but I'm trying to figure out what the essential reason was. If there were some problems with the Privacy Commissioner's mandate and law, why wouldn't that be fixed? Why would there be this separate codification in these two bills before us? I'm trying to figure out what the real reason for that was.

Hon. Joseph Volpe: Let me see if I can give you a much more precise response. I appreciate your bringing it up again.

You'll know that the Privacy Act explicitly recognizes that its own disclosure provisions may be superseded by other provisions in another statute. HRSDC—that's our department—is still subject to the Privacy Act, which covers the collection, the use, the disclosure, and the retention of personal information. The code we propose in this bill only governs the disclosure of personal information while maintaining the basic principles of the Privacy Act. The proposed

departmental legislation contains more stringent requirements than the Privacy Act does regarding the use of personal information for research purposes.

It's not an issue of there being a vacuum here or there. I think we're actually tightening things up and constraining departmental use of information because we recognize that in the creation of a new statute we might be opening up the door. The Privacy Act does not include offence provisions, which the department considers important to demonstrate to Canadians HRSD's commitment to privacy.

● (1125)

Mr. Paul Forseth: Did you have a...?

Hon. Joseph Volpe: Do you want me to read some more for you?

Mr. Paul Forseth: Yes. I'll give you another minute. This is good.

Hon. Joseph Volpe: I appreciate your giving me the latitude to be able to refer to some of my notes as well. We believe the code will be more effective, as I've been trying to indicate, in several ways.

First, it provides more consistency in the administration of personal information, as I indicated, than is currently the case, given the various statutory and regulatory provisions governing the disclosure of personal information. We're taking the opportunity to condense things so there's greater consistency.

Second, we provide a greater degree of transparency for Canadians as a result of the harmonization of all of these various codes.

Then it codifies the current administrative practices for protection of personal information for research purposes, which is not currently the case. This has been brought forward to us not only by the Privacy Commissioner but also by others in the general public who have said this is an area we need to address.

Finally, by including the offence provisions for knowingly disclosing personal information, as I indicated a moment ago, we provide a further brake on those who have not kept as strict an adherence to privacy protections as one would expect today.

Mr. Paul Forseth: I just have a quick supplemental. If you can, give me the government's political answer as to why homelessness as an administrative responsibility has found its place here rather than somewhere else. There have been suggestions really questioning, why here? There has to be some kind of rationale around that versus sticking it in with some other section of government. It seems like homelessness hasn't found a home yet.

Hon. Joseph Volpe: You may recall, Mr. Forseth, that a few years ago when the issue began to galvanize the attention of the House in particular, the government responded by putting in place—for want of a better word right now, let's say—a secretariat under the leadership then of a junior minister, who is the minister of state for this department, to collect all of those government programs that could impact on the issues related to homelessness.

That meant we were trying to interconnect and provide a network of services amongst the various departments of government under one roof, and that one roof invariably was called human resources development, now HRSD. The act governing the expenditures of funds to address some of those issues, which had not formed essentially their own department yet but were a collection of services by the Government of Canada for those people who found themselves in that situation, either by self-definition or by definition by others, meant that under that particular umbrella we would attempt to address the issues through the partnerships I cited earlier.

What happened is the minister responsible for homelessness or for the homeless was part of our department. Our department assumed many of their fiscal responsibilities and the statutory responsibilities resident with the administration of those responsibilities. We've attempted to put this back into legislation to indicate which of those two departments is responsible for it. It's not SDC; it's HRSDC.

• (1130)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll go on now with Madame Gagnon, s'il vous plait.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christiane Gagnon (Québec, BQ): I will begin and if there is time left over, I will give it to my colleague, Yves Lessard.

I would like to talk about information privacy. I would like to know why the administration of social insurance numbers has been given to Social Development Canada. It's well known that under the Employment Insurance Act, the Canada Employment Insurance Commission is responsible for that information.

Does this mean that the Employment Insurance Commission will not be subject to restructuring? Who will be managing the social insurance number? Is it the Employment Insurance Commission, Social Development or both?

Hon. Joseph Volpe: I will give you part of the answer, Ms. Gagnon. The bill does not provide for any organizational changes within the internal structure of the department. The Employment Insurance Commission will remain as it is.

Ms. de Cotret, who is our expert in the field, can provide you with a more technical answer.

Ms. Michèle René de Cotret (Senior Counsel, Department of Human Resources and Skills Development): The Employment Insurance Act contains the provisions dealing with the social insurance number, and it is the commission that is responsible for administering the Employment Insurance Act. Social Development can undertake certain operations involving the social insurance number if the commission has delegated some of its authority to it.

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: There's also the whole issue of information privacy. What kind of protection will exist for information held by the Employment Insurance Commission and being passed on to Social Development Canada? I see that the minister will have much more authority in terms of access to information. What other types of information could be collected? That might be of some concern to the public.

Hon. Joseph Volpe: I do not understand why one would be concerned, because no changes are being made to the current

situation. Neither the authority nor the management of the commission is being changed. There are no changes in the legislation providing the commission with more powers or authority. Its work and its responsibilities are set out in the Employment Insurance Act.

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: However, you intend to delegate certain powers to Social Development concerning the administration of social insurance numbers. That is certain. The new Department of Social Development will in fact be responsible for certain constituencies.

Ms. Michèle René de Cotret: Social Development must have the permission of the commission to administer the social security number.

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: You have not given the practical reasons for this change.

Ms. Michèle René de Cotret: I cannot answer that question.

• (1135)

Hon. Joseph Volpe: The new code we are discussing applies as much to our department as it does to Social Development. There is therefore no cause for concern.

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: When certain information will be collected by your department, will its disclosure be limited, accurate and authorized? What kind of information are we talking about? You're rather vague regarding the kind of information that you might want to keep. You will also have the privilege of deciding if you wish to disclose this information to certain organizations or to certain groups. A very precise list of the information you'll require must be drawn up. You have stated an intention, but it is rather weak.

Hon. Joseph Volpe: This is information that makes it possible for us to administer all that is needed to make a program effective, a program that will be useful to clients who must be well-served by the department. That's all. There is no question of any other information. In the case of SDC, it is information that would, for example, indicate that a person has reached a certain age or that another person has a certain disability. In the case of our department, obviously, everything is connected to employment. It is information that allows us to see when and for how long a client is working or not.

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: You do not seem concerned, but I must say that the Privacy Commissioner has expressed certain concerns.

Hon. Joseph Volpe: That is why I said that officials from my department are having serious legal and administrative discussions with the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada, and that is why we have included protections in this bill for both citizens and the process.

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: We can test that, because witnesses will be coming to address the issue. We can also think about it ourselves.

Hon. Joseph Volpe: That is the committee's role. The committee will hear from witnesses who have a completely different perspective from both a privacy and a legal point of view. That is the way it should be, in my opinion.

The Chair: Thank you. I'm sorry but your time has run out.

I now give the floor to Mr. Martin.

[English]

Mr. Tony Martin (Sault Ste. Marie, NDP): I don't have a lot of questions. I have one in particular, and it goes back to the question of Mr. Forseth. It is this. Why, given the social policy focus of the national homelessness initiative, is it in your ministry, HRSD, and, on the other hand, given some of the intention here, where people with disabilities are concerned, to get them into work, to adapt, and to give them training to become self-employed, it's included in the other ministry? It seems to me this should be flipped around.

Hon. Joseph Volpe: Mr. Martin, I can't tell you there was a very quick scissor-cut through everything, but the idea was to try to provide a seamless web of service while establishing a different policy initiative in two different departments, for the purposes of focusing the direction and delivering service more efficiently.

On the question of disabilities, that other department, the Department of Social Development Canada, has as its policy focus, of course, not only those who have disabilities by virtue of a workplace-related situation but also those whose disabilities are more long-term. Some of those disabilities lead to a point where they are also recipients of the Canada Pension Plan, the OAS, the GIS, etc., so there is a continuum that justifies putting all of the disabled, at least from a policy perspective, in that particular department.

Sometimes what it means is we need to adapt workplace skills or adapt training or adapt some of the requirements in the marketplace for those individuals. Our department is best equipped to be able to deliver on that particular service and that particular training or direction. While they have the particular legislative responsibility, invariably what will happen is there will be a combining of programs, with us as the deliverers.

I don't see an inconsistency, Mr. Martin.

• (1140)

Mr. Tony Martin: What about the homelessness initiative?

Hon. Joseph Volpe: On the question of homelessness, as I tried to indicate earlier, we attempted a few years ago to collect under one umbrella all of those issues that might pertain to the homeless, with the distinct purpose of trying to develop a vast array of directions that would address the problem that, as I said, began to surface in the late nineties and early in this decade.

Our department was the one that was most able and best equipped to handle it, in part because we were addressing all the issues that had to do with social development—we handled all social issues as well as all employment-related issues. This was, until last December, the largest department of government, accounting for something like—correct me if I'm wrong, Mr. Treusch—60% of all government expenditures. It was really the social arm of the Government of Canada.

What we've done now is say let's move some of these that are entitlement programs over under Social Development and the ones that are more current, more activist, under Human Resources and Skills Development.

The homelessness issues might fall more under ours, but because we have a Minister of Labour—by the way, covered by our current legislation—who is also responsible for Central Mortgage and Housing, we thought it would be much more appropriate to visit all

of those issues under that particular umbrella, because the housing strategy, in conjunction with provincial cooperation, might be able to address that a little bit better from a policy perspective.

Mr. Tony Martin: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Martin.

Monsieur D'Amours.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you for coming today, Mr. Minister.

I would like to discuss training. Given the globalization of markets, it is clear that we have to remain competitive as far as training is concerned. I am convinced that it is the key to the future.

What is your opinion of the advantages and the importance of your department as far as training is concerned? Formerly, we had Human Resources Development Canada, and now we have Human Resources and Skills Development. Why is it important to you that we look to the future, that we have a vision of the future to ensure that our country remains competitive, not only at the local level but also globally?

Hon. Joseph Volpe: Thank you for your observations, Mr. D'Amours.

Let me make it clear that the bill before you today has no bearing on the policies we are already implementing within the department. It is an administrative bill.

You are correct regarding the main objective of my department. We must create a labour market that gives every Canadian the opportunity to benefit from the economic momentum that exists in our country today. As minister, I accept the responsibility and privilege—and I stress the point—of developing programs that will ensure that each and every Canadian be trained with a view to filling new jobs and meeting new requirements for tomorrow's economy.

• (1145)

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Let us talk now about the issue of skills. This has been challenged at times, and I would like to hear your opinion. It is important for the Canadian government to ensure that not only one region or one province, but that all Canadians have the same opportunities to move forward, and the same chances of getting a better job which would secure a better quality of life for their family. Therefore it is important that there be national requirements, and not regional or provincial ones.

Hon. Joseph Volpe: Yes, that is true. We are a national government, and not a regional or local one. The Government of Canada has the objective or main challenge of giving every individual, wherever he or she may live in this country, the opportunity of being trained and prepared to the best of his or her abilities for tomorrow's jobs. We are trying to provide training to citizens in collaboration with our partners, the provincial governments, regional organizations, unions and employers. We must give every citizen the opportunity to benefit from the wealth that our economy is capable of producing. If we really want to have a national program, we must treat all people equally, regardless of their province or their region.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. D'Amours.

[English]

Mr. Volpe, we have now concluded our first round. I know there are other people around the table who wish to ask you a question. If you have a little more time, about 15 minutes or so, we could go through a second round of five minutes each. Would you be able to do this?

Hon. Joseph Volpe: I think it's only fair to all members. I've sat on both sides of the table, and sitting and sometimes not getting an opportunity to ask a question is not good. Do you have three or four more questions?

The Chair: I have three more questions.

Hon. Joseph Volpe: Fifteen minutes sounds fine.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

Mr. Devolin.

Mr. Barry Devolin (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): First of all, I want to apologize for being late. I was caught up in what was happening outside today. As a new member, it's all still quite exciting to me. Certainly, I wanted to come and hear your presentation.

I have a general question about employment insurance. It's my understanding that the employment insurance legislation says the premiums charged should be sufficient to cover the expenditures made under employment insurance. It's also my understanding that there has been a notional surplus within employment insurance for the past several years, where the premiums are essentially generating more money than the programs are costing.

I think we would all agree that payroll taxes kill jobs. The higher the cost of labour, the less labour that gets purchased in the market.

My question to the minister is this. What do you intend to do to reduce premiums so that the employment insurance system maintains itself, but by reducing premiums it helps to create more jobs in Canada?

Hon. Joseph Volpe: I appreciate the question, Mr. Devolin. I will answer the question, but I want to frame it as to where we are today. I want to talk about the bill today. That comes under the EI Act, your question, but I'll address it nonetheless. I don't want to prejudice the considerations of the bill before you.

The point you've raised, of course, has received a lot of attention lately. I don't want to be dismissive of it because it's very serious. The auditors general of the past indicated that what we needed to do was separate a notional account for all of those revenues that came in as a result of premium collection and all of the expenditures that went out as a result of benefits paid under the act. They said, and other auditors general repeated, that this is an appropriate accounting process, but there should be a particular balance. Leading up to 1994, the notional account was in a huge deficit. It means that the way the EI Act is supposed to operate is if there's a deficit in this notional account, all the moneys are paid through the consolidated

revenue fund. The flip side of that coin is if there is a notional surplus, it stays with the consolidated revenue fund.

What we attempt to do is we attempt to arrive at a balance where the offsets, i.e., benefits paid out, are more or less equal to the premiums taken out. We do that through a premium rate-setting mechanism, which until about a year and a half ago was our department in consultation with Finance, with the EI Commission, and with other stakeholders. As you will appreciate, Mr. Devolin, it's an estimate—you try to arrive at something.

Roughly ten years ago, when premiums were at about \$3.07 on average...we kept reducing them every year, keeping in mind the expectations that were both resident in the economy and in the government. Today we're at \$1.98. That has resulted in something like about \$425 per year per worker.

But it's also an inaccurate type of calculation, and here's why. I'm not being partisan here, but the economy has moved along at such a great pace that we have been very lucky as a nation to be able to say that our unemployment rates have gone down from where they were in 1994. They were at 12.5%. In some places they were a lot higher, and in very few places lower, but the national average was around 12%. Today the national average is around 7% or 7.1%. In some places, and I've said this at another meeting, in Alberta, for example, it really is non-existent. It's just under 5%. Even in Saskatchewan it's just around six-point-something. When you're getting at about 5.5% unemployment, you're looking at dysfunctional employment mobility.

The second thing we've seen is—

• (1150)

The Chair: We'll hear the second thing, but I'll ask you to be very brief, please.

Hon. Joseph Volpe: I'll do it very briefly. We've had a greater participation rate. The participation rate has climbed from about 62% to 67.5% across the country, so that means there's an additional 5% of people actually participating in our economy. Couple that with a decrease in unemployment and we have more people contributing than anybody could have ever estimated. It's not a question of underestimating what we need to do; it's a question of everybody performing at a level that's higher than anywhere else in the world. So we find ourselves with additional moneys that we had not anticipated. Where do we put those moneys? We put them in labour market development agreements with the provinces, in universities and colleges for training, in additional benefits to prepare people for re-entry into the workplace. We put them in all of those institutions or cultural-social institutions that partner with us for the purposes of preparing our workforce so that they'll become less and less likely to have an incidence of income interruption, i.e., losing a job.

• (1155)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. I have given you some extra time.

[Translation]

I had to give you more time given the extent of your answer.

Mr. Lessard.

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I note that your answers are often centred on economic development, which is not a bad thing in and of itself. However, I would like to hear more about the Department of Human Resources and Social Development's mission, the department we want to split.

When I asked you a question in the House, you quite rightly reminded us that we are working in committee to study the issue of the employment insurance fund, that of the Canada Employment Insurance Commission, as well as the rules, which we are currently doing, and that we had to wait for the results before starting to announce any changes. I think I understood correctly what you said at that time. We agree.

I have two questions for you.

First of all, how are we to understand the announcement made by the Minister of Finance, who said he intended to lower the premiums? That seems to be in contradiction to what you have said. I would like to hear your comments on that.

Secondly, in the bill establishing the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development, there is a reference to the Employment Insurance Commission component. It sets out a definition for the commission. Do you intend to ignore this part of the bill in the House, when the time comes to vote on the bill establishing Human Resources and Skills Development? Do you intend to wait until we have produced all our reports and see how the House intends to deal with them?

Hon. Joseph Volpe: Thank you, Mr. Lessard.

I accept your unexpected compliment. You mentioned the mission of the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development.

First of all, we have no intention of removing the provisions regarding the commission from the bill. That was the second part of your question. I repeat that our only intention is to provide a legal structure for the administrative situation that already exists in fact. We have no intention of changing the current situation. We want to respect what is already in place and make it more effective.

Mr. Lessard, could you please repeat the first part of your question?

Mr. Yves Lessard: I was asking about the statement of the Minister of Finance concerning...

Hon. Joseph Volpe: The Minister of Finance was speaking in the House about a situation which, he feels, could be repeated this year, as has been the case for the last decade. He said he intended to reduce the premium rate, but he did not say by how much. Obviously, the economy is doing at least as well as last year. So we should expect a reduction in premiums. How big will that be? We do not know yet. We must review the cost of all of the programs we intend to set up for the labour market and also for the economy. In my mind, there is no inconsistency there.

• (1200)

Mr. Yves Lessard: May I ask a final question?

The Chair: Yes, if you promise me that your question will be short, and if the honourable minister promises me that his answer will be equally short.

Hon. Joseph Volpe: I cannot speak for Mr. Lessard, but I have no intention of giving a long answer.

Mr. Yves Lessard: It will be very short, Madam Chair.

Am I to understand from the first part of your answer that you feel that the Employment Insurance Commission does not need to be changed?

Hon. Joseph Volpe: We do not intend to change anything about it for the moment. However, you already asked me the question about the employment insurance program. I answered you both in the House and in private, and I repeat it here today, that I have no intention of making any changes whatsoever until I have my party's task force report and the report of your subcommittee in hand.

Mr. Yves Lessard: You are open to discussing the program, but not the membership of the commission.

Hon. Joseph Volpe: I am open to the studies that the committee and my task force are getting ready to table, but I cannot make assumptions about what they are going to say.

Mr. Yves Lessard: From what I understand, you make a distinction between the rules and the commission. As far as the commission is concerned, you are adamant, whereas you show some flexibility regarding the rules.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Minister, on behalf of the members of this committee, I would like to thank you for having given us this time. I know that you have a very busy agenda.

Hon. Joseph Volpe: You have lost a...

The Chair: Yes, we've lost a few people, but we still have quorum. We will continue our work with the people from your department. Thank you very much.

Hon. Joseph Volpe: These are people who have shown themselves to be extremely competent in the past. I am sure they will make a good impression yet again today.

Thank you.

The Chair: I have no doubt about it. Thank you very much, Mr. Minister.

[*English*]

Monsieur Treusch, do you wish to make a presentation or do you wish to go on immediately to questions and comments?

Mr. Andrew Treusch (Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic Policy and Planning, Department of Human Resources and Skills Development): No, I don't think it would be fruitful to make a presentation given the pressure on the committee's time, but we are available to answer your questions.

The Chair: Very good. Thank you very much.

We're still into our five-minute round. I understand that no one from the Liberal side wishes to ask any questions at this time. Very good.

Mr. Forseth.

Mr. Paul Forseth: Thank you, and welcome.

When the minister first made his remarks, he had a series of notes. The most introductory part I'm certainly sure was written by the department, representing the larger philosophical approach of the department. One of the things that struck me was he talked about Canada and the world. That was right in the minister's statement. I'm wondering what the departmental thinking is about that. With this ministry, which is supposed to look at particular needs of Canadians, where does this vision statement about Canada and the world come in? Maybe you can talk about the departmental thinking in that regard and why something like that would be mentioned, because that's part of the self-perception or the public advertising as to what the ministry is saying about itself. Certainly you can help me with that phrase.

Mr. Andrew Treusch: The minister was alluding to one of the priorities of the Government of Canada from the current Prime Minister. This is one of the priorities that runs across departments, including our own. So he's bringing that reference in. I think the minister was also referring to the Prime Minister's announcement of December 12 and the link between why we are being restructured and some of the broad priorities.

With respect to Canada's role in the world, certainly we see ourselves as being the custodian of the human resource asset or base of Canada, and we are constantly at work with our international colleagues to compare notes on the policy trends. So some of the innovations and changes that you see us coming forward with are in part a result of our discussions with our international colleagues. That's certainly true of your deliberations of the parliamentary committee on student financial assistance, where some of the things there are the result of lessons learned in other countries.

I've just had the benefit of coming back from a conference where we were looking at workplace issues. This seems to be an international trend. It's in the U.K.; it's in the United States. It's something that quite interests us.

In terms of the department and its mandate, I would refer you to the report on plans and priorities recently tabled by the minister. There we set out our vision, our mission, our mandate, our business lines, and our strategic outcomes.

• (1205)

Mr. Paul Forseth: Just as a quick supplemental, could you perhaps name some of the international links Canada has, and perhaps some of the international conferences we attend? I take it this is not just situational that a country decides to put on a symposium, but that there are ongoing permanent links and forums. Maybe you could just highlight some of those for the record.

Mr. Andrew Treusch: Some examples are the OECD, the G-7, the International Labour Organization, and the Belmont Conference, which is a conference of six nations that deals with labour market issues. Obviously, insofar as these things come up through the UN and its subordinate bodies...and a number of bilateral relations with those countries with which we have shared interest in either policy or research. That's off the top of my head.

Mr. Paul Forseth: Is there a little unit that particularly looks at the international scope of the department?

Mr. Andrew Treusch: Yes. Within my strategic policy branch we have perhaps fewer than ten persons in an international unit.

Mr. Paul Forseth: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Forseth.

Madame Gagnon.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: I'd like to get back to the issue of the protection of personal information. This can be worrisome and I think the time has come to do some research in order to get a bit more information.

In terms of some of the provisions of Bill C-23, the commissioner expressed certain concerns about privacy. Earlier, the minister told us that you were negotiating. This is done in cooperation with the commissioner or people who work in her organization. What are the concerns that have been expressed regarding certain provisions of Bill C-23? After you answer that question, could you tell us whether the provisions of Bill C-23 would supersede the limits provided for under current legislation?

[*English*]

Mr. Andrew Treusch: I welcome the opportunity to clarify the provisions related to the privacy code in the bill. They're quite important, and we've put a great deal of care into their drafting and development.

Let me clarify that there's nothing in the legislation that departs from or sets aside the Privacy Act. In fact, our legislation is complementary and consistent with the Privacy Act. It builds upon it. The Privacy Act contemplates departmental legislation. It has a specific provision related to the disclosure of personal information. It contemplates companion or accompanying legislation.

On the situation today, in the former department of HRDC we had a piecemeal approach to privacy provisions, depending upon the program and when those provisions were enacted by Parliament. So there were provisions related to employment insurance. There were provisions in the previous departmental act. There were provisions in the student financial assistance regulations, there were provisions related to the Canada Pension Plan, as well as provisions arising from the labour side. So you can see there was a piecemeal approach to privacy.

What we've done in this code is put it at the centre of the department, in the heart of our departmental legislation, so our accountabilities are clear and foremost. We've gone beyond the privacy code in putting in place penalty or sanction provisions that you will not find in the privacy code, in a more rigorous approach to privacy.

With respect to the Privacy Commissioner, I've had no indication of concern. Perhaps there's something you wish to draw to my attention. Certainly in drafting these provisions we consulted closely with the Office of the Privacy Commissioner. We have corresponded with her, asking that we be assured that her office is comfortable with the approach we've taken. We've not heard otherwise. If you want representations from the Privacy Commissioner, I assume it is within the mandate of the committee to do so directly.

•(1210)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Lessard, you have the floor.

Mr. Yves Lessard: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to understand the logic behind keeping a single wicket system even though these two departments have been split.

You understand that we don't share the same opinion on employment insurance, particularly with regard to the rules. I won't go back to what Mr. Volpe said earlier about the number of unemployed which supposedly has diminished. Fewer than 40 per cent of people who pay employment insurance premiums have access to benefits.

Therefore, this is a matter of poverty. Do you acknowledge that employment insurance can mean that there will be fewer poor people? This week, or last week, the report on child poverty was tabled. We know that when there are poor children, there are poor parents.

Under what chapter can we find anything about this issue? One would be inclined to think that it would be found under the Department of Social Development. What are we to make of the fact that there are two separate funds, which means that the employment insurance program does not deal with that part?

[*English*]

Mr. Andrew Treusch: That is a complex question, sir. There are about three aspects to it. Notwithstanding the fact that there will be what's proposed to departments through our legislation and legislation for Social Development Canada, each with its own unique and clear policy focus, we have a shared service network, so the 300 service offices that exist across Canada will continue to deliver services on behalf of both departments. I can affirm that.

With respect to employment insurance, I think the member referred to what's called the BU ratio, and I recall this being the subject of some discussion at other testimony here. I really don't want to take the valuable time of the committee, other than to refer to the report we make to Parliament, where we monitor and assess employment insurance. I think it provides all the data and discussion on different measures of EI coverage.

With respect to labour markets, I could embellish on that at some length, but I don't think it would be courteous to do so. Some of the labour market indicators we have in Canada, whether it's the participation rate, the declining unemployment rate, the growth in jobs, and the like... When we look at Quebec, for example, and we look over the past decade, over 600,000 new jobs have been created. This is just another indication of how Canada's labour market... When we refer to some of these international bodies that came up in the previous discussion, Canada is the envy of industrialized countries for our strong record on job growth.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you. Mr. Lessard, you can ask a brief question and get a brief answer.

Mr. Yves Lessard: The gentleman provided us with statistics on job creation. Can you tell us how many people lost their jobs,

according to your calculations? Moreover, could you go back to the issue of poverty? You haven't dealt with it.

•(1215)

[*English*]

Mr. Andrew Treusch: Thank you. The number I gave for Quebec, for example, is a net number. That's the overall increase. Obviously in the new economy we have a very dynamic labour market. I have a figure in mind of five million job changes in a year. So new jobs are being created, old jobs are disappearing, and people are moving all the time. The important thing is that the labour market is growing. It is creating more new jobs and more permanent jobs than ever before, and we see it in our declining unemployment rate and our increasing participation rate.

On issues of poverty, clearly these span the Government of Canada. No one department deals solely with issues of poverty. We alleviate income loss from unemployment through employment insurance. The Department of Social Development Canada plays a critical role in providing income support to seniors, children, and families. There is the tax transfer system as well, which redistributes income and provides proportionately more support to those with low incomes. So a wide variety of instruments are used to address income distribution.

In closing, on the homelessness initiatives that we do in our department, obviously we're getting into the very difficult issue of low income—just to give some illustrations.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Treusch.

I think we've come to the end of our question period.

I'd like to thank you and Madame Glover and

[*Translation*]

Also Ms. Michèle René de Cotret. Thank you very much for having answered our questions. We will continue our deliberations.

[*English*]

As far as my colleagues are concerned, please stay a few extra minutes, as I do have some business I need to discuss with you.

Thank you very much again.

[*Translation*]

No, I'm not going to suspend the meeting, because I'd like to continue. I'm sorry, I'd really like to continue.

[*English*]

Colleagues, I would like to talk to you about the continuation of this. We have not come to the end of our meeting, but I need to know where the committee wants to go.

We have now heard from witnesses, including the minister, of course, on Bill C-23. Normally, we would go on to hear the other witnesses you have chosen and then go on to study this bill clause by clause. Do you have witnesses that you wish to suggest to this committee and to our clerk?

Monsieur Devolin.

Mr. Barry Devolin: I have something I'd like to say, and I don't know if this is a point of order, a point of privilege, or just a statement about this piece of legislation.

The Chair: Please go ahead

• (1220)

Mr. Barry Devolin: This change, the creation of these two departments, effectively took place over a year ago. I appreciate that the government has authority through orders in council and that the Parliament has certain authority, but, quite frankly, it offends me that a year and a half after the fact we are here discussing and considering something that has already taken place. I'm being asked to spend my time reading material, bringing forward witnesses, and interviewing people to talk about something that has already taken place. This is after the fact.

I don't know how I formally lodge my displeasure with the actions of the government on this case.

My question, I guess, to you is, what practical difference does it make if we bring forward any witnesses, and what practical difference does it make what questions we ask here today? This decision has already been made. It's already functional, it's already in place, and we are being asked to do nothing more than rubber-stamp a decision that was made a year ago by the government or the new Prime Minister.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Devolin.

In answer to the first part of your question, you have made your feelings felt here. Of course, you always have the possibility of writing a letter to the minister in charge and repeating what you have just said before your colleagues in this committee. The facts are the facts, as you have said yourself.

What is the practical use of what we are doing right now? On the one hand, we are certainly learning a lot more about what Bill C-23 contains, and eventually what Bill C-22 contains as well. We will certainly be able to bring amendments, and if we were to bring amendments to either or both of these bills, then I would suppose the government would have to listen to these amendments, since they have to go back to the House of Commons. Even though the two departments have now been working for the last year and a half, we could still bring amendments that have to be voted on, as the bill has to be voted on by the House of Commons, eventually by the Senate, and so on.

It is not a totally useless exercise, which is what I think you think it is.

Mr. Barry Devolin: You're saying it's not totally useless—but it's largely useless, I would argue.

I guess my point is that our committee has a very full agenda, and we actually have things in front of us that haven't happened yet and that we may be able to influence. This is not my caucus opinion, but my personal opinion, that spending a lot of time on stuff that we will have incremental impact on at best, including bringing a whole bunch of witnesses forward to say a bunch of things that probably will never have any impact, is not a good use of our time.

The Chair: Well, I don't think it would probably never have any impact. This is my personal opinion. But you are absolutely free to

suggest another way of going through this bill. That is your privilege.

I'll hear Madame Gagnon, because I know she wants to...

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: I have a somewhat different opinion. We're living in a democracy, and when there's a bill on the table, we should make sure that the interests of the community are represented properly. We will have a list of witnesses. Let's determine whether it would be interesting for them to come and testify. We also have to be realistic about time constraints. This is after all a process established by Parliament. We have the right to hear the opinions of witnesses about bills. For instance, we have to ask questions in order to be able to improve a bill. I'm talking for all the members of Parliament. In order to improve a bill, we also have to hear witnesses.

With regard to the protection of personal information, it would be important to put questions to certain people who have expertise in this area and if the bill is carefully examined, it will be up to us and the political parties to decide whether we vote for or against it. I don't think we should do anything that weakens the democratic process.

The Chair: Thank you. I'll get back to you in a minute, Ms. Gagnon. Mr. Silva, it's your turn.

[*English*]

Mr. Mario Silva (Davenport, Lib.): No, Madam Chair. I just wanted to state that I don't have any witnesses to suggest, but if there are some—and Madam Gagnon mentioned there might be others, though I don't know if there are—I think we can certainly move quickly through clause by clause in this particular bill, because there's very little controversy with it.

The other thing too, just to answer part of what Mr. Devolin stated, is that I think governments have a responsibility to act when they see a certain response. It's somewhat of a duty to act quickly. If we didn't do it this way, it could take years before you would actually have these changes. There might be structural changes in the departments, and they will never be able to move on with their agenda. So if the government feels that departments have to be changed or ministers have to have different departments, they have to act quickly. But you need laws to enact that afterwards to make legislation a reality for the correct creation of the department. I think it's a way for us not to tie government's hands, or else we could be here for a very long time debating something and not knowing if there's ever going to be a division of the ministers or what their responsibilities are going to be. It could be quite confusing for a government, in fact.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Silva.

What I see around this table is that there is not a consensus, as far as your opinion is concerned, Mr. Devolin. We could have had consensus, in which case we could have even started the clause-by-clause this morning.

This is obviously not possible, if I understand correctly, Madame Gagnon.

What I would suggest, then, is that you give the clerk as quickly as possible the names of the people you wish to appear as witnesses, because we would like to call our witnesses at our next meeting, which would be this coming Thursday.

I understand you would like the Privacy Commissioner to appear. Is that correct?

Mr. Barry Devolin: Oui.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: I'd like to ask you something about that. You might ask the commissioner to come back regarding Bill C-22. In your opinion, would it be possible to ask her to come back just once to answer our questions on both bills? I'm not sure exactly how this could be done from an organizational standpoint. Ms. Gagnon and Mr. Lessard, perhaps you could offer some suggestions about this.

• (1225)

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: I have not examined the provisions, but if the same ones apply to both departments, we would have more or less the same types of questions. I do not have a problem with that.

The Chair: That would save time for the commissioner and for us, of course.

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: Let's be practical.

The Chair: I am trying to be practical, while keeping our objectives in mind.

The clerk has received a list of witnesses from the Bloc Québécois for the consideration of Bill C-23. There are several names on it. I would therefore ask the representatives of the other parties to provide me with lists of potential witnesses, and I would also like you to give me some indication as to how much time you would like to spend hearing from witnesses. The Bloc Québécois has suggested 13 witnesses. I need colleagues to indicate how much time they want to spend hearing from witnesses.

The Clerk of the Committee: Do you want to ask for the committee's opinion now and revise the entire list?

The Chair: Do we still have quorum?

The Clerk: Yes. There are two members here.

The Chair: That is fine. I will continue, but I will ask my question at the end. The list of potential witnesses that has been submitted by the Bloc Québécois is divided into four parts, and the first deals with unions. The list of unions includes the Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec (FTQ), the Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN), the Canadian Labour Congress, and the Centrale des syndicats du Québec.

If I understand correctly, Ms. Gagnon and Mr. Lessard, you want to invite the four unions; you do not want us to choose among them.

Mr. Yves Lessard: If I may, Madam Chair, I would like to make a suggestion. We can perhaps proceed as we did on the subcommittee, in other words, sometimes we can group witnesses together.

The Chair: Would you want the four groups to appear together?

Mr. Yves Lessard: Yes, if they are available. That would speed things up a little bit.

The Chair: Fine. I will ask the question this way. Is it the wish of the committee to hear from the unions? There are four of them.

Maybe I asked the question backwards. Is it the wish of the committee to hear from the four unions? Perhaps it is the other way? Is it the wish of the committee to hear the unions? If yes, is it the wish of the committee to hear from all four? If it is not the wish of the committee, the committee may decide to choose from among the four unions that I mentioned. I think we need to make a choice. Are there any comments or reactions to my suggestion?

Mr. Forseth, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Mr. Paul Forseth: Related to the unions, I think they do have some typical messages, and perhaps it's better that they have a voice, but we could ask them to send a representative, to get their message together, if we have one witness or two. They could be part of a panel. But I think there is probably a typical message from that segment that perhaps has to go on the record, and if we don't give them an opportunity, then it's just forever headaches afterwards.

• (1230)

The Chair: Are you suggesting, Mr. Forseth, if I understand correctly, that the unions be invited, but that we ask the Bloc Québécois to choose, amongst the four groups, one group that would be invited to come here?

Mr. Paul Forseth: Or they may all send a representative, but we could put it to the unions to see if they can, amongst themselves, make one presentation.

The Chair: I think that's going to be very difficult to do.

Mr. Mario Silva: There are national organizations and provincial organizations. So there are national umbrellas. It could be a representative of the national umbrella.

Mr. Paul Forseth: If we decide, first of all, how much time we're going to allot, then the witnesses are going to have to adjust to that.

The Chair: Well, immediately after we've talked about the unions, my next question is going to be exactly the same as far as business is concerned. Let me go on to the list on business, and then we'll come back to the unions.

[*Translation*]

The businesses mentioned are: the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, the Business Council on National Issues, the Canadian Restaurant and Food Services Association, and the Canadian Construction Association.

[*English*]

So I ask the same question, do you want business to be represented? If so, do you wish these businesses represented, and do you wish all these businesses to be represented?

I know you don't have the list in front of you, but there's a principle at work here.

Madame Gagnon.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: We have not yet made a decision on the first proposal regarding the unions.

The Chair: No, we have not made a decision. I am continuing because this is part of a process, in the end. I think that if we choose several groups in one category, we have to choose several in another as well. The opposite is also true.

Mr. D'Amours, you have the floor.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Madam Chair, if we decide to hear witnesses, we could do what the subcommittee that Mr. Lessard and I sat on did. Everyone was invited; they were all on the list for the meeting. Everyone had five minutes to speak, and then we went on to questions. They all appeared at the same time.

The Chair: Are you talking about the unions, businesses and organizations, or are you just talking about the first group, the unions? I want to make sure I understand you correctly.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: We can have it all. In the end, we can ask all of the management organizations, all of the labour organizations and all organizations, period, to appear.

However, we must also know our objective. I am not questioning your list. I am wondering what the objective is, in order to advance matters or improve the situation.

We are talking about restaurant owners. If I remember correctly, many of them are linked to the Canadian Federation of Independent Business. I think we have to keep our objective in mind.

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: We must study the bill. Moreover, certain groups that represent society must be aware of the effects of this bill. It is all well and good to want to move forward, but the committee has not heard what they have to say. They came to express their ideas in a very specific context.

Now, we are asking them to speak to the bill. In my opinion, it is in our best interest to improve our perception of this bill.

We chose the Canadian Labour Congress. I do not think we should have a list that is too limited. What do we mean by the word "national"? Do we mean Quebec, or Canada? We also have to have people representing different points of view from different organizations.

The Chair: Excuse me, Ms. Gagnon.

Here's what I will suggest. I am sure that the 13 or 15 groups that have been suggested by the Bloc Québécois will not all be available. That is clear. Some will accept and others will decline, because they do not have time or for another reason.

I suggest we invite all of the groups suggested by the Bloc Québécois next Tuesday, and not this Thursday, because we could not get anyone to attend. I want us to hear witnesses.

I am going to ask the clerk, if you agree, to contact all of the people suggested by the Bloc and to contact the other people suggested by the other parties. We would invite them to appear together, the same day, next Tuesday, or one week from now, at 11 a. m.

At that time, we will hear from all of the witnesses.

• (1235)

[English]

I would like to remind you that we are not here to discuss the programs of either department, whether it be for Bill C-23 or later on for Bill C-22. We are here really only to discuss the way in which that big department, HRDC, has been divided into two departments.

It is my understanding—and this is certainly what the minister has told us, and there's nothing I have read that suggests the contrary—that this is a physical separation. That has repercussions, obviously, but we're not here to discuss programs.

We've had the ministers here before and we can have the ministers here again when we discuss programs.

I have made a suggestion and I would like your reaction.

Madame Gagnon.

[Translation]

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: Madam Chair, we should make a decision first.

We are being told that we are going to do all of that in one meeting. Would it be too much to ask to have three meetings for clause-by-clause consideration of the bill? That is the question we need to ask.

It is as if we had decided that there would only be one meeting.

The Chair: There would only be one meeting to do what?

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: There would only be one meeting to meet the witnesses.

The Chair: That is precisely what I suggested.

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: I think that solution is very limited. We could hold three meetings. During two meetings, we could hear from witnesses. We will see this week if there is enough interest expressed. However, we could decide to give ourselves three weeks. That is not much. I am sorry, I meant to say three meetings.

The Chair: If the meetings last three weeks, you run the risk of being here all alone, perhaps with Mr. Lessard.

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: I am sorry. In that case, I would spend New Year's with you, Ms. Folco. It would be a pleasure. Nevertheless, we could set aside at least three working sessions to examine the bill in its entirety.

There are also other witnesses. I would like us to hear from the commissioner, but I would also like us to hear from two independent experts. We have to find these experts. We can hear one from Canada and one from Quebec. Otherwise, we would be depriving ourselves of some important clarification.

The Chair: I anticipate serious problems. I will ask committee members to take a position, but I think that your suggestion is problematic. We expect Bill C-22 to be ready by the end of this week or by the beginning of next week. If we agree to your suggestion, there will be a scheduling conflict.

Also, don't forget that we decided to adopt the report of the Subcommittee on the Employment Insurance Funds by December 17th at the latest. It has to be tabled here and we then have to table it in the House of Commons. We made that commitment. Therefore, we don't have much time left to study Bill C-23. I think I will ask other committee members about the scheduling issue. You realize that we changed our schedule almost every week. We discussed the issue of scheduling every week we met.

Mr. Devolin, you have the floor.

[English]

Mr. Barry Devolin: Thank you.

As I said earlier, I find this process frustrating because (a) we're talking about something that practically has already happened, and (b) this bill deals with the mechanical separation of a large ministry into two smaller ministries. Unless we're going to talk about why this was done—and we'd need the Prime Minister or maybe Jane Stewart here to explain to us why this unwieldy ministry had to be cut in two—I think it should be less time rather than more. I think as a committee we should establish the number of hours we're prepared to listen to people for or against this from whatever group. I don't care how it's cut up or how many apply.

I agree with your suggestion, which is that the committee set aside one meeting, which is two hours, to hear from witnesses on this. If it's actually about the division, I don't see why we can't have witnesses comment on both bills at the same time. If it's truly about how the large ministry has been divided in two, comment about one inevitably touches on the other.

The Chair: If I understand you correctly, Mr. Devolin, you are suggesting that we not hear any witnesses right away, but wait until Bill C-22 is referred to this committee. Once that is done, then we hear all the witnesses at one time on both Bill C-22 and Bill C-23. Is that correct?

• (1240)

Mr. Barry Devolin: Yes. If the discussion is around the separation of the ministry, I would think we would do both at once.

The Chair: I understood that this was what the discussion was about.

I'm starting to feel there's...not a consensus certainly, but some kind of decision.

How do you feel about this, Madame Gagnon?

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: Very well.

[Translation]

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Martin...

I apologize, Ms. Gagnon, I did not understand.

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: I said it was fine. It will just be a little tight.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Martin.

Mr. Tony Martin: I think we should take whatever time is necessary to do this piece of business justice. It's an important activity by the government. If people have witnesses they want to

bring forward who have some information that might enlighten or challenge us in terms of amendments or whatever we want to make, then I think we should take the time necessary to do that.

I like the idea that perhaps is evolving that we bring witnesses for the two bills forward at the same time in the interest of making the best use of the time we have. We're going to rise on December 17, according to the calendar, unless we want to push this off until February. I'm not sure about the feeling around that.

But certainly if we could find a way to make sure that everybody's interest in hearing from witnesses is respected, and we have a chance then to make some suggestions for amendments that are good, to make sure this bill actually does what everybody hopes it will, then I would be supporting that.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Martin.

That would also allow us to invite the Privacy Commissioner once rather than twice to speak on privacy concerning the two bills.

If I understand correctly, what we would do then is not meet this coming Thursday, because it's unlikely the bill will be referred to us by then, since the debate in the House is not taking place today, as we thought it might be. What I would suggest, then, is that we give over the December 2 meeting to the subcommittee on employment insurance.

I know some people are happy and some people are unhappy.

Mr. Peter Van Loan (York—Simcoe, CPC): We need to call witnesses, lots of them, quickly.

The Chair: I like to see the smile on your face, Mr. Van Loan.

So this Thursday, December 2, there will not be a meeting of this committee. There will instead be a meeting of the subcommittee on employment insurance. Next Tuesday, December 7, we have a possibility that Bill C-22 will be referred to us. There's a strong possibility of this because we do have four or five working days between now and next Tuesday.

If Bill C-22 is referred to this committee before the meeting, then we can ask Minister Dryden to come—pretty well at the last minute, I guess. We can ask him to come and be a witness, along with his officials. It's an “ifs and buts” situation all along in this. Then what we would do on December 9 would be to call the witnesses on Bill C-22 and Bill C-23.

In case this is the scheme that works, I would ask you to make known to the clerk as soon as possible the names of the witnesses you wish to appear before this committee. Please don't put on too many. We do want to have Christmas holidays.

Let me just go on to the alternative before I give the floor over to you, Mr. Martin. There is a possibility—fairly small, I think—that Bill C-22 will not have been referred to us by next Tuesday, in which case I will have to decide on your behalf exactly where we go. But I think it's a very small possibility right now. I will inquire of the government leader of the House exactly what his agenda is between now and next Tuesday.

Mr. Martin has the floor.

Mr. Tony Martin: On a different subject, perhaps....

•(1245)

The Chair: Do you have a question on the same subject, Madame Gagnon?

I'll come back to you, Mr. Martin.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: Even if Bill C-22 is not ready on time, nothing prevents us from hearing witnesses. In any case, when the time comes for us to study Bill C-22, we will have few questions for witnesses, but we will nevertheless be able to ask some if need be. We could not link the two things, otherwise it will slow us down, and time is of the essence.

The Chair: I would invite you to make a decision, Ms. Gagnon, because the clerk has to tell witnesses when to show up.

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: Yes, but in any case, we will hear from them.

The Chair: Yes, there's no doubt that we will hear from them.

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: You stopped at December 9th.

The Chair: Yes, I made up a new schedule with my colleagues.

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: This means that we will only have one meeting to hear from both departments. I was very open to things and very pleased. But I expected at least two meetings, which would be a concession on my part.

The Chair: Ms. Gagnon, at the very beginning of the session, the committee decided by a vote to receive the report from the Subcommittee on the Employment Insurance Funds, which is working as fast as it can to have the report ready for us. The committee is bound to review it, to vote on it and to table it in the House of Commons by the end of the session. That is our obligation.

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: Do we have to vote on Bills C-21 and C-22?

The Chair: No. If this committee decides to delay that until February, it can choose to do so. The committee will decide.

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: I agree. We can come back to that later on. I will have to discuss it with my party. We could wait until December 2nd to decide on whether to adopt the bill or not.

The Chair: That's what I proposed, Ms. Gagnon, and that's why I'm not making much progress. I'm taking it one day at a time. Otherwise, we'll have to start everything all over again. Let's see what happens by next Tuesday. Will we have Bill C-22 by then? If so, I think that things will be easier than they are now. If not, we can meet and discuss the issue again.

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: Fine.

The Chair: Does the committee agree with my suggestion? We have a consensus. Thank you so very much.

[*English*]

I beg your pardon, Mr. Martin. You had something else you wanted to bring up.

[*Translation*]

Please, the meeting is not over yet.

[*English*]

Mr. Tony Martin: I'm just wondering what the intention of the chair and the committee is concerning the subcommittee on disabilities.

The Chair: Thank you. All the parties have now suggested names for the members of this subcommittee. I understand they're meeting tomorrow. Their first meeting will be tomorrow, at which time they can work out their calendar, their objectives, and so on. It's moving forward.

Mr. Tony Martin: Okay. Merci.

The Chair: Thank you very much everyone. Merci beaucoup.

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