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Chair

The Honourable Paul DeVillers

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• (1100)

[Translation]

The Chair (Hon. Paul DeVillers (Simcoe North, Lib.)): I call to order this meeting of the Standing Committee on Justice, Human Rights, Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness.

Our witnesses are the mayors and representatives of the municipalities. We are carrying out a study on the closing of RCMP detachments in the regions. Mr. Racine, Mayor of the City of Granby, is the spokesperson.

Mr. Mayor, I would like to ask you to introduce the representatives accompanying you.

We usually give our witnesses about 10 minutes to make their presentation. However, I know that you have to share your time with all of the municipality representatives, so I will ask you to make all of your presentations in 30 or 40 minutes. In that way, the members will have time to ask their questions.

Mayor Racine, you may begin.

Mr. Guy Racine (Mayor, Reeve of the MRC Haute-Yamaska and Spokesperson for the Coalition of Mayors, City of Granby): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, for welcoming and agreeing to hear us. We very much appreciate it.

Before starting and introducing my colleagues, I'd like to take a few moments to point out the members who are with us here today. I hope I won't forget any. This presentation is quite a production.

With us are Mr. Vincent, member for Shefford—my riding—Mr. Crête, member for Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, Ms. Bonsant, member for Compton—Stanstead, the Honourable Denis Paradis, from Brome—Missisquoi, who was a major partner in this issue. Have I forgotten any members?

An hon. member: Marc Boulianne.

Mr. Guy Racine: Not to mention Marc Boulianne, member for Mégantic—L'Érable.

Pardon me; I looked around a little earlier. And yet we both have the same haircut. I should have remembered. Pardon me.

I'm told that the member for Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, Mr. Loubier, will be here in a few moments.

Mr. Chairman, with your permission, I'd also like to note the presence in this room of the former member for Shefford, Ms. Saint-

Jacques, who ardently worked on the RCMP file, and David Price. A warm hello to them.

Now allow me to introduce the mayors and the mayors' representatives here with us. Some mayors couldn't be here today.

So we have Gilles Veilleux, representative of the City of Roberval; André Langevin, mayor of the City of Coaticook, and Serge Gosselin, municipal councillor of the City of Coaticook; Jean Thériault, representative of the City of Baie-Comeau; Claude Vigneault, mayor of the municipality of Îles-de-la-Madeleine; Jean-Clause Patenaude, representative of the City of Saint-Hyacinthe; Colette Roy Laroche, mayor of the City of Lac-Mégantic; Jean D'Amour, mayor of the City of Rivière-du-Loup, and Johanne St-Pierre, his director of communications.

I am the mayor of the City of Granby and the reeve of the MRC Haute-Yamaska. I'm acting as the spokesman of the common front of mayors who find this decision unacceptable.

Here's how I'll proceed, Mr. Chairman. As the spokesperson, I'll read you the message summing up the issue as a whole. Then I'll hand over, for a brief period, perhaps two or three minutes, to the people here with me so that they can add to the information given to you.

Then we'll be pleased to answer your questions or to listen to your comments.

With your permission, I'll proceed.

Following the September 23, 2004 announcement, the mayors of the cities affected by the closing of the RCMP detachments met with Pierre-Yves Bourduas of the RCMP. The latter explained to them that the aim of this administrative decision was to redeploy the RCMP's forces so it could better fulfill its mandate.

This announcement was made at the same time as Operation Cisaille was being carried out to combat marijuana cultivation. The federal government's decision to close RCMP detachments in nine Quebec cities has led to the creation of a coalition of the mayors of the cities concerned, as well as of the Reeves of the MRCs where these RCMP detachments are located, backed by the elected members for these ridings.

• (1105)

The aim of this group's concerted efforts is to request the federal government to declare a moratorium on and review this decision.

The withdrawal of the RCMP from our communities is a serious threat to the security of the populations concerned and creates an opening for increased crime. The RCMP's presence was fostering better partnership with the various authorities in our communities and the local police forces.

Increasingly, criminal activity is extending beyond the borders of the major urban centres and the signatories to this report object to any reorganization that drains the regions of their services, at a time when, at every level, decentralization is becoming a major tool for local development.

The Annual Report of the Criminal Intelligence Service Canada dealing with organized crime in Canada in 2004 says "Illicit drug activities fuel violence unlike any other criminal activity. There are socio-economic costs associated with the illicit drug trade such as property crimes, assaults and homicides."

This same report stresses that "illicit commodities are either concealed within the larger volume of legitimate commercial and traveller movement entering through designated customs entry points or smuggled surreptitiously through the vast stretches of less controlled border areas." It also states that organized criminals will exploit less controlled areas. It is noteworthy that the Executive Committee of the Criminal Intelligence Service Canada (CISC) is chaired by the RCMP Commissioner.

Let's talk about Baie-Comeau and the Baie-Comeau region. There are almost 600 km separating Baie-Comeau from the Labrador border along Highway 389 in a non-urban and unwatched area, leaving the way clear for the many narcotics smugglers. The closest RCMP detachment is in Sept-Îles, 240 km away, leaving Baie-Comeau with no federal policing service. The Baie-Comeau SQ detachment has only four police officers in its narcotics-related organized crime squad to cover over 900 km of roads, that is to say 600 km with the Labrador border, 200 km with Tadoussac and 120 km with Baie-Trinité.

Since the closing of the Baie-Comeau RCMP detachment, confidential information indicates that no maritime surveillance is happening at all. Furthermore, no joint SQ-RCMP projects are being contemplated for Baie-Comeau which, in the past, have led to arrests for trafficking or possession for the purpose of trafficking. These joint operations were making it possible to fight drug trafficking better.

Since September 11, 2001, the RCMP's priority has been focused on border entry points, with little surveillance of the maritime routes. The personnel at Sept-Îles consists of one supervisor and three police officers who have to cover the area from Tadoussac to Blanc-Sablon and from Schefferville to Anticosti. Since their workload is already excessive for the Sept-Îles area alone, maritime surveillance is currently nonexistent. The people who were working in Baie-Comeau were not transferred to Sept-Îles, but to different provinces in Canada. From eight officers on duty in Sept-Îles, there are now no more than four. We can assert that the "way is open" for traffickers in Baie-Comeau, via the Seaway.

For the City of Baie-Comeau, the entire maritime component of the St. Lawrence River is being left without surveillance. A lot of narcotics trafficking takes place on vessels travelling in these waters

and using the Baie-Comeau harbour and the Alcoa and Cargill Ltée wharfs.

• (1110)

The federal wharf received 68 vessels in 2003, Alcoa 78 and Cargill 119. Those vessels came from Algeria, Brazil, Sweden, Asia and the United States.

For Baie-Comeau, in spite of the Sûreté du Québec's efforts, their personnel is clearly insufficient: four police officers are assigned to the organized crime squad to watch Highways 138 and 389 to Labrador, giving narcotics traffickers free rein.

The population of the MRC Manicouagan, of which the City of Baie-Comeau is part, is 31,479 residents and, to this number, must be added 3,600 Aboriginal people who represent 11.4 percent of the total population.

Let's talk about Coaticook. The MRC de Coaticook has 18,500 inhabitants and would be henceforth served by the Sherbrooke RCMP located 35 kilometers away and 40 minutes travel time. The agricultural producers in the Coaticook region are dealing with pot growers who invade their land and corn fields.

The MRC de Coaticook runs along 30 km of the US border with the states of Vermont and New Hampshire and this border would be left without surveillance except for the three border crossing points located on Highways 253, 141 and 147. Finally, in the Coaticook area, Highways 253 (East-Hereford — Beecher Falls), 141 (Hereford and Canaan), and 147 (Stanhope) are unwatched.

As regards the City of Granby and the Granby region, the RCMP has been providing an essential presence in Granby since 1949. Granby has no more than three police officers to cover a very vast territory comprising three border crossing points. The day after the announcement, the RCMP building was covered with graffiti saying "Good riddance!". All that was missing was the applause.

The elected member for Shefford in 2003, Diane St-Jacques, with the assistance of the mayors, prefects and RCMP, SQ and municipal police management, had obtained the government's assurance that the Granby detachment would remain open.

We were told that the RCMP was to consult the elected members, mayors and other stakeholders before making any decision whatsoever, but instead we were faced with a *fait accompli*, without any consultation having taken place, with the excuse that it had to redeploy its forces to the major centres.

One might legitimately ask what Drummondville has as a major centre that Granby does not. We feel that this choice is unjustified.

The closing of the RCMP detachment represents a terrible loss for the city and the MRC, because, without a strong police presence, the area is open to organized crime and criminals of all sorts. The government is giving free rein to cannabis growing, narcotics trafficking, alcohol bootlegging, motorcycle gangs and terrorism, while weakening the enforcement of over 130 federal laws.

Our municipal security service in Granby cooperates regularly with the RCMP on almost a daily basis on a number of matters: criminal motorcycle gangs, narcotics trafficking, alcohol bootlegging, criminal investigations, and so on.

•(1115)

Should we conclude that one wants to make way for organized crime in the area? Because this closure is an invitation to organized crime to head to the Eastern Townships, to our regions where the borders are open.

The Sûreté du Québec and the municipal police forces cannot pick up all the slack for the area served. Along with undermanning at the Sûreté du Québec due to the map revision in 2002, 174 municipal police forces have merged into 44. There is widespread dissatisfaction among the cities served by the SQ and the municipal police force's job has grown. And who will end up paying for it? The citizens, of course. It will cost more to boost municipal police forces, because the SQ is undermanned and the RCMP is closing its detachments.

Our citizens pay municipal taxes for municipal policing, provincial taxes for the SQ and federal taxes for the RCMP. But we are not receiving these services and, on top of that, we are not being consulted.

Some RCMP staff members have, in fact, stated that their numbers are clearly insufficient to combat organized crime. As proof, the number of officers in Granby dropped from six to three in one year. The City of Granby has 46,500 inhabitants, in the very heart of the MRC Haute-Yamaska, which has 78,000 inhabitants. We will become an excellent place for organized crime, near to everything and far from everything.

As for the Magdalen Islands, the federal and provincial police authorities are aware that marine space is frequently used as a channel for narcotics trafficking. With the Magdalen Islands being located in the middle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, the RCMP officers were vigilant in combating marine and air smuggling traffic. We can expect narcotics smuggling to proliferate once the RCMP is no longer watching the marine space.

In the Magdalen Islands, the closing of the RCMP detachment will affect the surveillance of marine and air narcotics smuggling and the confrontations between seal hunters and anti-seal hunting activists are likely to increase.

For the Magdalen Islands, it is primarily the marine space that will not be watched for possible seaborne or airborne traffic.

As for the Joliette region, the MRC de Joliette detachment has existed since 1949. Two years ago, Joliette could count on more than a dozen officers serving its territory. This year, there are no more than four officers and, tomorrow, there will be nobody.

Joliette cannot concur with the plan concocted by management that will have policing services for the MRC concentrated in Saint-Jérôme or Trois-Rivières. This territory will be orphaned, without a federal policing service nearby. Yet, like everywhere else, crime is not decreasing. It is the entire Lanaudière region that will be deprived of policing services. Furthermore, the community pays taxes that should provide it with the same services as elsewhere.

The Joliette region will be doubly penalized: firstly, by losing personnel that the citizens have paid for and, secondly, by having to increase the number of provincial or municipal officers in order to

get the same services. It is common knowledge that reducing the number of police officers has always resulted in an increase in crime.

•(1120)

The population is worried because it seems that the RCMP is already quietly vacating the premises. The detachment is already no longer taking calls for complaints but is referring them to Saint-Jérôme.

Is the Joliette RCMP detachment effectively closed and is it being wound up even before we can be heard by the Justice Committee? Is the consultation process only for show or to have us believe that we can influence the decision?

What I'm saying about Joliette we've heard about Granby and the Magdalen Islands. As you'll see in the rest of the presentation, which is coming to an end, that will be repeated. The dismantling has begun, and we're appearing before the committee today in order to be heard. It's somewhat ironic, but we have evidence in our regions that the dismantling has begun.

In Lanaudière, the RCMP officers were handling close to 250 cases a year and conducting 100 or so searches. The statistics for the past few years attest to this.

We are thus opposed to the closing of the RCMP detachment in Joliette. We do not want to be treated like a second-class region. We are a full-fledged region and we demand the same rights and privileges as other regions of Quebec and Canada. We therefore insist that the government leave the detachment and officers as they are. The Lanaudière region deserves to be treated equitably. We demand the same services as elsewhere. It is our strictest right.

As I mentioned, the same sentence could have been repeated from city to city.

Moving on to the City of Lac-Mégantic, the RCMP has been there for over 50 years. The methods of the criminal groups have changed but they are now increasingly found operating locally, in rural areas, in more insidious forms. For the MRC de Granit, its low population density, accessibility and isolated farm and forest land are conducive to the growing, dealing and distribution of cannabis. This region is a preferred doorway for exporting cannabis in exchange for other narcotics from the United States. The proximity of the Canada-US border (31 km) and the reassignment of the RCMP officers to Sherbrooke (130 km from Lac-Mégantic) and Saint-Georges de Beauce (110 km from Lac-Mégantic) will mean that they will no longer be able to carry out regular preventive patrols along the border. The region comprises 171 kilometers of Canada-US border along the states of Maine and New Hampshire. The large distances to cover significantly reduce the ability of officers to respond quickly to emergency calls from customs and immigration officers.

The closing of the RCMP detachments for the border municipalities will allow the criminal groups, clandestine immigrant smugglers and terrorist organizations to operate more easily. The RCMP detachments in our municipalities and the preventive patrols on our territory are deterrents in the fight against organized crime. The government's restructuring is thus weakening police intervention in the rural regions.

There are close to 90,000 inhabitants in the City of Rivière-du-Loup and region and approximately 100 km of its border is shared with the United States. Its geographical situation makes it a very spread-out area with concentrated urbanized areas. The secondary roads and “rangs” are great places for illicit activities, mainly due to their isolation and low population density. The main criminal activities observed in this region are related to drugs (growing, distribution and sale), contraband (alcohol and cigarettes) and theft networks. The closing of the RCMP detachment puts the region in a vulnerable position because it will be exposed.

●(1125)

The presence of a well-known motorcycle gang in the Pocatière area confirms that criminal organizations are no longer solely active in the major centres but that regional communities also have to contend with them.

The Rivière-du-Loup region includes infrastructures that are conducive to and facilitate the transshipment of illicit goods, whether it be via the airport, the wharf facilities or the road system. With the closing of the RCMP detachments, the municipal public security services will have additional responsibilities thrust upon them for which they do not have the required expertise to conduct investigations under the many complex federal laws, especially as this type of mandate does not fit the level of service.

Furthermore, some crimes take place in the cities but they originate in neighbouring municipalities where the local police have no jurisdiction to intervene. In the same vein, many municipalities currently deplore the reduction in the number of patrols carried out by the Sûreté du Québec in their cities, since their municipal police force was abolished.

The Rivière-du-Loup region has many unwatched roads and trails in the Pohénégamook, Témiscouata and Kamouraska areas that can be accessed by various means of transportation such as four-wheel drive vehicles, snowmobiles, etc.

The removal of services inevitably means added costs for our citizens.

As for Roberval, the priority that the RCMP claims to be giving to the Aboriginal issue also opens up a number of questions for us. The Aboriginal communities that are located near urban centres may be properly served, perhaps, but what about the more northern communities of the Innu, Cree and Atikamek.

The demographic statistics are well known: a non-Aboriginal Quebec family produces 1.43 children per family, whereas Quebec Aboriginal families produce 4.3 children per family. Thirty percent of the population in these communities is under 16 years of age with all the attending social miseries (alcoholism, substance abuse, suicide, sexual abuse) experienced by such communities. The RCMP has no known strategy to follow up on these issues than to close the detachments neighbouring these communities. They surely do not realize how fragile the situation is.

Nobody can be happy about this situation and the presence of the RCMP on federal lands is essential. The Sûreté du Québec must support the RCMP and the Aboriginal police forces but the responsibility for supporting local police forces rests primarily with the federal government. In this geographical context, what message

does the Canadian government wish to deliver to the Quebec regions and the Aboriginal communities?

Lastly, before concluding, I'd like to talk about the Saint-Hyacinthe region. For a number of years, the Saint-Hyacinthe region has been contending with organized crime squatting on farmland for the purpose of growing large amounts of cannabis. With the presence of the RCMP detachment over the past few years, the situation has greatly improved. The RCMP represents an important deterrent in the fight against organized crime. The RCMP and the SQ exchange information almost daily.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, the mayors request that the Solicitor General decree a moratorium on the decision announced regarding the reassignment of the personnel of nine RCMP detachments in Quebec, especially as this decision was made without any real consultation having taken place. They invite the Solicitor General to review this matter, stay the decision and give back to the municipalities the personnel needed to carry out the RCMP's mandates.

●(1130)

By closing the nine RCMP detachments in Quebec, the Canadian government is sending a clear message to criminal groups: “Come out to the regions, there is no more surveillance.” The new policy advocated by the government in the RCMP issue seems to be based more on an internal management operation rather than on a real concern to better protect the borders and help stop organized crime and terrorism.

A complete analysis of criminal movements operating in the regions is urgently needed, unless one already exists and has been ignored. It seems unlikely that the use of border detection will be as efficient and effective as systematic patrolling. The Americans realized this quickly on September 11, 2001. Following the atrocious and tragic events in New York, the media brought out the fact that the American administration might have focused too much on intelligence to the detriment of a more deterrent local presence.

No detection surveillance or intelligence-oriented techniques could be as great a deterrent as a local presence. The minimum number of officers and necessary funds must be given back to the regions so that we can fight crime and the resulting social problems effectively. By losing the RCMP personnel in our municipalities, we lose the synergy with our police forces and the stakeholders in the community.

Everyone is decrying this decision: the mayors of the nine cities concerned; the MRC prefects; the Association des policiers provinciaux; the Fédération des policiers et policières municipaux du Québec; the Fraternité des policiers de la Montérégie; the Association de la Gendarmerie Royale du Canada au Québec. We are unanimous in requesting that this decision be reversed, or at the very least that a moratorium be decreed, to re-examine the whole situation.

We request that we be ensured that our taxes provide us with the same services as elsewhere. Crime and organized crime circles are not confined to any regions, cities or borders and do not need a consultation study or to be heard by committees in order to act. They are where we are not. They look for the weak link. Do not make way for them because, rest assured, they will come, if they have not already done so.

Mr. Chairman and committee members, thank you for your attention. With your permission, I'm going to hand over to the representatives and mayors here with me today. They will round out the brief description I've given you of the regions as a whole. I'll start with the mayor of Rivière-du-Loup, Mr. D'Amour.

• (1135)

Mr. Jean D'Amour (Mayor, City of Rivière-du-Loup): Thank you very much, Mr. Racine. Ladies and gentlemen, first I want to thank you for receiving us this morning. This is a particularly important subject for us.

First, I'll say that the RCMP presence in Rivière-du-Loup dates back to 1932. At that time, we had nine officers; from nine, the number fell to seven, then to two. We've finally just been told that, with only two resource persons, they can't adequately serve the area. I can't do anything but agree with that. With two persons, how can anyone do a proper job?

I don't intend to return to what my colleague, Mr. Racine, said a moment ago about Rivière-du-Loup. Simply to clarify the context, I will say that Rivière-du-Loup is roughly 110 kilometers from the Atlantic Provinces and approximately 100 kilometers from Maine. We own an airport and have a deep water port nearby, the seaport of Gros-Cacouna.

In short, there is a lot of traffic entering Rivière-du-Loup. With regard to the centralization of RCMP operations in Rimouski and Saint-Georges de Beauce, I would point out that Rimouski is approximately 120 kilometers from Rivière-du-Loup and Saint-Georges de Beauce 277 kilometers. You can imagine the kind of situation this leads to in Rivière-du-Loup.

Mr. Bourduas, who was asked how the RCMP would continue protecting the roads that are already protected and protecting the 100 or 150 access ways scattered over the area which are not, told us that that could be done electronically. He told us—and I take the liberty of repeating his words—that access via certain roads was monitored electronically and that RCMP officers did checks. They don't move in a case of a deer, but they do if they observe regular traffic. Can you imagine a smuggler deciding that Tuesday morning at nine o'clock is his day and time? I don't think so. This situation is causing a lot of concern in Rivière-du-Loup.

Lastly, let me tell you that, at a time when there has never been so much drug and narcotic activity in the area, the RCMP, by the actions it is taking today, that is to say its reassignment process, will jump-start the crime industry like never before. This concerns us. Today drugs are being found in elementary schools. I don't know whether that disturbs you, but that concerns me, particularly as a mayor and the father of four children.

Now I'm going to talk about the effects of this situation on police departments, both municipal departments and the Sûreté du Québec.

First I'll say that a municipal police department doesn't have all the expertise that the RCMP has. To conduct investigations under federal statutes, which are particularly complex—particularly since that type of mandate is not consistent either with the level of service, as I said earlier—our police department is being given additional responsibilities because some responsibilities have been taken away from the RCMP's Rivière-du-Loup detachment: I'm thinking here of the transportation and arrest of persons whose federal parole has been suspended. Furthermore, since the RCMP office no longer receives counterfeit cases, Rivière-du-Loup's Service de la sécurité publique has to forward them to the RCMP in Rimouski.

I should also say that many Quebec municipalities and cities are currently criticizing the Sûreté du Québec's low level presence in their areas. We won't conceal that fact. Consider, for example, the MRC de Rivière-du-Loup. There is currently only one patrol vehicle, and sometimes, when police officers have to take leave, the area is served by the MRC de Kamouraska. We're not greatly reassured by this, not to mention the fact that, in the past six or seven years, the organized crime squad, which was established in Rivière-du-Loup, has been centralized in Rimouski. That's another nice bit of business. All these denunciations about the Sûreté du Québec aren't at all reassuring either.

On November 25, 2004, very recently, a news item was published in the media concerning the SQ's intention to cut the number of its call centres currently in the various Quebec regions from 11 to two. My impression is that, when the cities pay, the governments say that achieving level 1 places numerous demands on the municipal police departments, but, when it's the Sûreté du Québec or the RCMP—and that's what we're talking about today—and it's the government that's paying, then they do reassignments.

I've examined this matter in a relatively exhaustive way with the members of our council in recent weeks, and I'd be tempted to tell you that we're talking here about the RCMP working for the RCMP. I'm referring directly to Mr. Bourduas' remarks. He told us that he had to rationalize, to implement cuts. So they're rationalizing in the regions.

The studies that have been conducted, including a document by ENAP, which we will be able to submit, refer to this phenomenon. Ultimately, if the regions are opened up, the major centres will be able to supply themselves with narcotics more easily.

•(1140)

It goes even further than that. Without being irresponsible, I'm going to push things a bit further. My colleague referred to September 11 a little earlier. We have common borders with the states of Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine. President Bush was in Canada last year. They talked about border protection. Jean Lapierre made a speech to the Fédération des chambres de commerce du Québec in early October. I heard it; I was sitting beside him. The most important thing for him, as Minister of Transport, is border protection in order to protect our international trade, our trade with the United States, which is entirely legitimate. Mr. Lapierre was very surprised when I subsequently went to see him and told him that we had never been consulted on the subject. I told him that we felt his speech was entirely responsible in the circumstances, particularly since the events of September 11, but that we had never been consulted.

I invite you to ask Jacques Chagnon, Quebec's Minister of Public Safety, whether he was consulted on the subject. I met him a month ago and I asked him the question. You'll be surprised at his answer, if you ask him the question. He told me he had been informed, but that he, the Minister of Public Safety, had not been consulted.

Are we going to leave this in the hands of a structure? I have a great deal of esteem and respect for Mr. Bourduas. I understand he has budgets that must be met, but this mustn't be done on the backs of the Quebec regions. I find that very hard to accept, and I'm going to denounce this situation at every opportunity.

Last week, some bar owners came to see me at my office. They were concerned about the possibility that a criminal group might establish itself in our area by buying other bars. I'm experiencing this reality. I'm the mayor of a city. One of my primary responsibilities, as is the case for my colleagues, is public safety. The fact that bar owners tell us to beware of what's coming seriously concerns me.

The effects on the community are numerous. Mr. Racine referred a little earlier to the annual report of the Canadian Criminal Intelligence Service. That service is headed by Mr. Bourduas. Read the report and look at the reassignment plan. You'll see inconsistencies and absurdities that speak for themselves.

I won't go on ad infinitum. I'm getting to the end. Don't worry.

Our understanding is this: the RCMP appears to be attributing the closing of the Rivière-du-Loup detachment to the fact that budgets have been cut in recent years. The Rivière-du-Loup detachment suffered significant budget cuts. Mandates were withdrawn. With less budgetary flexibility, they no longer have the means to conduct investigations, at a time when there are more narcotics than ever before in the area. You only have to watch the news. We get information on this every day. It's then much easier to justify position cuts by saying that the office is less effective.

I'm going to tell you what we've experienced back home. We've found it gut-wrenching. We learned through the media that, as a result of the meetings and discussions we had in Quebec City, the RCMP offices of certain regions might close sooner. We met in the first few days of October and made submissions. On October 22, they came to town, to Rivière-du-Loup, and did an equipment inventory. I invite you to check that. What's worse, there was a case

of flagrant contempt. On November 1, an airplane landed in Rivière-du-Loup with six persons on board, seven including the pilot. They had come to close the office in Rivière-du-Loup. They found themselves in a tough spot because they learned that some investigations were still under way. As though there were no such thing as a telephone.

We mayors have to experience these kinds of situations. This means that our police department will have to be even more vigilant at a time when the Sûreté du Québec—it has to be admitted—is less and less present. And now there's the RCMP case in addition to that.

That's the conclusion I've come to. It's as though municipal authorities told our snow remover: "There are three neighbourhoods in the city of Rivière-du-Loup: Saint-François, Saint-Patrice and Saint-Ludger. From now on, for economy's sake, don't plow Saint-Ludger. When a storm comes, we'll call you and you can go to Saint-Ludger. The rest of the time, forget about it. We have to rationalize." That's what the RCMP is doing. It says it's redeploying its personnel to the major centres and going to the small towns only if they report specific things. I don't accept that at all.

Thank you for listening to us because it's important. Correct me if I'm wrong, but there are 18,344 citizens in the City of Rivière-du-Loup. I didn't count them to see if they were all there this morning, but we have their support, and those people are concerned.

•(1145)

The Chair: Thank you. I must warn you that we have to stop at 1:00 p.m. If we want to have time for discussions with the members, you'll have to be more brief.

Mayor Racine, over to you.

Mr. Guy Racine: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Now that Mr. D'Amour is gone, the worst is over. I find it hard to control him, but I'm not his reeve, just his colleague. As I say, the worst is over and the best is yet to come. I'll be in trouble for that, Mr. Chairman.

Without any further delay, I'm going to hand over to the mayor of the City of Coaticook, Mr. Langevin.

Mr. Langevin.

Mr. André Langevin (Mayor, City of Coaticook): Thank you, Mr. Racine.

Mr. Chairman, committee members, thank you for welcoming us. I'll be brief, out of respect for my colleagues who have a few words to say.

RCMP management says it has to regroup its personnel in order to address priorities such as organized crime, terrorism, Aboriginal people and international services. In their view, the small towns and rural regions, even border regions, no longer require their continuing presence.

I have in my hand articles from *La Tribune*, a newspaper in Sherbrooke, in the Eastern Townships, which appeared yesterday and today. You have copies of them. I'm only going to read you this:

Tower sabotaged by terrorists? Explosives planted on a Hydro power line in Coaticook.

This happened less than two kilometers from the U.S. border. You can imagine, Mr. Chairman and committee members, that our neighbours, our American friends are very concerned about a situation like this.

Reference was made to cannabis. Coaticook is a highly agricultural region, and our farmers are frightened by being harassed by people involved in marijuana and cannabis. The Coaticook region runs along the U.S. border for nearly 35 kilometers. The RCMP has been in Coaticook since the 1930s, since 1933, more precisely. We've always acknowledged the importance of a detachment and officers in Coaticook, because it's important that the area be covered by the RCMP.

This question should be put to RCMP management: what's being done about prevention? We're always told that's important. How can you engage in prevention from 50 or 100 kilometers away when you can see today that the border posts are deserted? How can anyone consider that a police presence is less important in the rural and border areas? It's strange. The mayors and representatives of those cities and regions weren't consulted, much less listened to.

From what we know, gentlemen, you weren't consulted that much either in that negotiation. We're asking ourselves a serious question: who decides in this country, senior civil servants or elected representatives? We represent cities, regions, but you were elected to be part of the Government of Canada. How is it that these kinds of decisions are made and senior public servants consult no one? We trust you to defend the interests of our regions. In an election campaign, you tell us you won't forget our regions. And yet, every year, sometimes every month, decisions are made to cut services in our small towns and regions. We want you to defend our point of view. That's very important for the survival of the regions and small towns in Canada.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman and members.

•(1150)

Mr. Guy Racine: Thank you very much, Mr. Langevin.

Mr. Chairman, I'm now going to hand over to Mr. Veilleux, the representative of the City of Roberval.

Mr. Gilles Veilleux (Representative, City of Roberval): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Members, thank you for receiving us.

I'll start by telling you that, in Roberval, we mainly pay attention to the Aboriginal aspect. The City of Roberval had been served by the RCMP detachment since 1944. I worked with them myself because I had a 30-year career at the Sûreté du Québec. It's sad for a police officer to see an area abandoned by a large police force like the RCMP, which has enormous investigation and work resources. We talk about all kinds of things, drugs and other things as well.

Very recently, in our little municipality, there were two major seizures of drugs under hydroponic cultivation worth several millions of dollars. As my colleagues mentioned, drugs have now entered the elementary schools and are in contact with minors. We were told we were going to be given resources.

I'm going to quote a sentence from Mr. Bourduas, with all due respect:

Over the next year, Division C will continue to address the RCMP's strategic priorities and to be involved in the community by supporting community programs for youths and Aboriginal people in order to maintain a high level of service to Quebec citizens.

How can you say such a thing when nine territories in Quebec have been left without surveillance, including ours, where there are four Aboriginal reserves, which are federal territories: Obedjiwan, 350 kilometers from the Chicoutimi detachment, and Waswanipi, more than 400 kilometers from Chicoutimi? These areas have been left in isolation.

It has been left up to the Sûreté du Québec, which, as one of my colleagues said, has been completely overwhelmed since the municipal police forces were integrated, to cover the Obedjiwan reserve. A detachment of 10 to 15 officers goes there every two weeks, paid by the federal government, and we're told they lack resources. The federal government pays the Sûreté du Québec, which is already overwhelmed, so that it can provide police coverage in the area. This is abandonment. These are extreme costs.

Mr. D'Amour mentioned organized crime. When you've been on a police force as I have, you go to bars and you observe. Organized crime was largely dismantled through the spring 2001 operation, with mixed regional squads, squads like Carcajou. They dismantled organized crime on a large scale. But they're not stupid: you uproot a weed, and thousands of weeds grow back.

You can see in the bars that they're reorganizing very well. As Mr. D'Amour said, they're buying hotels. They're buying hotels back home as well. We increasingly see them organizing in bars. They used to hold meetings in secret; now they feel a little safer. The Sûreté du Québec is overwhelmed. There's no more municipal police force, and the RCMP has left the area. As my colleague said, I think they're taking over the place.

We're asking you and begging you not to accept this state of affairs. We need high-quality services, like an RCMP force. We absolutely need them. Let us keep them; I beg you, let us keep them. Thank you.

•(1155)

Mr. Guy Racine: Thank you very much for your presentation.

Mr. Chairman, I wasn't lying when I told you the best was yet to come. We've had a demonstration of that.

Without any further delay, I'll hand over to mayor Claude Vigneault, from the Magdalen Islands.

Mr. Mayor.

Mr. Claude Vigneault (Mayor, Municipality of Îles-de-la-Madeleine): Thank you, Mr. Racine.

Mr. Chairman, thank you very much for allowing us these few minutes to tell you about a major concern, that of all the municipalities affected by the closing of the various RCMP detachments.

In the Magdalen Islands, we have a population of 13,000 inhabitants, Canadians who are currently very concerned about this decision. In addition, every year, we have considerable tourist activity, which brings in traffic of 58,000 to 60,000 visitors.

The Magdalen Islands are located some 230 kilometers off the Gaspé coast, approximately 80 kilometers from Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia. As you can see, it's a hub, located in the middle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, where it's possible to engage in illegal trafficking.

As the mayor of the municipality, I'd say that such a rapid and dramatic elimination of the personnel that ensures citizens' safety means that we are not here today with a light heart. People tell us that Ottawa will have to listen to all the alarm calls that will be made in the coming days. You need only look at the local newspapers: for more than a month now, people have asked the federal government to be more watchful, to be more attentive to our regions.

For a very long time now, we have been looking for solutions in an attempt to resolve matters at all levels. The Magdalen Islands environment is highly fragile, in social terms in particular, but also in terms of erosion. Mr. Chairman, you have power in a matter such as this. We hope that, after listening to the comments of our representative, Mr. Racine, you will understand in the coming weeks that this is an alarm call.

Why are our regions so hard hit? Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island are absolutely unaffected by any personnel cuts. So we're very concerned. I hope that all the delegations accompanying us, ladies and gentlemen, will show solidarity in reacting very quickly starting tomorrow. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Guy Racine: Thank you, Mr. Mayor. I'll now hand over to the representative of the City of Baie-Comeau, Jean Thériault.

Mr. Jean Thériault (Representative, City of Baie-Comeau): Good morning, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for hearing us.

In Baie-Comeau, we feel that the detachment closing will have major impact. The port is the busiest in Quebec and receives cargo from around the world. The recent past has shown that investigators had to get lucky to intercept an illegal cargo. You need only think of the 45-gallon barrels found at Rivière-à-Tonnerre. Now with a single detachment in Sept-Îles, we're convinced that it will take miracles. I think this is an opening, almost a gift, that we're giving traffickers all along the St. Lawrence River.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

• (1200)

Mr. Guy Racine: Thank you very much, Mr. Thériault. I'll now hand over to the representative of the City of Saint-Hyacinthe, Jean-Claude Patenaude.

Mr. Jean-Claude Patenaude (Representative, City of Saint-Hyacinthe): Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, following Mr. Racine's preamble on the status of the situation in Saint-Hyacinthe, I would like to provide you with some additional information.

First of all, on September 23, 2004, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, through its commander in Quebec, announced a broad restructuring plan, including, among other things, the closing of nine regional RCMP offices in Quebec. The Saint-Hyacinthe office was one of them. This is not a new phenomenon: approximately five

years ago, Mr. Loubier was faced with a similar case, when there was talk of cutting personnel, indeed of even closing the office.

First of all, we would like to tell you that we were very surprised to learn that the RCMP was preparing to close the Saint-Hyacinthe detachment. Five years ago, when we were faced with the same situation, we managed to convince those responsible that closing regional offices in Quebec was not a good idea and especially that it was not in the interests of the Saint-Hyacinthe region.

So we want to tell you that we profoundly disagree with this decision. It has nothing to do with the objectives of efficiency stated by Deputy Commissioner Bourduas in a news release announcing the restructuring.

Need I recall that Montérégie, and the large region of Saint-Hyacinthe and Acton Vale in particular, have been coping with a terrible curse for a number of years now: squatting on agricultural land by organized crime in order to cultivate large quantities of cannabis? In addition, these criminal groups have national and international branches.

The situation has vastly improved in recent years. We believe that the presence of an RCMP office in our area has greatly contributed to that improvement. However, the effort should especially not be abandoned. Closing the office would definitely send a very wrong message.

We feel that our fellow citizens are safer as a result of the presence of RCMP officers in our area. Closing the RCMP detachments would send a clear message to the various criminal groups in Quebec that they can now operate more freely in the areas abandoned by the RCMP. The mere presence of an RCMP office is a deterrent in the fight against organized crime and an essential and complementary tool to the work done by the Sûreté du Québec.

Every year, the Saint-Hyacinthe detachment handles at least 300 cases, most of which concern drug traffickers. So we repeat that we profoundly disagree with the decision to close the Saint-Hyacinthe RCMP detachment. Madam Minister, we ask you please to intervene to set with unwarranted decision aside.

After that preamble, I should tell you that I too am a former police officer, with 33 years' experience, including 11 in criminal investigations. I had the privilege of working with officers from the Sûreté du Québec and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Our relations were very good. We conducted two major operations in the Saint-Hyacinthe region every year, and the crime rate fell sharply following those operations, and we have evidence to support that statement. Is it necessary for us to keep our RCMP officers? Yes, they must be kept. The appropriate and necessary efforts must be made to ensure better protection.

Mr. Guy Racine: Thank you very much, Mr. Patenaude.

Mr. Chairman, I've kept the dessert for the end. I now hand over to the mayor of the City of Lac-Mégantic, Colette Roy Laroche.

Ms. Colette Roy Laroche (Mayor, City Lac-Mégantic): Thank you, Mr. Racine.

Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, almost everything has already been said. So I'll try to be brief.

I represent a city whose population, of approximately 22,000 inhabitants, lives in an immense rural area. What characterizes our region is of course its low population density, but it's also a vast forested area. As Mr. Racine mentioned, the Canada-U.S. border extends 171 kilometers through our area. In addition, as we've already mentioned to you, the detachments that are nearest to us and where there are control measures are more than 100 kilometers away.

Last year, the municipal council and I made submissions to our federal MP, Mr. Binet. We obtained his support and that of David Price in defending our case. A year ago, we were reassured about the closing of the Lac-Mégantic detachment, among others. The City of Lac-Mégantic forwarded a resolution to the Solicitor General on September 11, 2003. However, in July of this year, the Deputy Prime Minister informed us that the RCMP had undertaken an analysis of its resources in Quebec, but that no decision had been made about the allocation of those resources. You have that letter; it's in our file.

We have a lot of questions and we're very concerned about the following facts. In July of this year, there was only one officer left at the Lac-Mégantic RCMP detachment. A few days later, on August 30, the detachment was closed for good. Today there's only one officer left.

Going along with what's already been said, I'm asking you, on behalf of the citizens of the region of Granit and the City of Lac-Mégantic, for the reasons already given, to review this decision. We must maintain the services of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in our regions, particularly in the sparsely populated, isolated rural areas.

Thank you.

•(1205)

The Chair: Mr. Racine.

Mr. Guy Racine: Thank you very much, Madam Mayor.

Mr. Chairman, we've now covered all the municipalities concerned, except for my own. So, as mayor of the City of Granby and reeve of the MRC, I'll take the liberty of adding a few words on the situation of Granby. We cover two ridings, Shefford and Brome-Missisquoi, which are represented respectively by Mr. Vincent and Mr. Paradis.

I would mention that there are border posts in these two ridings. I don't want to go back to the importance of ensuring the supervision of those posts: that was done earlier. However, I want to talk to you about the presence of the RCMP detachment in downtown Granby, which covers both ridings.

We get the impression that we're somehow the victims of our own excellence. At the RCMP, they told us that the forces would be redeployed to be sent to Drummondville and Saint-Jean. I have absolutely nothing against those cities. When I say that we're the victims of our own excellence, I'm alluding to the fact that Granby has distinguished itself in Quebec by eliminating its debt and, consequently, by achieving one of the lowest tax rates. In the minds of RCMP officials, Granby can definitely afford to increase the

budgets of its municipal police force since it has preserved its police department, in an attempt to offset the RCMP's staff shortages and withdrawal of services. Perhaps it's for that reason that the decision was made to make the transfer to Drummondville and Saint-Jean.

Mr. Chairman, I want to say that this kind of magical thinking is false. I'm talking to you about money because, when we nine mayors met Mr. Bourduas in Quebec City, he drew a comparison that somewhat stunned us. I'm happy I already have almost no hair because I would probably have lost a lot then. Regarding the presence of police officers in the small municipalities, he told us that their salary, which is \$63,000, was a bit high for de luxe gardeners. He was alluding there to the cultivation of marijuana.

If I told my municipal police officers, who earn approximately \$50,000 a year, to let citizens file joint reports and to respond only to given situations, I'm not sure I'd be kept at city hall for very long. Accountability goes together with the fact that our face is posted on telephone poles every four years. All of Quebec will go through that experience in 2005. When you hear comments like that, you realize that accountability doesn't carry much weight. Mr. Bourduas gave us a perfect demonstration of that. He came to us with a well substantiated file on the reasons why this kind of rationalization had to be done. He told us it wasn't for financial reasons, but he talked about money again and again. He told us that this service rationalization wasn't a dollar matter, but he very much emphasized the financial aspect.

The personnel have been reassigned, but, with all that's been said about the municipalities concerned, one wonders about the place that organized crime will occupy. It was with this in mind that all the mayors issued an alarm call. This decision absolutely has to be reviewed. As I told you, in Granby, the morning after the closing was announced in the media—that is to say after the news was simply communicated to us—graffiti covered the building and the criminals applauded. Wherever the RCMP isn't, the criminal world will be; you can be sure of that.

•(1210)

I'll conclude by telling you that all the mayors, reeves, members of Parliament and public who are represented here pay taxes as they do in any other MRC, any other riding, any other city in Quebec or Canada, and are entitled to the services of the RCMP. We don't want to think that it's a privilege to have that. This is a presence that is unfortunately necessary because of the criminal world. If there were no criminals, we wouldn't be here, but we're not on the right planet. We need all our police departments, and the RCMP is one of them.

Thank you for listening to us. Now I'll hand over to you. We're ready to answer your questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much to all the presenters. It's really something to hear the concerns of your regions as a whole.

I'm going to give the floor to the members. I would inform you that I'll be very strict about speaking times in order to give time to the largest possible number of speakers.

Mr. Toews, for seven minutes.

[English]

Mr. Vic Toews (Provencher, CPC): Thank you very much.

I want to thank all of the municipal officials who came here today and provided us with this very important information, which will serve as the basis for questioning the commissioner. I also want to thank my colleague in the Bloc, Richard Marceau, who brought this motion forward.

The irony isn't lost on me that a separatist would bring forward a motion to keep a federal police force in Quebec, but that's quite another issue. I happen to agree with the thrust of the motion. One would think that rather than wasting millions of dollars on flags in Quebec to increase the federal presence, one of the things our Liberal government could have done was keep the RCMP there to maintain the federal presence. That would not only maintain the federal presence, but of course be an effective law enforcement mechanism.

In response to your question, Mayor Racine, that this all for show, and can you influence the decision, I want to assure you we in the Conservative Party are very concerned about this particular issue, and I'll tell you why.

Your story is all too familiar. In the western provinces the RCMP serve as our provincial police force. Back in 1998, the province where I come from, Manitoba, went through a very similar process with the closing of detachments. What we were told at the time—and I was in the provincial government then—was that this would better fulfill the RCMP's mandate and get more RCMP officers into the street.

In fact, what did we see? First of all, we saw the local RCMP detachments close—exactly what has happened—then centralization, and then a cut in the RCMP officers in the centralized detachments. So that's coming already if you don't stand up and speak clearly in the way you have been doing.

As for what we see in a place like Manitoba, we have 65 police officers dedicated to the highway patrol, and 35 of those officers are now being moved out of highway patrol, leaving 30 officers for all of the province of Manitoba to basically do all of our rural area. Manitoba isn't as large as Quebec, but it is a large province geographically. This has a huge impact on accident scenes, regular patrols, and patrol of the border.

We want to assure you that this problem is not simply a regional problem in Quebec; it's something we've been experiencing in western Canada. That's why I was so pleased that Mr. Marceau brought this motion forward. It's exactly the same problem as happened in Manitoba.

One of the large problems is that we have an RCMP commissioner who is in effect a deputy minister in the government. How can a man serve two masters like this? He is serving the interests of his minister, yet trying to represent the interests of the RCMP. You can't do it. There needs to be a fundamental shift in the way the RCMP is joined together with the federal government. We're not serving the interests of law enforcement; we're serving the interests of a particular political party that is in government right now. That needs to be changed.

Rather than taking up any more of your time—I don't know if there's any response to that—I simply want to assure you that we are with you, we understand your problem, and we will work for your issue, together with the Bloc and the other MPs who want to join in

with this particular motion. We think the motion is timely, and we thank you very much for your representation.

• (1215)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Guy Racine: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Toews.

Mr. Racine, would you like to make a comment?

Mr. Guy Racine: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you very much, sir, for your good words. As for responding to your remarks, I'd like instead to hand over to my colleague, Mr. D'Amour, who is the mayor of Rivière-du-Loup.

Mr. Jean D'Amour: I'll only say a few words further to what you said about your province, about how this whole process has played out in the west. As for Ontario, Mr. Bourduas often talks about a similar exercise he conducted in that province. Earlier I spoke to you briefly about a letter from Robert Bernier, who is a professor at ENAP. In that letter, he wrote:

Furthermore, a similar operation was conducted in Ontario in 1995, and the results have been mixed, because they open the door to greater circulation of criminal activity, more particularly in the Timmins region.

You can see that a similar kind of situation appears to be getting established in Quebec. You also refer to the western provinces. We see that this operation didn't achieve the desired results in Ontario either. If you wish, I'll submit a copy of this document. Do you already have it? All right. I'm told it's already been submitted.

• (1220)

The Chair: All right, thank you.

Mr. Ménard will take the floor for the Bloc québécois?

You have seven minutes.

Mr. Serge Ménard (Marc-Aurèle-Fortin, BQ): Thank you. First I want to thank the mayors for coming here today. As you may have noticed, the Conservative member admitted that it was Mr. Marceau who introduced the resolution to invite you to appear. We agree with and understand your position. We also know that we have good friends on the other side who think exactly the same way on this subject, even though we don't belong to the same political party.

We are aware of the specific problems associated with police surveillance in the largest state of North America. If we think of a map, we see that the largest state in North America is Quebec. It's also the one with the longest borders. To come back to my Conservative friend, I'll say that, as long as we are part of Confederation, we'll continue to pay taxes associated with that surveillance. We are aware of its deficiencies.

We have before us a plan of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in which it is claimed that better supervision will be provided by moving police officers away from the borders. I would point out that these people made the same mistake with regard to the supervision of ports. They removed police officers in 1997, but were forced to return them to the ports later. If my memory serves me, that operation cost approximately \$123 million. Their attitude is still the same: today, investigations make it necessary to target large criminal organizations, and, to that end, to concentrate police officers. I'll explain later what that means in practice. According to what they say, they consulted the provinces, which will continue the services. In view of the checks you make, you know perfectly well that's false. Quebec is financially unable to replace the police officers who are being removed from the field.

The federal government constantly tends to seek a mission, regardless of the area of jurisdiction it relates to, to carry it out and thus to create a need among the public. Once people are used to that need, it withdraws. It then asks the provinces or municipal authorities to bear the same expenses, without financial compensation.

In fact, the RCMP is once again trying to play its role as the aristocrat of police forces. These people want to conduct major investigations, those that last a long time and produce spectacular results. They prefer to work from nine to five in the safety of their well-organized offices rather than go dirty their hands in the field by patrolling, familiarizing themselves with locales, attempting to determine where smugglers go and getting to know people. As a result of this action, the police officers removed from certain cities are taken far away from the borders. This is what's quite different from the American trend toward reinforcing surveillance and increasing strength in the field.

At the borders, the number of patrollers in the field was already insufficient to cover this immense area—practically the biggest in North America—that is our border areas. To meet the present challenges, we need more police officers at the borders, not fewer.

It's marvellous to see you here today. It shows that all Quebec elected representatives, regardless of their level or political party, are aware that this decision is a mistake and that it must not be allowed.

• (1225)

The question is whether, in a democratic state, the opinion of all elected representatives is of any importance. Who will decide to monitor our borders adequately? Will it be a federal public servant, or police headquarters if we're in a police state?

I don't know whether you have anything to suggest or add, Mr. Racine, but I invite you to do so since the others feel that you're their spokesman. I'm convinced that we all view the problem the same way.

The Chair: There are two minutes left.

Mr. Serge Ménard: I believe Mr. Vincent has something to say, particularly since he's your member.

Mr. Robert Vincent (Shefford, BQ): I'm going to add this. I think the Bloc québécois has been monitoring the issue from the outset, and I'm sure we'll see it through to the end. I believe the Bloc members from the regions concerned are all here today. I also note

that the Liberal, Conservative and NDP members are here as well. This is a very serious issue. Mr. Loubier fought this fight on closings seven years ago with the member for Shefford at the time. Mr. Loubier received death threats for denouncing the situation.

We're dealing with the same type of closing today, but I think we're prepared. I think we have the leadership of the mayors and everyone. Of course we'll wait for the Commissioner's version on Thursday. At that point, we'll be better informed and can make the best possible decision.

I'll now hand over to Mr. Racine.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vincent.

Mayor Racine, you have one minute.

Mr. Guy Racine: Thank you, Mr. Vincent and Mr. Ménard. I don't want to go on too long. Mr. Ménard, you thanked us for being here. So I first want to thank the mayors and councillors who have travelled here. December is budget month in our municipalities. Most of us have to sit on municipal council Monday evening to present our budgets. We weren't given any dispensation to come and meet with you. Most of us got to our hotel rooms around two o'clock this morning. That's why we're so bright-eyed and talkative. It's also why the witty remarks are coming fast.

That said, we can't put a price on the defence of these interests. As you emphasized, we have put Mayor Langevin's good words and vast experience to good use. We are all clearly headed in the same direction. I'm pleased to hear the people from the Bloc québécois and the Conservative Party say that party differences don't matter on this issue. There are only elected representatives who are all on the same footing. We all have the same objective, the welfare of our fellow citizens. That and their safety are what are at stake today.

[English]

The Chair: *Merci, Maire Racine.*

Next is the New Democratic Party, Mr. Christopherson.

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

Thank you all for your presentations.

I was formerly a city councillor myself. I started out in municipal politics, so I understand all of these things that we talk about at the end of the day. I also served in the provincial legislature, so I know very well how things start here and flow through. We all know what flows downhill, and it goes right on down to the municipalities, where the real world happens. There's certainly nothing more important to elected representatives, particularly at the municipal level, than the actual physical safety and well-being of their citizens. So your concerns are certainly understandable, and we in the New Democratic Party share those concerns about security being an absolute priority.

You're making your case, obviously, that this needs to be changed. I'm sitting in for Mr. Comartin, who's our regular member here, so I may not be fully up to speed on the file. But I am curious about whether you had a chance to review the RCMP budget, and if you were able to identify where money saved was not being reinvested directly into Quebec and was going elsewhere.

Have you been able to identify anything, or is the argument being made that the money is being reinvested and it's there in the budget? From a budget perspective, have you been able to identify whether any money is being saved by the rationalization, the closing, of any detachments and if that money is being reinvested elsewhere outside Quebec?

• (1230)

The Chair: Thank you.

Monsieur le maire Racine.

[Translation]

Mr. Guy Racine: No. Unfortunately, we haven't seen the RCMP's budget figures. When we met with Mr. Bourduas in Quebec City, he briefed us on the situation and told us the reasons for these decisions. He was very well documented. The budget question was always avoided. We didn't ask any questions. The mayors got together to hear Mr. Bourduas, not to react to his remarks. So we heard him.

On the only occasions when he talked about money, it was to tell us that our \$65,000 a year gardeners were a luxury for our small municipalities. I can guarantee you—we're going to continue talking about money—that it took everything we had to refrain from reacting. We had decided not to react, and that's what we did. He told us, in his presentation, that the idea was merely to redeploy the forces, that it wasn't a matter of rationalization. Those were the only times—I'd ask my colleagues to correct me if I'm wrong—that we heard about money.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Serge Gosselin (Municipal Counsel, City of Coaticook): Mr. Chairman, Mr. Christopherson, for your information, there are no budgets. However, I can tell you that, at the Coaticook detachment, immediately after the events of September 11, there were at least 11 members to investigate, monitor and so on. Today there's no one. So where did those 11 persons go? Where are the budgets? We have no idea.

Mr. Guy Racine: Mr. D'Amour.

Mr. Jean D'Amour: I simply want to add that Mr. Bourduas also spoke to us about an additional amount of \$700 million, which he had received after September 11 in order to be able to properly serve the borders. I would simply recall that New Hampshire, Vermont and Maine are the three states with which we're going to have serious problems at the borders.

Since we're talking about money, I would like to recall that six individuals, plus the pilot, came to town to close an office, which moreover was not closed because investigations were under way. How much did all that cost? This is the kind of example we deal with, in our cities, when rationalizations are conducted.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson, you still have three minutes left.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for your answers. That's very helpful.

I also noted that the Solicitor General in Quebec—or is it the Minister of Public Safety, anyway, the Solicitor General—had no idea. They were informed but not consulted. And I wondered if you

have any awareness.... I don't know if Mr. Ménard can be of help here, being a former Solicitor General in Quebec, but I would find it very surprising, as a former Solicitor General of Ontario, which I am, to find there was any kind of review of RCMP services where you wouldn't be working in tandem with the provincial police.

There aren't many provinces that have their own provincial police. We have Quebec and Ontario, and I'm not sure who the others are, but those are the two. I know the feds wouldn't dare do that in Ontario, and I wanted to make sure I understood correctly that your minister in Quebec has said that—I'm assuming it's a he—he or she was advised but not consulted. I wondered if you've had discussion with the minister.

Is this unusual in Quebec? I find it really hard to believe, because it's pretty well integrated at that level. By the time you have municipal police services, provincial, RCMP, if you're going to be effective because you have three different jurisdictions, you need to have a coordinated plan. You have to have good dialogue going on among them and you have to make sure your deployment efforts are complementing one another in your regions, so that inadvertently each person doesn't back off and suddenly there's nothing there.

So could you expand on that a little bit? I found it really surprising and potentially troubling.

• (1235)

[Translation]

Mr. Guy Racine: I see the word “information” has stuck in your mind. The information we received from the minister is that he had... How was it said, Mr. D'Amour? How can we summarize his sentence? I don't want to attribute words to him that he didn't say.

Mr. Jean D'Amour: He said he had been informed, not consulted. Ultimately, it's a bit like us. I'll refer to a meeting that Mr. Crête organized in January, if I'm not mistaken, in Rivière-du-Loup with Mr. Bourduas. Mr. Bourduas gave us his vision of matters, but he was supposed to come back and see us before making any decisions or clearer recommendations regarding the deployment. But I learned how things turned out through the media.

When we talk about cooperation between the RCMP and the Sûreté du Québec and, I would add, our municipal police departments, the three forces have to work together. I'm not saying they don't or that they won't. We all have the same interest, but that's how we learned it.

If I put myself in the position of the Minister of Public Security in Quebec City, it's not pleasant or interesting. I'm not sure that it's ultimately more effective because the SQ was not consulted. There may be some things that it would be better for everyone to know at the same time. The same is true for the municipal police departments. It's not because we're in cities that we're less effective, that we have a lesser interest in public safety.

The Chair: To conclude, we'll hear from Mayor Racine.

Mr. Guy Racine: I'd prefer to hand over to Mr. D'Amour because it was he who spoke with the minister. I got a phone call late in the afternoon informing me that this was going to appear in the newspaper the next day. I was quite dismayed: it was inconceivable to act that way. I called my member, Mr. Vincent, who had just been elected. I was the one who gave him the news. I was insulted that Mr. Vincent, the member of Parliament, was not aware. I thought he wasn't taking an interest in his files, but in fact he hadn't been informed.

I'd like to clarify something. I reacted quickly at the time and that made the headlines, which is another story. Look, it's inconceivable! No one was informed: the sitting member, the mayors, my municipal security director or the reeve. I checked with the member, and he hadn't been informed because I gave him the news. The words "information" and "communication" may not be part of Mr. Bourduas' standard vocabulary.

The Chair: Thank you, Mayor Racine.

I'll move on to another member from the region, Mr. Paradis. I know he's monitoring the situation closely. It was Mr. Paradis who wrote the committee at the very start so that this meeting could take place.

Mr. Paradis, the floor is yours.

Hon. Denis Paradis (Brome—Missisquoi, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. As everyone knows, this is not a recent issue. Some raised this question four or five years ago. There was some question that these detachments would be closed at that time. In fact, this didn't all start before the last election; it started earlier than that. The RCMP made a kind of commitment that it would not move without consulting us. I note the ceaseless work of my former colleagues in this matter, Diane St-Jacques, David Price and Gérard Binet. I also congratulate my new colleagues for continuing the work.

I agree with Serge Ménard. This issue affects everyone. It isn't related to one political party or another; it affects our general population. I thank the mayors for their presentation and for coming here to meet with us today to sound the alarm. The mayors, as we know, operate at the political level, which may be the closest to the people in our regions. That's important. You take the public's pulse every day. Thank you for passing on this information to us.

I'm the member for Brome—Missisquoi, Mr. Chairman. There are 10 border posts in my riding. The Granby detachment deals with those border posts more particularly.

Perhaps two years ago, I received an invitation to appear before a committee of the U.S. Congress. It was a committee on justice and drugs that were circulating and were found near the border on U.S. soil. I attended and met people from Congress. To make a long story short, at the end of my testimony or the end of the discussion with the committee members, the committee chair asked me:

• (1240)

[English]

"What about your Quebec gold?"

[Translation]

That shows that these people want the borders to be tight, monitored and so on.

[English]

"What about your Quebec gold?"

[Translation]

That comment has stuck in my mind. They really think we produce cannabis on a large scale and send it to them from the other side of the border. This kind of thing is definitely not conducive to better relations at the border, in this case between Vermont and Quebec.

There are 10 border posts in our riding, but there are even more roads to Vermont. In three or four cases, there's no surveillance. From what one customs officer told me, sometimes a guy will get out of a car from Vermont, run back across the border and be picked up by someone else in another car on the other side. With the short staff we have, things simply aren't working, so if we reduce it even further, do you think they'll be any better? This makes no sense.

I'm going to talk about the schools. I've heard the testimony of a number of teachers, from Cowansville and Farnham, among other places. The mayor of Rivière-du-Loup previously mentioned that there's now cannabis in the elementary schools. That really makes no sense. We're not going to fight over which region is the hardest hit. The mayor of Coaticook said earlier that there were a lot in his region. The same is true of Saint-Hyacinthe. I have to tell you that we haven't been spared in Brome-Missisquoi either. There's violence in the schools, with everything that entails. It's important to preserve a police presence in our regions. Of course it has a deterrent effect. When we don't see any police officers, virtually everything seems to go. You need only think of certain individuals who feel they can exceed the speed limit when they don't see any police officers on the road. It's important to see police officers and that they be in the regions, if only to read our regional newspapers.

The other day, in one of the small papers in my riding, they said that properties around a large lake in my riding had been sold for two or three times their appraised value. A real estate agent told me that they had also been paid for in cash. There are cases where you have to be in the field and see the people in the community to learn certain things. Police officers have to see with their own eyes that so and so, who's on welfare, has a new truck every year and has a snowmobile for each of his four children. If they're not in the field, they can't see that some things are wrong. Their presence can also reassure seniors who see these things, as well as farmers. Some of them receive \$2,000 in their mailbox at the side of the road. They wonder why, but gradually they accumulate amounts of \$2,000.

I remember a meeting that Diane St-Jacques organized in Granby a few years ago. The RCMP, the Granby police department and the Sûreté du Québec were there. People told us about the chemistry that has to exist between police forces. If police officers don't work together and personnel are reassigned from Drummondville or Montreal, no chemistry is possible. It's created through the habit that police departments acquire of working together. It's an important phenomenon.

Mr. Chairman, I'll close by talking about costs. I find some things hard to understand. If three investigators are sent to my riding to work on a case over two weeks, they have to stay at a hotel and bill their meals. I'm not sure this kind of thing has been considered. Someone said that we're talking here about the RCMP working for the RCMP. Sometimes I'd be inclined to say that's the case. And yet we should be talking about the RCMP working for the public. We all agree on that point.

Lastly, I'd like to emphasize that the Quebec Liberal Caucus is unanimously asking that the RCMP remain in all these regions of Quebec.

•(1245)

Mr. Paul Crête (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, BQ): Only organized crime and the RCMP don't agree with you.

Hon. Denis Paradis: Mr. Chairman, those were more comments than questions. I don't know whether the mayor of Granby would like to comment on my remarks.

The Chair: Mr. Racine, you have roughly 30 seconds.

Mr. Guy Racine: I'll begin right away because the countdown's started.

Mr. Paradis referred to the meetings at Granby City Hall at the time there was talk of potentially closing the RCMP detachment in Granby. The municipal police department, the Sûreté du Québec and the RCMP were all there. The word "chemistry" constantly came up. Real drama was going on in Granby at the time that happened. Criminal biker gangs had invaded the area. It was in the headlines at the time. Municipal police officers had received death threats. A major operation was conducted by the three police forces to dismantle those criminal biker gangs. It may have taken a year or two of investigating to work up to a major operation, and it succeeded.

Adding on to what Mr. Paradis said, when you talk about pot sales in the schools, when you talk about street sales, dealers get their supplies from a higher level. The higher level gets its supplies from another higher level. If the RCMP isn't there, my municipal police force won't have the necessary expertise and won't be able to deploy the necessary personnel to attack levels 3, 4 and 5, which are importing what's on the street. It's even happening in the elementary schools. On this point, Mr. Paradis is correct in saying that the welfare and safety of citizens, and even our children, are at stake.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Mayor.

[English]

Mr. Breitzkreuz, for three minutes.

Mr. Garry Breitzkreuz (Yorkton—Melville, CPC): Thank you very much.

I really appreciate your presentation. It gives us a lot of help in our battle to have more safety for our public citizens. Your presentation really strikes at the heart of why we organize ourselves in a civil society, and that is to provide for public safety. That's number one. I think you have a lot of evidence, even in other jurisdictions such as New York City, that if you have the presence of police officers on the street it is a strong deterrent to crime, and in fact even violent crime

was reduced in that city simply by having more police present on the street.

I think that organized crime is really unravelling the very fabric of our society in ways many people do not realize, and we have a responsibility to combat this extremely serious situation. Unfortunately, politics is involved in many of the decisions. I think everybody around here has the same goals, but money is not unlimited. We have to determine what our priorities are and where we want to spend that money.

I want to tell you of an incident that happened last week at this committee to illustrate that we do have to make decisions, and I want your reaction to that in case you are not familiar with this. We, as Conservatives, introduced a motion to take \$20 million from the wasteful gun registry and the Firearms Centre and transfer that money to front-line RCMP policing priorities. That's what happened at this committee. Unfortunately, the Bloc, the Liberals, and the NDP voted against our motion, and at that point I could not understand why, because I knew that this was coming and I felt that very strongly we needed to give you that kind of support. It will come up again this Thursday, but what do you think?

I really understand your situation. In my home town of Yorkton, Saskatchewan, we have the same situation, but we're not as well organized as you are, where you come to the committee, you go right to where the decisions are made. What do you feel about this? Do you think that you would have supported us in our priorities to put more money into the RCMP front line?

•(1250)

[Translation]

The Chair: You have 30 seconds to give your answer.

Mr. Guy Racine: We've come to file our complaints with the committee and to talk to the political authorities, but we don't want to interfere in the decisions of the political parties.

I simply want to tell you, as you mentioned a little earlier, that we, all political parties included, agree on one point: we have to see together how this decision can be deferred and reviewed for the welfare and safety of citizens. It's of little importance to the mayors whether it's a question of money or of redistributing funds. For us, the important thing is that security be guaranteed in our regions and that our fellow citizens who pay direct and indirect taxes to the federal, provincial and municipal governments are all treated fairly.

We live in a free and democratic country. We're lucky to be able to express ourselves and make our submissions. Today, the mayors' common front has come to make its submissions. We leave the political aspect to the House of Commons.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Mayor. You answered well.

[English]

Mr. Cullen, for three minutes.

[Translation]

Hon. Roy Cullen (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

First I would like to thank you all, mayors, reeve and other representatives, for coming here today, for travelling to Ottawa to present your viewpoint on the closing of the RCMP detachments in your regions of Quebec. I understand perfectly well that it's a very important subject for you and your fellow citizens, and that's why you're here today before the Standing Committee on Justice, Human Rights, Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness.

I also want to hail my colleagues from the last Parliament, Diane St-Jacques, David Price and Gérard Binet and to praise their commitment, since they're still working on this issue.

I'm a member from Ontario, but I was born in Montreal and did part of my education in the Eastern Townships. So I know a little about your region and some of your challenges.

I apologize for switching to English because this is a bit complex.

[English]

I'd like to say at the outset that this decision of the RCMP, which the federal government supports, has nothing to do with resources. In fact, if you look at the budgetary allocations to the RCMP, you'll see that since 2000 their allocation has gone up from \$2 billion a year to more than \$2.8 billion. That's not to say we're not always working with the RCMP to look at the resources they need to fight organized crime, to fight terrorism. But this decision parallels a decision that was made in Ontario in 1995 to consolidate resources and have a stronger critical mass so that we could fight terrorism and organized crime more effectively.

Monsieur Racine, you said that the SQ is understaffed in Quebec. That might well be; I don't know. But you're right that we have to work together. You said you don't want to be second-class citizens. Well, the citizens of the province of Ontario went through the same exercise in 1995.

We talked about the cross-border crime. We have established integrated border enforcement teams—in fact there are three in Quebec: eastern, which deals with Quebec, Vermont, and Maine; Champlain, which covers Quebec, New York, and Vermont; and Valleyfield. This is where we're getting a lot of cooperation across borders with U.S. law enforcement, and intelligence operations as well.

I agree with you that we need to be very concerned about organized crime. In fact, our government has introduced legislation that will bring in tougher sanctions for grow-ops. We do know that organized crime is involved, and we're going to take the steps necessary to make sure the RCMP has the resources they need.

Remember that the RCMP in the province of Quebec and in Ontario is not the front-line police force. You have the Sûreté du Québec. The RCMP acts in some provinces as a contract police, but in the province of Quebec it is simply there to deal with federal

matters. The delivery of law enforcement in the province of Quebec is primarily through the Sûreté.

I think my time is probably running short, and I want to give you a chance to respond.

I want to thank you.

•(1255)

[Translation]

I want to thank you for being here.

[English]

We hear what you're saying. We see it more as an operational decision of the RCMP, which was done in parallel in Ontario some years ago, but we respect your views and we thank you for coming here today.

[Translation]

The Chair: Would you like to react briefly before I give the floor to Mr. Ménard for the last turn?

Mr. Guy Racine: I understood. You're saying it's an operational decision. All right, it's an operation. However, as Mr. Langevin emphasized earlier, we are elected representatives. Political decisions are being made in the orientations area. We elected representatives will never interfere in their application. I'll never tell my public safety director to install radars at a particular location or to investigate or search another. However, as elected representatives, we have a responsibility to set orientations. That's why we oppose this decision, because we were never consulted, we were never informed after receiving assurances that the matter would remain open.

You refer to the matter of jurisdictions. I won't be teaching anyone anything by saying that, in the world of organized crime, when criminals are preparing to commit a crime, be it at the international, provincial or local level, they don't consider what jurisdiction may catch them. They simply consider where it's easiest to go, to enter Quebec, to infiltrate organized crime, to infiltrate the schools to sell their drugs, their habits. They look at where it's easiest to pass counterfeit money or bootleg alcohol, to buy off farmers, to put \$2,000 in their mailbox and to use part of their field to grow pot. They don't start looking at the government committee or jurisdiction that's responsible for that. Is it the Sûreté du Québec, the Ontario Provincial Police or the RCMP? No, it may be the parish guard because there's no one left in our regions.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Mayor.

Mr. Guy Racine: Mr. Langevin wanted to add a brief word, with your permission, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Langevin.

Mr. André Langevin: We all know that our American friends and neighbours doubt that we really want to protect our borders. I don't think I'm mistaken in saying that border protection is mainly the responsibility of the RCMP and the Government of Canada.

The Chair: Mr. Ménard, you have the floor for the last three minutes.

Mr. Serge Ménard: First I'd like to add a word to what I said earlier about the attitude of the RCMP, which wants to be the aristocrat of police forces. I would nevertheless point out that the members of the RCMP who are in the field and who therefore know the field and experience people's day-to-day problems are also opposed to the closings.

I see a news release from them:

The federal government's decision to close nine detachments of the RCMP across Quebec as of November 1 will result in a general free-for-all for organized crime and terrorism by leaving certain isolated regions without appropriate federal police protection, say the members representing the RCMP association in the province.

You see, these are people who have knowledge in the field and who don't share this purely elitist vision of RCMP authorities.

Here's what we propose to do. I'll ask you whether you agree with me. So that our meeting today is effective, I would like to move that the committee report to the House on our proceedings. That means that all the submissions that you've made will be forwarded to the House, properly transcribed. With the unanimous consent of the people here, I and my Bloc québécois colleagues would like to present the following motion:

That the Committee recommend to the government that the RCMP immediately stop reassigning personnel in Quebec in order to keep the nine detachments in Quebec open, and that it maintain a critical mass of eight officers per detachment.

I would like to know whether you are in favour of this resolution.

Lastly, I'll remind government representatives that border surveillance is clearly a federal jurisdiction. This is what's causing the greatest concerns. The arguments the RCMP is giving you and that you are repeating to us are the same as those you advanced in favour of withdrawing from the national ports and international airports. In 2001, you were forced to turn to the airports and national

ports. In the public interest, we want you to avoid making the same mistake.

● (1300)

The Chair: Mr. Ménard, the committee must hear the RCMP before making a decision. I believe it would be preferable to await the RCMP's reply before giving notice of your motion.

Mr. Serge Ménard: Thank you for your advice. I believe it's correct, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Mayor Racine, you have the floor.

Mr. Guy Racine: To answer Mr. Ménard's question, we agree on his resolution because of the comments you've just made, Mr. Chairman. Of course, we can't be opposed to virtue because that's the objective we've set for ourselves in appearing here.

I would like to add one thing to what Mr. Ménard said when he talked about RCMP officers working in the field. He then referred to the news release. Since that operation in September—my colleagues can probably tell you the same thing—I've received calls from RCMP members working in the field. They've told me not to give up and that this simply makes no sense. Of course, I won't give any names; these people who supported us in our efforts are in active positions.

The Chair: I would like to thank all the mayors and representatives of the municipalities for coming here today. As agreed, we will hear the representatives of the RCMP on Thursday morning and will take our measures after that. Thank you very much and I wish you a speedy return to your region, before two in the morning, I hope.

Mr. Guy Racine: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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