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—
Chair

The Honourable Don Boudria

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•(1105)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Hon. Don Boudria (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, Lib.)): I would like to welcome you all to this first meeting since Parliament returned.

We did have quorum, but my mallet seems to have frightened some of our colleagues, since there were more of us two minutes ago.

In accordance with Standing Order 93(1), we will now consider Bill C-312, an Act to amend the Canada Elections Act AACEA (appointment of returning officers).

The bill was passed by the House on second reading, and referred to the committee. The procedure is therefore part of the business of the House. The motion was put to the vote. The bill is before us. Today, we have the pleasure of welcoming Michel Guimond, who will be talking about this bill, which he is sponsoring.

Is there is a point of order? Go ahead.

[*English*]

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC): I'll be very brief, Mr. Chair. We don't have to do this now, but we could do it after our witness has spoken and we've had a chance to ask some questions.

I will be introducing a motion on inviting the ministers for democratic reform and renewal to come to our committee.

The Chair: Oh, that's okay. Actually, we have an agenda-setting meeting scheduled for 12 noon in any case.

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay, perfect.

The Chair: As a matter of fact, I'll get to that later. I've already asked that the ministers appear to respond to this private member's bill, and maybe at that time we'll want to do other things, but if you don't mind, we could do what you ask after we finish listening to the witness. Our regular agenda-setting meeting...it has been sent to your office already.

Mr. Broadbent.

Hon. Ed Broadbent (Ottawa Centre, NDP): I respect the point that you're getting at about the agenda, Mr. Chairman, but having seen a copy of Mr. Reid's motion, it has elements in it other than the ministers' appearance. I hope we could deal with it before noon, because then I'll be replaced by someone else. As you know, the subject matter of electoral reform is my caucus responsibility, so if we could deal with Mr. Reid's motion before noon, I'd appreciate it.

The Chair: Okay, we'll do our best to accommodate you as well, Mr. Broadbent.

Hon. Ed Broadbent: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: In the meantime, I consulted the two vice-chairs of the committees before entering today's meeting on the schedule. It was agreed that we would hear the sponsor of this bill.

Mr. Guimond, would you like to provide an overview of your bill before colleagues put their questions? Would you prefer that we go directly to questions?

Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord): I will be brief, but I do have some introductory notes.

First, I would point out that the fact that the bill was passed at second reading is the best evidence we can have that colleagues from all parties recognize that it is a non-partisan bill.

I am of course very proud to be the sponsor of this bill, but I would think that everyone with good will around this table could have put forward the same bill.

We at the Bloc Québécois can say that what we wish to achieve with this bill goes back to when we first entered the House in 1993. The whips who came before me, those responsible for all relations with the Chief Electoral Officer, have suggested that the returning officer appointment process be different than it is now, that it should be more transparent, and that an effort should be made to find the best qualified person in every case.

I believe that this notion is supported by the Conservative Party, by our NDP colleagues, and by most Liberal members. The Deputy Government House Leader has even stated, once again before this committee and the House, that he was responsible for the parliamentary reform measures designed to correct what the current Prime Minister called the democratic deficit when he was elected leader of the party.

In my view, the bill is designed to correct a measure which is in some ways a relic of another time, a measure from a period that we consider archaic.

Mr. Chairman, you have been parliamentary House Leader and you have often had the opportunity to appoint returning officers. I appreciate your willing ear and your understanding, but I am sure you do not fully share our view that the current process is archaic.

That said, there was a two-hour debate in the House during which representatives of each party had an opportunity to speak. Moreover, the Chief Electoral Officer, Mr. Kingsley, agrees with the final intent of this bill, which is to change the way in which returning officers are appointed, so that the returning officers are more accountable and action can easily be taken in cases of obvious incompetence.

In conclusion, I would say once again that this is a non-partisan bill. It focuses on those who will be responsible for managing the election, which is a democratic process. Therefore, we would begin with the issuing of the writ. Under certain provisions, we will of course remain the members for our ridings until our successors are elected, but nonetheless, technically, under the Elections Act, the outgoing member is considered a regular candidate, who continues to discharge parliamentary duties. This is how we can keep our offices open, and keep our staff. However, according to the democratic process, we are once more candidates just like those who are running for our seats.

Thus, this bill will ensure that the person responsible for the practical expression of the democratic process in a riding is selected at the conclusion of an open and transparent process, so that no one can believe he was appointed by the party in power, something that might occasionally create the perception of partiality.

As you know, in politics, perception is everything. A perception of partiality can undermine the democratic process.

I would be happy to answer your question. I hope that this bill will be passed at third reading in the House of Commons.

• (1110)

The Chair: Thank you for your presentation, Mr. Guimond. We will now ask colleagues whether they have questions.

First, however, I would like to take this opportunity to announce that the Chief Electoral Officer's report was made public at 10 a.m. this morning. I was just given a copy several minutes ago.

Mr. Kingsley's report contains a recommendation on this issue. Since the report has just been released, some colleagues may not be aware of it. I therefore wanted to take a minute to provide some information. If you like, I could even read his recommendations in a few moments.

[English]

The official opposition, do you have any questions on the bill proposed to us this morning by Monsieur Guimond?

Mr. Reid.

[Translation]

Mr. Scott Reid: Mr. Guimond, I have a document here that explains a system used in the provinces. I note that some provinces have used a system exactly like the one you suggest. At present, is Quebec using the open competition system?

• (1115)

Mr. Michel Guimond: Yes, it is. I won't be telling you anything you do not know by saying that we looked at what Quebec was doing and based much of our bill on it. If I remember correctly, Quebec has had this process since 1977. Perhaps your document provides that date.

Ms. Pauline Picard (Drummond, BQ): Since 1980.

Mr. Michel Guimond: Since 1980. At the conclusion of an open and transparent competition, the Chief Electoral Officer advertises for candidates in the newspapers. An independent committee goes through the selection process, and the National Assembly makes the final recommendation for hiring.

As far as I know, I have heard no complaints from any of the three parties. This is an apolitical process. I am not here to promote a provincial party or any other party. The current process is unanimously supported by the three parties represented at the National Assembly, including the Quebec Liberal Party, the Parti Québécois and Action Démocratique.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Reid, do you have another question? If you do not, we will move to Ms. Picard.

Ms. Pauline Picard: I believe that Mr. Guimond clearly answered the question about the reputation and effectiveness of Quebec's electoral system.

I do not know what you think about this, Michel. In Quebec, there are 125 ridings and this system works extremely well. I know that it is renowned worldwide. But Canada has three times as many ridings as Quebec does. Do you think that the same electoral system could easily be applied federally?

Mr. Michel Guimond: If we compare the means available to a provincial chief electoral officer, I think that Mr. Kingsley has the tools he needs to manage the electoral process and the whole issue of competitions.

I do not think that we need to compare numbers or that it would be more complicated to manage 308 ridings than 125. I do not think that the equation works that way. I think that selecting 308 people Canada-wide to hold these positions is quite significant.

In a past life, before becoming a member of Parliament, I worked in human resources for 16 years. I can tell you that when factories were built or started up, we hired massive numbers of people with very small teams and it worked.

I think it would be relatively simple to implement the process as quickly as possible.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Broadbent, do you have a question, sir?

[Translation]

Hon. Ed Broadbent: I simply want to say that very often, we agree with our colleagues from the Bloc. That is not always the case, but it happens quite often.

In this case, we fully support the bill. We agree with all of the sections, all of the commas, all of the periods, and all of the sentences.

Mr. Michel Guimond: I would like to make a short comment. I am happy to see that Mr. Broadbent, a seasoned parliamentarian, does not hold a grudge. The summer must have done him some good. He came back with better feelings about me. It is true that on another matter, our opinions were more divergent.

That proves that your reputation is well deserved, Mr. Broadbent.

The Chair: That probably proves that the summer break generally did a lot of good.

Mr. Michel Guimond: It is almost as if we were in Quebec, in the 1970s, where there was reconciliation or something like that. The summer break seems to have done us some good. We are almost learning to like each other.

• (1120)

[*English*]

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Niagara Falls, CPC): And you, sir, have your reputation.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: On that, we will move on to the next comment.

Ms. Boivin, do you want to comment?

Ms. Françoise Boivin (Gatineau, Lib.): Continuing with the good summer theme, I too fully support Bill C-312. I agree with the underlying objective which is to ensure transparency.

Bear in mind that during discussions in committee during consideration of this matter with Mr. Kingsley, my past experience in labour relations always came up to some extent. In fact, I try to protect people in their positions and their reputations.

In that context, I wholeheartedly support this method of hiring returning officers in the future.

My question Mr. Guimond, is more practical. I remember a question that somebody asked Mr. Kingsley. It was about the 308 ridings in Canada, and consequently, 308 returning officers. The bill states that a returning officer shall be appointed by means of an open competition.

Does that mean that once adopted, Bill C-312 will relieve the 308 returning officers of their duties so that there can be an open competition? I am simply trying to understand the process. It seems to me that Mr. Kingsley had said that he would probably keep the 300-some returning officers, except for the two or three well-known cases of incompetency. I ask this question, because I do not know what the procedure will be once the bill has been adopted.

This is, however, an excellent initiative that I will support from A to Z.

Mr. Michel Guimond: We will indeed have to determine how exactly to make the transition from the Old Testament to the New Testament, if you'll forgive my choice of words.

It is very possible, should this bill be adopted quickly and receive royal assent, that the process will be completed in October. At that point, in my opinion, the whole process of posting the positions for all 308 ridings could begin. I must admit that I haven't gone into all the details as yet. Not that this isn't important, but as yet I still haven't fully explored all the legal ramifications of the orders in council which have been issued.

For example, if I were a returning officer in the riding of Hull—Aylmer and I was appointed for a fixed term, under Bill C-312 would my appointment automatically be revoked? Quite clearly legal opinion needs to be sought on that question. Mr. Kingsley or

Ms. Davidson, his assistant, or perhaps our researcher, could take a look at this issue and give us an answer. Unfortunately, I'm not able to answer that question today.

The Chair: Actually, I was going to ask a question about that. From what I understand, under this bill no appointment would be revoked. That would mean that, if on the day of royal assent 15 positions were vacant, the bill would only apply to those persons filling those 15 positions. No appointment would be revoked under the bill, the bill would therefore only apply to new returning officers.

Mr. Michel Guimond: That's probably the approach we should take. We'd have to monitor the end of each term. As each returning officer was appointed at a different time, obviously all 308 won't finish their term at the same time and I imagine that mandates do often come to an end. Logic would suggest that this new system would only apply to positions that are currently vacant and to those that will soon become available.

The Chair: Okay. I also have a question about returning officers appointed under this bill. The procedure for revoking the appointment of returning officers appointed by order in council is highly complex; the Privy Council has a very long list. So, how would such an appointment be revoked? And what about those returning officers appointed under this bill? How would those appointments be revoked? Such a position is almost like that of a judge; returning officers are advocates for democracy in their ridings. According to what criteria could the Chief Electoral Officer revoke the appointments of any of these returning officers?

Mr. Michel Guimond: The bill is perhaps not explicit enough as to the procedure, but as a rule, applicants themselves would point out any instance of incompetence or breach of ethics, of the rules of democracy or natural law; they could lodge complaints before the Chief Electoral Officer. At the end of the day, it would be the CEO's responsibility to start dismissal procedures. The bill is perhaps not sufficiently explicit on this matter.

The Chair: Good. Thank you very much.

Are there any other questions for our colleague?

Madam Whip.

• (1125)

[*English*]

Hon. Karen Redman (Kitchener Centre, Lib.): Thank you very much. I don't know if this is amending existing legislation—and forgive me, because you may have touched on this already, Mr. Chair—but is the big blank space after number “(7)” talking about who could be removed...? Is that written in some other act that stipulates it?

The Chair: It's the Elections Act.

Hon. Karen Redman: So we have to look at the Elections Act, and you're saying that removal from office would stay as it is currently.

You also say, Monsieur Guimond, that this is largely based on the Quebec experience. When you were doing your investigation, did you look by any chance at what it costs to run the process of selecting returning officers in Quebec? Obviously they do it for the province. We're looking nationally, but it would be a bit of a marker if we looked at a different layer of bureaucracy. I'm just wondering if your research at all indicated what that price might be.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Michel Guimond: I don't have any information on the costs. I could give you a perhaps silly and overly simple answer by saying that democracy has no price. Having said that, I think it would be a very inexpensive process. Once again, we could ask our researcher to write to Marcel Blanchet's office. He is the Chief Electoral Officer in Quebec. I'm convinced that we will be able to find this information very easily in Quebec's public accounts. A lot of emphasis seems to be placed on the Quebec experience, and yet variations on this model exist in several other provinces. In British Columbia, Newfoundland and Labrador, the Northwest Territories, Manitoba and Nunavut, an appointment is handed down directly by the Chief Electoral Officer. I of course am speaking largely from experience of the system I know best, which, incidentally, has been widely publicized. Remember when we studied the political financing bill? It was Bill C-24 at the time, I think.

Mr. James Robertson (Committee Researcher): Indeed.

Mr. Michel Guimond: Marcel Blanchet, Quebec's Chief Electoral Officer, testified before the committee. I asked him a question he could not answer. Since we had the opportunity to have him before us, I asked him his opinion on the current system.

So I would like to refer my colleagues to Mr. Blanchet's testimony before this committee concerning legislation on political party financing.

Hon. Karen Redman: Thank you.

• (1130)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Are there any other questions?

Mr. Nicholson.

[*English*]

Hon. Rob Nicholson: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I don't want to take up very much time of the committee.

I'm very interested in your proposal, Monsieur Guimond, and I think it's a step in the right direction. That being said, I just wanted to relate to you for the record that the process that's been in place hasn't been completely flawed, although systems can be improved upon.

I have to tell you the story of the returning officer in my riding of Niagara Falls. He was appointed in 1956 during the Louis St. Laurent government and managed to survive right straight through to the Kim Campbell government of 1993. He was only replaced after I left office in 1993. At the time, he—Mr. Clive Jacklin was his name—was the youngest person ever appointed a returning officer. When he retired, in or about 1995, he had held the post longer than any other. He held it, as you appreciate, through different administrations and was very fair, honest, and respected by everyone in the community.

I'm sure I'm just gratuitously putting that comment on the record, but I'm pleased to see that you brought forward this particular bill. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Would anyone like to react?

Mr. Michel Guimond: Indeed, cases of that certainly exist. However, at the end of their mandate, outgoing returning officers will be able to run again within the framework of an open and transparent competition. In our ridings, we all know of competent returning officers, but there are also some who are incompetent. As far as I'm concerned, I think that one incompetent returning officer is one too many.

I referred to my own riding as an example. I believe that the returning officer appointed in 2003 or 2004 — I don't know if you were leader at the time, Mr. Chairman — was incompetent.

It is not necessary anymore to swear under oath that one is unable to go out and vote. The number of reasons for voting in advance has been increased, which is a good thing. However, on the last day when people were allowed to vote in advance, 10 people were not able to do so because the returning officer had run out of ballots. Is this type of situation normal and acceptable? I don't know if those people would have voted for or against me. I received 62 per cent of the vote. So there is a 62 per cent chance that they would have voted for me, even though there's no guarantee of that. The fact remains that 10 of our fellow citizens were not able to vote because a certain decision had been taken, or because someone had planned her work badly. Those people were working in James Bay and could not vote on June 28th. That is an example of people whose right to vote had been taken away from them. It's not the reason I am tabling this bill, but it underscores what I am talking about.

In response to my colleague Mr. Nicholson, I would say that Mr. Jacklin did indeed survive governments of every political stripe. The reason he was appointed again is because he was competent; everyone was unanimous about that. I repeat that I don't think that the 308 returning officers are incompetent. Those who are competent and who have contributed to the job will be able to run for the position. Perhaps they will have an advantage in terms of the selection criteria, given that they have on-the-job experience, they already know the work, so perhaps they will be appointed once more.

The Chair: That's right.

Mr. Broadbent, you have the floor.

Hon. Ed Broadbent: I would like to talk about costs. This type of system does not only exist in Quebec, but also in Newfoundland, Manitoba and British Columbia. The New Democratic governments in British Columbia and Manitoba implemented the same type of system. Money is not a big problem. As Mr. Guimond said, it's the cost of democracy.

• (1135)

The Chair: Very well.

There is something else I would like to say, and if we are done after that, we will move on to something else. Otherwise, we can continue.

I would like to talk about transitional measures. I read the bill carefully in order to understand how it works. The mandate of returning officers, as it now stands, ends when electoral boundaries are redrawn. There is no set mandate. So if the boundaries of 307 ridings are redrawn, but the remaining riding does not change, the mandates of all 307 returning officers will end, whereas the 308th returning officer will stay. In fact, that is what happened during the last election. I believe that the riding represented by Mr. Caccia at the time was the only one which was not affected, and the returning officer stayed on the job.

So my question is about the transitional measures contained in the bill. As far as I understand, the bill will apply when a position becomes vacant. In light of my personal experience, I would say that there are always about 10 vacant positions. On average, a returning officer steps down once a week or falls ill. So there is a normal rotation.

Mr. Michel Guimond: He also has to live in the riding.

The Chair: That's right.

Mr. Michel Guimond: Or he may move elsewhere.

The Chair: Sometimes people move, and others step down, and this usually happens about once a week. So the new returning officers will obviously be appointed under the new criteria. However, the mandates of the returning officers who were appointed under the old system will end when electoral boundaries are redrawn. In the case of new officers, their mandate will end after 10 years.

I wonder if the member has thought about a transitional measure which could reconcile both systems at some point, since some appointments will end differently from others. Would the member agree to adopting a transitional provision under which some returning officers would fall under the new system? Otherwise, it may possibly take several decades before there is a universal system which applies to all returning officers.

Mr. Michel Guimond: That's an excellent suggestion. We will have to study it. However, when something new is implemented, it's always tempting to reach for the easy solution. As I was saying, we will look at the issue of the legality of revocation. I doubt that it would be easy to revoke their mandates when the new system is adopted. In fact, under the new procedure, some of the 308 individuals will be appointed under the new system, whereas others will have been appointed under the old one. That's how it works when a new system is brought in. But we don't want to wait 58 years before the system is changed. If that was the point of your suggestion, we will have to take a serious look at it, since it might make it easier to implement the new system.

The Chair: Are there any other members who would like to ask a question? If not, we can move right on to the second part of our agenda. Some members would like to move on to the other subjects as soon as possible.

Is your question for Mr. Guimond?

[English]

Mr. Scott Reid: No, it's just to say that I think we can deal with the matter I've got before going in camera.

The Chair: Okay. We're not there yet. If you don't mind, I'll recognize you immediately after.

[Translation]

Ms. Boivin, do you have a question for Mr. Guimond?

Ms. Françoise Boivin: I don't want to ask a question, I simply want to talk about follow-up. Are we postponing this indefinitely, or should we give our research analyst the mandate, as Mr. Guimond suggested, to do some research? Indeed, the outstanding issues which remain deal strictly with the transition and the implementation of the bill. I don't know when he could come back to us on that...

The Chair: Wait. I think we're getting ahead of ourselves. We have a meeting at noon to decide on who the next witnesses on this bill will be and to discuss other subjects we would like to study.

Ms. Françoise Boivin: All right.

The Chair: So we are not done yet. This does not mean that we have ended our study of the bill. I would simply ask my colleagues whether we finished hearing the presentation from the bill's sponsor.

• (1140)

Mr. Michel Guimond: I would also like to remind colleagues that our very competent clerk this week sent us the names of the legislative clerks who are working on the bill. So, if we have any amendments to present, we will get them to you the usual way. I take it for granted that the process will not be postponed indefinitely after my testimony is over.

The Chair: Absolutely not.

Mr. Michel Guimond: I get the impression that it is not essential for me to be part of Parliament's follow-up process.

The Chair: In fact...

Mr. Michel Guimond: I sometimes think about that. However, it's all part of my usual modesty.

The Chair: Fine. Thanks for your modesty.

A little earlier, we were talking about the minister's availability and about related matters. In the meantime, we were able to contact his office. Mr. Guimond, thank you very much for your presentation.

We will now change the topic and move on to other issues on the agenda.

We have a motion presented by M. Scott Reid. We also have a series of things to do later on today, including deciding on the list of witnesses who will speak to Bill C-312, which we discussed a little earlier today.

Just before the summer break, in June, we said we would like to hear from M. Kingsley at a certain point. Since then, we got his report, which of course we wanted to receive, and which deals with several electoral issues, including the one raised by Bill C-312. So I put this out for the members' consideration.

That being said, Mr. Reid, you presented a motion today. I will give you the floor, if you would like to speak to it.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[English]

I believe everybody has received a copy of the motion. It has been distributed in both official languages, and as you can see, it's fairly straightforward. As you read it, perhaps I'll just explain some of the logic of it.

The goal here is to have both of the ministers responsible for the democracy portfolio, Monsieur Bélanger, the Minister responsible for Democratic Reform, and Madam Stronach, the Minister responsible for Democratic Renewal, to come before the committee together—I have used the term “joint witnesses”—as soon as possible.

There are three things I'd like them to discuss with us while they are here. The first is to determine who actually is in charge of the electoral reform portfolio. This is a vexing question that has continued to confuse all of us in the opposition parties and our friends in the media as well. One would have thought it might have been resolved over the summer, but I see that correspondence regarding electoral reform that Fair Vote Canada submitted to Monsieur Bélanger wound up getting responded to out of Ms. Stronach's office, rather than out of Mr. Bélanger's office, but then yesterday he told me—we were on a panel show together—that he was in charge. I'm frankly confused. I would enjoy very much having one person in charge, or at the very least figuring out how we ought to get things moving, whom we ought to speak to on what matters, and how best to ensure that we can communicate effectively with the ministers who are responsible for following this.

As well, I don't know this conclusively, but it seems very likely to me that the confusion and the general problem of too many chefs spoiling the broth may account for why the forty-third report of this committee was not complied with. We were supposed to have two parallel processes set up starting October 1. We all agreed to this unanimously. That isn't happening.

There is now a serious concern as to whether or not the government can comply with all of the other provisions of the forty-third report, including final reporting deadlines. I think it is not unreasonable to find out, given there was a whole summer to work on this, why it is that the government has not complied with the starting point of October 1, as laid out in the proposals of the forty-third report, and how the government plans, whichever minister it happens to be, to ensure that the other deadlines and other provisions of that report can be met. After all, if the government can no longer meet them, then we ought to start looking at contingency planning as to how we can best accommodate the general goals that the report had proposed in order that we can recraft our recommendations to the government reflecting these new realities.

I think I can leave it there, Mr. Chairman.

• (1145)

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Guimond, would you like to say something about this motion?

Mr. Michel Guimond: Yes. I would like to thank my colleague Mr. Reid for having presented the motion.

I would like to answer his first question, which is finding out which of the two ministers is in charge of electoral reform. In my mind, from the very beginning, even before Ms. Stronach defected from the Conservatives to the Liberals, and even afterwards, I always thought that Mauril Bélanger was in charge of electoral reform.

In the French version of the motion I have before, Mr. Reid says: “[...] Belinda Stronach, Minister for Democratic Renewal [...]” What I understood, based on the Prime Minister's press conference and on certain comments he made afterwards, was that Ms. Stronach would be responsible for the implementation of the Gomery Commission's recommendations. I do not know whether *renouvellement démocratique* corresponds, in English, to democratic renewal.

Belinda Stronach is there to look at the results of the Gomery Commission. I never thought she had anything to do with electoral reform.

The Chair: Fine. Pardon me.

Mr. Michel Guimond: To conclude, I think that questions 2 and 3 are relevant.

The Chair: Mr. Broadbent.

[English]

Hon. Ed Broadbent: Well, Mr. Chairman, I certainly support this motion. I just have a few points on the question of ministerial responsibility. I, too, had heard the story from Fair Vote Canada that they had sent letters to Mr. Bélanger on the specific subject of electoral reform and were informed those would be dealt with by Ms. Stronach. Yesterday, in part of the same discussion that Scott Reid was involved in, Mr. Bélanger reiterated, however, that he was in charge of electoral reform. So I don't know what's going on. We do need to know.

Apart from that clarification, we now have 39 ministers, or one short of an historical record. Maybe we could appoint another one to deal with some other aspect of democracy and then we could get the whole process delayed for another two years. We've already had it delayed.

I am particularly interested in point number two. Members of this committee travelled to London, Edinburgh, Berlin, New Zealand, and Australia, at great cost to the public. We came back determined to get something achieved in this parliament. A lot of discussions took place, which I thought were quite genuine and in good taste, amongst all members and parties, and we came up with a workable agenda that would start this fall so that taxpayers' money would not be wasted and so that the learning experience of the members themselves would count for something. The government has chosen to totally disregard that. I think it requires serious explanation.

The dates, as everyone around this table knows, were worked out in conjunction or in informal discussions with the minister himself, because it was thought to be a believable, workable agenda. Well, the believable, workable agenda has been deep-sixed, and there's no way that we can have, for example, any engagement with citizens, any serious attempt to find out the values and principles that Canadians actually want in their electoral system before next spring, given the contractual process that we would have to go through in getting it established and so on. So the probability of anything being done before the next election, which I thought everybody in this committee wanted to accomplish, is now dead as a dodo. I certainly want to hear from either of the ministers. God knows, maybe they'll have their responsibilities changed before the next meeting; if so, they could probably explain it when they come here. It would be good to have democratically elected ministers come to explain why a democratic mandate, achieved unanimously on the committee and sent to them, was ignored by the government.

I look forward to it.

• (1150)

The Chair: Okay. Does anyone from the government side wish to speak?

Madam Redman, I'm sorry, I hadn't seen you.

Hon. Karen Redman: Thank you.

I would agree that it's a good idea to have both ministers. I think it's probably of interest, whether it is renewal or democratic reform, to get some clarity and see how the government plans to move forward on this. I think this is a great recommendation and could certainly add some light to this discussion.

The Chair: Your chair needs a little guidance here to understand this.

We're going to invite both ministers together. We were already going to get Minister Bélanger next week to discuss Bill C-312. I understand that he is able to come next week. It's what I have been told informally. Of course, I have no idea whether the other minister is available next week.

I'm seeking clarification on how we're going to do this, so that we don't delay one piece of legislation. I guess you follow where I'm going on this.

Monsieur Guimond.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Michel Guimond: That is german to what I am concerned about, Mr. Chairman. I agree that we should try to hear from both ministers, but that would be next week. I am appealing to my colleagues of every party. I believe that Bill C-312 enjoys unanimous support. It will probably be reorganized, amended and improved. Just because one minister or the other is not available—and we know that Mr. Bélanger is available next week—I would not want the adoption of the bill and parliamentary process to be delayed.

I do not know if Mr. Reid would agree to an amendment in that regard, but if Ms. Stronach is not available next week, we can still hear from Mr. Bélanger. It would make sense to ask him these questions. Mr. Bélanger should spend more than half an hour with us. In any case, he does not have the reputation of a minister who is

parsimonious with his time. He is an Ottawa area MP and he has time for us when he comes before this committee. So, he should stay long enough to answer any questions we have for him.

As for Ms. Stronach appearing next week on Bill C-312, we realize that she will not have a thing to say; she will vote just like any of us will.

However, if Mr. Reid would agree to an amendment in that regard, I...

The Chair: I always try to reach a consensus without pushing people. Mr. Bélanger can come next week for the first part, let's say the first 30 or 45 minutes, to discuss Bill C-312, and, if she is available, Ms. Stronach could come during the second part to talk about the other issue. Does everyone agree with that? I do not know if that is the right way to go about things.

Ms. Pauline Picard: Are we sure she will be able to come?

The Chair: I am trying to reach a consensus based on when I think she is available.

Ms. Pauline Picard: Are we sure of that?

[*English*]

The Chair: Would that be okay?

Oui.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Françoise Boivin: I want to be sure I understand the clarification. Does this mean that if Ms. Stronach is not available, we will not ask questions of Mr. Bélanger on this issue? My only problem with regard to the motion is the word jointly. If one of them is available, then we can deal with the one issue, that is, Bill C-312, then we will hear from both Mr. Bélanger and Ms. Stronach, if she is available. However, if she is not, that should not prevent us from going ahead anyhow.

The Chair: We all agree that is what it means. In any case, I do not think it would be well received if I told members that they are not allowed to ask such and such a question of the minister. I do not think it would be well received, even if I try to do it next week.

So, if we agree, let's say that the first hour will deal with Bill C-312, and after that meeting, or that hour, depending on the first eventuality, members who wish to do so will be able to ask questions on electoral reform.

• (1155)

Ms. Pauline Picard: Done.

Mr. Michel Guimond: Just to be sure, if Ms. Stronach—I do not want to put words into Mr. Reid's mouth—is not available for the second half of next Tuesday or Thursday's meeting, we will find another time to meet with both of them.

Mr. Scott Reid: Yes.

The Chair: Fine. We agree. Is that all right with you? Do you need a motion for that? Do we need to adopt it, or can all agree on saying that this is what we want?

[*English*]

Are you still moving it, or is it understood?

Mr. Scott Reid: It sounds like people are content to let things be. I'm happy to let things be if that's the informal agreement of the committee.

The Chair: Okay. You might want to keep this for next week, if you feel it didn't go your way, and move it again.

Mr. Scott Reid: That would be fine.

The Chair: We'll launch the invitation, having said what we just said.

I would now like to move in camera to discuss the overall scheduling of the committee.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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