



House of Commons
CANADA

Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

PROC • NUMBER 045 • 1st SESSION • 38th PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Tuesday, October 4, 2005

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Chair

The Honourable Don Boudria

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•(1105)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Don Boudria (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, Lib.)): Order, please.

Thank you, colleagues.

[Translation]

Pursuant to the order of reference of Wednesday, June 22, 2005, we shall proceed with our study of Bill C-312, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act (appointment of returning officers).

[English]

Our witness this morning is Mr. Harry Neufeld, the chief electoral officer of British Columbia.

I want to take this opportunity to thank him for accepting to join us this morning. I understand the phone call from our clerk to him was at a very opportune time, in that he was already visiting Ottawa or was in the neighbourhood in a timeframe very close to our request. That made it possible for him to be here.

This being said, we appreciate his presence this morning.

For the benefit of honourable members, a little later this morning we will have the clerk designate, I guess I can say now, of the House of Commons—until last week the acting Clerk of the House of Commons. She will be appearing before us to discuss an issue brought to our attention by Mr. Godin—and the issue is not the way it was described in the media, as we all know.

This being said, we will do that afterwards. We've tentatively asked Madame O'Brien to be here around 11:45 a.m., if we've completed our discussion with the witness who is before us; if not, we'll do that later on.

[Translation]

That being said, we will start by hearing from the witness who is here before us now.

[English]

Mr. Neufeld, would you like to make an initial presentation, sir, or do you want me to proceed to asking questions?

I gather there's enthusiasm for a presentation.

Mr. Harry Neufeld (Chief Electoral Officer, Elections BC): I have a few comments I'd like to make.

The Chair: Please proceed, Mr. Neufeld, and welcome.

Mr. Harry Neufeld: Thank you.

I'm honoured to be here in front of this committee as you review Bill C-312.

I'm a relatively recent chief electoral officer, in the Canadian context. I was appointed on November 7, 2002.

Mr. Harry Neufeld I want to say at the outset that I endorse the key concept of Bill C-312, which is the impartial selection process of senior federal election officials, with their appointments being based on merit.

The principle of non-partisan election administration is a widely endorsed ethical principle in western democracies. One of the codes of conduct that's published by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance—International IDEA—based in Stockholm, Sweden, is on the topic of ethical and professional administration of elections. The five key principles they iterate in this publication are: one, election administration must demonstrate respect for the law; two, election administration must be non-partisan and neutral; three, election administration must be transparent; four, election administration must be accurate; and five, election administration must be designed to serve the voters.

I think ethical principle number two, which is that election administration must be non-partisan and neutral, is the one that's at stake here. International IDEA elaborates that:

For an election to be successful, participants in the process have to trust that the election administrators will carry out their functions in a politically neutral way. If the people managing an election are perceived to have a commitment to any particular election result, the public credibility of the election process will be so seriously compromised that it will be difficult to restore faith in the process. Election administrators must therefore perform all their tasks in a manner that is strictly non-partisan and politically neutral.

When British Columbia rewrote its Election Act in 1995, I think the five principles I just reviewed with you were very much principles that guided and informed the content and the language of the B.C. Election Act. There's a handout that has some excerpts in it for your reference, from chapter 106 of the Revised Statutes of British Columbia, 1996.

I consider there to be three informal categories of the effort it associated with the process of recruitment, selection, and appointment of all the full-time and part-time staff employed by my office, which is generally known as Elections BC. Overall, the process is either heavy, it's moderate, or it's light.

The heaviest process, I believe, is for the appointment of my position as chief electoral officer. This requires unanimous recommendation of an all-party special committee of the legislature and an informal endorsement by the legislative assembly itself. The term of a chief electoral officer in British Columbia is two general elections plus one year. Now that we have fixed election dates—which as an election administrator I can say make life a lot easier to plan—this means it's a maximum of eight years; however, reappointment is possible.

Permanent staff who work in my office are appointed in what I also consider a quite heavy process. It's outlined in section 10 of the B.C. Election Act. Permanent positions are subject to all the Public Service Act rules regarding classification, job postings, juried assessments, reference checking, appeal periods, and a period of trial before a permanent position is granted.

But a less cumbersome process, what I'd say was a medium-weight process, is used for the appointment of district electoral officers and deputy district electoral officers for the 79 constituencies in the province of British Columbia.

I must explain that in British Columbia we use the term “district electoral officer”, which is the equivalent in the Canada Elections Act to the returning officer. We also have a position of deputy district electoral officer, which is equivalent to an assistant returning officer federally.

•(1110)

The appointment of both the district electoral officers and the deputy district electoral officers is spelled out in section 18 of the B. C. Election Act—that's on the second page of the handout that was prepared, entitled “Excerpts of Provincial Legislation”. That process is under my direct control as the chief electoral officer, and the Public Service Act does not apply to these part-time positions or to any other temporary employment with my office.

An aspect that members of this committee may find of interest is that the appointment is only for one electoral business cycle. In British Columbia we consider an electoral business cycle to be six months after one election to six months after the next election. So all the district electoral officers and all the deputy electoral officers will automatically be rescinded on November 17, six months after our May 17 election. Again, reappointment is possible.

An important thing for me is that district electoral officers and deputies are not permitted under the legislation to resign with less than three months' notice.

Lastly, the appointments can be rescinded, and it's spelled out in legislation—this is on the second page, subsection 18(9), just above the heading “Manitoba”, the last piece in the B.C. excerpt.

Finally, there is a comparatively merit-like process that we use for hiring all the personnel and officials who work in the districts in support of the offices that we establish, as enumerators, voting supervisors, voting officers, voting clerks, and so on. The merit principle is still applied, but the process is designed to be very efficient. Most of the 30,000-plus employees that we hire for a provincial election are really only there for one day of employment.

I have just a few more points, and then I'll be happy to take any questions you have.

District electoral officers and deputy district electoral officers, in the way we administer their positions, are considered contractors, not employees.

Secondly, and I would think this would hold for returning officers and assistant returning officers as well, most of them are retired or semi-retired persons, because they need to be available for several months full time, and most people with full-time employment don't have the capacity to do that.

Thirdly, people who fill these positions need special skill sets and they need specialized training. They're not just an average person off the street. I've seen the work of a district electoral officer or the deputies to the district electoral officers evolve over the last several decades, become much more complex, make far greater use and have far greater responsibility for computerization and information management, and become steadily subject to a higher level of scrutiny both by the public and by the media.

And finally, the role of the district electoral officer, deputy district electoral officer in British Columbia, the returning officers and assistant returning officers federally is absolutely crucial to the delivery of democratic elections.

I'll be happy to answer any questions you might have.

•(1115)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

We will begin with a member of the official opposition.

[*English*]

Mr. Epp.

Mr. Ken Epp (Edmonton—Sherwood Park, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and thanks, Mr. Neufeld, for being here.

I know B.C. is a long way, and I always feel sorry for our B.C. MPs who have that three-hour time warp every time they come to Ottawa.

I would like to ask you a question with respect to the duration of the legislation under which you're operating. How long has it been the way it is now in British Columbia? Is it relatively recent, or has that been historically for a long time too?

Mr. Harry Neufeld: The legislation was passed or given royal assent on September 1, 1995—just a little over a decade ago.

Mr. Ken Epp: In your opinion, is it really working well?

Mr. Harry Neufeld: I think it's working extraordinarily well. I had no complaints from the public and no complaints from the political parties or any candidates during our recent election about my district electoral officers or their deputies.

I think it's a process that has evolved. My predecessor evolved it for, of course, eight years before I got there. I think the process has worked really well in British Columbia, and it's simply not an issue in terms of people not having trust in their district electoral officers being competent or being in any way politically partisan.

Mr. Ken Epp: How many electoral districts are there in B.C.?

Mr. Harry Neufeld: Currently there are 79. The recent throne speech indicated there may be as many as 85 in the future. There's a boundary commission about to begin.

Mr. Ken Epp: With respect to the reappointment, your people automatically expire, if I can use that term, six months after the election, which means you now have some 75 or 80 appointments to make. What criteria do you use? If you haven't had any complaints, is he or she automatically reinstated, or do you do a detailed performance review? How do you do that?

Mr. Harry Neufeld: We did a detailed review of performance that we're actually providing as a report card to each district electoral officer and deputy next week, when we have our post-event conference. As far as I know, this is a first in British Columbia. We have an assessment of their performance against a number of criteria and an assessment of their performance as compared to their colleagues.

We face some tremendous challenges in the next few years in British Columbia, in that in the throne speech of September 12, there is a commitment to having another referendum on electoral reform. It is to be held in conjunction with the local government elections on November 15, 2008. Depending on the result of that election, we will run the election six months later, actually a little less than six months later, on May 12, 2009, either on the current single member plurality system or on a proposed single transferable vote system—the Irish system, as many call it.

I'm going to have to have district electoral officers trained and ready to go either way. Quite frankly, I think we're going to be establishing a whole new set of criteria about selection. We may end up with more than one set, because I'm going to need district electoral officers to run the referendum and I'm going to need them to be ready for the two different types of elections, under two very different sets of system rules. So I would say that reappointments are not going to be automatic. I think many of the district electoral officers are going to want to know what the scope of their responsibilities is going to be before they would even take on the job, and we have a lot of planning to do before we decide exactly what the management framework is going to be.

• (1120)

Mr. Ken Epp: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Those are my questions for now.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

I am now going to give the floor to Ms. Picard from the Bloc Québécois.

Ms. Pauline Picard (Drummond, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Welcome. Let us talk about the recruitment process. I would like you to explain to us the different stages involved in the process, and the costs related to it.

How do you go about recruiting your returning officers?

[*English*]

Mr. Harry Neufeld: m It's a very good question. The costs are something that the committee clerk has asked my office to prepare. I don't have a ready answer. It has been a greatly variable cost, depending on the timing.

Let me give you a little bit of history about the recruitment process that I've been engaged in with district electoral officers since I took on the position. In 2002, I was faced with very large financial restraints that the B.C. government put on basically every agency in government, including the independent offices. I was implementing a 35% budget cut, and that required that we restructure quite extensively the way business had been done.

At a meeting I held with the district electoral officers and deputies, most of whom had been reappointed from the 2001 election, I laid out the enlarged scope of their responsibilities, the additional time it would take in 2005, and advised them that if they wanted to resign, I understood, because the scope of the job had increased.

About 25% of them did resign, so we started a recruitment process. What we did first was hire a consultant who helped us with an advisory group of my district electoral officers, where we established what the key qualities were that district electoral officers needed in terms of leadership style, in terms of management style and in terms of logistical sort of savvy, a wide range of interpersonal skills, as well as attitudes needed in working as a team, dealing with the public and dealing in the greatly varied kind of environment that they would be required to deal with.

Our consultant developed a computer profile. We posted newspaper advertisements and advertisements on our website and we circulated job descriptions through local community organizations. In some cases, we contacted local officials and advised that we were looking to fill these positions, and we accepted applications.

We pared these applications down to between 6 and 10 per electoral district and administered this web-based survey. Based on that web-based survey, the people whose responses best fit the profile—and there was a wide variety—were short-listed and interviewed.

Some of the interviews were by telephone. Generally, though, they involved my human resources director, a member of our district electoral officer advisory committee, and when it was a deputy district electoral officer that was being hired, to the maximum extent possible it involved the district electoral officer for the district they would have to be working with.

Through that process we made a selection. The people who were not successful were advised, as well as those who were successful, and then an appointment process was started.

A first round of training was given to each group as they were brought on, so they had a sort of base level of understanding about what the expectations of the role were, of the non-partisan nature of the administration, and their responsibilities for understanding the legislation they were responsible for administering.

• (1125)

[Translation]

Ms. Pauline Picard: Do you follow the same process for selecting deputy district electoral officers?

[English]

Mr. Harry Neufeld: In British Columbia we take the position of deputy district electoral officer very, very seriously, because if the district electoral officer cannot perform for some reason, we think it very important—and the legislation supports this—that immediately there be somebody who can take over. In fact, the legislation is quite clear that in the absence of the district electoral officer, the deputy district electoral officer has all the powers and all the authority to act.

Given the very long hours and the long weeks that are sometimes associated with election administration, this is a model that works very well. We train them together. They're always together when they're going through training. It's a minimum of 10 days of training. They're expected to work very closely as a team. They're expected to spell each other off in terms of always having a presence in the office, but both of them are recruited under the same rules and the same guidelines.

[Translation]

The Chair: The floor is yours, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Sir, I am delighted to welcome you to the committee.

Earlier, you spoke of your experience in British Columbia. The government has always had the power to appoint people directly. Many voters, even amongst those who voted for the governing party, have complained about this, as our system is democratic and elections should be fair for all political parties. Canadians must be allowed to make their own choices as to which party will form government.

Why do government appointments exist? I see such appointments as flying in the face of democracy. Appointments ought to be made by an impartial party. What was the government's reaction to this? Do you think that the government would like to go back to the old way of doing things?

• (1130)

[English]

Mr. Harry Neufeld: I have to say that in British Columbia this is a complete non-issue. There's no discussion on this matter whatsoever. I think it was regarded as part of a natural evolution.

This is not to say the appointments made prior to 1995 were not of competent people. Many district electoral officers appointed before 1995 were district electoral officers in 2005. I think there would be an outcry if the government came forward with a bill to have these positions appointed by the government of the day, not on the basis of merit, and by somebody other than the chief electoral officer.

Mr. Yvon Godin: How does the director—you, yourself—get appointed?

Mr. Harry Neufeld: I describe that in my statement. A special all-party committee of the legislature is tasked with the recruitment. They have to make a unanimous recommendation to the legislative assembly, and the legislative assembly has to make a decision to appoint the chief electoral officer. It's for a fixed term, which is two general elections plus one year—so it's eight years, approximately.

Mr. Yvon Godin: What is the process if you have to—I don't know if I'm using the right word—take away the responsibility of the person? You know, you have to....

Mr. Harry Neufeld: Dismiss him.

Mr. Yvon Godin: You have to get rid of him. What is the process?

Mr. Harry Neufeld: To be honest, I'm not sure what the process is for my position, but it's possible—

Mr. Yvon Godin: Not yours—no, not yours. Probably Parliament will do it by legislation. Right? The one who put you there will take you out, but what is it for the other one, for the riding?

Mr. Harry Neufeld: It's spelled out in the legislation under subsection 18(9). It's the section just before “Manitoba” in your handout. The reasons are as follows: the official is incapable by reason of illness or otherwise of satisfactorily performing the individual's duties under the act; the official hasn't followed the direction of the chief electoral officer; the official has failed to competently discharge—

Mr. Yvon Godin: Who would do it?

Mr. Harry Neufeld: I'd do it.

Mr. Yvon Godin: You'd do it. Okay. That was my question—not the cost, but who would do it. You'd do it.

[Translation]

The Chair: Do you have another question, Mr. Godin?

Mr. Yvon Godin: No.

The Chair: Very well.

Over to you, Ms. Redman.

[English]

Hon. Karen Redman (Kitchener Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Clearly, your province has been a real leader in some of the electoral reform in which this committee is engaged in a very serious way.

You spoke about having your returning officers basically being ready for a dual track if you were going to go to the single ballot transferable, or the Irish, system. Can you talk to us for a minute? One of the things we're grappling with is how to implement change in a way that engages citizens. We looked at a very abbreviated citizen engagement. Would you like to comment on your experience, and how long British Columbia took, and the sort of time necessary in order to have citizens feel they've had the kind of participation one would want for this kind of fundamental change?

Mr. Harry Neufeld: As members of the committee probably know, there was a citizens' assembly on electoral reform in British Columbia that gave its final report in December of last year. There was a referendum on their recommendation. The question that was asked of all voters is, should British Columbia change to the BC-STV electoral system as recommended by the citizens' assembly on electoral reform?

That referendum narrowly failed. It received 57.69% of overall support. It required 60% for the first threshold. There was a second threshold that required support in at least 60%...that was 48 of the 79 electoral districts. It received majority support in 77 of the 79 electoral districts. For this reason, it's been decided, politically, that the referendum will be held on the same question of electoral reform again. The issue of reassembling the citizens' assembly has been set aside.

Generally, I think the commentators, the observers of the citizens' assembly, and certainly the participants were astonished at how well the process worked—but it was a two-year process. In April 2003, the British Columbia legislative assembly passed the provisions for establishing the citizens' assembly. In the summer, we randomly selected 100 men and 100 women per electoral district from the voters list. Letters went out from the offices of the citizens' assembly, and they ultimately picked one man and one woman from each electoral district. There was no aboriginal representation. They changed the rules and added two members who had been in the random selection process but hadn't had their name picked out of a hat. It ended up being 160 strangers who got together for a series of very structured meetings. That took place for just about a full 12 months.

There is some excellent documentation that's been written. There's a really good video, which is one hour long, that the Knowledge Network did as a documentary. You may be interested in seeing that.

The citizens' assembly process worked exceedingly well, but perhaps a design flaw was that there was no public education process following the assembly's completion of its work. It wasn't mandated to do public education. The government set up an information office, but there was not a very large budget and not a lot of time. A lot of complaints were made about there not being enough information for people to really understand the new system they were expected to vote on. There was a lot of concern that there wasn't any funding for yes and no committees. It was a completely voluntary thing. Quite honestly, the expectation that people would be debating electoral reform on the street corners, at the barber shops, and at the hairdressers just didn't happen.

We have the simplest electoral system in the world, but to describe anything else in less than five minutes is extremely difficult. For that reason, it requires an engagement that takes quite a bit of effort. Whatever you might come up with as a process, I would caution that the public education aspect also be addressed in your design.

● (1135)

Hon. Karen Redman: I have one final question.

I appreciate that you did a provincial education process and citizens' assembly, and we will be looking at a national one. In your view, would a proposed four- or five-month period be realistic to

accomplish the kinds of things that a citizens' assembly and citizen engagement are intended to bring about?

Mr. Harry Neufeld: The consultant's classic answer always is “it depends”; it depends so much on the scope of what it is you're asking the assembly to review.

The citizens' assembly on electoral reform in British Columbia was given quite a large scope. They were asked to look at whether there was a better electoral system available for British Columbia, and if so, specify it and decide whether or not that should be recommended to be asked in the referendum.

So 160 strangers had to go through a learning process, then they went through an extensive public hearing process, and then they went through a four-month deliberation process. So for the scope of that question, they needed that much time.

It was aggressive, and these people were doing this on weekends, and they took out 11 weekends of their year. They were given a small amount of compensation and their expenses for travel were covered, but it's a large commitment to expect citizens to engage in that.

What shocked many commentators—and I have to say I was even quite impressed—was that only one person quit the assembly in all that time. They were very engaged and very excited by their work. So as a method of deliberative democracy, I think this holds some promise.

● (1140)

The Chair: Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I had some questions about the returning officers. Before I go to that, maybe I can follow up a little bit on Ms. Redman's questions.

The upcoming referendum in which the same question will be revisited, is it going to be 60% again this time or 50% that will be the required threshold?

Mr. Harry Neufeld: It won't be the same question. The question will be devised in the legislature, but the thresholds will be the same. That is what the indication was in the throne speech. So it will be 60% of the ballot votes cast and a simple majority in 60% of the ridings, that is, 48 of the 79 ridings.

Mr. Scott Reid: Although I wasn't actually in British Columbia at the time, the impression I get is that an issue raised particularly by people who favoured not the status quo but alternatives to the one that was actually being voted on—MMP in particular—was that there was not sufficient detail as to how the system would actually work. There was not detail, for example, as to exactly how the very large rural areas would be represented and this sort of thing.

The premier has indicated from press reports I've seen that he intends to have further detail. Is the actual draft legislation going to be dealt with by the legislature prior to the referendum, or would that still take place after the referendum?

Mr. Harry Neufeld: I'm smiling because I very much need that legislation to not only be in draft but to be final, because I cannot prepare for an election under an entirely new set of rules without knowing specifically what the requirements are. I have to do all the guides and forms, training manuals, interpretations, and policies, and I need this two years in advance. It's a very large undertaking.

Mr. Scott Reid: How long will you have between the next election and the four-year rotation and the period prior to that when the referendum takes place?

Mr. Harry Neufeld: It will be less than six months between the referendum and the election.

Mr. Scott Reid: A lot of jurisdictions that conduct referenda on a regular basis—the American states, the Swiss cantons—ask questions like this in a referendum: are you in favour of Bill 10 or Bill 20? In the United States it's, are you in favour of proposition whatever, yes or no? Proposition 13 is a famous one.

It removes any other wording, but it assumes that either a bill has been passed or is in a finalized and unchangeable form so people know exactly what they're voting on.

From your perspective, would that be a preferable situation?

Mr. Harry Neufeld: When it comes to the ballot and the question that's on the ballot, I don't have a problem with there being more referendum questions, if that's what legislators decide is appropriate.

The issue I have is there's a responsibility for civic education, and I think placing the onus completely on the members of the public is not a realistic expectation.

Mr. Scott Reid: When I asked the question, I meant that instead of having a reference to some kind of model that perhaps isn't fully drafted, if you were to question it, you'd have to actually refer to the legislation that produced the new model. It presumably gets a bill number and is in the legislature.

Mr. Harry Neufeld: I see your point. Perhaps that'll be a consideration as the debate evolves in British Columbia. Maybe the reference will not be to the citizens' assembly recommendation but to a bill that has been agreed to in the legislature as the new election act under the B.C. single transferable vote electoral system.

Mr. Scott Reid: I only have about one minute left.

In regard to the district electoral officers, you indicated in a response to an earlier question that about 25% chose not to seek reappointment. Have you or your predecessor found any reason in the past to remove anybody from office? I'm not thinking so much at the point of reappointment but rather in the course of an election. That's one question.

Tied to that, I noticed from looking through the review, where sections of your legislation are taken out, that there appears to be no residency requirement for someone to reside in the district or in an adjoining district to the one they represent. Are there benefits or problems to having that?

• (1145)

Mr. Harry Neufeld: I'll start with your last question first.

There are no residency requirements, and this provides me with flexibility, which I very much appreciate. Sometimes it's impossible

to find somebody within the electoral district, given the amount of time we have. You may have a resignation or a death. Sometimes you have to consider the fact that many of these district electoral officers are elderly, and when their spouses become ill, they resign, whether or not it's required under law to give three months' notice. They don't have much patience for being told they're supposed to stay on the job and give more notice. It's completely understandable, and I have to cope with that. But when you're trying to find a new person and the election is coming in weeks, you need flexibility.

We've always found somebody in the riding or adjacent to the riding, but there have been times when I've considered appointing one of my staff to go out there, pick up the reins, and deliver the election. I think that flexibility is something of a benefit. I noticed that the Manitoba legislation has some language where, in extraordinary circumstances, the chief electoral officer can do that.

In regard to your first comment on the 25% who decided not to stay on, that was in reaction to a more enlarged scope. We basically went from a requirement that they be available full time for a minimum of six weeks to a requirement of closer to three months, and some of them simply could not do that.

When looking at the records, it seems that about 15% of the district electoral officers who served under my predecessor in 2001 were not reappointed on the basis of his decision that their performances left something to be desired and that it would be worth going to a competition for the positions. This time, because of the widely changing scope of responsibilities, I'm going to have to lay out all of that up front and have full competitions.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I have an additional question on the revocation.

In terms of the system that exists now by order in council, some would argue, as I think you have, that it is not as transparent as the one you have. However, at least in the eyes of some, one of the redeeming values is the revocation process, which is rather heavy in the sense that one cannot be removed for frivolous reasons and you need what is known as "cause". It's quite a complicated process. It's almost as tough as removing a judge, because that person is, after all, the arbiter of democracy in the riding.

Can I conclude that the threshold for removing someone from office is far lower under your system because, first of all, everything expires after the election and arguably there's a valve there for you or for whoever holds the position to remove someone at that point, and secondly, even outside of that process, the mechanisms to remove someone are not as weighty, if you feel that's the appropriate thing to do?

Mr. Harry Neufeld: I would certainly agree with your comment that they're not as weighty as what you've just described in federal legislation for removal for cause. I have removed district electoral officers on the basis of performance; I removed one during the last election.

We don't compensate district electoral officers at the same rate as judges, and perhaps we don't hold them to the same level of performance as we would hold a judge, but when it comes to running an election, you can't have performance issues with the people who are in charge of running the election in an electoral district. You have to have competent managers. So having the flexibility to say, "You haven't followed my instruction, this is the third time I've told you, and your appointment is rescinded and we're replacing you", is something I need to have to be an effective election administrator on behalf of the province.

• (1150)

The Chair: Thank you.

Are there any other questions from colleagues before we change gears, as it were, for the next presentation?

[Translation]

If not, I would like to thank...

The floor is yours, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Chair, I would like us to turn our attention back to the matter of the deputy district electoral officer. Ms. Picard tells me that the bill provides for the same situation as exists in Quebec; in other words, the district electoral officer appoints... I cannot find what I am looking for in the research notes.

Ms. Pauline Picard: The district electoral officer appoints the deputy district electoral officer.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I would like to hear your views on the matter. For example, in British Columbia, the Chief Electoral Officer appoints the district electoral officer and the deputy district electoral officer. However, in Quebec, according to our information, the Chief Electoral Officer appoints the district electoral officer, who then appoints his deputy.

The Chair: That is also how it works at a federal level. Number one in command appoints number two.

Ms. Pauline Picard: The difference is that, at a federal level, the appointment of the district electoral officer would be a partisan appointment as would be, in turn, the appointment of the deputy district electoral officer. Under Quebec legislation, however, we organize a competition for the post, which results in a merit-based appointment being made. Although the district electoral officer appoints his own deputy, it remains an inherently non-partisan process.

The Chair: That is open to debate.

Mr. Neufeld, you have the floor.

[English]

Mr. Yvon Godin: My question is, do you see any problem if the director of the election in the riding makes the appointment? Do you see a problem with that? I would like to have your opinion on that, compared with your...

Mr. Harry Neufeld: My preference would be the arrangement we have in British Columbia, because if there are issues with the district electoral officer and the district electoral officer has appointed the deputy, the deputy is likely to side with the district electoral officer if there's a dispute with me. If I appoint the deputy and the district electoral officer... But I do see the value, or do not underestimate the

value, of the district electoral officer having a hand in selecting their deputy; it's important that they work together really, really well. But there's a difference between being the exclusive person selecting them and being part of a team that selects them.

So my preference is the arrangement we have in British Columbia, where the chief electoral officer is responsible for the appointment of both the district electoral officer and the deputy.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Thank you.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[English]

With that, we want to thank you for joining us, Mr. Neufeld. This has been very helpful to our committee as we debate this bill. We have a number of other witnesses over the next few days, including your provincial counterparts from other parts of the country, and we're looking forward to their testimony as well. We wish you a very good trip back home, whenever you do return to what I would normally say is the warmer province in Canada, but today I think Ottawa pretty well qualifies for that—although it's not usually the case. So thank you, Mr. Neufeld.

Mr. Harry Neufeld: Thank you so much.

[Translation]

The Chair: Before proceeding to the next item on the agenda, I should point out that the clerk has brought it to my attention that we need to approve a budget to cover the transport costs of our next witnesses, particularly those provincial chief electoral officers who have to come to Ottawa. They will be appearing before us on Bill C-312.

[English]

So I would need a motion to pay for the transportation of other witnesses on this, that would say the following:

That the proposed budget for the study of Bill C-312, in the amount of \$16,900, for the period of October 4, 2005 to October 28, 2005, be adopted.

Is there someone to move such a motion? Monsieur Godin.

Is there debate?

Hon. Judi Longfield (Whitby—Oshawa, Lib.): What are the details of the \$16,900?

• (1155)

The Chair: We will give you that in a moment.

Hon. Judi Longfield: I'd like to know why it's being moved.

The Chair: It's for plane tickets and things of that nature for the witnesses we have lined up. I will attempt to get you the information right now.

So far, this is the total amount of the budget for all the witnesses we need. However, not all of them have made claims, so we may not actually... I'm pretty sure we won't need it all because we already know that some of them won't. But here is what it covers: one ticket from Vancouver-Victoria to Ottawa; one from Winnipeg; one from Toronto; and one from Quebec City. That doesn't mean these people will claim that. It means it's enough to cover the expenses—

Hon. Judi Longfield: And that's \$16,900, is it?

The Chair: That's including per diem and including hotels. Any one of us who has flown to Vancouver recently will know what I'm saying about the prices of some of the tickets. This is for tickets, hotels, and per diems, should a claim be made. This is to cover the maximum amount thereof for our staff to reimburse these claims.

Are there any other questions on this? If not, can we now entertain Mr. Godin's motion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: That ends that item.

Maybe I should outline for the committee the witnesses we have for Thursday. We have the chief electoral officers for the provinces of Ontario, Quebec, and Manitoba as a panel. You will notice that in two of those, they have the system proposed in the bill. In the third, they've opted not to have the system that's in the bill, or they haven't done it, which is the province of Ontario. We will hear from this panel on Thursday, and I think that will assist the committee.

For your information, members of the committee, the minister will be here in the week we're back.

The second order of reference we have this morning is pursuant to Standing Order 108(3), a review of the Standing Orders, procedures and practices of the House. That is effectively the rubric that enables us to have Madam Audrey O'Brien with us this morning. I don't know if I'm supposed to call her the acting clerk, clerk designate, or both.

Ms. Audrey O'Brien (Acting Clerk, House of Commons): I think acting clerk will be fine.

The Chair: Welcome, and congratulations, Madam O'Brien.

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: We don't want to jinx anything.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Thank you.

As colleagues will know, there has been an interest expressed in studying the possibility of the House of Commons having a time clock similar to those that exist in a number of provincial legislatures, notably the province of Ontario. I'm familiar with it because it was installed there in 1981, when I was a member of the legislature. Twenty-four years later we're very pleased to receive you, Madam O'Brien, and see how much time it will take for us to catch up. It may exist in other legislatures; I'm not sure.

The subject that was brought to our attention was at the initiative of Monsieur Godin. Madam O'Brien, I think you know what the subject is, and perhaps you could describe to us one of these time clocks, how it would work and so on, and then we could have questions.

I notice you brought staff with you—Monsieur Bard. Would you like to have Monsieur Bard join you?

[*Translation*]

Welcome, Mr. Bard.

[*English*]

I think all of us know Monsieur Bard, from our House of Commons administration, who makes everything happen around here.

Madam O'Brien.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am delighted to be here today to talk about the matter of the countdown clock.

● (1200)

[*English*]

This countdown clock is not a new subject. Obviously, as you mentioned, this has existed in other legislatures for some time. We have and can make available to Mr. Robertson the jurisdictions in which it exists, and so forth.

I noticed in looking back over our records that in 1991 it was studied by the then Standing Committee on House Management. I think that was the precursor to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, and of course in 2002 it was one of the topics that was addressed in the report of the Special Committee on the Modernization and Improvement of the Procedures of the House of Commons.

Just reading what the report said, in there we undertook that...

[*Translation*]

The Clerk of the House is now looking into the available systems, and we hope to have something available in the near future. We will also be consulting with House leaders and members of Parliament.

[*English*]

We did in fact look at the possibilities at the time, and one of the things we found was that we wanted to tie the notion of the countdown clock to the countdown that's already going on at the table on the computers there, and we wanted to have that application stable before we went forward.

At that time, there did not seem to be that much of a press to go forward. In fact, we've modified the application and stabilized it since then. So the application itself at the table is considerably better. I think we would be in a position, then, to apply that if the committee decided to recommend that we go forward with the countdown clock, if indeed the House decided to accept that recommendation.

I just want to mention that in terms of the precedents we found in other legislatures, it's important to note that the countdown clock—or the count-up clock, which is what happens in some places—is not used for every proceeding. It's only used for some proceedings. So that's something that I think the committee would have to look at fairly carefully.

In fairness to the whole issue, it is important that members be aware that there's a downside to the use of the clock and the presence of a clock. That is, really, it removes a certain element of flexibility and discretion from whoever is chairing the proceedings. Sometimes the expectations of having something that is clear and, for once, a simple answer as to whether the person is out of time or not is a mechanistic approach to order and to the orderly unfolding of proceedings, whereas the flexibility that the Speaker or Acting Speaker might have, in terms of granting an extra five seconds for a person to complete their thought or in relation to the various applause from various sides, or heckling, to modify it as a result of what they've seen happen, might be a more holistic approach to the bringing of order to proceedings.

[Translation]

That being said, any decision is obviously entirely up to you. I asked Louis Bard to accompany me in order to answer any technical questions that you may have.

If the House of Commons so desires, we would be able to make a recommendation in the near future.

[English]

At the same time, we have a medium-term option that would see us doing something, perhaps in the next longer recess, that would allow us to come up with perhaps a bit more elegant solution.

Basically, the key question before you at this time is, do you want to proceed with that? Then the question of the technical issues are relatively easily solved, with the exception, of course, of the arcana of heritage considerations and putting holes in the table for cabling and stuff. That's a bit of a black art, but I'm sure we can manage to work something out there.

[Translation]

That brings me to the end of what I had to say.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. O'Brien.

I should point out that those of us seated close to the Clerk of the House of Commons are already able to consult the countdown clock that he has on his desk. I myself have a similar clock, as do all the Conservative members seated near me, and, of course, they can also consult the clerk's time clock. Around one member in ten already has access to the time clocks that we have in the chamber.

Mr. Epp has a question.

●(1205)

[English]

Mr. Ken Epp: Well, thank you.

In a few days I'll have been in the House for 12 years.

A voice: You're starting from scratch!

Mr. Ken Epp: I'm gradually learning how it works around here.

About five or six years ago I bought my own countdown clock. I'm one who doesn't usually speak from notes, so when I'm speaking, the clock is very, very useful. I'd sometimes look at the clock when I started talking and then I'd have to wonder, on the second channel of my master computer here, while talking and thinking about what I

was saying, now, what was the time and when am I out? So I bought the little countdown timer, and I was careful to buy one whose buttons don't make any noise and which doesn't beep at the end of the time. I did my research on that and got a decent clock. They cost \$20 each. If anybody wants one, let them go and buy one. That's my view.

Secondly, I think we need to work pretty hard at improving the decorum in the House. I think a countdown clock would make it into a hockey rink, where as the period comes to an end, the masses count, "Five, four, three, two, one", and then with that, "Time, time". We don't need that in the House. I'm therefore opposed to this thing, and I think we shouldn't spend any time or any money trying to do it. Leave it as it is. That's my view.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Epp.

Next on my list is Ms. Picard.

Ms. Pauline Picard: I would like to react to what Mr. Epp just said. When compared to many countries in the world, I think that Canada is the only federal government which has not yet introduced an electronic voting system. All that we are asking for is a little countdown clock. I do not think that we should limit ourselves by pretending to muddle along just fine with the little clocks that we buy ourselves. I am rather disappointed by reactions to this. To my mind, it belittles our role in the House of Commons.

Ms. O'Brien provided us with some interesting information. You said that you could initially provide us with a temporary system, and that in December, while the House stands adjourned, you would be able to install a more permanent...

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: That was not exactly what I said.

Mr. Bard and I have discussed this matter. We would be able to provide you with screens which, as the chairman said earlier, would allow those of you seated near the desk to see the information on the clerks' screens. The system could be placed on the desk itself, in order that everybody have access to it. Such a solution would, however, entail making certain changes to what is currently on the desk, and we are not entirely sure of the effect that that would have. We do not want to cause any interference with broadcasting, and we would not want it to be caught by the television cameras, because...

Ms. Pauline Picard: People would be able to hear...

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: Exactly. That is what we have to offer by way of an immediate solution. We could install such a system, but it is not ideal.

Ms. Pauline Picard: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Picard.

Mr. Godin.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I did not expect this matter to give rise to this sort of debate.

Ms. O'Brien, you are saying that a countdown clock will offer less flexibility because, for example, if a member has 20 minutes to make a speech, and the countdown clock hits zero, the Speaker would not be able to grant the member a few more seconds. But it depends on how we choose to operate. That is what already happens with the table clock. We could adopt a regulation stating that the microphones will be cut off when the Speaker rises, and not when the countdown clock hits zero. That would provide us with a few seconds' flexibility.

Personally, I am not looking for a countdown clock which would turn parliamentary debate into a hockey match. We're not going to say: unlucky, you scored too late. That is not the type of situation that we're looking to create.

Furthermore, such a system could not be used during question period. During question period, when we have, for example, 35 seconds, we would not have time to look at both the clock and the minister to whom we are speaking. It is up to us to make sure that our questions fit in the 35-second slot. I was thinking more along the lines of the way in which the countdown clock is used in the Legislative Assembly of Ontario, for example.

When some members make a speech in the House, they base themselves on a text which has been drafted by their party. Such cases are straightforward, the member simply has to read the speech, and knows that it will take 15, or 18 minutes to do so.

That is not, however, the way that all members work. When we make speeches, we rage against fellow parliamentarians. The Speaker begins to shift in his chair a couple of minutes before our time expires; but we are looking at the person shouting at us, and not the Speaker. The poor Speaker starts leaping up and down in his chair, trying to catch our attention. That is how it works, that is the reality of Parliament.

Do you agree with me?

When there is only one minute remaining, the Speaker raises a finger at us. We still pay no heed. The poor Speaker is still frantically trying to get our attention, because he is trying to do his job and let us know that we must conclude our remarks.

I am adamant that placing two clocks behind the Speaker, one to each side, would not disfigure Parliament. The countdown clock should not go on the table, as it would only help those seated nearby. I am not talking about a huge hockey clock which displays penalties, like Peter Adams suggested. That would be ridiculous. That is not what we're looking for. It is a matter of improving how we work. When we have 20 minutes to make a speech, we have time to look around. We would not have to look at the Speaker, we would simply have to turn to the clock to see that we only had five minutes remaining. This is the crux of the matter. If we see that we only have 10 minutes left, we would be able to begin concluding our speech, rather than waiting to the very end when the Speaker points out that we only have a minute left. When that happens, we find ourselves with a great deal still to say, but no time left.

The purpose of this suggestion is to help members of Parliament, not worsen the situation. I can honestly say that I believe that all members in the House of Commons will use the clock when it is introduced.

Mr. Epp has a clock on his desk, it only cost \$20. It is easy to modify, if you open it and break it, the alarm will not go off any longer. But that is not the question at hand. A countdown clock would be useful to everybody, and not just the member who is making a speech. The next person due to speak would be able to look at the clock and see that his colleague only had 5 or 10 minutes remaining. He would know that he had to get ready to speak.

A countdown clock would be a useful and inexpensive tool. We do not have to wait until Parliament is renovated. It would not be costly, it is only a matter of connecting a wire from your computers to a wall socket. That is the way that I see it.

Do you agree with me that we could adopt a regulation stipulating that it would be the Speaker, rather than the clock, who would decide when to stop proceedings in the chamber?

• (1210)

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: You are absolutely right in what you say about flexibility. But everybody would have to agree that both the right to grant a member the floor and to cut him off remains in the hands of the Speaker. The House could ask the administration to install a countdown clock as a tool for members of Parliament. It would make life easier for those members who get carried away by their speeches, as you have so eloquently described, and would allow them to see time ticking by.

• (1215)

The Chair: My time clock is telling me that it is time for another committee member to take the floor.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Could we please come back to this matter later? I would like to comment on it.

The Chair: Yes, yes, of course. We will come back to it later.

Over to you, Ms. Redman.

[*English*]

Hon. Karen Redman: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I commend Monsieur Godin for his passion for this topic, but I have to say I'm very much at one with the logic Mr. Epp spoke to, so I would vote against this.

The Chair: Maybe I can ask one question before we go to the next round, if colleagues will allow me.

I have sat in the legislature with one of those, and for the first two days after you install it people say, "Five, four, three, two, one", but after three days it's not funny any more, so everybody cuts it out. That's just normal nature.

But there's an alternative, isn't there? First of all, in the Ontario house they just put red numbers underneath the clock—where it is now in the chamber—showing the minutes.

Another alternative is to just put up a light with no clock. When there's one minute left, the light goes on to tell the speaker to prepare to sit down because their time is almost up. It's just a matter of having a light turned on.

Would you agree that both of those things are doable?

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: I think both of those things are feasible, but if you're talking about having a light for the last minute, it's akin to what Monsieur Godin was saying about seeing the Speaker's appropriately chosen finger to tell you that your time is up. He was looking for five minutes and not just one minute. That's the thing about the lights. The lights get into a bit—

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid: Like Mr. Epp, I have one of these little timers. Mine didn't cost \$20, but it does make a little beep, which we can all hear. But I've got to tell you that nobody has really complained about it when I've used it in the House. I have one that I take to committee with me and one that I keep in the House. It has not one but two timers on it. It can count up or down, which means it doesn't beep at the end. I always count up; therefore, it makes no beep at the end of my remarks.

I regularly set it to keep track of the speaker ahead of me, as Mr. Godin has expressed, so I will know when that speaker is getting to the end of their remarks. But frankly, that's no assurance anyway, because people sometimes take five minutes when they've got a ten-minute speaking slot. So there's a limit to what you can do with these things.

I have some reservations about the clock, for a variety of reasons. An obvious one is that if it's at the front, we don't all have the same visual acuity, and as a practical matter, it might be difficult for some people to see it, whereas I can set this wherever my focal length happens to be.

If you're someone like my colleague, Mr. Fletcher, who is not able to move his head, it would be very difficult unless it was positioned exactly where he was. So it really wouldn't accomplish everything for everybody in terms of its intended goal.

I really do believe, based on my own experience, that if you feel the need to keep track of time very precisely you can accomplish more with a little \$5 timer than this clock would accomplish for us at a fair bit of public expense.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Bergeron.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron (Verchères—Les Patriotes, BQ): I will try to be brief.

I simply want to say that I agree with Mr. Godin. Were we to introduce a countdown clock, it could only be as a guide. We have to be able to continue speaking, if the Speaker sees fit, even if the countdown clock has hit zero.

The Speaker decides when somebody's time has expired. The countdown clock would only be used as a guide; the microphone would not be cut off the moment the clock hit zero.

Perhaps Mr. Bard would be able to shed some light on this for us. It is my understanding that all of our desks in the chamber are electronically linked. It would seem, therefore, that it would be neither very complicated nor very costly to link them to the table clock, to which some colleagues already have access. Members who are seated far away from the table are, in a certain sense,

disadvantaged, because they cannot see the table clock. If we just had a simple link-up on our desks, we would be able to see the table clock, and we would know exactly where we were. It would only be used as a guide, to allow us to have a better idea of where we should be up to in our speech.

It is somewhat problematic when the Speaker announces that we only have two minutes remaining, and we are only a third of the way through what we wanted to say. If, however, we were able to see the time being counted down, we would be able to organize our remaining time as we made our speech.

I think it would be a useful tool for members of Parliament. Those who did not want to use it, could simply switch it off. It would, however, be very useful, and not very costly, for those who do want to use it.

I have a question that Mr. Bard could perhaps answer. Do we already have technology which would allow us to easily install a small countdown clock on each desk? By doing so, we would be able to cater to those with vision problems, and to those who are unable to turn their head?

Unlike Mr. Godin, I do not believe that having a single clock would be a practical solution. After all, we are no more likely to see the clock than we are the Speaker of the House if we are not looking in the right direction. For example, if we are deep in discussion with a colleague over the floor, it is no more likely that we would look at a clock above the Speaker, than we would look at the Speaker signalling to us that our time is up.

If, however, the clock was in front of us, we would be likely to see it when speaking to our colleague. Furthermore, I do not think that a large clock would work well aesthetically. I would far prefer to have a small clock or timer synchronized with the table clock.

Would it be possible to implement such a system inexpensively and without causing too many problems?

• (1220)

Mr. Louis Bard (Chief Information Officer, House of Commons): Mr. Bergeron, we have evaluated three options since being tasked with the matter on Thursday.

Last weekend, we determined that it would be possible to immediately install, if you so desired, computer screens on the centre table. I should also point out that this is what Mr. Boudria requested; he suggested that computer screens be placed below the clocks which are currently in the chamber.

The second option would be to introduce a time clock in between two and four weeks' time.

The third solution is exactly what you just mentioned. Different possibilities are open to us. Members who bring their laptops to the House could have a countdown clock installed on their computers, in order not to have to use the one on the wall. Installing such a system would, however, take a little longer, as it would have to be properly synchronized so that all 308 members could use it at the same time. As such, this is more of a long-term solution, which would require longer to install; we could perhaps get it done by Christmas or summer.

Furthermore, we would have to work in collaboration with the Federal Heritage Buildings Review Office before placing computer screens on your desks. We would also have to ensure that we had approval from the Department of Canadian Heritage.

These are the three options that we have considered; one can be implemented immediately, one in a few weeks' time, and the third in a few months' time.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Would it be too difficult to install time clocks on our desks? They are, after all, very small.

Mr. Louis Bard: The problem is not in having a time clock, but, rather, being able to activate it and synchronize all 308 with the clock on the table.

If you do not require the time clocks to be synchronized, were each member to have his or her own time clock...

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: No. But are you saying that it would be difficult to link our individual time clocks to the central time clock?

Mr. Louis Bard: It would involve a lot of work.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Okay, that is fine.

The Chair: You have the floor, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Chairman, some of my colleagues seem to be surmising that the objective of a time clock is to check up on who is being granted extra time. I would just like to assure everybody that this is by no means the case.

As for parliamentary heritage, we should bear in mind that the clock which we currently have in the House does not date back to 1900 or 1910. This is the year 2005; we have to move with the times, and so too does Parliament. All we are talking about is improving the current system. I am fairly certain that we will be able to find a clock or a time clock which could be linked up to the House clock without causing so much damage to the chamber that the Department of Canadian Heritage goes into a deep depression.

We should remember that Parliament belongs to the parliamentarians who carry out their work in its walls. Personally, I would like to know what systems it would be possible to install. One of your options was to install a system on our desks. I do not think that the House clock constitutes an aesthetic attribute for a parliament like ours, but we accept it nonetheless. The same goes for other clocks in Parliament. If you take a look around, you can see that the clocks that we have in these buildings are not oak models dating from 1910. I think that we should stop saying no to the idea of a time clock on purely aesthetic grounds.

Furthermore, I do not think that it is our responsibility to go out and buy time clocks and cart them around in our briefcases, having to make sure that we do not forget them. We should be provided with the tools which we need to do our job!

• (1225)

The Chair: Very well. Thank you.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Even if people countdown 4, 3, 2, 1, 0 on the first day, the joke will quickly wear thin.

The Chair: That has certainly been my experience.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Thank you for having drawn that to people's attention. It will make people realize that it is not about turning

parliamentary debate into a hockey match, but, rather, a matter of providing members with a tool to help them do their job.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

Would you like to comment on this point, Ms. O'Brien?

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: Mr. Chairman, I simply wanted to say that I do not think that we have to limit ourselves to having just the one clock next to the Speaker.

After all, as Mr. Bergeron was saying, members who are unable to see the Speaker, will also be unable to see the countdown clock. We could perhaps install a digital system under the clocks, on both sides of the chamber. Mr. Bergeron spoke of installing time clocks on members' desks, but I think that it would be easier to install this digital system than it would be to synchronize 308 desk clocks.

The Chair: Is there another question from this side?

If not, the floor is yours, Mr. Bergeron.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Mr. Chairman, to avoid members being distracted by their colleagues counting down their last five seconds, would it not be possible to have the time clock displayed only on the desk of the member who is speaking? If the member speaking were the only person able to see the clerk's time clock, we would be able to avoid bedlam breaking out at the end of each speech. We could have a system whereby a member's time clock would appear as soon as the console operator opened his or her microphone. The individual time clock would be connected to the table clock.

The Chair: Allow me to make a suggestion. Would it not be possible to find a compromise solution to satisfy both those who want a time clock and those who do not? We could simply use our laptops. I believe that the House has a wireless network. We could install software which would offer us the option of using the time clock when we opened our laptops. Those who choose not to bring their laptops to the House would not have to see the time clock, but those who do would have access to it.

Furthermore, BlackBerrys are high-tech machines, which appear to be upgraded every three months. I am sure we could get a similar program for our BlackBerrys. Those who want to could use their BlackBerrys to see the time clock, and those who do not, could simply leave their BlackBerrys at home.

I am trying to find a compromise to satisfy both those who want such a system and those who do not. I do not know whether it will be possible to please both groups.

Mr. Yvon Godin: BlackBerrys would be problematic. Were one to start vibrating while a member was making a speech, it would cause interference.

The Chair: That already happens every day.

Mr. Yvon Godin: That does not mean that it is not a problem.

The Chair: Okay, forget about the BlackBerrys. Let us come back to the idea of laptops. It was Mr. Epp who pioneered the use of laptops in the House. Basically, he was the one who encouraged us to introduce rules allowing their use in the House.

Is my proposal technically viable?

Mr. Louis Bard: Mr. Chairman, that is exactly what Mr. Bergeron suggested. It is something which we have evaluated, and we do consider it to be a workable solution.

The Chair: Very well. If there are no further questions, would you like time to think about what we have heard? Would you like additional documentation providing more detailed information on the various options? It is clear that not all members wish to see a time clock installed on the chamber wall. I think that we can already say that much based on what we have heard around the table. Other options were presented to us today. Would you like to see additional information on them?

• (1230)

Mr. Yvon Godin: It is only Ms. Redman who has stated her opinion on the matter. We have not heard from the other members. Perhaps they would not mind having a countdown clock installed under the House clock.

The Chair: I am simply trying to determine whether there is a consensus.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Mr. Chairman, I would suggest that we do not yet vote on the matter. We have expressed reservations and made suggestions; I think, therefore, that we should ask the House of Commons officials to give consideration to our reservations, concerns and suggestions, and develop a solution which would be acceptable to everybody, including those who consider a time clock to be of no use to them and who do not want one installed. I would ask that our officials be as receptive and helpful to those who believe that a time clock could be useful. A parliamentarian should not be guided by his own interests, but by those of the institution and all parliamentarians.

In light of the reservations and suggestions that have been raised, I think that, rather than dismissing a given suggestion out of hand, or adopting any old idea, we should give the House of Commons officials the opportunity to develop a solution which would be acceptable to everybody.

If we vote in favour of this, what exactly are we endorsing? We do not have a proposal on paper. Let us wait until we have a properly drafted proposal before we vote.

The Chair: If I understand you correctly, Mr. Bergeron, you are proposing that a detailed explanation of the various options be submitted to the committee. Is that correct?

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Yes, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Are you moving a formal proposal?

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Do we need a formal proposal, or is this a matter upon which we can all simply agree? I am asking the question. If my colleagues insist upon a formal proposal, I would be happy to move one.

[*English*]

Mr. Jay Hill (Prince George—Peace River, CPC): A point of order, Mr. Chair.

I'm quite sure the officials have more than a full-time job. I think there should be a formal motion on the floor if we're going to direct them to do something on our behalf. Then we should see whether the committee members feel this is something worthwhile to take up some of their valuable time.

The Chair: That sounds reasonable.

[*Translation*]

Would you like to make your proposal, Mr. Bergeron?

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: I move that we direct the House of Commons officials to give consideration to comments made by members of the committee, and provide us with a more formal proposal at a later date.

The Chair: That is the proposal.

Ms. Longfield.

[*English*]

Hon. Judi Longfield: I don't think this is something we should be asking our House officials to put before us. If you specifically want the time on your desk, then make that your motion. I don't think it's fair to ask our House officials to come up with recommendations for us. It was not their suggestion that we do this; the committee wanted to look at it.

That's my opinion. I would not support that motion, given that.

Mr. Scott Reid: A point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Just a second. Certainly one person is entitled to propose a motion. Another member is not out of order by saying they're against it.

Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid: It just seems to me we're struggling between two different dialogues here. Mr. Bergeron is suggesting that if we had the right kind of proposal we might be able to move forward. We just have to search around and find, with the assistance of our officials, the right model.

The sense I have—and I could be wrong—is that Ms. Longfield feels we should just let the whole issue go.

Before we do Mr. Bergeron's motion, why don't we just do a straw poll to see which way people are leaning?

The Chair: I'm sorry, but that's not procedurally very acceptable. There is a formal proposal on the floor, and I believe that it was formalized at the request of one of your colleagues, Mr. Reid. So given that there is a formal proposal on the floor now, I don't think it's appropriate to put it aside in favour of having a straw vote on the not-formal proposal.

I don't know if you're ready to vote on the proposal.

Monsieur Godin.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I have a point of order. After you have a proposal on the floor, you need a seconder. I'd like to second it before it's read.

The Chair: No seconders in committees.

Mr. Yvon Godin: No seconder in committees.

The Chair: Do people still want to intervene, or can I proceed with the vote?

Mr. Yvon Godin: Yes.

The Chair: Just a second.

[*Translation*]

You have the floor, Ms. Boivin.

Ms. Françoise Boivin (Gatineau, Lib.): Last week, we decided which issues we were going to study, and the question of time clocks was on the list. We put it on the agenda. We are here to discuss it today, and have invited witnesses to appear before the committee. Mr. Bard informs me that he has already studied short-term, medium-term and long-term solutions.

While I do not wish to spend longer than necessary on this, I think it would be a little cavalier to simply dismiss the matter out of hand. We are studying a proposal which, though perhaps ridiculous to some members, could be very helpful to others.

In my view, if we are all in agreement about Bill C-312, yet are still prepared to bring in witnesses from across the country and continue the study, even though it seems that the vote will be unanimous. I do not think that it would be too much to ask to spend one of our next meetings studying the work that has already been done on this matter.

That would be my suggestion, although it should not be taken as an indication of how I am going to vote. Personally, I do not feel any real need for a time clock although, as I explained to some of my colleagues, the first time new members such as myself see the Speaker raise a finger for the first time, they sometimes think that they are being asked to stop talking for a moment. It may well be useful to have a countdown mechanism, but, on the other hand, I consider myself to be responsible for organizing the time that I have available.

I think that out of respect for the fact that this is a proposal which somebody has made, we could at least ask our staff to study it. I am sure that they have had stranger requests in their time.

• (1235)

The Chair: Do you wish to continue debating the matter, or should I call the question?

Mr. Yvon Godin: I want to continue the debate.

The Chair: Very well, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Chairman, I agree with Ms. Boivin, and I disagree with Ms. Longfield. The fact that this idea was raised by committee members does not mean that we have to do all of the work. That is why we have staff who are paid to do the research and enlighten us on such matters. It is not too much to ask.

As I have already said, there are three options. We are not asking House of Commons officials to spend the next three weeks studying the House of Commons clock. The work has already been done, we want recommendations. It is their responsibility to provide them to us. We are here to act upon recommendations that officials make to us. This is no big deal. That is why I am supporting the motion. If you want to talk about ridiculous ideas, we have certainly seen worse!

The Chair: Fine. On that note, are we ready for the question?

Mr. Adams, you are not a member of the committee, but I see that you wish to speak. I will give you the floor, but you will not be allowed to vote unless you are replacing somebody. Go ahead.

[*English*]

Hon. Peter Adams (Peterborough, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As an associate member of the committee and as a member of Parliament, I apologize for not being here during the discussion. I was here earlier, I came back, and I missed the piece in between.

I would simply like to put on the record my own thoughts about Yvon Godin's proposal.

The Chair: One moment, Mr. Adams. We're not debating that at the present time. We're debating the motion of Mr. Bergeron that the staff prepare alternatives for the committee.

Hon. Peter Adams: Mr. Chair, thank you. On a point of order, could I ask the indulgence of the committee for two minutes—

The Chair: Yes.

Hon. Peter Adams: —to place on the record my views on this matter? And I apologize for repeating what's going on.

First of all, Mr. Chair, I think there's a real difference between advising the person speaking and the audience of the time left in a speech. I think advising the person speaking, for example, at their desk or through an earpiece or through gestures from the Speaker, is very useful to a person giving the speech, but I think having a clock counting down is distracting. It distracts from the content of the speech. The House of Commons has moved far enough I think towards written speeches and prepared speeches—not Yvon Godin, I know, I can't accuse him of that—taking away attention from the Speaker.

The second thing, Mr. Chair, is that when I was on this committee we were moving towards refurbishing the House of Commons. I think to incrementally add things like clocks and other things around the walls before that occurs is an expensive and inappropriate procedure. Suggestions of this type should be built into the refurbishing of the House of Commons, which this committee has been working on for several years.

I'm most grateful for your patience, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Is the committee ready for the question?

[*Translation*]

(Motion defeated.)

• (1240)

The Chair: Ms. O'Brien, thank you very much for having come along this morning.

[*English*]

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.): I know that colleagues have other commitments and we're running out of time, but you may have seen that I tabled a certificate of nomination in the House of Commons on Friday that Audrey O'Brien become the Clerk of the House. We talked about this at House leaders meetings and so on, Mr. Chairman, and I'm simply asking colleagues, do we want to bring Ms. O'Brien back for a discussion of this? Maybe colleagues have a view. Can the committee dispose of this and make a recommendation back to the House of Commons?

[*Translation*]

Can we tell the House of Commons that the committee approves of the nomination? I am not familiar with the process.

[*English*]

I'm looking for some direction. But if we could dispose of this now, we might be able to report back to the House and move on to our other business and not make Ms. O'Brien come back again. Therefore, if it's in order, Mr. Chairman, I'd make a motion that this committee support the appointment, or recommend the appointment, back to the House—I don't know the language—of Ms. O'Brien.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: I think that I can be of assistance to the committee. I have had informal discussions with representatives from each party. One party asked that I wait until Thursday to deal with the matter, while others wanted it to be addressed today. With your permission, in the interest of reaching a consensus, we could perhaps address the matter on Thursday, after having heard from the witnesses.

[*English*]

I'm not trying to blame people here; I'm trying to find consensus.

Hon. Karen Redman: Do we have consensus to do this now?

A voice: No.

Mr. Jay Hill: I think he just said there's one party that wants to wait until Thursday.

The Chair: That's okay. I'm only trying to get everybody to agree. Some people have changed members this morning, given the witnesses that were appearing. I understand that was their reasoning.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: That's fine.

The Chair: Perhaps you can make yourself available on Thursday, Madam O'Brien, after we hear our witnesses.

Ms. Audrey O'Brien: I never venture very far, so that's fine.

The Chair: With that, we thank you for your presence this morning.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bard, we would also like to thank you for the information that you provided.

[*English*]

The committee is adjourned.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of the House of Commons

Publié en conformité de l'autorité du Président de la Chambre des communes

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