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Chair

Mr. James Bezan

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• (1530)

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle (Huron—Bruce, Lib.)): I'm going to call the meeting to order.

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): I'm going to make a motion that we begin our work on the APF today and that we set Alex's motion aside until we're done with the APF report. I'll repeat that for him.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): Do you want to do that again?

Alex, do you want to listen to the motion? I know you're at a distance, but I think you can hear it from there.

Mr. David Anderson: I'm making a motion that we basically invert our order of business so that we begin the work on the APF this afternoon. Once we're done with the APF report, we will return to Mr. Atamanenko's motion.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): We have a motion. There is now debate on the motion. Who wants to get on the speakers' list? Obviously, we have an agenda, which we agreed to, but we have a motion.

We understand it's not a debatable motion. Therefore, I'm going to call the question.

(Motion negatived)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): Your motion has been defeated, Mr. Anderson.

Now we move to the motion of Mr. Atamanenko.

I might just say, before we get into the heart of this meeting, that I do have to leave here at 4:15. Mr. Bellavance is not here. That leaves us without any possible vice-chair, but the committee can deal with that, if they choose to do so. If the committee wishes to and can expedite the handling of this motion in the time given, between now and 4:15, then we will deal with this motion today. If not, we'll have a vote on this motion next week. Let's see how we get along, but the meeting may very well be called to adjournment at 4:15. It may be a short meeting. This is just so that everybody is aware of that and keeps that in mind as they speak to the motion today.

Mr. Atamanenko, do you want to introduce your motion?

Mr. Alex Atamanenko (British Columbia Southern Interior, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The motion is as follows:

That the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food write a letter to the Honourable Sheila Fraser, Auditor General of Canada, indicating the Committee's support for the National Farmers Union's (NFU) April 19th, 2007 submission to the Honourable Sheila Fraser calling for an investigation into the government's conduct and spending by the Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food throughout the recent Canadian Wheat Board barley marketing plebiscite.

I'll take a few minutes to speak to this motion, with the agreement of my colleagues, and obviously leave some time for some rebuttal.

Although it may seem strange that I'm bringing up the letter of the National Farmers Union, basically this letter summarizes my party's position and concerns in regard to the barley plebiscite. I feel, and we feel, there has been some confusion in the process. The final question lacked clarity. It's my contention that this plebiscite ignored the will of Parliament in regard to the type of question, and I think it's fair. I should emphasize that we're calling for an investigation into the process, and if the process has been fair and legitimate, then obviously the conclusions will result from the process and we'll move on. On the other hand, if it hasn't and it is found that there were some irregularities, then being part of our democratic system, that is what we have to look for. So let's let the Auditor General decide part of this democratic process.

There's just a brief summary of this letter, which we all have. I feel there is some question in regard to the actual language of this three-part question, which led the producer to conclude, with the second question, that the producer could have the best of both worlds—in other words, a strong Canadian Wheat Board and the chance to sell outside of the Wheat Board.

One thing that has been my concern since the beginning of this process is the fact that I believe this has been hastily fashioned. The whole process—the sham commission, the blockage, the changing of the Wheat Board director, some of the criteria for the votes—was just part of this step to eventually dismantle the Canadian Wheat Board. I would like to submit that from the studies that have been done, and in fact even the minister's own report—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): Mr. Miller.

Mr. Larry Miller (Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, CPC): Mr. Chair, you can call it a point of order or a point of clarification, but I think it needs to be pointed out that never did the government say it had any intention of dismantling the Wheat Board.

• (1535)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): That's not a point of order, Mr. Miller.

Mr. Atamanenko, you're on again.

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: Thank you.

In fact, the impression was left that things could continue as they could. I don't plan to resurrect the whole debate on the Canadian Wheat Board. I would just like to summarize some of the points in the letter.

We believe there was no publicity available in regard to the voters' list. I feel the process wasn't as tight as it could have been in our democratic country. The letter states that there were some "voting irregularities". Point four mentions the couple in the Pennant area of Saskatchewan, in regard to the ballots and the counting of the vote. There's no need for me to read that. We've all read the letter.

I believe what's really important for the Auditor General to investigate is the idea of third-party spending. The minister and his department chose to move forward with a vote without first placing limits on third-party spending. I quote from the letter: "Nor did the Minister or his department require reporting of spending."

We're questioning the idea, questioning the fact, that there was publicity put out for the government side by various members of Parliament in their ten percenters and other publicity that came out from the government side. The letter is questioning whether in fact this was legitimate. And I think that's a legitimate question to ask.

There's the whole idea of ballot secrecy and trust—one farmer, one vote.

I'll just summarize the conclusion of this letter. I believe, as the National Farmers Union believes...and I must emphasize that this is a national organization. It's made up of thousands of members, not 200 or 300 or 400 members, like some other organizations, and it does speak for a majority of farmers.

The conclusion of this letter states:

...the Minister and his department conducted themselves in a manner that is unfair, undemocratic, and damaging to the public interest. Further, in so doing, the Minister and his department and government MPs improperly spent public money while simultaneously imposing draconian spending limits on those they disagreed with.

If I can digress for a minute and look at money, there's this whole idea now of...is there going to be compensation to the Wheat Board, and the farmers will have to pay for contracts that may not be able to be fulfilled because of the latest developments in this whole episode? I would like to submit that it wouldn't be fair for the Wheat Board—and that is farmers' money—to have to pay out contracts if they're not able to be fulfilled by the Wheat Board as a result of this plebiscite or other things that are going on.

So I'm asking, by this motion, that there be an investigation immediately and in detail, and that the findings be reported as soon as possible. If there is misconduct and misspending, we ask that the Auditor General declare clearly that the results of the recent barley marketing plebiscite be invalid.

As I said, I'm not going to take time; I know that other honourable members would like to take some time to refute what I've been saying. I would just like to emphasize that I believe, and have from the beginning of this whole process, that it could have been done differently. There could have been different ways to go about effecting change through a method of evolution and not revolution. I believe the whole process is short-sighted. Regardless of which

government, provincial or federal, they so often tend to look at things in the short range and not in the long range.

We're in the process of looking at a whole agriculture policy for the next five years or more. I believe that in the long-term interests of farmers in Canada and of agriculture, this process could have been undertaken differently. There could have been more consultation, more socio-economic studies as to the actual effect of this move—the eventual dismantling, call it, or watering down of the power of the single desk—on farmers and on farming communities.

I'd like to submit that this has not been done. And it could have been done. We could have had some studies and then moved, together with the Wheat Board and with the farmers of Canada, to arrive at some kind of solution acceptable to all parties.

● (1540)

I believe that all those around this table and all those people who represent farming communities want the best for farmers. I just think this government has moved too hastily under the advice of some interest groups and lobbyists and others to eventually fulfill the plans of those who would like us to dismantle the Canadian Wheat Board—I shouldn't say that the government wants to, but there are those who want us to dismantle this trade enterprise that has been serving farmers over the years.

Let's not forget, as was brought up in our consultations over the course of those two weeks that we spent, that there is a force in collectivism, that this rugged individualism that many opponents of the single desk talk about is not really valid for Canada, that we're not in a system in which companies can take control of the farmers and do what they want. We have had a Canadian Wheat Board that stood up for them; we have had a Canadian Wheat Board that's evolving; we have had a Canadian Wheat Board that's trying the very best, through elections, and keeps electing farmer directors who are for the Canadian Wheat Board, by and large, and all of a sudden we find this shift.

I find it a very disturbing shift. When I talk about that, I do get emotional. I'm not just here as a spokesman for a farming organization; I'm here as someone who has analyzed what's going on. I have spent most of my time in this portfolio looking at the Canadian Wheat Board when, like many others, I could have been doing other things, and it was because of this shift of this current government.

I think it's wrong. It is just another step in all of this that has happened.

I'll let other people speak. I understand that we probably will have a chance at least to vote on my motion; if it is not today, then it will be next time. I certainly respect your desire to end early. I agree with David, and we talked about taking this procedure.

Thank you very much.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): Thank you, Mr. Atamanenko. Before the vote would be held, you have one opportunity to speak once again.

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): Mr. Menzies is next on our list of speakers.

Mr. Ted Menzies (Macleod, CPC): Can I defer to Mr. Anderson? I'd also certainly like to speak later.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): I can't guarantee that, because the order of speaking is Mr. Anderson—oh, I'm sorry; if you've decided to reverse, that's okay.

Mr. Ted Menzies: Okay.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): Mr. Anderson is first, and then Mr. Menzies.

Mr. David Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Do we have a number of other people on there? I certainly don't want to take all the time if there are others who want to speak as well.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): Oh, yes, we certainly have others here.

Mr. David Anderson: Mr. Chair, I have a couple of concerns.

The first one is that once again the government has tried to get to the APF report. We brought a motion in, as you know, at the beginning of the meeting again today to try to do that immediately and get to it right away.

I'm going to express one more time the concerns I had the other day. We have tried to urge the committee and the members of the opposition to be diligent and to get this report done quickly. I've been trying to convince them of that since—I don't know—probably last September or October. I saw the importance of the report, but I also saw the importance of doing it quickly, because the federal government and the provinces are having their negotiations. They've been doing that for over a year now; they're moving toward a new farm policy, so if we want to have an influence on that, it's important that we move quickly as well.

We put off our hearings last fall for a number of months because of this issue that Alex has brought up again today. We encouraged the committee to move quickly on this when we came back in January. Once again, it was put off for a number of months. We've only just recently been able to do the travelling, and then we had the excellent report, as Mr. Bellavance said yesterday. I think it was Mr. Bellavance or Mr. Gaudet who commented on the excellent report that we've got and the work we need to do on that.

That's why we thought it was important today to get to this report. I brought the motion forward in order to try to encourage that, but it's unfortunate that once again the opposition has together decided that they're not going to pursue that road today.

We've got farm organizations who are asking us to—

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

I believe we had agreement yesterday that we'd deal with the two motions and then the APF. If Mr. Anderson wants to filibuster and talk this out, that responsibility lies on the government's shoulders.

There's only one party responsible for the delay of this committee on the APF, and I'm looking at him. It happens to be the parliamentary secretary and his government colleagues.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): Let's move on. That's not a point of order, but I do think we need to get on with that—

Mr. David Anderson: Actually—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): We did have agreement at this committee a number of meetings ago that we would do it in order. Basically we would have to have all parties, and all parties have not agreed; therefore, let's get on with the debate—

•(1545)

Mr. David Anderson: Actually, we did not have agreement. What we had was a motion that the opposition brought in to overrule the government; the government, at that point, had wanted to go directly to the APF report. This is the second time—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): But we did have a—

Mr. David Anderson: We did not agree to that. The opposition made the motion—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): There was a legitimate vote here, a majority carried, and the order was given that we proceed to the two motions, followed by going to the APF. That was the agreement that was reached by majority around this table, so let's now move on to the motion.

Mr. David Anderson: Actually, the motion I brought forward today is legitimate as well. It was the government's intention and hope that we could return to—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): We've dealt with that. Let's move on with the motion from Mr. Atamanenko.

Mr. David Anderson: Mr. Chair, I think I've got my say here.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): That's what you were speaking—

Mr. David Anderson: I'm getting to that. I was just laying out the fact that we want to deal with the APF today. We want to come back to the motion of Mr. Atamanenko after we've done the APF, so it's unfortunate we can't do that. I guess the farm organizations know that we've taken this stance and we want to move ahead.

I will get to the motion by Mr. Atamanenko, and I'm actually really disturbed by this because I think in the seven years that I've been here, this is the first time I have seen a motion that expects us to do the bidding of a third party that's not associated directly with the committee. I went back and I checked the reports that we've done, and I think I have 24 pages of them here, or whatever. It goes back many years. We've never done this, taken up a third-party position that we're going to specifically support. I'm very concerned that we're setting a precedent here that is completely inappropriate.

I'm not surprised that Mr. Atamanenko does this because I noticed when he started off his comments, the words were "I feel" and "we feel", when he was talking about the NFU and his own position about the barley plebiscite. I know there's a general perception, particularly in the west, that the National Farmers Union is the agricultural wing of the NDP and that the NDP is the political wing of the National Farmers Union. We've certainly seen that I think in this committee over the last few months, but it has never been as blatant as it is in this motion or in the private member's bill that Mr. Atamanenko has brought forward.

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: I have a point of order.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): Yes, Mr. Atamanenko.

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: I think that statement is incorrect. I think inferring that we're a political arm of the National Farmers Union is ridiculous.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): It's not a point of order; it may be a point of privilege.

I would agree with Mr. Atamanenko that we should not be casting disparaging comments about people. People have their own political views and we should leave that with those people.

Deal with the content of the motion. That's what we're here to do this afternoon, please.

Mr. David Anderson: Mr. Chair, I'm not sure it's disparaging to say that somebody is affiliated with the NFU. That's one thing. I'm just pointing out that there's been a very close connection over the last year between the positions taken publicly and Mr. Atamanenko's interests and the things he brought forward at the time when the NFU has made their positions known.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): I think there could be other fingers pointed at certain parties—

Mr. David Anderson: Is that a point of order, Mr. Chair?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): —as having other interests as well.

The chair has the privilege.

Hon. Wayne Easter: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I take offence. I'm a former president of the NFU and I'm not NDP.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): Okay, let's move on, please. Time is wasted.

Mr. David Anderson: Good comment. He actually made the statement when he said you're not.

Mr. Larry Miller: This is a point of order, Mr. Chairman. I think you'd agree.

Mr. Chairman, I respect your position and the job you're doing, but I think it's inappropriate for the chair to point out his opinion on different farm groups and what have you. I just point that out, and I'll end at that.

Mr. David Anderson: Anyway, Mr. Chairman, I'm going to continue, because should we actually take it seriously, I actually would wonder about the appropriateness of this motion if not actually whether it is even in order.

In my mind, it demeans and lessens the role of the committee. We're allowing an outside lobby organization to influence the

committee. It's actually interesting. When we check, the National Farmers Union is not even registered as a lobbyist. I noticed that most of the other farm organizations are. I'm just wondering what the relationship would be between Mr. Atamanenko and the NFU, when they are not registered, in anything that we could find, as a lobby group. They certainly work as a lobby group, in my opinion, because we've gotten faxes from the NFU, from a telephone number in Saskatoon, regularly. They have been down here to talk to people, to lobby people. I know they're very active in the farm community.

So it puzzled me when we looked. And I may be mistaken, I certainly am willing to be corrected, but it puzzled me when we looked to see if they were registered as a lobby association to find that they actually are not.

If they're not, I'm wondering what they are and why the agriculture committee would be taking up their cause for them. It really calls into question the independence of the committee if we're going to take a third party's opinion, and then begin to support that and to present it as the opinion of this committee.

It could have been worded far differently, and probably would have been a far better motion, if Mr. Atamanenko wanted to call in the Auditor General herself. We certainly could have done that, because in the past, as you know, we've done that. We were the ones who made the motion to bring the Auditor General in on the CAIS report, and I believe we called on her services with the packers and that whole investigation of the programs that were put in place after the BSE problem began.

I think it is really inappropriate for this committee to recommend this motion. We see that there's no precedent for it. We recognize, most of us, that the NFU has limited support, particularly in the Canadian Wheat Board area. It's not one of the strong farm organizations there. They have some support, but they definitely do not represent a majority of farmers in the designated area for the Canadian Wheat Board. I don't think anyone would argue that.

This motion, Mr. Chair, shows bias, and it puts the committee in a situation where they're biased towards one lobby group. Certainly, I don't expect some members of this committee would be willing to take up the position of other lobby groups that we have in western Canada involving this issue, in any formal way, anyway.

I think it undermines the moral authority of the committee, because if we do this we will be seen as biased on this issue. It's going to be fairly difficult for anyone to take the committee seriously when the public can see that the committee, if it votes in favour of this motion, has made a decision that indicates some serious bias.

The worst part of it all, I guess, is that it shows that the committee is willing to serve only select groups, and in the years that I've been on this committee that certainly has not been the case. This committee has been willing to hear all sides of the issue, we've been able to put reports together, for the most part, that have been neutral and that have been good reports and have been reports that we can take out to the public. Actually, when I look at the APF report and see what's in there, I think we've been able to begin to do that again.

I think back to the report on the Canadian Grain Commission last summer. I think that was a good report that was agreed to by everyone around the committee. All of us put a little bit of wine in our water in order to make that report work, and we were more than willing to do that.

One of the things I want to point out is that the committee is not a lobby group, and that is what this amounts to: the committee is going to be made into a lobby group. I don't think it's appropriate that the committee do the lobbying for the National Farmers Union when the information we have is that it doesn't even have status as a lobby group.

I'm just wondering, maybe the Ethics Commissioner is the one who should be called in, rather than the Auditor General, on this issue.

Anyway, I guess I'm concerned that Mr. Atamanenko is choosing to be the mouthpiece for the National Farmers Union and trying to use the committee to reflect that opinion, because I think it's inappropriate. I don't think it does the committee well. So we're going to continue to oppose this.

I also want to go through the letter because I think that's important. They've sent a letter here that's a number of pages and makes a number of accusations about the government. So I think it's important that we go through and deal with some of the issues they've addressed in here, because they're definitely making a point, in my mind, that's biased.

● (1550)

I think everybody would agree they have a bias and are willing to get out and lobby for that viewpoint.

I don't think it's appropriate for the committee to say that's the bias we're going to support, and particularly when we haven't spent the time going through the letter. I don't know whether most members of the committee have studied this letter or not, but I doubt they spent a lot of time checking it out and seeing what it says, so it's probably good that we look at it before we have a chance to vote on the motion.

First of all, they don't like the language in the question. I think this is a strange turn of events, because this is similar to the language that has been used in the Canadian Wheat Board survey for years. I have the survey here. It goes through a number of different areas, of course, for western Canada. They have three choices and have had them for years; they have them in wheat and in other areas too. We can go quickly through some of those as well.

On dual marketing, they have questions. "I think if the CWB had competition it would provide better service". Well, 60% of the farmers in western Canada think that's a good idea.

"A dual market for grain would not necessarily mean the end of the CWB". That's 59% or 60% as well.

On barley: "I am...confident I could market my own barley without the CWB". That's just under 60% as well.

"I think if the CWB had competition I would get better prices for my grain". There are 54% or 55% who believe that.

So there are some pretty strong attitudes or opinions that the Wheat Board could do better with some competition and that farmers think they're capable of marketing their own grain.

In terms of marketing barley, the questions are asked: should it remain the sole responsibility of the Wheat Board, should there be a dual market where private companies and individual farmers can compete, or should there be a totally open market? Those are similar to the questions that were asked on the plebiscite.

Farmers are not stupid. They know what the options are. They've been listening to them for years on the surveys we've had. You can go through them.

In Alberta, the support for this is about 75%. In Saskatchewan it's well over 60%. In Manitoba, in this survey, it was at 60%. We look at that total percentage across the prairies as being almost 65% of farmers who support dual marketing or a change in the Wheat Board marketing system.

We find the same thing when it comes to dual marketing of wheat. Again they ask the same questions: should it remain the sole responsibility of the Wheat Board, should there be a dual marketing option where private companies and individual farmers can compete with the Board, and should there be a totally open market for wheat without the Canadian Wheat Board?

Actually, it's interesting that the questions the Wheat Board asked are, if anything, more aggressive than the questions that were on the plebiscite. That second question for the Wheat Board is where private companies and individual farmers can compete with the Wheat Board, and our option was to allow the person to market their barley to the Wheat Board or to anyone else. In that situation, again, we have more than 50% of the farmers who support this as their option.

Clearly, the language was not an issue for farmers on the prairies. They knew full well that the three options were there, so they made their choice and voted it, and we'll come a little bit later, hopefully, to the results.

They repeat their argument that there was confusion over the options. As I've pointed out, I haven't talked to one farmer who really was confused by those three questions. If they were, I just said to them, "You knew what the questions were when the Wheat Board surveyed you, didn't you?" And they say yes. So if they're saying they're confused by these options, I would say they're probably taking the position that they don't like the results of the survey.

Again, one of their issues is that there is a lack of clarity to the questions. Well, the questions are very clear: the Canadian Wheat Board should retain the single desk; I'd like the option to market barley; or it should not have a role in marketing barley. Those are about as clear as anyone could have. There is no lack of clarity on those questions, and it's clear to me that farmers understood them and voted in a way that reflected that.

Mr. Chair, they also make the assertion that we've been ignoring farmers in Parliament, and clearly that's not true. Farmers have chosen to elect a Conservative government, and particularly in the designated area, with a very strong support. They were well aware of what our position was on the Wheat Board. They'll say, we didn't elect you just on the Wheat Board, and that may be true. But that was one thing they knew was part of our agriculture policy, and they seemed to like it, because they came out to support us very strongly.

● (1555)

Clearly, we're not ignoring farmers. They know what we're doing and they've been supporting it, and they're calling for change. Actually, it's interesting because a couple of the farm organizations have come forward and I think they're asking that the date be moved ahead.

Mr. Ted Menzies: They're excited.

Mr. David Anderson: It's not just that they want it to be August 1. They actually want to get at this and get some of these contracts signed and under way prior to August 1 so that they can take care of some of the issues of being able to sign contracts prior to the beginning of the new crop year and then begin to move ahead from that. So they're excited about it, as Mr. Menzies has said, and they're ready to move ahead.

There was a criticism of the voters' list in the NFU's letter. Actually, KPMG was given the job of overseeing the election. The government did not interfere in that. We think KPMG took the bull by the horns. They had a very difficult job. We know that through the last—I think it's four—rounds of Wheat Board elections, it's been very difficult for the Wheat Board to establish a voters' list, and in this situation it wasn't easy as well, but the government I think did the best it could. Ballots, if I remember correctly, went out to all the folks who were in CAIS programs, the ones who were in production insurance, and then they were allowed to fill them out. If you hadn't gotten a ballot, you could fill out a declaration and get one. The only obligation on people is that they only filled one out for their farm operation. So that was clear. It went out, so that dealt with that issue, I think.

There was no issue of voters' rights because there was to be one vote per farm, and I think that was clear. People didn't have to be concerned about that. KPMG scrutinized the vote. I don't think anyone is going to say they're not an organization that's capable of doing that. So they were responsible for doing that. There were some people who had requested that they have scrutineers there, and that was limited because we would have had everybody and their dog there, probably, if we'd said open it up and everyone can come and scrutineer as they please; we'd still be counting ballots. So KPMG had the responsibility for that, and we think they did a responsible job on that as well.

In terms of spending limits, there were no restrictions put on spending limits, that's true. But at the same time, everyone had the opportunity to be involved, and it was farm organizations and farmers, so they were able to do that. I think it was appropriate that the Wheat Board, which is a government agency, was not involved. The minister and the cabinet made a decision earlier that they should focus on marketing grain and not be involved politically, as they have in the past. So the request was made to them that they abstain

from political involvement. Actually, it seems to be working. It seems like they're focused more on marketing grain than they have been in the past and maybe less on trying to influence things politically, so that's been a good thing.

Ballot secrecy was an issue, but in terms of that, KPMG supervised that and they gave assurances to the government that no one was going to be able to be traced back to their ballot when the process was done. We trust they did that, and I don't think there's been any issue of that as well. Again, the intention was that each farm operation would have one vote, and for the most part, farmers were declaring honestly. We think that was done.

There was some issue about websites. I guess this goes to the fact that the farm organizations were free to set up and lobby, and there were websites set up on both sides of the issue. It was interesting to look at some of them because there were websites that were clearly on the side of choice and wanting to open up the market, and there were other websites that were set up by people who clearly supported the Canadian Wheat Board and were trying to do all they could to support the position in the past.

Just in terms of the ballots, when they were counted—I mentioned I wanted to get back to that, and I want to give some other people an opportunity to speak here, and maybe I can get back on the list later as well—the results were pretty clear. There were about 37% who said they'd like to retain the single desk, and then there was just about 50% who said they wanted the option of having the choice, and another 14% said the Wheat Board should not have any role in the marketing of barley at all. So you can add them up how you want, but clearly 48.4% want an option and another 13% want a change. That comes out to, what, 62% or so of the farmers who voted wanted some change to the system that didn't lock them in to the single desk, as in the past.

Whether the National Farmers Union likes the numbers that turned out or not is really irrelevant to this request. They clearly did not, as some other people have expressed. They don't like the numbers. They don't like the fact that 60-some percent of farmers have said, we really want to market our own grain.

● (1600)

Hon. Wayne Easter: The reality is that the long term effect of this means there will be no Wheat Board, and only 13.8% supported that position. The government can add the numbers any way it likes, but they were only 13.8%. That's the democratic proof.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): Well, it's not a point of order. We'll get to the real numbers at some point, but let's carry on.

Mr. David Anderson: Actually, I can get to them right now because I have them right here. I'll just go right through them: 37.5% voted that the Canadian Wheat Board should retain the single desk; 48.4% would like an option to market barley to the Wheat Board or any other buyer. There's nothing Mr. Easter can do to argue with that number.

Mr. Larry Miller: On a point of order, Mr. Chairman, Mr. Easter just brought up a point that I know isn't true, but I would like to ask at this point that he show us where the government has—

•(1605)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): We're not going to get into this.

Mr. Larry Miller: It is not fair to us when someone—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): You've asked for this. It's not a point of order. We're not going to deal with it right now. We're going to deal with the....

Mr. Anderson has the floor. I'm going back to Mr. Anderson.

Mr. Larry Miller: You're misinterpreting and you know it, Wayne.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): We have various interpretations of numbers. We're not going to get into that.

Mr. Anderson.

Mr. David Anderson: Well, thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to wrap up here fairly quickly. I'm going to maybe put my name back on the speakers' list, because it's obvious that some of the other folks want to get up to speak here.

Mr. Larry Miller: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): Through the chair, Mr. Miller, please. Let's get back to order.

Mr. Anderson.

Mr. David Anderson: Maybe I can deal with the grumbling, Mr. Chair, just by reading out the results: 37.5% want the Canadian Wheat Board to retain the single desk; 48.4% said they would like an option to market their barley either to the Wheat Board or somebody else—that doesn't say the Wheat Board's gone or anything like that, in spite of what Mr. Easter wants to make out of it—and 14% said they don't think the Wheat Board should have a role in the marketing of barley.

Those are the results. However you add them up, 48.4% said they want the option of marketing their barley to the Wheat Board or outside the Wheat Board, so that's where we're at with that. Obviously, as you've seen in the last couple of minutes, people want to interpret those numbers differently, but those are what the numbers are.

So that's a bit of a discussion about the letter and the contents of it, and just a bit of a rebuttal specifically on the letter. Actually, I'd like to probably come back a little later to talk about what the government has done over the past year in order to bring the barley plebiscite to the conclusion it has, but I'm certainly willing to turn it over to somebody else.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): Mr. Menzies, we have about nine minutes left.

Mr. Ted Menzies: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As you are well aware, I'm not a regular member on this committee, but I do enjoy being asked to participate, especially in this debate about the future of farmers, because it is so important to farmers.

I'm certainly questioning the debate of this motion today. I think everyone in this room and everyone in this House knows that the

NDP doesn't represent farmers, and I'm a little surprised that now we have a de facto new party, the NFU, which was not elected by anybody to represent them in the House of Commons.

Yet we're debating today what is basically a conspiracy theory on behalf of an unregistered lobby group—and thank you for clarifying that, Mr. Anderson. Why don't we take some other group? Why don't we take what the barley growers have been asking for, for 30 years, and put that forward as policy? Why didn't we take some of what the wheat growers have been asking for, for 36 years, who represent far more individuals, far more farmers, than the NFU has ever represented, despite the fact that their membership certainly climbed through their Wheat Board lobby on this issue in the last few months? I throw that out as a rhetorical question. If this committee is going to jeopardize its credibility...and I would argue it has great credibility.

This committee has done some good studies. It's done some good work. It's got some farmers on it, which is great, who represent farmers across this country. For this committee to jeopardize its credibility by saying that the National Farmers Union should dictate to a House of Commons standing committee on agriculture how to think, I find that very troubling.

Mr. Atamanenko talks about the democratic system. This is about as far from the democratic system as you get if this committee accepts NFU as a policy-maker for this government, or a policy-maker for this committee to even discuss. Once again, I'm appalled that we're even taking time.

I can't help but go back to the fact that farmers have been asking us, as members of Parliament, to come up with a new program. We've all admitted that the CAIS program is not working great. We have an opportunity to discuss it, and I can't quite believe that this motion was defeated to talk about something that's history, something that's been done. It was democratically voted on and won by 62%. Let's move on. Farmers have made their decision. Let's get on with it. Let's not belabour that. Let's develop a new agricultural policy framework, if that's what we're going to call it, that's going to help farmers. We have a first step in freedom of marketing for Canadian farmers in the Wheat Board district since the 1930s. And for Mr. Atamanenko to suggest that this was hastily put together....

I might share a little bit of my history going back to when Wayne Easter and I were presidents of two of the farm groups in Canada. Wayne was president of the NFU. I was president of the Western Canadian Wheat Growers. That was one of the reasons why the Western Canadian Wheat Growers was founded, to provide a voice for western farmers, within the Wheat Board jurisdiction, to actually be able to improve their bottom lines.

The first initiative was to actually recognize that there is a difference in the protein contents of wheat, and farmers should be compensated for that. This was one of the things the Wheat Board fought for and won. It only took 20 years, if I recall.

•(1610)

We were also fighting for years to try to get the freedom to actually make that one final decision on our farm. We make every other decision as a farmer, but that one decision, which, by the way, has the largest impact on our bottom line, that final decision was taken away from us.

In actuality our wheat was confiscated the day it left the seed drill and was put in the ground. If I grew bread wheat, that was all I could do with it. If I grew malting barley, all I could do with it was to let the marketing agency that called itself the Canadian Wheat Board market it for me.

Their mandate was to market it, but they failed to do that in many years because they decided it wasn't enough money for a farmer. They decided arbitrarily that they were just going to hold on to this. Their mandate was to market it, not to make a marketing decision of whether or not it was enough money for my farm. Many farms ended up having to go deeper into debt to be able to pay their input costs because the Canadian Wheat Board had forgotten to market their grain or decided it wasn't a high enough price at that time.

Mr. Atamanenko commented about the NFU representing the majority of farmers. That's certainly not an accurate statement. The numbers show that. I think we can quite easily argue that most farmers aren't represented by the National Farmers Union. The 62% that was the outcome of the vote I think clarifies the position that they do not represent the majority of farmers.

On publicity of the voters' list, and I'm just going through some of the comments Mr. Atamanenko made, I don't know how we would publicize it any more.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): Mr. Gaudet.

[Translation]

Mr. Roger Gaudet (Montcalm, BQ): I have just read Mr. Atamanenko's motion again. It suggests asking Ms. Fraser to audit the expenses. Is that really so dangerous? I do not understand Mr. Menzies' point of view.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): That's not a point of order, Mr. Gaudet. There will come a time when you will be able to speak, and you can make that point then.

[Translation]

Mr. Roger Gaudet: Mr. Chair, I am talking about the motion at the moment. He is talking about everything but the motion.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): We're entering into a debate, and we're not going to do that today. We're going to finish with Mr. Menzies, and then we'll come back another time and then you can make your point.

Mr. Easter.

•(1615)

Hon. Wayne Easter: To your point, Mr. Chair, I know the other vice-chair isn't here and you have to leave, but is there not a way that somebody else could chair the committee and we could continue on to the proper adjournment time at 5:30? I have no problem if Charlie,

Larry, Barry, or anybody else chairs the meeting. The call to the committee went out from 3:30 to 5:30. Why can't we do it?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): I indicated at the outset of the meeting that I have to leave at 4:15. The current vice-chair, who would succeed me as chair in my absence, is not here. This meeting has the prerogative of choosing another chair. I believe that is correct. If this group wishes to continue after 4:15, at your pleasure, by all means.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Why I raise the point of order now, Mr. Chair, is that we would need to do it now before you adjourn the meeting. Could I make a motion?

Mr. David Anderson: He doesn't have the floor for one thing, so he can't make a motion.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): That was an interruption. I can defer it and come back.

Hon. Wayne Easter: The parliamentary secretary is not going to allow me to make a motion so that the meeting can continue, so really, instead of filibustering, he's just cancelling the meeting.

Mr. David Anderson: Quit playing around. You don't have the floor, for one thing.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): First of all, you can't make a motion on a point of order.

Mr. Anderson.

Mr. David Anderson: I'll just make the point that Mr. Easter was late for the meeting. We had agreed, I thought, among the rest of us that we were going to adjourn at 4:15. If Mr. Easter wanted to continue that, he could have come and talked to me. He didn't do that. I don't know if he's just playing games. I'm willing to talk to others. It doesn't matter to us, we can stay and talk about this for the rest of the meeting and that's fine.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): Mr. Atamanenko.

Mr. Alex Atamanenko: In all fairness to David, he did approach me, and I talked with Roger, on the fact that you had to leave and the fact that we would continue speaking next meeting; he did commit to bringing this to a vote in the next meeting. I'm willing to go along with that and adjourn early.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): Okay.

We're at that point where we either have to continue or have an adjournment.

An hon. member: Adjournment.

Mr. Ted Menzies: Mr. Chair, seeing as I have the floor, if we have agreement, I will move that this meeting be adjourned.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): All in favour? All opposed?

(Motion agreed to)

Hon. Wayne Easter: Can we have a vote on that?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): We just did.

Hon. Wayne Easter: A recorded vote.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): If that's what you wish, we can have a recorded vote.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Yes, I want a recorded vote.

Mr. Ted Menzies: Did you call for a recorded vote before?

Hon. Wayne Easter: All right, that's fine. I'm not going to argue the point.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Steckle): We are adjourned.

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