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—
Chair

Mr. Gary Goodyear

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•(1115)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Gary Goodyear (Cambridge, CPC)): Ladies and gentlemen, we'll begin the meeting.

Members, I want to remind you that today we are having a video conference from Vancouver, British Columbia. Because of that, I have been asked to advise members that we need to speak a little more slowly and perhaps a little more clearly than we are used to doing at some of our other meetings. Thank you for that.

I want to remind members as well that this meeting is being held in public. We will start with a brief introduction from our guest this morning, followed by five-minute rounds of questioning. We will continue to do those rounds in the usual format with the official opposition, the Liberals, then the Conservative Party, the Bloc, and the NDP, and then begin the second round.

The purpose of this meeting is to continue our consideration of Bill C-16, an act to amend the Canada Elections Act for fixed election dates.

Our witness this morning is Ms. Linda Johnson, Deputy Chief Electoral Officer for the Province of British Columbia. As members know, Ms. Johnson was asked to present for this committee as British Columbia is the only province to have gone through the entire process under the fixed election date format.

We certainly appreciate very much your appearance this morning, Ms. Johnson. We all realize that you had to get up a lot earlier than we did for this meeting, and we appreciate that very much.

I will turn the meeting over to you now for your statement, for whatever you would like to say to the committee, and then we will open for questions.

Ms. Linda Johnson (Deputy Chief Electoral Officer, Elections BC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman—and my appreciation to the committee for allowing me to appear before you via video conference. It's a great convenience to me and is much appreciated.

I want to begin by setting a bit of context around British Columbia.

In our elections in B.C., we use a 28-day election calendar. We have 39 registered political parties in British Columbia at the present time, so our political environment is a little different. Our general elections are to fill 79 seats in our provincial legislature.

When fixed election dates were brought to B.C., they came with mixed expectations and concerns, and I want to speak to those. There

were expectations that fixed election dates would greatly ease the administration of elections—that is true. There were expectations that fixed election dates would save money in the administration of elections. That is true, but they don't save a lot of money. There were also concerns that by merely amending the B.C. Constitution Act and not making changes to provisions in the Election Act regarding campaign financing, there would be abuses of campaign spending rules. Those did not materialize.

That is my brief summary.

What happened in British Columbia with fixed dates is that they allowed us to plan better. We were able to rent our district electoral offices earlier. We were able to negotiate better financial arrangements with suppliers for equipment, because we could tell them when we needed it. We were able to secure better voting places, because we were able to advise the lessors of exactly when we required those spaces. We were able to recruit better staff by having certainty on when election officials would be required, which allowed us to do more thoughtful screening of applicants and to apply the merit principle in recruitment. I think the public was better served by the quality of both the voting places and the officials who served them.

We were able to do a lot of our administrative infrastructure upfront, and we knew well in advance of the election when things as simple as payroll cutoff dates would be. When you're paying 30,000 temporary employees during a provincial general election, that in itself is greatly beneficial. We were able to pack and prepare our warehouse in a reasonable scheduled time and to ship material out by less expensive means, because we had the knowledge of when the material was required; therefore, there were no late deliveries or emergency shipments.

Where we saw some of our greatest savings was in the area of advertising. Having the certainty of a fixed date allowed us to book television space well in advance of the event, and we saved significantly on the television advertising. We also saved some money on booking radio spots well in advance as well. So there were savings in advertising, which is a significant cost during the general election.

What fixed dates don't change is human behaviour. In the 2005 general election, we had 412 candidates. Almost 10% of those candidates waited until the last day of nominations to file their nomination papers, even though they had known, literally, for years when the election would be called. So human nature did not change with the fixed election dates.

● (1120)

We were pleased to be able to tell our returning electoral officers exactly when we would be requiring their services. It resulted in less attrition...[*Technical difficulty—Editor*]...to train the district electoral officers in a more thoughtful way over a period of time.

We also received a lot of advance interest from individuals who wanted to work in district electoral offices. Election officials again had knowledge of when they would be required, and we were able to more thoughtfully approach our staffing of those offices.

Because we were able to secure our advance voting locations well in advance, we were...[*Technical difficulty—Editor*]...the addresses of those locations on the where-to-vote cards...[*Technical difficulty—Editor*]...in the general election.

I believe in part due to that addition on the where-to-vote cards, our turnout at advanced voting increased 82% in our last election. Voter turnout in the 2005 election went up overall, albeit marginally. It's the first time we've seen an increase in turnout over a long time... *Technical difficulty—Editor*...and we were very pleased with that.

The public...[*Technical difficulty—Editor*]...election was going to be, and we're rather impatient for it to get under way. We had a number of voters requesting mail-in packages before the writs were issued. Something we need to make clear to the public is that we don't issue ballots until the writs are issued, whether we know the date in advance or not.

I mentioned earlier that there had been some concerns about the effect of fixed dates on the political financing framework. We did not see any abuses in the 2005 election. The parties spent a little more, and they also took in a little more in contributions. There were more third-party advertisers in our last election; however, the number of third-party advertisers seems to fluctuate in B.C., from one election to the next, depending on the issues that are relevant at the time.

Overall I would advise the committee that I think fixed election dates are of great value to voters and certainly to the electoral administration bodies. It brings efficiencies and the opportunity for improved effectiveness and better service.

There are minor savings, which is fine. It certainly doesn't save a lot of money, as I said, because most of the money spent in a general election is on salaries and those are unchanged whether you have a fixed date or not.

It doesn't change human behaviour; it didn't encourage all the candidates to register their nominations early on. But overall... [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]...was of great benefit, and I certainly am a believer.

That concludes my remarks.

The Chair: Ms. Johnson, I would note that we are temporarily losing a bit of the video feed periodically. I suspect you may find the same problem at your end. It appears to kick in at times.

The audio seems to be better, but we will speak slowly and clearly. If you have any difficulty with a question, please feel free to ask the member to repeat the question.

● (1125)

Ms. Linda Johnson: Thank you.

The Chair: My pleasure.

Do you need us to use interpretation?

Ms. Linda Johnson: Yes, please.

The Chair: Okay. Are we prepared for that? I'm getting a nod that we are prepared, so we're ready to go to our first round of questions.

Mr. Owen, please.

Hon. Stephen Owen (Vancouver Quadra, Lib.): Thank you.

Thank you, Ms. Johnson, for joining us from supernatural, beautiful British Columbia. Your experience is particularly relevant and important to us, of course, being the first jurisdiction in Canada to not only put fixed election dates into legislation but to also have experienced an election under those conditions.

I was a little disappointed to hear you acknowledge that fixed election dates haven't changed human nature. We had higher hopes for that here, however it may be.

The proposed legislation that we're considering contains a reference to the powers of the Governor General. It specifically states that nothing in this legislation will alter the powers of the Governor General, including the Governor General's discretion to dissolve Parliament for the purpose of an election. It's become an issue of some discussion for us as to what the impact of that is.

Does the British Columbia legislation contains a similar provision with respect to the powers of the Lieutenant Governor?

Ms. Linda Johnson: The provincial legislation does not have an impact on the discretionary powers of the Lieutenant Governor.

Hon. Stephen Owen: Did it say that specifically, or is that simply the interpretation that is given to the legislation?

Ms. Linda Johnson: I believe it's explicit.

Hon. Stephen Owen: Has there been any discussion, which we sometimes hear, with respect to fixed election dates? Maybe this relates to your comment about human nature. There is the spectre of a fixed election date either causing a government to be a lame duck during the year before the fixed date, or that the political activity will start earlier, knowing the fixed date, and therefore be a distraction to the work of Parliament or the legislature. Has that been an experience one way or the other in British Columbia?

Ms. Linda Johnson: I'm sorry, I've lost a lot of your question. If you're asking if my impression is that fixed dates affected the effectiveness of government in the lead-up to the election, I would have to qualify this somewhat. The previous three elections in British Columbia all went to the very end of a five-year mandate. So it was customary in B.C., in the months leading up to an election, for the members to be somewhat distracted by the upcoming election. So I didn't see any difference with a fixed date. It was the same effect because we had had these full-term elections previously. Certainly in the year leading up to the election I did not note any difference in the behaviour by the political parties.

Hon. Stephen Owen: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Johnson.

Our next questioner is Mr. Hill, please.

Hon. Jay Hill (Prince George—Peace River, CPC): Thank you, Ms. Johnson, for appearing, albeit by video conference this morning. I just echo the chairman's remarks in the sense that I'm well aware of the time difference. Prince George—Peace River is my riding in northern British Columbia, and like Mr. Owen, we're reminded on a weekly basis sometimes. So we appreciate your taking the time.

Being a British Columbia resident and a strong supporter of fixed election dates, I would agree with your overall summary that you shared with us in your opening remarks. I'm a little disappointed with your remarks that despite all the things you've listed—and I won't go through the same list again—the savings were only minor, was the term you used. When you alluded to substantial advertising savings and things like that, the certainty for staffing, the efficiencies you alluded to, and you had a long list there, I wonder why the savings would be only minor.

• (1130)

Ms. Linda Johnson: I would say they were minor in the whole context of election costs. We saved over a million dollars in advertising expenses in the 2005 election.

We're also consciously trying to contain costs of the...*[Technical Difficulty—Editor]*...election in 2005 in B.C. cost about the same as the election in 2001 in straight dollars. So we were pleased that we were able to hold the cost of the election, but in the context of about \$23 million that the election cost, I would put the savings resulting from a fixed-date election at perhaps \$2 million.

Hon. Jay Hill: I have another question, and I'll see if some of my Conservative colleagues would like to pose a question as well.

You referred to the fact that although advance polls were up by 82%—in other words, perhaps because of the greater forewarning or foreknowledge of when the polls would be, people obviously took advantage of that—the overall voter turnout was only up marginally.

I don't want to belittle that. We've struggled at the federal level as well with low voter turnout. This is one of the things that we're hoping perhaps fixed election dates will help. Perhaps you could add a little more on that, on why you feel that it only marginally increased.

Ms. Linda Johnson: Overall, turnout in our election increased 3%, so certainly all those people who showed up to vote at advanced voting weren't new voters to us. They were simply voting at a different time. But the 3% I think is significant.

Now, Elections B.C. did very extensive outreach and promotion of voting in the lead-up to the election, so it's difficult to determine whether this was the result of those efforts or a consequence of having a fixed date. We aren't able to discern that. But certainly having the fixed date allowed us to plan our promotion more effectively and to buy good times on television and radio to maximize exposure to the public as to when and where the voting would occur.

The Chair: One minute.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Regina—Lumsden—Lake Centre, CPC): Ms. Johnson, thank you very much for your comments. I appreciated them very much.

I have one observation, and then I have one question.

My observation is with respect to voter turnout. We'll have to get a report from you in future years, I suppose, but in subsequent elections, I would hope that voter turnout would increase as people become more and more acclimatized to the routine of a fixed election date. I know in the United States and other jurisdictions that have fixed elections, everyone knows that on a certain day, for example every four years, there will be a presidential election. I think this will help.

My question to you specifically, however, is that you mentioned all of the great benefits of fixed election dates, but are there any changes that you would suggest or recommend to your legislation and to the legislation we're contemplating to improve what you've already enacted?

Are there any obvious improvements that could be added to your legislation that might assist us?

Ms. Linda Johnson: The one change that I think would be beneficial to Elections B.C. in the context of fixed dates is that we should shorten the nomination period. We have a very tight calendar in British Columbia, only 28 days, and shortening the nomination period somewhat, given that the candidates have full knowledge well in advance of when the election will be, would allow Elections British Columbia more time to prepare the ballots and the list of candidates and distribute them during the election calendar. The fact that 10% of our candidates waited until the last...*[Technical Difficulty—Editor]*.... This is human behaviour rather than having difficulty navigating the nomination process. *[Technical Difficulty—Editor]*...effect on the number of candidates.

• (1135)

The Chair: Thank you. That is the end of that round.

We're going to move now, please, to Monsieur Guimond.

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair. You will have a chance to practice your...

[English]

The Chair: May I just remind you, Monsieur Guimond, to speak slowly so that we can have the interpretation. We are having some feed difficulties, so that would be very kind.

Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Guimond: Yes, I will speak slowly. Speaking so slowly might require an appointment at Ottawa Hospital for a lobotomy because to speak this way is simply not in my nature. You have gotten to know me. Just imagine, Ms. Johnson might think I always speak at this rate!

Do not despair, Ms. Johnson. I got my lobotomy yesterday and am recovering well.

Members: [laughter]

Mr. Michel Guimond: Just a brief question, Ms. Johnson. Are municipal elections held on fixed dates in British Columbia?

[English]

Ms. Linda Johnson: Yes, municipal elections are held on fixed dates in British Columbia every three years.

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Guimond: At what date?

[English]

Ms. Linda Johnson: They are held in November every three years, on a Saturday. I'm sorry, I don't know which Saturday.

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Guimond: So you say it is a Saturday?

[English]

Ms. Linda Johnson: Yes.

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Guimond: They have never overlapped?

[English]

The third Saturday...?

Ms. Linda Johnson: It's in November for the municipal elections. The provincial elections are on a fixed date in May.

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Guimond: Do you have advice as to what date we should set? I'd like to reassure the government: that does not necessarily mean that my party opposes the bill; it's only that there is overlap between municipal elections in Quebec and the date of October 19.

Based on your experience in democratic elections, do you believe there could be a problem if the date of federal elections, as proposed in Bill C-16 now under consideration, overlaps with that of

municipal elections held in over 2,200 municipalities in Quebec? Do you see a problem or a risk of confusing the electorate?

[English]

It will be my last question. My time is up, anyway.

Ms. Linda Johnson: The only concern I would have about an overlap is the availability of voting locations and election workers. You will have the federal jurisdiction competing with the municipal authorities in Quebec for resources that frankly can be hard to come by. I don't know that the voters would necessarily be confused, but I do think the resource issue needs to be considered.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Actually, you have one and a half minutes left.

Madame Picard, would you like to have a question? No? Okay. Thank you very much. We'll move on.

Yes?

[Translation]

Ms. Pauline Picard (Drummond, BQ): I'll pass. I will speak at the next turn.

[English]

The Chair: Next round? Thank you very much.

Mr. Dewar, please.

• (1140)

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Thank you.

Hi, Ms. Johnson. It's Paul Dewar with the New Democratic Party. Appropriately, it's raining here today to make you feel at home.

I have a couple of questions.

In terms of the premier's prerogative, am I understanding correctly that the premier could still—withstanding the fixed election date legislation—walk down the street and ask to dissolve and call an election, or is that not within his realm now? Does he have to abide by the fixed election date, at least with a majority government?

Ms. Linda Johnson: I am certainly not an authority on this matter, but I do not see anything in the Constitution Act that would preclude the premier from requesting that the lieutenant governor dissolve the legislature. She has the prerogative to refuse.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Thank you.

We've talked a bit here about the fact that what we really have is flexible-fixed, because in a minority situation you could still have a confidence vote, the legislature could fall, and thus you would be into an election.

What I would like to know a bit about is outcomes. I was in British Columbia in the 1980s during an election, and there was what I think was called a section 87 that gave citizens the opportunity to have themselves put on the voters list on election day. That is, if you weren't on the list prior to the election, the only opportunity you had was on election day. This caused much dislocation. Has that changed now in your enumeration?

Ms. Linda Johnson: It has changed, and I think it's been significantly improved. The old section 80 registrations required... [Technical difficulty—Editor]...considered during our final count. It was...[Technical difficulty—Editor]...bit of an administrative nightmare.

Under our current statute, our new and improved section 41 allows unregistered eligible voters to register in conjunction with voting. However, if they are doing so at their assigned voting place for their place of residence, those ballots are treated like any other registered voters ballots. This has streamlined it considerably, and it's a very popular opportunity in British Columbia.

Mr. Paul Dewar: In summary, I just have two quick questions.

One, in terms of enumeration, did you find there was an improved enumeration process? That's question number one.

Question number two is that I'm interested in terms of outcomes, as some have said this would improve the opportunity for women, aboriginals, and visible minorities, both to present themselves as candidates.... I'm just wondering if you could comment on that. Did you have more candidates who were from those communities? And did you see a higher voter turnout—if you have that data—with regard to women, visible minorities, or aboriginals?

Thank you.

Ms. Linda Johnson: In terms of enumeration, British Columbia does not normally enumerate; we have a continuous voters list system. We did a targeted enumeration prior to the last election, and certainly the fixed date of the election was very helpful in allowing us to enumerate in close proximity to that event. So there was relevance there.

The organization does not maintain statistics regarding ethnicity, so I can't comment on participation by aboriginal persons, either as candidates or as voters. The increase in participation that we saw was primarily of youth, which went up somewhat, and we were very pleased about that, but otherwise, the increase in turnout seemed to be of both genders and across all age groups, with a slight boost in youth registration and participation. We...[Technical difficulty—Editor]...female candidates.

• (1145)

The Chair: Mr. Dewar, we did lose some feed there. I'm happy to offer you a bit more time for clarification, if you need that.

Mr. Paul Dewar: It's just the last comment on women candidates.

Ms. Linda Johnson: We did not see an increase in female candidacy.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Johnson.

We are finished round one. We'll move to round two, which will also be five minutes. However, I mistakenly moved from Mr. Owen, who actually had two minutes and ten seconds left, so I will offer our

Liberal colleagues an additional two minutes and ten seconds on this round if they need it.

Monsieur Proulx.

Mr. Marcel Proulx (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Good morning, Ms. Johnson. My name is Marcel Proulx. I'm the Liberal member for Hull—Aylmer in the province of Quebec.

I came in late this morning and I didn't hear if you mentioned what day of the week your elections were held.

Ms. Linda Johnson: Our elections are on a Tuesday.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: In May?

Ms. Linda Johnson: That's correct.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: Okay.

Can you tell us what types of results.... I know you're talking about provincial elections, but in the municipal elections I'd be very interested to know what the participation was, seeing those were on a Saturday.

In the province of Quebec, we have our provincial elections on Sundays, which makes it so much easier for the chief electoral officer to get schools, gymnasiums, and so on, when organizing the election. It would be the same thing, I presume, on Saturdays in British Columbia for the municipal elections.

Do you have figures to compare the participation in municipal elections with the provincial elections, which would be on a Saturday versus a Tuesday?

Ms. Linda Johnson: Municipal participation varies considerably around the province. However, it is consistently much lower than in provincial elections, before and after fixed dates were introduced for provincial general elections. Our participation most definitely exceeds that of municipal elections.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: Thank you.

What about your advance polls? When are they? I should say, what days of the week are they?

Ms. Linda Johnson: Our advance polls are on the Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday of the week preceding general voting day. In terms of participation, we start out with pretty strong participation on the Wednesday, but the Saturday is always the busiest day.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: Of course. Is it also a problem for you to find proper offices or voting stations because it's on a Tuesday?

Ms. Linda Johnson: I'm sorry, I didn't hear the question.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: Is it difficult for you to find appropriate locations, offices, or halls for the vote because it's on a Tuesday?

Ms. Linda Johnson: Not particularly, no. Knowing well in advance when we will require them is certainly of great assistance.

We do not generally have difficulty in getting school gymnasiums for Tuesdays because the schools know well in advance that it's coming. We also promote it as a learning opportunity for the students in the school, which I think helps.

But we have always had provincial elections on a weekday and that's what we're familiar with.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: Okay. Could you talk about your list of voters? Do you have a permanent list, or do you have an enumeration every time you have an election?

Ms. Linda Johnson: We have a permanent list.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: I presume the fact that you have a fixed date has helped you to have an updated list that is in much better condition than if you had to wait until an election was declared to update your list. Am I right?

•(1150)

Ms. Linda Johnson: Our permanent list is updated on a continuous basis. We share voter data with Elections Canada. We also receive updates through the driver's licence program in B.C. Our list is kept quite current and complete on an ongoing basis.

But the fixed-date election allowed us to do some targeted registration of under-represented voters, such as shut-ins, in areas of high growth to really maximize the currency and quality of the list going into the election.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: I don't find it particularly encouraging when you say that you regularly update with the Elections Canada list, because we don't find it's that perfect.

How perfect do you find your list to be once it's updated? Are there a lot of mistakes or a lot of problems with your list being a permanent list, or are you very comfortable that your list is in very good condition?

Ms. Linda Johnson: We have had a permanent list in British Columbia for...*Technical difficulty—Editor*. It's been our standard. We...*Technical difficulty—Editor*...the last election with about...*Technical difficulty—Editor*...eligible voters registered.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: Excuse me. Somebody forgot to pay the phone bill at this end. We're missing some of your comments. Could you start your answer again, please?

Ms. Linda Johnson: Certainly.

British Columbia has had a permanent voters list for decades. We were the first in Canada with a continuous list. When we went into the 2005 general election, we had about 90% of eligible voters registered. We had a currency rate—that is, people registered at the correct residential address—of just over 80%.

The list somewhat degrades between elections, because voters are not motivated to let us know when they move, but overall I think the list in British Columbia is of good quality.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: You sound sincere, so I'll believe you.

Ms. Linda Johnson: Thank you.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: Thank you.

The Chair: On that note, we'll end this round.

Thank you very much, Mr. Proulx.

Mr. Reid, please.

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

Thank you for taking the time to appear with our committee this morning.

I want to ask you a question about an item of discretion for the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada that is written into the draft legislation as it stands, and then to tell you what our Chief Electoral Officer has commented on it, and to get your feedback on his commentary.

As it now stands, the legislation, and I'm going to read a little of it, says:

If the Chief Electoral Officer is of the opinion that a Monday that would otherwise be polling day

—for the election—

is not suitable for that purpose, including by reason of its being in conflict with a day of cultural or religious significance or a provincial or municipal election, the Chief Electoral Officer may choose another day in accordance with subsection (4)

And then proposed subsection 56.2.(4) says:

The alternate day must be either the Tuesday immediately following the Monday that would otherwise be polling day or be the Monday of the following week.

In essence, the Chief Electoral Officer gets to decide, under this legislation, whether the third Monday in October is the approved day, and if it seems that there's a good reason not to, then it can be shifted by either one day or by seven days.

The Chief Electoral Officer commented on this to our committee earlier this week—and I'm quoting here from his presentation—by saying:

...if the date of the election has to shift beyond a Tuesday, it would be preferable to have it moved to the next day, rather than the following Monday as currently proposed.

In other words, it would be a shift of either one day, 24 hours, or of 48 hours, rather than of 24 hours or a whole week.

When I asked him what the reason was, because he hadn't provided a rationale in his written presentation, he said it had to do with the difficulty of keeping staff available, that kind of thing.

I want to get your comment on what would be preferable if you found yourself in the position of having the responsibility of making this kind of adjustment.

•(1155)

Ms. Linda Johnson: I'm certainly inclined to agree with Mr. Kingsley that...*Technical difficulty—Editor*...means that the staff are planning their...*Technical difficulty—Editor*. And it is difficult to find enough...*Technical difficulty—Editor*...so a week's delay may prove problematic. And I think—

The Chair: Excuse me. Sorry to interrupt, Ms. Johnson, but we are having those “lack of payment of the audio bills in Ottawa” problems again. I'm wondering if you could simply repeat your answer to that question in full. Thank you.

Ms. Linda Johnson: I agree with Mr. Kingsley. It is very difficult to get temporary staff in an election. With a fixed date, those staff will have planned their other commitments around that date. And if it is moved, one or two days would be preferable to a full week.

Mr. Scott Reid: I should mention that under this legislation the Chief Electoral Officer has to provide this information about the shift no later than August 1—I think I'm right. So it would be a good two and a half months in advance. I don't know if that's of relevance in the whole equation.

Ms. Linda Johnson: It would be relevant for the junior election officials, but for the returning officers, they're already making their plans.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you.

The Chair: We will move now to Madame Picard, *s'il vous plait*.
[Translation]

Ms. Pauline Picard: Good day, Ms. Johnson. My name is Pauline Picard and I am from Quebec.

For registered political parties, does a fixed-date election mean there is a year of election campaigning during which future candidates are allowed to advertise, at their own expense, in newspapers to promote their candidacy in the election? Is that true?
[English]

Ms. Linda Johnson: Outside of a campaign period, which is defined in the act as beginning on writ day, yes, the candidates would be free to do so. However, the voters really aren't paying attention until much closer to the election. So I would question the wisdom of that spending.

[Translation]

Ms. Pauline Picard: A candidate can therefore spend fairly significant sums on advertising to promote his/her candidacy. There is no rule of law to forbid it.

[English]

Ms. Linda Johnson: It is true. They would have to report the spending, but the spending would not be subject to their expenses limit under the Election Act.

[Translation]

Ms. Pauline Picard: Thank you very much.

[English]

The Chair: That's it.

We will proceed now to Mr. Dewar.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Thank you.

Ms. Johnson, I just had a question about your district returning officers and generally speaking the staff who are under your purview. How does that work? Is that done by way of the government making recommendations for DROs, or candidates for that matter? Or is it done through your office specifically without hindrance from the likes of people like us?

Ms. Linda Johnson: The equivalent of returning officers in British Columbia, we call them district electoral officers, are appointed by the Chief Electoral Officer. We do not accept nominations, if you will, from anyone. We do a recruitment on

our own. Those officials for...[*Technical difficulty—Editor...*]for recruiting the election officials who work...[*Technical difficulty—Editor...*]...they recruit on their own. There is no provision for political parties to recommend officials.

• (1200)

Mr. Paul Dewar: We hopefully will be moving to that. We have a bill presently in the Senate that will affect the federal system in the same manner that you have there. I'm wondering, was a benefit of having a fixed election date that you had more time to recruit and train people? Was that helpful to you?

Ms. Linda Johnson: It was definitely helpful. It allowed us to apply the principle of merit rather than just scrambling and hiring whoever appeared. It allowed us to plan our training...[*Technical difficulty—Editor...*]...and in turn they have their election officials in a more thoughtful way. I think it resulted in...[*Technical difficulty—Editor...*].

The Chair: Excuse me, Ms. Johnson, if you can still hear me, we just lost the last 45 seconds of that. I'm terribly sorry for this inconvenience. Mr. Dewar, I apologize to you too. Somehow it seems the technology seems to be picking on you today. I'm sure there's nothing at all behind that. But I would ask you, Ms. Johnson, to repeat your last answer, and I will extend you, Mr. Dewar, sufficient additional time.

Ms. Linda Johnson: No problem.

I definitely feel that fixed election dates resulted in better quality staff and better quality training. It allowed us to apply the merit principle in our recruitment. It allowed us to be more thoughtful in the...[*Technical difficulty—Editor...*]...and to focus on getting the best quality staff in every position. I think the fixed date was what allowed us to achieve that effectiveness.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Lastly, you said your fixed election date is in May, and I have a question about why it's May. Why is it that May was chosen as the month?

Ms. Linda Johnson: I don't really know. The spring election has been common in British Columbia. I don't know why government chose May over another month. From a weather perspective, May works well in every part of the province. We're past spring breakup and we don't have snow anywhere. That is not always true in October.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dewar.

We will begin round three of questioning. Again we'll stick with the five-minute time limit. I think that's working very well.

Ms. Redman is next, please.

Hon. Karen Redman (Kitchener Centre, Lib.): Thank you very much.

Hello, Ms. Johnson. It's good of you to join us, even with these intermittent interruptions.

There are two areas I'd like to cover. First, when you're speaking to the merit principle of the people who get hired, I know that in my riding two returning officers have actually gone to other countries to train people. I understand where your comment's coming from, but I wouldn't want any innuendo to say that we currently have substandard staff, because I know they worked very well in my riding. One was the appointment of a previous member. They have indeed gone to show how elections should be run in other countries, so despite the fact that it may be a somewhat more partisan appointment system, there are people with great merit who are fulfilling those roles federally now.

Ms. Linda Johnson: No question, and some of the federal officials have also worked provincially.

I'm referring to the recruitment of office staff and front-line election officials, a process wherein we've had an opportunity to take the time to match skills and abilities with the roles they'll be filling, which isn't always possible without a fixed date.

● (1205)

Hon. Karen Redman: Is there any kind of assessment or debriefing done after the election? As much as we've all made hires that we thought were good skill matches, is there some kind of assessment done as to how successful that hire has been?

Ms. Linda Johnson: The district electoral officers are expected to do assessments of their staff so that they can make good choices in the future, and Elections B.C. has a formal performance measurement process for our district electoral officers and deputies.

Hon. Karen Redman: There is another area I wanted to touch on. I know you talked a little bit about election spending, and you referenced in passing third-party spending during elections. Have you ever compared the rules and parameters under which your provincial elections are held vis-à-vis how the federal elections are held, specifically with an eye to those two issues?

Ms. Linda Johnson: In British Columbia, we currently require third-party advertisers to register with the Chief Electoral Officer. If they sponsor over \$500 worth of election advertising, they must file a disclosure report, but there are no spending limits for third-party election advertisers in B.C. That provision was repealed.

Hon. Karen Redman: With reference to pre-writ spending by a candidate or an incumbent, there are no parameters or rules, and you haven't seen any abuse or any increased spending?

Ms. Linda Johnson: We saw a slight increase in spending by some of the larger...[*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. Most of that was during the campaign period. We didn't see widespread...[*Technical difficulty—Editor*]...as some people had feared in the context of a fixed-date event.

Hon. Karen Redman: I just heard "larger", and then there was a blank. The spending was by larger what?

Ms. Linda Johnson: The larger parties somewhat increased their spending in this past election, but we did not see significant spending outside the campaign period.

Hon. Karen Redman: Having been a previous regional and municipal councillor at a lower level, obviously, in Ontario, I know

that certain decisions and certain pieces of legislation were not carried forward at the municipal level after a point on the calendar had been arbitrarily set, based on when we knew the coming election was to be. There's no rule or any incumbency placed on people in the legislature? Do they just carry on business as usual until they come to the writ period?

Ms. Linda Johnson: That's correct.

Hon. Karen Redman: Thank you.

The Chair: You still have a minute left, if you or any of your colleagues would like to take that time.

Hon. Karen Redman: I had offered to sing for you earlier, but I think I'll pass.

The Chair: We here are far more grateful for that decision than I'm sure you are, Ms. Johnson.

I will now pass the microphone to Monsieur Guimond.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Michel Guimond: Over the past few years, have you had minority governments in British Columbia? I am not a specialist in British Columbia elections, but it seems to me that when the Socreds were in, there was...

Mr. Hill says no. I believe him.

[*English*]

Hon. Jay Hill: Not recently.

Ms. Linda Johnson: That's correct.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Michel Guimond: When was the last minority government in British Columbia? This is not a trick question.

[*English*]

Ms. Linda Johnson: I'm sorry, I don't recall, but it was definitely a very long time ago.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Michel Guimond: Were you born?

[*English*]

Ms. Linda Johnson: I think so.

M. Michel Guimond: Yes, but you had the Socreds and the Liberals and the NDP.

● (1210)

Hon. Jay Hill: When the Socreds were in, there was virtually no support for the Liberals. It was a long time ago. I don't remember.

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Guimond: One last question. What was the voter turnout rate in 2005? Perhaps you've already answered that question.

[English]

Ms. Linda Johnson: Voter turnout by writ voters I believe was... [Technical difficulty —Editor].

The Chair: Again, my apologies.

Would you mind repeating the number for us again?

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Guimond: Maybe we could issue a motion to congratulate videoconference organizers because the answers I get make me feel like I am playing a word puzzle. It reminds me of reports submitted under the Access to Information Act: The only words that could be read were “of” and “the”. The others were blacked out and you had to try to understand without them.

You said seventy, Madam?

[English]

The Chair: Order. If you wouldn't mind, would you repeat that last number?

Ms. Linda Johnson: Seventy-three percent.

Mr. Michel Guimond: In 2005?

Ms. Linda Johnson: Correct.

[Translation]

A member: What percentage is that? Is it the percentage of registered voters?

M. Michel Guimond: It's voter turnout.

A member: That's not what she's saying.

[English]

Ms. Linda Johnson: For registered voters.

The Chair: Mr. Guimond, you have the floor. If you want to ask that question, please do.

Mr. Michel Guimond: Okay. I made a pass on the hockey stick of Mr. Proulx. I will keep this question.

[Translation]

Here, when we speak of voter turnout, it's clear. I would like to understand the subtleties of the term registered voters, to understand the difference.

Seventy-three percent of voters registered on the electoral list voted in 2005. Is that correct?

[English]

Ms. Linda Johnson: That's correct.

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Guimond: That's in relation to registered voters. You used the jargon “registered voters.” Of course, children and persons under 18 years are excluded.

Other than people under 18 years, who might not be a registered voter? That would be the case of someone who does not appear on

the electoral list, but you have the permanent list. Do all people over 18 years appear on the electoral list in British Columbia?

[English]

Ms. Linda Johnson: No, that is not correct. In British Columbia you have to register to have your name on the permanent list. There is no automatic registration unless... [Technical difficulty —Editor]... national register of electors, and we share information. So citizens who choose not to register to vote or who are otherwise unqualified are not on the list.

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Guimond: Then it was 73%. Do you remember the numbers relating to the past three elections? If not, you could send that information to our clerk.

What were voter turnout percentages for the three elections preceding that of 2005?

You understand the purpose of my question. I simply would like to know if holding elections at a fixed date increased voter turnout in British Columbia, as well as your compatriots' interest in democratic elections.

[English]

Ms. Linda Johnson: The voter turnout had been steadily declining in British Columbia. In the 2005 election, turnout increased by about 3%. We don't know if that was because of a fixed-date election or because of efforts by Elections British Columbia and the media to promote participation in democracy.

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Guimond: But what was it for the two previous elections?

[English]

Ms. Linda Johnson: In 2001, turnout was about 70%. I'm afraid I don't recall what the turnout rate was in 1996. It was slightly higher than the 70% in 2001.

•(1215)

Mr. Michel Guimond: Are you able to provide the clerk with the score for 1996 and the elections before 1996?

Ms. Linda Johnson: Certainly.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Johnson, for providing that information. We'll pass it around once we receive it.

Mr. Dewar.

Mr. Paul Dewar: People have had concerns about campaigns that go on too long because of fixed election dates. Certainly we can appreciate that the average person wouldn't want to see people campaigning months in advance of any fixed election date.

You gave us an indication that there are some boundaries in British Columbia around advertising. I'm curious about your experience between 2005 and 2001. I would like to hear any observations you may have around literature, signs being erected, that kind of thing. I would also appreciate your comments—not scientific, but anecdotal—about concerns that people have or observations you have regarding campaigns going on too long.

Ms. Linda Johnson: My impression between 2001 and 2005 was that there was no increase in campaign activity. I mentioned earlier that many candidates in British Columbia didn't even file their nomination documents until the last day, so they lost an opportunity for a couple of weeks of campaigning that they would otherwise have had.

My impression is that the campaign in 2001 and 2005 was of a similar duration. Although the public and media had expressed some concern that there might be rampant and uncontrolled campaigning and campaign spending, we saw no evidence of this in British Columbia.

Mr. Paul Dewar: You had a citizens assembly on electoral reform, and we know the story there. I'm curious how that affected you. Did you plan or even speculate about how your work would have changed if you had moved to the model proposed by the citizens assembly? Did you involve yourself in that, or were you waiting to hear from the citizens? If you had looked at that, forecast it, how might the proposed transferrable vote model have affected elections and the work you do?

Ms. Linda Johnson: We looked at it. We didn't go into a lot of depth. It wouldn't have been appropriate to have invested a lot of energy in something speculative. Generally speaking, though, we could see where the voting and counting part of our business might have changed. There might have been some change in the infrastructure we use in administering an event at the time the election is on, but overall it would not have had a dramatic impact on the work of Elections B.C. Voter registration would not necessarily have changed. Campaign finance would have changed somewhat, but probably not significantly. [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]...into voting places staffed by competent people would not have changed either.

The Chair: Are you comfortable with that, Mr. Dewar? You have time left, if you wish.

You are finished. We will now go to Mr. Proulx.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good day again, Ms. Johnson.

I just want to clarify something. I want to understand the 73% of registered voters. Can a voter register on election day in British Columbia?

Ms. Linda Johnson: Yes, they can.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: If they register on election day, are they counted in your figure of registered voters?

Ms. Linda Johnson: Yes, they are.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: Therefore 73 is the total percentage of voters who were legally allowed to vote because they had registered either before or on the day of the election.

•(1220)

Ms. Linda Johnson: That's correct.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: Do you have figures showing the percentage of eligible voters actually registered to vote? I'll explain my question. If you tell us that 25% of eligible voters actually register, then the 73% doesn't represent a very high rate of participation.

Ms. Linda Johnson: We had about 90% of eligible voters registered. What I will undertake to do is provide the clerk with statistics regarding participation by registered voters and participation based on the total number of eligible voters. We have both numbers available.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Looking around the table, I think the members of the committee have concluded their questions.

Ms. Johnson, on behalf of the committee, I want to thank you very much for coming out this morning. Obviously you are quite an expert in your field, and we thank you very much for the time you took to prepare for this morning's meeting. On behalf of the committee and the Government of Canada, thank you so much for your assistance in what we have to do with Bill C-16, and I wish you a great day.

Ms. Linda Johnson: Thank you so much.

The Chair: Members, we have now disconnected. We are no longer in a teleconference. The meeting is still in public.

I would like to announce that the video problems that we were having apparently were originating from the site in Victoria. There were no problems with this room. However, for our next teleconference we will not use that room again, so that should eliminate those problems. We will also move our room. The problems they were having had to do with camera. We will move into Centre Block so that they are not having camera problems and we're not having audio problems. Hopefully that will fix that problem, although frankly I was quite impressed with the technology that we used today, and the savings that we made on behalf of the taxpayers.

Having said that, we have concluded our business for today and would simply like to discuss future business and remind committee members of a few things.

On Tuesday, October 3, we have representatives of the following parties appearing before the committee: the Conservative Party, the Bloc, the New Democratic Party, the Green Party. Unfortunately, the Liberal Party cannot attend. On our behalf, I wonder if I could appeal to our members from the Liberal Party to see if they could have somebody attend, though the notice that we have is that the Liberal Party cannot attend. Any assistance that the members might give us would be helpful.

Thursday, October 5—

Hon. Jay Hill: I think they can if they get a tax receipt. I'm pretty sure that's the case.

The Chair: That's unnecessary.

Order, please.

On October 5 we are having a panel of academics, as you know, but we still have to finalize that list. Let me inform the members of where we are so far.

For Henry Milner, we're trying to arrange a video conference from Sweden. He can attend. We're attempting to do the video conference.

Louis Massicotte will be appearing in person.

For Andrew Heard, we're attempting to set up a video conference from Victoria, but not in that particular room.

Peter Hogg is not available.

We are still waiting to hear from Professor Sullivan.

The feeling is that if we can even get the three—Milner, Massicotte, and Heard—which it appears we can, they will be able to discuss in detail the issues with which the committee has concerns: conventions and statutes. It might be too late to ask anyone else, so I'm requesting that the committee agree that if all we can get is the three, that would be acceptable, and we should move forward with those three on that Thursday.

Yes, Mr. Reid?

Mr. Scott Reid: I have some reservations about trying to line up more than one teleconference participant at a single conference. Without actually having examined the relevant time of day in Sweden versus Victoria—I'm going to guess it's about 12 hours difference—that's one consideration. The interaction might be very confusing.

I urge us to consider, if we can't get Professor Sullivan at a later date, trying to get her and one of the teleconference participants on one day, and the other teleconference participant on another day—or something like that. I have visions of a very confused meeting.

•(1225)

The Chair: Would you respond to that?

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Lucile McGregor): On the teleconferencing, I have been in touch with Professor Milner in Sweden, and he is the one who suggested doing it. He did it last year with the Quebec National Assembly. For Professor Milner it would be about 5 p.m. in Sweden; for Professor Heard it would be 8 a.m. in Victoria. Both are quite comfortable with the times.

On my understanding of the way the video conference works, it's one screen that goes on whoever is speaking at the time. So they're aware of that.

As the chairman mentioned, we're also going to be moving to the room in the Centre Block that has a fixed, permanent system. So hopefully the little camera glitches they had at their end will be solved, as well as the sound problems. But again, this is not something we do all the time.

Mr. Scott Reid: I'm sure we'll have a better room in Victoria, but I'm just going to throw out a wild guess that our control over video conferencing in Sweden will be limited. We had problems here today, and when you have a problem with one participant, that person kind of goes on hold while you try to solve it. We could spend all our time dealing with that sort of thing.

I don't think you get twice as many problems; the problems start increasing exponentially when you have more than one conference at the same time.

The Chair: We could just do Victoria. We could also make it clear to the witnesses that if we end up having difficulties we will stop the participation of that witness and arrange another time. That way we

will at least have the opportunity, if things go well, to get it all done in one meeting.

I'm opening it up to the committee for suggestions. The obvious thing is to have one video conference and one witness here, and then arrange for a different date for the other witness.

Mr. Scott Reid: We could even have one in the first hour and one in the second hour. I really have my doubts about having both of them on screen at the same time. I figure we should maybe leave the technical experimentation to some other committee.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: Do you not trust our technicians?

Mr. Scott Reid: I just have reservations about the whole thing in general. I like a low-risk approach.

The Chair: That doesn't seem to be too unreasonable.

Mr. Owen.

Hon. Stephen Owen: On proceeding in this way, we wouldn't want that to close off the opportunity to call other witnesses if we still had gaps in our comfort.

The Chair: So is it the decision of the committee to set it up the way we have, but just have one video conference in the first hour and the other in the second hour, or will we have them all together again?

Mr. Marcel Proulx: Do these two witnesses want to interact? That might be one of the reasons why they want to be together.

The Chair: That's a good point.

The Clerk: They didn't ask to be together. They know that they will be part of a panel.

The Chair: Mrs. Redman.

Hon. Karen Redman: I have been at video conferences in the Promenade Building where this happened, so despite this unfortunate technology I have been party to this kind of format and it has worked quite well.

The Chair: Having heard all the different comments, I'm going to take the risk that we trust our technology and, as we planned, have two video conferences at the same time with a witness in front. If it falls apart, we will have to rearrange the time. Then we'll quit for lunch, as Mrs. Redman said.

Are there any further comments on that? Okay, then we're set for next Tuesday and Thursday.

Jamie, would you like to respond to the last item of business, private member's Bill C-290?

Mr. James Robertson (Committee Researcher): The clerk has advised that debate on Bill C-290, which is an amendment to the Electoral Boundaries Readjustment Act, will begin today. Under the Standing Orders, the committee must table a report regarding a legislative committee, because that's where it will be referred if it receives second reading, but the report of the legislative committee must be tabled within five sitting days. So that needs to be tabled in the House by the committee by next Thursday.

In accordance with the usual practice, the whips can provide the clerk with the names for the legislative committee. If the whips are agreed, the chair will table that report next week.

•(1230)

The Clerk: This is just a heads-up. We'll be sending the whips a letter about that.

The Chair: It's just a heads-up.

Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid: Did I just misunderstand something? This is the first hour of debate, is it not? So it would then go off for a second hour of debate...not less than ten days. The legislative committee won't deal with that until after the second hour of debate...if it's passed, yes—

Mr. James Robertson: The Standing Orders provide that the striking committee, i.e. this committee, must table the names for the legislative committee within five sitting days of debate beginning. So whether it was the debate beginning on Bill C-2, five sitting days, or this bill, the time begins from the beginning of debate. It's just the way the Standing Orders are worded.

Mr. Scott Reid: I misunderstood what it was about.

The Chair: Mr. Lukiwski.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Yes, on a question of clarification, I spoke with Diane Marleau about that very issue before I came here, questioning why she wanted it to go to a legislative committee as opposed to this committee, which normally deals with those issues. She had a couple of reasons, but she didn't feel that she was hard over on it. If it came to this committee as opposed to a legislative committee, my sense from talking with Diane is that she wouldn't have a big problem either way.

We didn't go beyond that, because I thought, as Scott did, that since this was only the first hour of the debate, we had some time to determine whether it would go to a legislative committee.

Mr. James Robertson: This committee is the committee responsible for electoral matters, including electoral redistribution. I think that in accordance with the Standing Orders, until her motion for second reading is amended, the chair and this committee are obliged to table that report by next Thursday, assuming debate starts today. If her motion is amended on the floor of the House, which it can be with unanimous consent, there would be no problem, and it would not need to table a report by next week.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: We kind of left it up in the air. My sense, again, is that Diane wouldn't have a problem referring it to this committee, if it gets that far, as opposed to a special legislative committee. But maybe, Karen, you can talk with her. Quite frankly, it's her choice.

The Chair: Just to go slightly further on the clarity of this—

The Clerk: I haven't looked at the order paper today, but I'm assuming the motion that's on the order paper today is the motion for second reading and a referral to a legislative committee. So that's the motion that's going to be before the House.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Unless it's amended by unanimous consent.

The Clerk: Unless it is amended, yes.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: If you want to talk to Diane.... If she wants to leave it as is, that's the way it will be, obviously.

Hon. Karen Redman: I will get back to the whip. There's nothing this committee can do about it. Either it gets unanimous consent to be amended in the House, or it goes to a legislative committee.

The Chair: Okay, that was more of a heads-up, but obviously we have some direction to move on that.

Is there any further business for this committee today?

Monsieur Guimond.

Mr. Michel Guimond: I just want to know if there's a plan to have a bill to amend the electoral law concerning...I think we agreed on three or four items in the Kingsley report. If we want to have some changes made in the law for the next election, we must know the position of the government.

This is the question I'm asking. I want to know if you are planning to make a formal answer to the report we tabled in June—you have till October 20—or whether the answer will be a bill on the changes we agreed on. You remember, Jay, we discussed that. I want to know.

There's consensus from every party on four or five items, I think.

The Chair: Mr. Hill, would you like to respond to that?

Hon. Jay Hill: I appreciate that you want to know, Michel; that's fair enough. But we're not prepared to state at this point in time whether it will be a very formal presentation in the form of legislation or whether it will just be a reply to the report.

•(1235)

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: I can just assure Monsieur Guimond that there will be a response by the deadline, obviously, but I can't comment on the content.

Mr. Michel Guimond: Does the government realize, if we want it before the next election.... If we have the election next month, we won't have time, but if we have some time, I think we'll have enough time to make changes.

You realize the dilemma?

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Yes.

Mr. Michel Guimond: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: Just to remind the committee, the government has 150 calendar days to respond to that report. I think that October 20, give or take, is the time.

Is there any further business by the committee?

Seeing none, the meeting is adjourned.

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