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Chair

Mr. Gary Goodyear

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•(1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Gary Goodyear (Cambridge, CPC)): Colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, I call the meeting to order. Thank you all for coming this morning. I appreciate everyone being here. The proceedings are being televised at the request of some committee members.

As agreed by the committee at the last meeting on Tuesday, and pursuant to the committee's order of reference of Thursday, November 7, 2007, the committee is here to continue its study of Bill C-16, which is the new number. This is the former Bill C-55 from the last session. It is an Act to amend the Canada Elections Act (expanded voting opportunities) and to make a consequential amendment to the Referendum Act.

Madam Robillard, do you have a comment?

[Translation]

Hon. Lucienne Robillard (Westmount—Ville-Marie, Lib.): Mr. Chairman, I have a question for you. When we began our study of what was then Bill C-55, Minister Van Loan appeared before the committee to answer our questions. While he was here, he quoted a number of research papers. Before he left, Mr. Chairman, you yourself asked the minister to provide us with a list of those studies so that our researchers could summarize them for us. The minister said that he would provide us with a list.

Has it been sent to you yet? Are we going to be given a summary of the research that has been carried out on the subject?

[English]

The Chair: My apologies. I'll take that as a point of clarification. We have the list of research, and I will submit it to members as soon as possible. We'll have it photocopied and sent around the table right away.

Is there any further comment?

[Translation]

Hon. Lucienne Robillard: Mr. Chairman, you said: "Our researchers could summarize it for members of the committee."

Is it only the list that we have, or has a summary also been prepared?

Mr. Michel Bédard (Committee Researcher): We are going to begin preparing a summary of the research and I can promise you that you will have it by the time clause-by-clause examination of the bill begins.

Hon. Lucienne Robillard: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[English]

The Chair: *Merci.*

Colleagues, we have some other routine business, but I'll raise it after our witnesses are finished this morning.

I'd like to introduce our witnesses for this morning. We have Monsieur Mayrand, the Chief Electoral Officer for Elections Canada.

Monsieur Mayrand, I will offer you the opportunity to introduce your colleagues now, and then we'll start the proceedings.

Mr. Marc Mayrand (Chief Electoral Officer, Office of the Chief Electoral Officer): With me is Mrs. Diane Davidson, the deputy chief electoral officer and chief legal counsel; Mr. Rennie Molnar, deputy chief electoral officer for electoral events; and Monsieur Stéphane Perrault, senior general counsel.

•(1110)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Welcome to everyone.

Monsieur Mayrand, I will offer you 10 minutes, but I'm not going to shut you down. I understand you have a rather detailed introduction, and I will allow you the time to introduce that and read it out to the committee.

Colleagues, we will have the usual allocation of time and the usual rounds of questioning.

Monsieur Mayrand, you have the floor.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I'm pleased to appear before the committee today to discuss Bill C-16, the purpose of which is to add two advance polling days to the election calendar.

[Translation]

This bill provides greater flexibility for us to serve electors by giving them more opportunities to exercise their right to vote. In so doing, it facilitates participation and access to the electoral process. Access is, in fact, one of the strategic objectives Elections Canada set itself in the five-year strategy plan that we recently developed.

However, the bill presents a number of operational challenges, which touch on three elements: the fact of having two consecutive polling days in some 64,000 polling stations; differences in rules applicable for the day before election day and for election day itself; and, lastly, the proposed timeframe for implementation.

These challenges are in addition to a series of changes to the electoral process that include Bill C-31, passed last spring, and upcoming changes addressed in different bills recently introduced in Parliament. The adjustments resulting from the successive changes present challenges for electors, political entities and election officials that must be taken into account.

With regard to the first challenge, the bill provides for one last advance voting day the day before polling day. Day 1 in our jargon, and that is how I will refer to it this morning. Day 1 polling would be held in all of the approximately 64,000 polling stations used on polling day. This creates several operational issues for Elections Canada. I would like to focus on four in particular.

The first operational issue is recruiting and retaining election officers; indeed, this was already a major challenge even before the introduction of Bill C-16, owing partly to the fact that returning officers must wait for political parties to supply the names up to the 17th day prior to election day to hire deputy returning officers and clerks. And on that day, the political parties have usually supplied less than half of the names needed to fill openings. This means that, 17 days before polling day, most of the recruiting has yet to be done, and we need to be ready for the advance voting days, which start one week later. Furthermore, it is sometimes necessary to train up to 800 people in order to fill the 500 to 600 positions in each electoral district.

The second operational issue relates to polling stations and opening hours. Polling stations will be open from noon to 8:00 p.m. in all regions of the country, which effectively means a 10-hour working day, if one includes preparation time prior to opening the polling stations and procedures required following the close of the polling stations. However, in British Columbia, Alberta and the Yukon, polling stations must open again at 7:00 a.m. or 7:30 a.m. the next day for approximately a 14-hour work day, for a total of 24 hours' work over two days. Not only is this a great deal to ask of election workers, but also a short rest period increases the risk that workers who are not rested and ready for election day will fail to report for work on that day.

[English]

The Chair: *Excusez-moi.* It's too noisy.

We seem to have an echo in the room, so any conversations that are taking place around the room tend to bounce right back into the centre, and the door is open to try to remove some of the extra warmth in the room. So I apologize, Monsieur Mayrand.

Can we just keep the conversations down? Or perhaps folks could exit the room.

Monsieur Mayrand, please, my apologies.

•(1115)

[Translation]

Mr. Marc Mayrand: The third operational issue relates to polling stations. Polling stations will be in the same location for day 1 and for polling day. In rural areas, the only places available for use as polling stations are often schools or places of worship. It is possible that churches are available only on the Monday, while schools are available only on the Sunday.

In fact, some 11% of the approximately 20,000 sites currently used for polling on Mondays are in churches or other places of worship. We believe that, in many cases, schools or churches will not be available for two days in a row, on a Sunday and Monday.

Our fourth operational issue is that there are certain risks associated with leaving uncounted ballots in the care of some 64,000 election workers. It is possible that some people will quit—or worse, disappear—between day 1 and day 0. It would therefore be preferable to consider alternatives in order to give returning officers ways of coping with these inevitable situations.

To address the challenges presented by two consecutive polling days, I would ask that you consider the three following solutions.

Firstly, day 1 advance polling stations could be open for eight hours, as is already the case, but on a staggered schedule from east to west. Thus, polling stations would open at 11:00 a.m. in the Atlantic provinces, Quebec and Ontario, at 10:00 a.m. in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta, and at 9:00 a.m. in British Columbia. In this way, polling stations in British Columbia would close at 5:00 p.m. instead of 8:00 p.m. on day 1, giving election officers in the western provinces comparable rest time as eastern provinces and thereby reducing the risk that they fail to report in the morning of election day.

Secondly, returning officers should have the discretion to locate a polling station at two different sites in the event that it is not possible for polling to take place at the same site on both day 1 and day 0. Our aim would be to have polling take place in the same location on both days, but in some cases there might be no choice but to use two different sites.

My third proposed solution to the aforementioned challenges is as follows: returning officers in each of the 64,000 polling stations should be given discretion to decide on the best solution for safe-keeping ballot boxes and uncounted ballots, in accordance with instructions from the Chief Electoral Officer. Such instructions would include a range of options for returning officers such as storage in a secure location at the polling station site or the office of the returning officer, or even at the deputy returning officer's home.

[English]

The second challenge regards the rules applicable to voting day and the day before voting. The bill states that advance polling rules will apply on day one. On the day after, of course, polling day rules will apply, but it's the same election workers who will have to apply both sets of rules. As a result, they will need to be given additional training so that they can apply different procedures for each of the two polling days they are hired for.

For example, during the advance poll, the poll clerk must complete the register of the names of electors who voted and have it signed by the elector, who identifies himself or herself and provides the required piece of identification before he or she can vote. By comparison, on election day, once the elector has identified himself or herself and provided the required pieces of identification, all the clerk has to do is find the elector's name on the voters list and cross it off. Electors then can vote. This makes the process much quicker, much more fluid, and simpler for both electors and electoral workers.

To address this challenge, I would ask you to consider amending the legislation in such a way that the polling day rules for the conduct of the vote also apply to day one advance polling, except with regard to polling hours. This recommendation would have two effects: one, obviate the need to enter in the register the name and address of electors who have voted and to have electors sign the register; and two, allow bingo cards to be provided to the candidates' representatives every 30 minutes instead of just once at the end of the day, as is the case on the other advance voting days.

Lastly, I would bring to your attention the fact that our reading of the bill is that certain rules applying to polling day will not apply on day one. I'm thinking, for example, of the ban on election advertising and on the first publication of an election survey, as well as the right each employee has to three consecutive hours in which to vote.

The implementation period is another challenge. I'd like to address it, given the significant impact the bill could have on the conduct of elections. As drafted, the bill would come into force three months after royal assent. I have to tell you right off that Elections Canada can't possibly get ready to hold an election according to the new rules in such a short period of time.

The proper implementation of Bill C-16 will require considerable effort to educate voters, update the manuals, train election personnel, and upgrade the 11 computer systems affected by the amendments. Each of these activities require detailed planning, the development and adoption of stringent programs, and painstaking execution. None of these activities can be carried out satisfactorily within the three months set aside by the legislation.

Meanwhile, we still have work to complete to comply with the December 22, 2007, and April 22, 2008, coming-into-force dates for certain provisions of Bill C-31. The overlap with the implementation of Bill C-16 adds to the complexity of the task, particularly when it comes to modifying the computer systems.

Finally, all implementation and communication activities must be carried out while remaining ready at all times for a general election or byelection.

For all these reasons, I would ask you to defer the coming into force of Bill C-16 until January 1, 2009, assuming that the legislation receives royal assent before March 1, 2008. For my part, I pledge to do everything in my power, as was the case for certain key provisions of Bill C-31 last summer, to implement the legislation ahead of schedule if the preparations have been finalized.

• (1120)

Before concluding my remarks, I'd like to point out that the initial implementation costs of this bill will be a bit less than \$3.5 million, and adding the two voting days will cost upward of \$34 million for each general election. Ninety-four per cent of these costs have to do with the additional advanced voting day the day before the vote. The last general election cost \$277 million, including reimbursement to parties and candidates of \$54 million. These changes would therefore represent an increase of 14% of the total cost of a general election.

It may therefore be worthwhile to review the impact of these changes on voter turnout for a general election following the bill's coming into force.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, Elections Canada supports the objective underlying this bill, which is to make it easier for electors to exercise their right to vote. I would ask you, however, to consider certain amendments to the bill in order to provide some limited flexibility in the administration of those new rules.

Furthermore, I would ask you to defer the coming into force of the bill so that we can have time to put in place the tools needed to ensure the success of the new provision while ensuring the integrity of the electoral process.

In closing, I would like to provide the committee with some technical documents suggesting wording for the proposed amendments to the bill.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Mayrand.

Perhaps I can just ask, before we begin our rounds of questioning, whether I misheard you. On page 13 of your report I believe you stated it was a 14% increase. Is it 14% or 12%? It's 12%?

• (1125)

Mr. Marc Mayrand: It's 12%.

The Chair: Okay, so colleagues know it's a 12% increase.

We will begin our round of questioning, starting with Madam Robillard. We will start our first round with seven minutes, and the second round will be five.

Madam Robillard, please, you have the floor for seven minutes.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Lucienne Robillard: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I would like to thank the Elections Canada team for once again appearing before the committee. Given the bills that we will be studying, I imagine that we will have the opportunity to meet with you often over the upcoming weeks and months.

Mr. Mayrand, I think that all parliamentarians around this table, and indeed the majority of Canadians, would agree that if the objective of this bill is to facilitate voting, then so much the better. After all, who would oppose a noble cause? However, as the saying goes, too much of a good thing can spoil everything.

To my mind, the current federal voting system is extremely flexible. Take for example voting by special ballot and postal voting. We already have three advance polling days in addition to polling day itself, yet still people are seeking to add two more. If we carry on down this track, we will soon find ourselves with 36 polling days.

We have to be certain, and I am not, as yet, that such a measure will result in increased voter turn-out. When the minister appeared before the committee, we asked whether studies showed a correlative increase in voter turnout. He mentioned a number of studies from other countries that showed that allowing people to vote on Sundays increased turnout by 10%. He also mentioned a poll carried out by Elections Canada in 2003. This is something that I would like you to discuss with us at greater length. As you have provided us with a working paper on voter turnout today, I was wondering whether you had carried out any additional work on the subject. After all, although facilitating voting may result in an increase in voter turnout, the difference may be negligible. I would like to hear your viewpoint on this matter.

In addition, I would like to know whether you can provide us with a daily breakdown of voter turnout statistics for advance polling days—in other words, how many people choose to vote on a Friday, a Saturday and a Monday. At the moment, we assume, for example, that people will be more inclined to vote on a Sunday than a Saturday, for example.

Lastly, I would like to discuss my concerns about recruiting election officers. As far as I understand, this is a bigger and bigger challenge with each passing election. I'm not talking about our volunteers, I'm talking about paid electoral officers. We have just had three by-elections in Quebec, and our three returning officers struggled to fill the positions. We need people to work four, five or six days over approximately a week. I am very worried about this situation.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Firstly, a number of surveys have been carried out on how voter turnout is affected, and I believe the minister mentioned them when he appeared before the committee to discuss the bill. In addition, this morning we circulated a study on potential impacts on voter turnout that we commissioned from Professor Blais of the Université de Montréal. Obviously, it is a very complex issue. A number of very diverse factors can affect voter turnout. We have to consider factors such as age, demographics, geography and voters' individual circumstances.

In the 2003 survey to which you referred, citizens who did not exercise their right to vote often blamed factors such as scheduling conflicts with family or professional responsibilities.

The bill provides voters with another option by allowing them to vote in all polling stations either on the day before polling day or on another advance polling day. I am unable to give you concrete conclusions as to the exact effect the bill will have on voter turnout. It would seem reasonable to suggest that by giving voters more options it will be easier for them to manage their schedules and find a convenient time to go to the polling station.

With regard to a day-by-day breakdown of voter turnout statistics, I am unable to give you any such information this morning. Indeed, I'm not even certain that we have such information. It is something that we would want to do were the bill to be adopted, so that we could measure its impact. By way of a general comment on voter turnout, Canada has witnessed a decline in turnout over the past four or five federal elections, with the exception of the 2006 election where an increase of just over 4% was recorded. We will have to

wait until the next general election to see whether it was a one-event increase or whether it is indicative of a new trend.

We have also noted that there has been an increase in the number of votes cast using the alternative voting procedures, even if such ballots still represent a relatively small percentage of the overall vote. Three per cent of voters use the rights accorded under the special regulations to vote either at the office of the returning officer or by mail.

• (1130)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

I'm sorry. That was seven minutes. Thank you very much. There will be time for another round, I'm positive.

We go now to Mr. Reid for seven minutes, please.

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

First of all, thank you very much, Mr. Mayrand and your team, for coming out here. It's always a pleasure to have you before our committee.

I occupied myself during your presentation by attempting to simultaneously listen to you and read the report of Professor Blais and two other co-authors, one whose name I can't pronounce. I have a number of questions that arose out of what they were discussing and that overlap to some degree with your comments.

The thing I was looking for in the study—and I don't see a specific number—was their projection as to the actual percentage increase in voter turnout, what they anticipate. They say it would very likely happen, but it would be modest. I'm not sure if there is an actual number they give.

And secondly, I was hoping to find—and I don't think I saw in here—any information as to where you'd be likely to see greater or lesser degrees of impact on voter turnout.

I'll ask you if there is any further information you have or light you could shed on those two subjects, and then I want to come back after that with some further discussion.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Yes. And maybe I should point out that Canada, to my knowledge, would be the only country to have two days of consecutive voting, along with, I believe, Sweden, among developed countries.

Mr. Blais has looked at various studies, has looked at all the factors at play, and his conclusion is that providing additional opportunities for voters is likely to increase participation. To what extent, again, is very difficult to say. As he points out, there are so many factors at play here that it's very difficult to isolate one as being the one that really influences the participation rate. But again, his conclusion is that we can reasonably expect that it will increase—maybe marginally, but it will increase—participation.

•(1135)

Mr. Scott Reid: In going through it, I didn't see anything regarding different impacts in different areas of the country. I'll tell you the sort of thing that occurs to me, and I'm wondering whether there's anything you have that either supports or contradicts the hypothesis I'm going to put forward. It seems to me that in an urban area you're unlikely to see as much of a change in voter participation as you would in a rural or remote area. I used to represent a partly urban, partly rural riding—now it's all rural—and the obvious point to note is that going to an advance poll in a rural area frequently involves a long trip. Especially when you have aging populations, as you often do in areas where there's population decline—such as the one I represent—many of them no longer have driver's licences and they are dependent on family members to get them out to the polls, that kind of thing.

In a remote area—Nunavut comes to mind—you have a situation in which if the poll isn't the poll in your community, the one that occurs on voting day, you really can't vote. So advance voting, at least prior to the implementation of this bill, would be more a theoretical concept than a reality. I would expect a greater level of shift there in terms of voter participation than I would in an urban area, where essentially it's a choice between going to the high school a block away on voting day or someplace that's three or four blocks away on another day.

Do you have any comment or any familiarity with that?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: There is no doubt in my mind that the bill would make it much more convenient for electors in terms of having access to exercise their right to vote. We have increased the number of advance polling locations over the years, but again, the initiative proposed here, to have a full advance polling day on the Sunday, would certainly meet the challenge that many electors face in the region.

Mr. Scott Reid: I'm sorry, I wasn't sure if you were consulting with some notes for further comment.

I was looking at some of what Professor Blais talked about, and it does seem to me that there is one area where.... I want to be cautious in saying that I dispute his findings, because I have great respect for the professor and his work, but he makes a comparison between 2004 and 2006 and attempts, based on some kind of numerical measure, to say that there is an increase in voter turnout at advance polls. Looking at those two results, and the results in the same ridings on how many additional votes in total were cast, we can come up with the metric that says for every additional vote cast in 2006 at advance polls, in a riding-by-riding comparison, we see a 0.56% increase in total voter turnout. While it's an interesting number, I do think it is, frankly, a bit of a non sequitur here, and I guess I'm throwing it out just so people are aware of my concern. This is, I think, fundamentally different from the idea of an advance voting day where polls are available everywhere. I'm just not sure this particular metric can be applied to that future hypothetical situation and produce the same kind of overall result.

I don't know if you would agree with me that the application of that to a future hypothetical situation might not produce the precise outcome he's suggesting.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: It is very difficult, because again, there's been no experience at all with this new approach, which is quite innovative. Again, we always have to be careful in comparing things. One thing the committee may want to look into is what happened recently in the Ontario provincial election, where there was a significant increase in numbers of advance polling days, yet at the end of the day there was still a decrease in overall turnout.

Again, it's a different regime there from what's being proposed in Bill C-16. I'm just being cautious as to expectations that can be raised. It would certainly make it more convenient for electors.

•(1140)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Reid, I appreciate that.

We will go to our next questioner, Monsieur Paquette, for seven minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Paquette (Joliette, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I would like to thank you for your presentation, which was very informative, even if it did raise more questions than it answered.

You gave the example of the Ontario election, where a significant number of people used advance poll voting. Unfortunately, overall voter turnout remained essentially the same. We experienced exactly the same situation in Quebec in 2006. The advance poll vote led us to believe that we would register record turnout—especially as there were three parties in the race—but, at the end of the day, voter turnout was exactly the same as it had been in 2003.

As this is both a fairly costly and extremely complex bill—and I will come back to its complexity later—I cannot but wonder whether it would not be better to carry out the survey and studies before we enact legislation. For example, will there be a spillover effect? This question is particularly relevant given that we are talking about two consecutive days. Will people who would have gone to vote on Monday simply decide to go on a Sunday? At the end of the day, we could end up with the same level of voter turnout.

Were the spread of the advance days different, the impact could be very different. Imagine a scenario where you could not vote on the weekend because you had to be out of town for a few days. If you are not able to vote on the Sunday, you are not going to be able to vote on the Monday either. However, if the advance polling day were held on the previous weekend, or a few weeks earlier, it would open up other possibilities for arranging your schedule.

Would it be possible for Elections Canada to carry out a study to ensure... I have a copy of the study that you gave us and it seems very interesting. As Ms. Robillard said, nobody can be against a noble cause, but if the disadvantages outweigh the advantages... Allow me to quote from the study, it says:

[...] but that the correlations are not very robust. This suggests that all of these measures may have a positive impact on turnout, but that the effect is somewhat weak and uncertain.

I am no expert, but it would perhaps be preferable to commission Elections Canada to carry out more in-depth studies, particularly on voter behaviour, to ensure that we do not experience the same spillover effect that seems to have occurred in both the Quebec and the Ontario elections.

Would it be possible for the committee or the House to ask Elections Canada to carry out some studies before proceeding any further with our debate and the process of adopting the bill?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: You are correct in saying that voter turnout on advance polling days is not a great predictor of overall voter turnout. That is something which has been noted on a number of occasions.

Secondly, it is also difficult to say whether advance polling days allow voters who would not otherwise have voted to vote, or whether they simply result in those voters who would have voted anyway voting on a different day. It is very difficult to say with any certainty.

One of the problems is that we cannot really hold dry runs to try out different approaches. We simply have to implement them, either at a by-election or at the general election, and see whether they do actually bring about the desired effect.

Perhaps the committee would like to invite Mr. Blais to appear before you to explain his study and his methodology.

Mr. Pierre Paquette: That would be a good idea.

I believe that you said earlier that, to the best of your knowledge, no other country offers two consecutive polling days.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: With the exception of Sweden, and I could not tell you off the top of my head what its voter turnout is.

Mr. Pierre Paquette: It must be important for a social democrat.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: I believe that Mr. Blais discusses it in his paper.

Mr. Pierre Paquette: Your presentation raised issues that we ourselves have raised. I am sure you are aware that the political parties have concerns about the feasibility of the bill as it is currently drafted.

You spoke about the difficulty of recruiting electoral officers; we share your concerns, but you did not suggest any solution. You simply said that you are going to redouble your efforts. Do you, for example, plan to offer greater financial incentives to make the job more appealing?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Pay can indeed be a factor that facilitates recruitment and stems attrition, which is actually a fairly significant problem. The pay scale has just been reviewed with a view to the next election campaign. In fact, the new pay scale was already in force for the September by-elections. It would, however, have to be reviewed again—it always needs tweaking. We will have to determine whether it ought to be increased, which will obviously require Treasury Board approval.

Other factors also come into play. We did not suggest any solutions to the committee today, firstly because I am not certain that this particular issue is actually relevant to the bill in its present form; and secondly, because I believe we should first consult with the political parties to get a better understanding of the challenges they face and to hear their suggested solutions. That is something which I plan to do...

• (1145)

Mr. Pierre Paquette: We have to know that we will be able to find this staff that we need before implementing a system that could

give rise to dissatisfaction. I would ask that you keep us informed of what you find out.

You spoke about the ban on election-period advertising and on the first publication of an election survey—measures that currently apply on general elections polling days—but you did not make any specific recommendations.

Given that the last advance polling day has essentially become a second general election polling day, do you think that the same rules should apply on both days? For example, I am always asked to move three or four of my electoral signs that are visible from the polling station entrance. Would this mean that I could leave them up outside the school on a Sunday? We did not make any recommendations on this front. Do you not think that the same rules should apply on both days?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: My objective this morning was to bring these issues, which could become controversial during an election, to the attention of the committee. I wanted to share our understanding of the bill with you. I think it is for the committee to discuss them and come up with suggestions.

Mr. Pierre Paquette: I think that you have met your objective this morning.

[*English*]

The Chair: Next is Mr. Godin for seven minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

I would like to thank our witnesses, especially Mr. Mayrand, for coming this morning to share their views with us.

You talked about Sweden. In that case, is it two consecutive days, and is it Sunday and Monday?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: It is two consecutive days, and from what I recall, one of them is Sunday, but I do not remember if the other day is Saturday or Monday. I do not want to mislead you.

Mr. Yvon Godin: From the outset, Sunday is a problem for me. People could raise religious considerations, but it goes much farther than that. In fact, allowing stores to be open on Sundays has already messed up our weekends.

At the end of the week, people who have a pay cheque only have a certain amount to spend. Now, families have lost their weekends. They no longer exist. I'm afraid that Elections Canada will be causing people who need rest to lose even more of their weekends. That is why weekends exist. That is the comment I wanted to make. There is no respect for Sundays and weekends. Everyone wants to take them over and make people work. Our society is lacking that. It is as if we have to work 24 hours a day, seven days a week. There's no more room for rest. At the outset, it is not a good idea.

Having said that, I do have a suggestion to make. Of course, it would be up to us to do it, since we are the legislators. You say you are looking for people. Many people could help Elections Canada, but they cannot do so because of the regulations. For example, people who are receiving employment insurance could volunteer. At home, we have the highest unemployment rate in Canada. Many people could work, but because they have to declare their income, at the end of the week, they will have lost more money than they have earned. A large number of people could help throughout Canada. Since this is about working for the country, perhaps an exception could be made in that specific circumstance. In the case of Elections Canada, it could be excluded as income under employment insurance. That could be a future recommendation. It would be a lot easier to find people. People know how to count. If they calculate that they will have lost money by the end of the week, they will not even consider it worthwhile to go.

As regards the churches, your comments are very accurate. Some rural regions no longer have community centres. They have closed. The church is the only place available. That will become a problem. I would like to hear you elaborate a little more on that.

Moreover, you suggested that the office of the returning officer or even the deputy returning officer keep the ballot boxes. I have a problem with entrusting the ballots to one person. It is a huge responsibility. That could lend itself to controversy and cause squabbling. We would have to be careful so that it did not turn into a circus.

• (1150)

Mr. Marc Mayrand: At the moment, there are just over 2,000 churches that are used as voting places. So far, we have not exactly determined how many of them would be available for voting on Sunday. The preliminary information we have from people in the field indicates that we would have to expect that many of these churches would not be available on Sunday.

That said, we will have to look at other options. That is why one of our suggestions today is that the committee consider an amendment that would provide greater flexibility regarding the polling place. We think that in some cases, the two polling days could not be held in the same location. This further complicates the information we need to give voters, and could be a problem.

With respect to the safekeeping of ballot boxes, the bill in its current form is such that day 1 would be an advance polling day. At the moment, the deputy returning officers are responsible for safeguarding the ballot boxes on the advance polling day right up till the time the votes are counted. We raised this issue, because the proposed system would mean that the current number of deputy returning officers, 3,000, would increase to approximately 64,000. And they would be responsible for safeguarding the ballot boxes.

The other difficulty in this regard is the following. It could happen that a DRO would not be available on the following day, but because of the hours of work, we would have a little time to find the individual and recover the material. The fact is that Bill C-16 provides that in some locations, the vote will end at 8:00 p.m. and begin at 7:00 a.m. the following morning. This would leave very little time to recover the material, in the case of an incident. For purely operational reasons, we suggest that the committee consider

an amendment that would provide for some flexibility in this regard. This discretion would be exercised in accordance with public instructions given to DROs and returning officers.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Colleagues, we did schedule our witnesses this morning for one hour, but I'm going to ask if it's all right with everybody that we go at least one more round of questioning, which puts the witnesses at 12:15 approximately. Is that okay?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you. I'm assuming, colleagues, with the preparation, we would at least want one more round of questioning.

We will enter our second round. It will be a five-minute round and we'll begin with Monsieur Proulx.

[*Translation*]

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

Thank you, Mr. Mayrand, Ms. Davidson, Mr. Perrault and Mr. Molnar. We always appreciate having you come to meet with us.

Mr. Mayrand, we are talking here about the day preceding the usual voting day. So it would become a second polling day that would be open from A to Z. So rather than having some advance polling days and one election day, we end up with two election days and a few advance polling days, to be held a week or a few days beforehand. That is pretty much what this bill would do.

• (1155)

Mr. Marc Mayrand: I think that is how voters would see it. As I mentioned earlier, day 1 is subject to different rules. The vote begins at noon on the Sunday, stops overnight and continues the next morning. It would involve the same officials, the same electoral list and the same premises.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: I have a question about recruiting election officials. You confirm that a person who works as the DRO on the Sunday could not be the DRO on election day, unless the individual had the ballot box with him for the whole day or rented a vault at the local bank in order to safeguard the ballot box. Otherwise, it would be impossible to ensure the safekeeping of the ballot box.

Do you agree?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Generally speaking, yes, to the extent that I understand your question. The same election officials would be working both days. According to the provisions of the bill as I understand them, these people would be responsible for safeguarding the ballot box overnight. They would take it home with them and would come back with it the next morning.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: That means that you would use the same box on election day as had been used the Sunday before.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Yes.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: These are no longer considered the results of the advance poll. That confirms that we would have two election days, rather than one. The results of the advance polls of all the other days are received separately.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: It is true that votes would be counted at the same time.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: The counting of the votes from the advance polling days will be—

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Of the two days, yes.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: From the Sunday and from election day.

So there would be one long voting day with a few hours off for sleep. That is what it amounts to.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Particularly in some parts of the country.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: I see.

Please remind me whether we have the same staggering of voting hours for advance polls between the east and the west on the other advance polling days.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Not for the other advanced polling days. That is why we are making this suggestion for day 1.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: On the other advance polling days, are the polls open at the same local time? You say that in the Atlantic region, and Quebec and Ontario, the polling stations could open at 11:00 a.m. At what times are they open at the moment?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: At noon.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: Is it noon everywhere?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: The times are the same.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: According to local time?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Yes.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: Thank you.

I agree with what my colleague, Mr. Godin, was saying about the remuneration of workers. He forgot to mention another category of individuals who refuse to work for all sorts of reasons—namely welfare recipients. While I certainly do not wish to judge these people, the fact remains that when we ask these individuals to work, they analyze the consequences and tell us that they will lose some of their benefits. The situation will be even worse, if we add extra days.

However, the problem you have and the one that makes it impossible to include them in the exceptions is the fact that they come under provincial programs, not under the federal EI program. This is something else you should add to your list of complications. The situation is complicated by the fact that the pay these people receive will be taken into account in determining their benefits.

• (1200)

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Proulx, the five minutes is up. If there's a quick question, I'll allow a quick answer.

Mr. Marcel Proulx: It was so interesting.

The Chair: I was enthralled. I almost lost my attention span.

Thank you very much.

We'll move to Mr. Preston.

Again, I'd just remind folks that we are on a five-minute round.

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): This round I'll speak as quickly as I possibly can, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chair, through you to our guests, thank you so much for coming. It's always great to have our Elections Canada friends here.

I just want to start off with a little bit of a preamble related to what Mr. Godin said and what my friend Marcel just said about who we could get to work. These are all personal choices. If someone would like to top up their EI by working a couple of days for Elections Canada, then I'm sure they'll make that choice. As Mr. Proulx said, it's the same thing with someone who is collecting welfare, or whatever it's called in each province.

Certainly it's a personal choice as to whether they take a job with Elections Canada and whether that will top up their income. In every case that I can think of, it would certainly be a top-up. They may be limited out.

The other thing Mr. Godin mentioned was that we're now taking up another day. You're driving people to the polls on a Sunday. Three provinces in this country now do their voting on Sunday. Certainly what this adds is a day of choice. If, in fact, you do not want to vote on the Sunday, all this has done is add a choice. Am I correct? We're not telling you that you can't go on the Monday. It's there.

We talked a bit about the structure of voting and how hard it might be to get.... In a lot of small villages, in rural ridings like mine, the church is where we vote. I don't know of any voting polling station in my riding—I'd have to look across the country, as I'm sure there are some—where we actually vote in the sanctuary. For the most part, it's in a church hall or in the front area, or something to that effect.

I think the voting on Sunday can be accommodated in a room in a church that isn't the sanctuary, where mass may take place. In fact, I suggest to you that in many of my small villages, going to church that day will then give the opportunity to head downstairs and place a vote.

Again, this is about offering choice. You mentioned in the beginning that one of your strategic objectives at Elections Canada is to increase voter turnout and increase access. Do you believe that C-16 does that?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Bill C-16 increases access. There is no doubt in my mind. It provides more opportunities and more convenience for electors to fulfill their civic duty.

Mr. Joe Preston: This is what I hear in my riding too. We're busy. We're seven days a week now. It's not a Monday to Friday situation in our lives any more. We're busy each and every day. With the fact of busy work and family life, giving more choice may in fact allow someone, small business owners or whomever, the opportunity to actually get out and place a vote, whereas otherwise they may not give up some of the income they could make on the day of voting, on a Monday. This gives them an opportunity to actually get out and vote.

Sir, do we in fact have 35 days of voting now anyway? I can head to the elections office in my riding and vote on a special ballot from day 35, can I not?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Yes.

Mr. Joe Preston: We have that now. This is not changing anything. This is adding a personal choice convenience to allow me to vote closer to my home.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Yes, certainly, on the day before polling day.

Mr. Joe Preston: I have one other question.

On the ballot box, you're talking about the security of the ballot box, the containing of ballot boxes. You're suggesting now we're going to combine an advance poll day and an election day into the same box.

How will we know if we're successful on this advance polling day if we have combined the ballots?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Interestingly, without going into all the minutiae of it, there will be the list of electors and the bingo cards, and there are also some pretty detailed procedures as to how you secure the ballots.

Mr. Joe Preston: It will be a pretty full box in a lot of cases, but there is some other way for us to track whether the advance poll has worked for us.

If I might just say at the end, all we're looking at here is an increased choice for voters and an opportunity for people who might, in their busy lives, otherwise not have gotten out to vote. This is a chance to go close to home, specifically in a rural riding where it's a long way from the elections office to their home. At least now there will be two days when the poll is open close to home. Other than that, they still have the same opportunities they ever had of driving into the elections office and voting on a special ballot or driving to the advance polls that are somewhat sprinkled around the riding but not as close to home. In fact, what we're offering with Bill C-16 is access to voters to actually get out and exercise their vote.

• (1205)

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Yes, absolutely.

Mr. Joe Preston: It sounds like a great idea.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Madame Picard, five minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

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

Have you considered increasing the number of advance polls, rather than adding extra days, in order to increase voter turnout? Particularly in remote regions, rather than having just one polling station and rather than adding another day, why not encourage people to go out and vote by establishing more polling stations?

This is a problem. Some people travel quite far in order to vote. We need to take this fact into account. You are saying that it would cost three and a half million dollars to implement this plan. Rather than investing this money in adding one extra day, we could invest it as I suggest. We could also use the money to facilitate voter registration and correct the errors in the Register. Perhaps that would be more appropriate.

What do you think about that?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: At every election, in every riding, we exercise to determine how many advance polling places there will be. In the last election, the number of advance polling places increased by 20%. It depends on all sorts of geographic and demographic factors as well as the availability of staff, of course. However, we are taking the necessary steps to increase the number of polling stations and to ensure that these stations are located in places that are accessible to voters. Of course, this will never be like a full voting day.

Bill C-31, which has been passed, will also make it possible to do more in this regard. We can now use the returning officers a little more to get this preparatory work done. So that should give us a little more flexibility.

As regards the Register, Bill C-31 introduces some amendments that will come into force in December and particularly in March. They will definitely improve the Register and make the list much more reliable for the parties, entities and candidates.

Ms. Pauline Picard: You estimated that it will cost approximately \$3.5 million to implement the bill. However, have you estimated how much it will cost in total for a general election?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Yes, the document clarifies that the implementation costs would be \$3.5 million and that recurring costs, that is costs for each general election, would be about \$34 million, namely about 12% of the election budget.

Ms. Pauline Picard: The increase in the number of polling stations to accommodate advance voting, for instance, will result in more costs, right?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Yes indeed, and that will be reflected in the budgets we prepare for a general election, a budget that we revise on an ongoing basis and which must be adjusted to reflect any changes made.

Ms. Pauline Picard: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

The Chair: We have one minute left if you want. You're good. Thank you very much.

We have five minutes, then, for Mr. Godin.

I have had requests from some colleagues for another round. If members are agreeable to that, we'll do a two-minute round after this one—two minutes, one quick question from each party.

Mr. Godin, you have five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvon Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Mayrand, you have proposed in this scenario for Sunday and Monday—and that is found as the second point on page 7 of your presentation—two different places in special cases.

Have you considered the fact that people may get mixed up and show up at the wrong place? Even Elections Canada sometimes makes mistakes. For example, in my region, the people from Allardville had to vote in Doney, and the people from Doney had to go to Allardville. You can just imagine all the fuss that that created on that day. So we are talking about two different polling stations indicated in a notice. Have you given any thought to what could happen?

• (1210)

Mr. Marc Mayrand: As I mentioned a little bit earlier, we will have to carry out a very solid information and awareness campaign with the electors. This is why I pointed out in my presentation that we needed time to prepare that. This is not the type of thing that you can implement quickly without running the risk of significant mistakes and confusion.

The changes that are proposed in the bill probably require a complete review of the electoral map. We are constantly adding new information to this map and it is becoming saturated. We therefore have to rethink what is for us one of the main tools that they use in order to inform electors of the times and locations where they can vote, and so on and so forth. This is a significant challenge, but I think that we can do this providing that we have enough time to deal with all of the issues at hand.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I do not really see how we can get people to consult their agenda. It is simply going to be confusing. People are going to say that they showed up where they thought they were supposed to go, but that they were not at the right spot. In reality, we are talking about two locations for the same vote.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: First of all, I want to point out that this is not our preferred approach. We would prefer that it always be held at the same place, but we are thinking about possible exceptions that we will have to deal with. We will take action with respect to the information. Furthermore, I dare to hope—but we have not done any analysis on this matter—that these locations will not be far from each other.

Mr. Yvon Godin: In some regions, the church is the only public place. In my riding, Acadie—Bathurst, we no longer set up polling stations in people's houses. We got rid of this practice. Now everything takes place in public, impartial places. We no longer report that one individual or another voted for a given candidate. We must not go backwards. I do not know what we are going to do, but this is the type of concern that I have.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: As I mentioned, slightly more than 2,000 polling stations are located in churches. We have to study each of these locations and determine whether in fact they are available on Sunday, if not we will have to find out what the other options are in each of the ridings.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Imagine the case where Parliament defeats Bill C-16. In order to improve voting—you do have this power, because this has not been voted on—you increase the number. As our friend Mr. Joe Preston said, there are 35 voting days. There are 35 days.

In order to allow people to vote closer to where they live—not everywhere in Canada but in specific locations—we could add advance polling stations that were closer to them.

I do not think that that would require any big changes and it is in your power to do this.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Currently there are 3,000 advance polling stations. I do not think that I could increase this number to 60,000 by means of a simple administrative measure.

Mr. Yvon Godin: No, but I am not suggesting that there be 60,000. Let's forget about Toronto and Montreal because we do not have this type of problem there. I am talking about rural areas, remote areas.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Indeed, but as I was saying earlier, that's what we do at each election. We study each of the ridings, one by one, and we add stations in accordance with the demographic changes in the riding.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Marc Mayrand: But I do not want to create expectations and give people the idea that it's like having a—

Mr. Yvon Godin: No, that is not the same thing.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We have finished that round. We did have some requests for what we might call another rapid-question round, but let's take no longer than two minutes, please.

Mr. McGuinty is first, and then Mr. Lemieux.

• (1215)

Mr. David McGuinty (Ottawa South, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Monsieur Mayrand and guests, thank you for coming.

I have a couple of snap questions. Today you presented to us here a study of *Potential Impacts of Extended Advance Voting on Voter Turnout*. How much did this study cost?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: It was around \$18,000.

Mr. David McGuinty: It was about \$18,000—great.

Do you have confidence in its methodology? Do you have confidence in the authors and their methodology?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Yes, because we did pay out—

Mr. David McGuinty: That's important for us to know. It's good value for money, and you have—

Mr. Marc Mayrand: And I think Mr. Blais is quite reputable in that field.

Mr. David McGuinty: I'm sure he is.

Do you not think, then, as a result of this investment and as a result of the confidence that we probably all place in this report, that we should actually heed its findings?

I mean, I've read this report, and there's not a single conclusion in this report to indicate that what's being proposed here by the government is going to work. In fact, what we see is that it's going to cost \$3.5 million to start this up. It's going to cost \$34 million per election, which is a 12% increase overall in costs per election. I would expect the government to be all over this as a value-for-money proposition, for example, but if you go through this page by page, I have marked at least 20 different locations where this report concludes that this proposal is simply not going to work.

Isn't it possible that the elephant in the room here, for Canadians who are watching these proceedings, is the following: that we're not quite sure why voter turnout is down; that perhaps there are larger questions looming about why voter turnout continues to drop; and that a band-aid solution of bringing in a voting day on a Sunday before the Monday, according to this report, is going to have a negligible effect for \$36 million?

Shouldn't we, as responsible parliamentarians on all sides of the House, actually heed the findings of the evidence presented here before us today?

The Chair: It's a yes or no answer, because we've got two seconds.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Voter turnout is very complex in terms of the factors to analyze that influence electors' participation. I think the conclusion of Mr. Blais is that it is likely to increase participation of electors; however, we can't predict how significant the effect will be. I think I'm paraphrasing him. I believe he suggests that the increase may be somewhat marginal.

The Chair: Thank you.

You have two minutes, please, Monsieur Lemieux.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, CPC): First to comment on that, I think there are many factors, as you said. One of the factors is definitely long lineups and congestion at voting stations, and certainly having a second day would have an impact on that.

I did want to raise one concern I have, which has to do with the integrity of the ballot boxes. I noticed in your presentation, on page 8, you talk about perhaps the polling boxes returning to the deputy returning officer's home. My concern is that ballot box integrity is very important. There's a whole process in place to ensure ballot box integrity, whereby it's verified that the box is empty, scrutineers can verify that it's empty, and then it's taped, the day starts, and it's taped at the end of the day, etc.

I also heard in your presentation that you'd like to see—not in its detail—the advance day just before the election day and the election day being together, and perhaps all ballots going into the same box. I've got a real concern with this idea of the ballot boxes going back to the deputy returning officer's home, particularly how it looks to the eyes of Canadians. There are always reports and rumours about things that happen on election day, and certainly in the public's perception, these being in people's homes is a huge cause for concern.

I'm wondering if you have other practical solutions. I'm thinking of one in which you have two separate ballot boxes. You have a ballot box for this advance day, and it's treated like an advance poll

ballot box: it's taped, it's sealed, and it goes back to Elections Canada. On election day you've got your election day ballot box at the same poll, but it's a separate box; it goes through a separate verification process, etc. I wonder if you could comment on that.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: It is something that would have to be considered. Currently our understanding of Bill C-16 is that it's the same ballot box for day one and polling day. It's the DROs who take those boxes overnight. We have put forward some suggestions providing some flexibility to ensure the safety and the keeping of those boxes overnight.

Again, if we were to have separate boxes, it might address part of the problem. I'm not sure it would be the full solution. It might also have an impact on counting the results. It might add delays in counting the results if you had two boxes. Anyway, it is something that would need to be probed in much more detail.

• (1220)

The Chair: Thank you.

Again, we're having difficulty staying in the two minutes.

You have two minutes, Mr. Paquette.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Paquette: You mentioned that there were 2,000 polling stations in churches. Are these located throughout Canada or are they concentrated in conservative ridings? Further to Mr. Preston's comments, I believe this question is valid.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: This is the situation more or less throughout Canada. We see this more in less urban regions. Churches are the third most common type of station. The most common polling station is the community centre and the second most common is a teaching or educational facility. Churches are the third most common. The first two groups each represent a bit more than 25% of all polling places. Places of worship represent 11% of the country's polling stations.

Mr. Pierre Paquette: You are talking about initial costs of \$3.5 million. What are these initial costs?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Without getting into too much detail, most of the expense comes from the computer systems. They have to be redeveloped and, of course, tested.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Godin, one minute, of course.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvon Godin: So, the \$34 million would cover the entire changeover, would it not?

Mr. Marc Mayrand: No, the \$34 million would cover what I call recurrent costs. In other words, the \$34 million would basically be used to pay electoral workers.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I see, but that is for the changeover. The \$3.5 million is for the computer systems, but in total, every election would cost \$34 million more, because there would be an additional day.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: That is for every election.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I see, thank you.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: Actually, there would be two more days. You need to remember that. The bill provides for two days of early voting: the first day, which we have focused on heavily today, but also the previous Sunday, which is a regular advance polling day.

Mr. Yvon Godin: I am just trying to get a handle on this. There is the regular election day, on the scheduled date, and the Sunday is added.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: A Sunday is added, and there are three advance voting days from the previous week. A fourth day is added to the weekend, and that is the Sunday. So there would be four consecutive days of regular advance voting, based on the rules as we understand them, and also a day on the eve of polling day where people would be able to vote at any of the polling stations nationwide.

Mr. Yvon Godin: So the \$34 million covers that additional day.

Mr. Marc Mayrand: That is for the entire bill. It would cover all the provisions of the bill, at every election, and the costs associated with this.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, colleagues, but I'd especially like to thank our witnesses, not only for coming on short notice, but for agreeing to stay. I'm sure all committee members appreciate the added answers we had as a result of this second round.

Thank you very much. We very much appreciate the opportunity to meet with you.

Colleagues, we're going to suspend for one minute so we can get our witnesses out and the next group of witnesses in. So we will suspend the meeting for one minute.

- _____ (Pause) _____
-
- (1225)

The Chair: Colleagues, let's begin with our second set of witnesses today.

I will open the floor so the witnesses can introduce themselves, and then we will begin our round of questioning.

If we could, let's keep opening comments to maybe less than two minutes, if that's fair.

Mr. Mortimer, please introduce yourself, and then we will....

Mr. Harry Mortimer (Director, Regulatory Compliance and Reporting, Liberal Party of Canada): Good afternoon.

My name is Harry Mortimer. I am with the Liberal Party of Canada. I'm the director of regulatory compliance and reporting. I appreciate having been invited here to share our views on this bill. I have a short prepared statement, and I'll be happy to take questions after.

[Translation]

Mr. Éric Hébert-Daly (Federal Secretary, New Democratic Party): My name is Éric Hébert-Daly. I am the federal secretary of the New Democratic Party of Canada. We know each other because I

have appeared regularly before your committee. So as far as introductions go, that will suffice.

[English]

The Chair: We did invite representatives from the four parties. I believe we invited representatives from the Green Party as well. Unfortunately, we have no representatives from the Conservatives or the Bloc. However, we did receive a statement, a letter, which you have, from a representative of the Conservative Party of Canada. That's been circulated.

We'll begin with an opening statement from our witnesses who are here, and then we will start with a five-minute round. That is what I'm suggesting, unless there are objections.

Mr. Mortimer, please, your opening comments.

Mr. Harry Mortimer: Thank you.

I would like to say that the Liberal Party fully supports all efforts to increase voter participation. We strongly believe that all Canadians should have the opportunity to participate in the electoral process equally.

Having said that, we do have some concerns that I will highlight for you today in general terms, and I will be happy to expand on those when asked.

Our concerns are threefold. One, this government has done no consultations or studies to show that this bill will actually increase voter participation. It appears that this is yet another piecemeal attempt at electoral reform, a move done without consultation or adequate study. Two, we have logistical concerns over the fact that this bill effectively creates two election days. Three, we have specific concerns regarding subclause 176.6(5), and subparagraph 167.2(a) (ii).

As you know, this bill will amend the Canada Elections Act to add two additional advance polling days for national elections. This effectively creates a two-day election. Our main concern is that election days are resource-intensive for both Elections Canada and political campaigns. Unless we know whether or not these measures will increase voter participation, it is difficult to justify the added time, expense, and logistical challenges of a second full day of voting. Keep in mind that in the last election there were 62,000 polling stations on election day, requiring the attendance of over 124,000 deputy returning officers and poll clerks.

The value of increased participation in the electoral process may be priceless, but before jumping off this cliff, it might be helpful to have some hard evidence that all of this will make a substantial difference. We would urge the committee to undertake such a study, and we ask the government to consider implementing this on a trial basis for the pending by-elections prior to rolling it out on a national level.

In addition, this bill may have logistical consequences that the government has either ignored or failed to address. For example, an ordinary advance polling station located in a church would be required to be open on a Sunday, and all 62,000-plus polling stations would need to be situated in locations that were available not merely for a day on Monday but on the consecutive Sunday and Monday. The committee would be well advised to study these issues carefully, as they would have unintended consequences.

We also have specific concerns with two subclauses of the bill. Subclause 176.6(5) provides that the poll clerk is to give the candidate's representatives a list of who voted upon closing of the advanced polls. Our concern is that if this list is only distributed to candidates' agents in this way, campaigns can only know who voted if they have a scrutineer available at every polling station at closing time. This is logistically unfeasible.

We propose a revision that requires each returning officer to provide each candidate with a copy of the list of who has voted no later than 11 p.m. on the day of any advance poll.

Finally, we recommend that subparagraph 167.2(a)(ii) be deleted, as it appears to be redundant in light of clause 176.1.

To summarize, while we are supportive of the bill, I would advise the committee to carefully study the impacts of the bill, as it appears that the government has not done so.

I appreciate having been invited to share our thoughts on this matter and will be happy to field any questions you may have.

• (1230)

The Chair: *Merci.*

Monsieur Hébert-Daly.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Éric Hébert-Daly: Obviously, the New Democratic Party of Canada will support all efforts to encourage greater voter turnout. This has always been an issue of the utmost importance for our party.

However, just like my colleague from the Liberal Party, we share Elections Canada's concerns, which were mentioned by Mr. Mayrand. We are concerned, for example, that ballot boxes may be moved about, by the time it's going to take to implement the proposed provisions, and about the cost involved. We are looking at a 12 % increase in the general election budget. There was consideration of the 35 days of polling, but at the end of the day, it is 30 days in total instead.

In any event, the current Elections Act provides for several polling possibilities. This is why the money should perhaps be used on awareness and to encourage people to use the other existing methods and polling days including the advance polling ballot and special ballots which may be sent at any point throughout the campaign right up to the Tuesday before polling day.

We also are concerned about staff recruitment. I'm not necessarily referring to recruiting people, because I think it will actually be easier to find people to work on Sunday than on Monday. Rather, the problem is with training. If the election staff all have different schedules, there may have to be ongoing training of a large number of people throughout the whole process.

On several occasions throughout any given polling day, local identification of people is a problem. Either people are poorly trained, or they've been trained but have their own personal spin on what they're supposed to do on polling day. The problem only gets bigger when different people turn up to do the same job.

Our job, as a political party, is to get people out to vote, and this is always going to be our goal. But the fact remains that some people are always going to be a little upset about getting calls on a Sunday morning or having to answer the door when people come and try and get them out to vote. As a political party, we're going to have to be very careful about that. So, with that in mind, I encourage you to not necessarily see Sunday as an ordinary polling day.

In closing, I think that Bill C-31, which was enacted during the last parliamentary session, could have included a focus on voter turnout. Had this been done, now that the act has been passed, we wouldn't be facing so many problems today.

Thank you.

• (1235)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll start our first five-minute round.

Madam Redman, please.

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

I would like to thank both of you for coming because I think you bring a very important perspective. It's interesting that a lot of your concerns in your briefs very much reflect some of the concerns we heard from the Chief Electoral Officer.

Clearly there's an interest in getting more Canadians involved in the process. I'm sure that every political party, ours included, has looked at the youth not coming out and participating at the levels we'd like to see.

Mr. Hébert-Daly, you talked about the mail-in vote. I'm just wondering if either of you, from a party perspective, have had discussions amongst the grassroots, or maybe at the party bureaucratic level, about looking at e-voting or other methods of voting other than these additional days. If the intent of this piece of legislation is to increase voter turnout, it strikes me that this is a bit like giving the same message, either repeating it or yelling it louder, rather than finding another method of reaching potential voters.

I wonder if either of you could comment on any kind of investigation you've done into alternative methods of engaging electors, especially young people.

Mr. Éric Hébert-Daly: I can say that in 2003 the federal NDP held an electronic ballot for the selection of our leader. It was the first time that kind of voting process had taken place in Canada, and it was a very educational process for us, and actually one that gave us a tremendous amount of confidence in a lot of the options that are available around e-voting. It would require an entire other study on the part of this committee for that kind of work to be done, but I do think we might be able to appeal to that younger demographic that you're talking about in a way that we currently don't, and I think that could definitely be something worth investigating. It's something we've discussed within the party and certainly something that there is an openness within our party to consider.

Mr. Harry Mortimer: In short, the work our party has done I think has been very much on a smaller scope and wouldn't have the information value that would apply to a full election, in order to really apply in this case.

The Chair: Thank you.

Next on my list I have Mr. Godin, for five minutes, please.

[Translation]

Mr. Yvon Godin: My question is for Mr. Hébert-Daly.

Earlier, you said the money would perhaps be better spent if Elections Canada went on a publicity blitz, increased awareness, and gave people more information and training, etc.

I think I'd like to tackle another issue this morning. I'm referring to the problem concerning people's names on the electoral list. In times gone by, they used to send someone from house to house, and that's how the list was drawn up. I remember Mr. Kingsley was against that. He wanted to do away with that practice and use the lists provided by provinces.

For example, I can tell you that it's my belief that on the Elections Canada lists, there are the names of people who are deceased. They've appeared in my data base six times, and I think everybody is in the same boat.

The Elections Canada list is inadequate. It's time to use the \$32 million to employ people to go to people's homes just before the election, to find out if they actually live there, and to update the list. It would also encourage people to turn out and vote.

I'd like to hear what you have to say about this.

Mr. Éric Hébert-Daly: In fact, voter turnout is a topic which is ripe for discussion. As it turns out, if there are several deceased persons on a list, or people who no longer live at the stated address, or whatever the case may be, when it comes time to calculate the voter turnout percentage, the figures are skewed as a result. So care needs to be taken. Indeed, there does need to be an investment in this.

The NDP has been calling for, not necessarily a complete census, but a census targeting areas where there have been a lot of relocations, problems, seniors, or deceased persons. There are geographical regions that can be singled out with a view to a highly-targeted review. It would be a good investment and would ensure that the electoral list is accurate for the purposes of determining voter turnout.

• (1240)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much, colleagues.

We are actually going to move to our second round right now, and we'll start with Mr. Reid. We'll stay with five minutes.

I'm sorry, we didn't see your hand up for the first round. So we're on the second round, it's still five minutes, and I was paying attention.

Mr. Reid.

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

Thank you to our witnesses for coming here. We're glad you came.

I think, Mr. Hébert-Daly, you've been here before. So thank you. It's always a pleasure to see you.

I'm not sure, Mr. Mortimer, if we met before, but I very much enjoyed your presentation, and actually the questions I have are directed to you because you give some interesting details that I thought were worth mentioning.

The first one is your suggestion of using the legislation on a trial basis. By-election turnouts are, of course, notoriously bad, and anything we can do to boost them presumably would be beneficial. So it's not a bad idea. I guess the concern I have is that we've just heard Elections Canada mentioning they would have some logistical problems in pulling this together within the limited timeframe.

Unfortunately, until you asked your question, I hadn't thought of asking this to the Chief Electoral Officer, but the question is, do you think there'd be a problem, logistically, with preparing by-elections in a short period of time, or do you think those logistical issues would be less likely to be a problem in terms of the advance time that's necessary, whether they could be done perhaps at a more advanced rate than the pace that Elections Canada is proposing for dealing with a general election?

Then I have a second question, and if you can answer the first one, I'll get back to you on it. It's a more specific thing.

Mr. Harry Mortimer: Thank you.

I can't speak for Elections Canada, of course. Obviously they're addressing the concern with computer programming and things, which will have time requirements. But certainly, part of his comment was about the quantity of the logistics and the number of locations. To me it would appear quite likely that they would be able to address this smaller by-election issue in a shorter timeframe, because it's only a few upcoming by-elections we're facing.

Mr. Scott Reid: All right. Thank you.

A second thing you mentioned specifically—and unfortunately you were trying to comply with our very tight constraints—is that part of proposed section 167.2 is redundant and dealt with elsewhere.

What was the exact redundancy you were referring to?

Mr. Harry Mortimer: Basically, in one part of the act it's saying that it's an election day and the other element of it is repeating the same information in the requirements.

Mr. Scott Reid: So it was one of the specific subsections of 167?

Mr. Harry Mortimer: Oh, I'm sorry, it's proposed subparagraph 167.2(a)(ii).

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay. And what is that repeating?

Mr. Harry Mortimer: Proposed subsection 176.1.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Paquette, you have five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Paquette: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you for your testimony. Here's my first question. A little earlier, the Chief Electoral Officer made a presentation. He mentioned there were 64,000 polling stations and that half of the names required to fill the electoral officer positions were provided by political parties, and that's a lot of people. Given this new constraint, that is being required to work two days in a row at a polling station, do you think you'll be able to increase and maintain staff levels, in other words the names that you'll be able to transfer? If half the staff come from political parties and if the political parties consider that it's going to cause some recruitment problems, it may also lead to recruitment problems for the Chief Electoral Officer. And at the end of the day, implementing a second polling day would not be possible. I'd like to hear your assessment of this issue.

Mr. Éric Hébert-Daly: Regarding the number of employees, perhaps I am not all that worried, as I said, because people who want to make both ends meet will often accept working on Sundays, whereas they may not accept to work on Mondays. I think that it might not be all that difficult.

Regarding volunteers, which means being able to provide a team for two consecutive election days, I feel more worried. However, this is a more general kind of problem; we are talking about volunteer work in a broader sense. I think that all political parties and all non-profit organizations have to deal with this. Given that Sunday is traditionally a day of rest, even if it is not for religious reasons, I think that it could cause a problem because of family obligations. Nevertheless, we need many people who are not employees of Elections Canada. We also need volunteers in other sectors for running the electoral machinery on Sundays. Clearly, we will have to discuss the scope of this problem.

• (1245)

Mr. Pierre Paquette: Mr. Mortimer, have you any comments regarding this matter?

[*English*]

Mr. Harry Mortimer: Certainly, as a national party, we have a grand diversity of ridings with many different issues, and I think they'll all express concern about being able to get enough volunteers to cover all of the requirements for the poll. It's always a challenge for everybody, and it will be a concern if we move to more voting days.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Paquette: In a general way, the Chief Electoral Officer mentioned many challenges in his presentation, but he gave few solutions. The Chief Electoral Officer said that if the legislation was

adopted, he would have to have some studies done before being able to implement the logistics required by the bill.

Do you not think that we are putting the cart before the horse? If our questions have not been answered, before adopting such legislation, should we not make sure that Elections Canada is able to provide the logistics required for implementing it? I am putting this question to both of you.

Mr. Éric Hébert-Daly: I entirely agree.

[*English*]

Mr. Harry Mortimer: Absolutely.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Paquette: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Monsieur Godin, did you want in on this round?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvon Godin: No, I thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: No? Thank you very much.

We're going to move to our third round, then, which is only going to be three minutes.

Mr. Preston is on the list.

Mr. Preston, three minutes, please.

Mr. Joe Preston: Thank you very much.

We've all said at one point or another that we want to increase voter turnout. We're willing to do anything we can to do so, or at least anything within reason. Then the resistance-to-change animal comes out in us all and says yes, but not if it means changing things.

We say that the definition of insanity is doing the same things over and over and expecting a different outcome. I don't think we can stay where we are and expect to get a greater voter turnout. It may only be anecdotal. We've asked for studies. We've said to study it some more. Well, we have a study here, and the Chief Electoral Officer says that the study itself can only be a guide towards where we might get, because until we do it, we won't know whether in fact we will change it or not.

We're all, in our own ridings, asking people why they didn't get out to vote. We are told that it's a time and place thing. They don't have the time. They're busy working. They're trying to spend time with their families.

We're going to give them the option of voting on a Sunday if they want, and if they don't, they can go on Monday or they can go over to Elections Canada. In the case of a large rural riding, it's not easy to get to the Elections Canada office and do a special ballot, even though it's available almost every day. So we're offering choices, and that's truly what this is about. It's about us agreeing that unless we step forward, we'll never get over that hump of declining voter turnout.

I also want to address very quickly that we continue to say that one of the other problems is a voters list that is just not accurate. We all agree that this is the case, and many of us spend a great deal of time trying to look at our voters lists. I think we picture this panacea of the old days when we used to go door to door and get an accurate voters list, and then they would post it on a telephone pole at the end of the street and you would be able to check it off. I'm not certain, under today's privacy rules, that this is truly what we want to do from an enumeration point of view. For those of you who are like me and do door-to-door, we are finding that very few people are at home anyway, so a door-to-door enumeration is maybe a panacea from the 50s that we think is a correction that's out there.

I'd like your comments on that enumeration thing, what we could do to fix that, and then certainly on why we are being resistant to opening up more opportunities for people to get out to vote.

Mr. Harry Mortimer: Our concern is not the issue of opening up more opportunities. It's the cost-benefit of it, and that's part of the reality we're looking at. Are we able to get that?

• (1250)

Mr. Éric Hébert-Daly: There is no question that there need to be changes to allow people to vote, and I don't actually believe that this particular change is that radical, to be quite honest with you. But it's not the radical nature that upsets me—and as a New Democrat, that shouldn't surprise you. I think it's more a question of what can be effective. The question is whether we have properly used the methods we have now at our disposal and advertised them properly. That, to me, is the piece, which we have at our disposal and doesn't require legislative change, that we haven't quite explored yet.

The Chair: Thank you.

That ends that round, and I have been looking at members who may have another question. There is a question, so with everybody's permission, we will try to get another round in.

You have two minutes this time, Mr. Reid, please.

Mr. Scott Reid: I've been chatting, Mr. Mortimer, with our researcher, and I think maybe your interpretation of subparagraph 167(2)(a)(ii) is incorrect. You have said that it replicates and is an unnecessary repetition of something that comes up in subsection 176(1). Subsection 176(1) states that "Every polling station established for polling day shall be open as an advance polling station on the day before polling day". But subparagraph 167(2)(a)(ii) requires that the returning officer shall give notice in a prescribed form that sets out certain information, and one piece of information is "the name, if any, and the number of each of the polling divisions established for the day before polling day".

I think those are two different things. One is saying that the station shall be open, and the second one is saying that the officer shall

place a notice out for the public stating that the station is open. You can correct me if I've misinterpreted this, but I think, for that reason, that those actually are two different functions that need to be stated separately. Am I incorrect in that?

Mr. Harry Mortimer: I think the issue is more that day one voting is similar to the polling day and the information that is being put out there is the same. They're having that day one polling day and it's the same as voting day, and that would be the information that would be put out, rather than the information that's separate. In light of some of the discussions earlier today, this may not be as relevant.

We didn't think the requirement for the information is there for the returning officer to post, if they're only saying it's another polling day similar to voting day.

Mr. Scott Reid: Well, you'd want to let people know that that's the case, that all polling stations are open for this particular advance poll. On some voting days only certain polls are open. On one of the advance poll days, all the stations are open. Presumably, that would be the information that one is required to state. I guess you could word it differently, but I don't think it's actually a redundancy per se. If you took this out, you'd have to put it in the law in some other form, I suspect.

Mr. Harry Mortimer: Individuals recognizing it as the same polling and the same day.

Mr. Scott Reid: That's right. Thank you.

• (1255)

The Chair: Everybody's good. Thank you, colleagues. Thank you very much. And a special thanks to our witnesses for coming out today and being prepared for a plethora of questions. We certainly appreciate that.

Colleagues, I want to clarify that in checking with the clerk, I confirm that the Green Party was not actually extended a formal invitation. I recall one of the members of the Bloc made a note that that would be a good idea. However, it did not end up on the Bloc's list of requested witnesses, and as such a formal invitation was not made.

If it's the wish of the committee, I have a couple of suggestions based on some conversations with members. We have had the Bloc request, perhaps, that the invitation be extended again to the Bloc representatives. If that's the wish of the committee, we can do that. We can invite the Green Party. We can also extend the wish to the Conservative Party of Canada as well, in that framework.

The other suggestion that has been brought to me is that we offer an invitation to the authors of the study we reviewed. In fact, one of the authors has been invited already. They're on the list to be invited. So if it's the wish of the committee...I just want some direction. Do we extend the invitation at this point, re-extend the invitation to the Bloc and the Conservative Party and include the Green Party? Is that something the committee wants me to do?

All right. I'm seeing you're okay with that. We'll instruct the clerks to do exactly that.

Secondly, we have on the witness list already one of the researchers.

A voice: We have two.

The Chair: Do we want to invite...we have two? We have two of the three. Shall we invite the third researcher? Let's do that too.

Thank you very much, colleagues. That solves two problems. Please, before you go, I have two other things.

You have received, and you will receive again, a letter from me regarding the ethics commissioner's invitation to show up at one of the meetings for perhaps the final 20 minutes, simply to introduce herself and become familiar with members of the committee. I'll send that out. We don't need to make a decision on that today.

We've had the same offer from Monsieur Mayrand for the committee to actually go over to Elections Canada and visit the facilities and meet some of the folks.

I'll send you a letter out regarding those two matters. Give that your attention, and we'll make a decision on those two at one of the future meetings.

At the next meeting, colleagues, we're hoping to get a group of witnesses here. That will be next Tuesday, and it will be...we're not sure, but it will be a full list in panel style; one hour followed by a second hour. With that, I think we're finished with potential business.

Monsieur Godin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Chairman, I would like to clarify something, because just now, there was some confusion. When we meet witnesses, as we did today, I think that we should follow an established list for deciding who puts the questions. I think that we have already drawn up a list to avoid confusion. Otherwise, it goes to whoever is the first to raise their hand. A party could well raise a hand three times and get the floor three times.

To avoid confusion, we must make sure that we alternate. It is not as if we were at a simple ordinary meeting for discussing future work and things like that amongst ourselves. That will make things easier for everyone, especially when we hear witnesses. This is my recommendation.

[*English*]

The Chair: I appreciate the suggestion. Just for clarification, we do follow the list. I look around, though, to see which members want to speak first. I do make it a point to try to get eye contact with just

about every member or a representative of the party when there is no one on the list.

So what happened today was, of course, we were going through the usual procedure, and since there weren't certain parties on the list, because I did not see any hands go up, I just went to another round, and we ultimately ended up in the same....

But I appreciate your comments and we will follow the list. If there are no members who wish to speak or ask questions, we will just move on.

As I see no further business, Madam Redman, please.

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

I recognize we have legislation before us, and this is of great interest, and I'm fully in support of hearing from witnesses. I would also recognize that we have a motion before us that had an amendment that was on the floor at our last meeting, and perhaps this is an issue that the steering committee could take up. But I know certainly there have been committees that put on extra meeting times or have dealt with an issue on a Tuesday, for instance, and have dealt with the legislation on a Thursday, and there would be some division so that we could move forward. We have been dealing with that other issue since August and we have not moved forward with it, so I would respectfully request that some accommodation be made in our time schedule for that.

The Chair: What I could suggest, as chair, is, as agreed by all members, we will move forward on the legislation, but I won't make a decision for the committee. It's my suggestion we stick with legislation; however, I'm not opposed to meeting with the steering committee.

I'm seeing some nods that the steering committee would be okay with a meeting, and perhaps we could set up additional meetings. Either way, we can get our work done. But I'm open to that, and I'll just make that mention.

While some of the members of the steering committee are here, you can contact me and we can set something up, if that's acceptable.

Thank you.

No further business?

Thank you, colleagues.

The meeting is adjourned.

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