



House of Commons
CANADA

Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

PROC • NUMBER 005 • 2nd SESSION • 39th PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Tuesday, November 20, 2007

—
Chair

Mr. Gary Goodyear

Also available on the Parliament of Canada Web Site at the following address:

<http://www.parl.gc.ca>

Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

Tuesday, November 20, 2007

•(1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Gary Goodyear (Cambridge, CPC)): Colleagues, let's bring this meeting to order. We do have a number of witnesses to go through today, who have joined us and will be joining us, so I don't want to get too far behind.

First, I want to thank everybody for coming out this morning. As you well know, pursuant to the committee's order of reference of Thursday, November 7, 2007, the committee is here to study Bill C-16, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act (expanded voting opportunities) and to make a consequential amendment to the Referendum Act.

Members, I want to remind everybody that we are in a larger room today still. At the request of some members, we are still going to have a larger room as a result of the number of folks who do tend to join us, both staff and observers, as well as the number of witnesses we're going through during our study.

Members, the meeting is still being televised. At the end of this meeting we have some housekeeping duties to go through, so I'm going to reserve about 15 minutes at the end to talk about some things, including the budget of this committee, the fact that the Ethics Commissioner wants to come informally to meet the committee. I want to have some discussions with members about when we should do that, and some other things that we'll talk about at the end of the meeting. One of them will be whether we continue to televise these meetings. It's entirely up to members, and I will bend to the will of the committee.

As we begin, we have three witnesses with us this morning, and I do want to thank them for coming out. It's always a pleasure, and it's actually quite an honour for members of the community to come forward, for parliamentarians to ask questions and get a full and broad visual, I suppose, or a thought process going on the bills at hand.

Colleagues, we have with us Mr. McDonald from the Baptist General Conference of Canada, Mr. Cryer from the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, and Reverend Roberts from the United Church of Canada.

First, I would like to welcome the witnesses again. I will offer you 10 minutes, about two to three minutes each, to introduce yourselves, and if you have an opening statement, feel free to go forward with that. You don't have to do that, but it's entirely up to you.

Colleagues, I think we'll continue after that with our usual rounds of questioning. I believe we can start with a seven-minute round for the first one. We'll see how things go. We'll have these witnesses with us only for one hour, so you can use your time to get as many questions in and answers as you deem fit.

Perhaps we can start with Mr. McDonald. Please introduce yourself, and perhaps you have an opening statement.

Thank you.

Mr. Jamey McDonald (Executive Director, Baptist General Conference of Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My name is Jamey McDonald, and I apologize at the outset because I do not have a written submission to go before you. I have a written submission in front of me, but the late invitation came to me at the latter part of last week. *Je parle français, mais* I can't write in French. So I do not have a written presentation. But I will read something to you.

Thank you very much. I consider it a real privilege to be able to speak with you this morning. I am a passionate believer in this grand experiment called Canada. I travel the world in my line of work, and I admire all cultures, but every time I return home to Canada, I thank God for what we have here. It is truly the best country in the world.

I also respect very much what you are trying to do in bringing leadership and governance to this great country. Thank you. It's not easy, is it? As good as Canada is, we can always do better. So thank you for doing your best to bring better to Canada.

I want to address your proposal suggested through Bill C-16, and especially your suggestion to allow advance polls to occur on Sundays before our election dates.

Who am I? Number one, I am the executive director of the Baptist General Conference of Canada. According to the latest census data, Baptists make up about 2% of the Canadian population. That's perhaps 750,000 adults. There are five major Baptist groups in Canada. I speak for one of them. A good number of our present members of Parliament would call a Baptist church their home base. Tommy Douglas was a Baptist minister before stepping into political life.

Historically, Baptists have always heeded to the separation of church and state, asking that though we may influence each other, we shall not dictate to each other. Today is not different. My comments today as a Baptist minister are not designed to dictate to this group. I merely offer observations and opinions.

Second, you need to understand me. I am also a church attender. Recent data suggests that over 30% of Canada still attends church on a regular basis, at least monthly if not weekly. This suggests that close to 11 million Canadians would still identify themselves as churchgoers, and by implication, 70% would not.

This is my point. I realize that the intent of this bill is to encourage more Canadians to participate in their democratic right to vote, but I'm of the opinion that opening polls on a Sunday would not in fact do so and may in fact have a deleterious effect.

I would ask you to consider the wisdom of opening advance polls on Sundays. Why? There are three reasons. First is what I call the irritation factor. Not all Canadians attend church on Sundays, but 30% do, and I wonder if bringing voting to that day would not irritate them, or at least make the government vulnerable to irritating a fairly large segment of our population.

Second is what I call the disenfranchisement factor. Not all Canadians meet in church buildings for their Sunday services. About 5% of our congregations, the ones I am overseeing, use schools, community halls, and public places on a rental basis. In most cases these congregations are new Canadians; they're new to Canada. They're first-generation Canadians, and they struggle to have the financial resources to afford their own church properties. Thus, they rent public facilities. If these public locations are also used for advance polls, my thoughts are that the election will trump their church service, and at least some worshippers will be disenfranchised, even if only for a Sunday or two.

Third, I raise the question of what I call the non-effectiveness factor. At present, eligible Canadians participate in the voting process perhaps at the 50 to 60 percentile, if days are good; if you live in Saskatchewan, it's 70.

We have advance poll dates well publicized. We even have legislation in place that mandates that employers allow their employees a minimum of four hours of available time in order to vote before public polls close. I'm not persuaded that low voter turnout is because of an inability to get to an advance poll or even to an election day station. I wonder if the apathy is deeper rooted.

In conclusion, may I encourage this committee to show wisdom and not alter advance polling to include Sundays around election day. Please keep thinking, but go longer and harder in your thought processes.

• (1110)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go to Mr. Cryer, please.

Mr. Doug Cryer (Director, Public Policy, Evangelical Fellowship of Canada): I am Doug Cryer. I am the director of public policy for the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada.

The EFC is a national organization that has affiliate denominations—40 different denominations—and over 100 different ministry organizations as well as about 40 institutes of higher Christian education.

The EFC encourages active civic engagement and recognizes that we all benefit when Canadian citizens exercise their right and their

duty to vote. Providing more voting opportunities might be helpful to increase voter turnout. However, the proposal made in Bill C-16 to set up advance polls on two Sundays before the federal election day will have a significant impact on Christians whose day of worship is Sunday. The question we are asking is, will churches be competing with federal elections on Sundays? Or we could ask why they should intrude on religious observance days at all.

The addition of the advance poll on the Sunday before the election is the most problematic, because rather than it being a typical advance poll with limited voting stations, every polling station will be open just as it would be on an election day. In a recent internal poll that we conducted within the EFC, we asked whether people agreed that there should be an advance poll with all polling stations open on the day before a Monday election. Four hundred and ten people responded out of 1,300, and 84% of them said no, that they were not in favour of this proposal. This response indicates that there could be widespread disapproval of this initiative, and rather than strengthening the voting process, it would run the risk of turning more people away.

Many Christians still count Sundays as their Sabbath day of rest and a day dedicated to family. Some latest statistics, as already mentioned, demonstrated that 32% of Canadians, or 11 million people, attend worship at least monthly. Christians, as an identifiable minority in Canada with already established habits and practices on Sundays, are clearly the most affected by these proposed advanced polls.

The proposed change also means that churches will be in competition with Elections Canada for rental space, a point already made by Mr. McDonald. Churches that host polling stations in their church halls will be affected, unless the polls are moved elsewhere, and in countless growing communities across Canada it is not unusual for a church to rent space in local school gymnasiums or in community halls—the same places where Elections Canada will be vying to rent space for their polling stations. Other activities are often displaced to accommodate polling stations on election days.

Should Christians bear an undue burden in their accommodation of these proposed changes where their regularly established worship arrangements may be disrupted? There are many questions as to how to encourage more people to vote. Ultimately, however, the government should not infringe on the worship practices of a substantial religious community when it is not essential to do so.

I believe you have our three recommendations that we handed out to you regarding this bill.

Thank you.

• (1115)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Cryer.

Reverend Roberts, please.

Rev. Lillian Roberts (Reverend, Ottawa Presbytery, The United Church of Canada): I'm Reverend Lillian Roberts. I'm here representing the United Church of Canada. I am a staff person for Ottawa Presbytery.

The United Church of Canada is the largest Protestant denomination in our country. The concerns that I bring before you this morning are practical in nature, but they do also speak to the relationship and the connection that individual participants in the faith community are able to make with their civic understandings and responsibilities.

Many of our church buildings throughout the country do in fact serve as polling stations both on the day of election and on the days of advance polls. This is the case as often our church buildings are well known in the community and are physically accessible.

The concern I want to raise regarding the proposed changes in legislation arise from the implications of the bill on the availability and ability of churches to share in the civic process. The proposed changes will now stipulate that all polling stations open on polling day will also be open on the last day of advance polls, which is the Sunday immediately before the election. The provision is that the advance polls will be open from noon until 8 p.m. While this may be possible in some United churches, it will be difficult for others to clear the space for polling stations on a Sunday morning by noon. The result will be that these congregations will therefore find themselves ineligible for use as a regular polling station.

Certainly this will have a direct effect on some churches that have experienced a welcome source of rental income that comes from participating, but of more concern is the loss of participation in the civic process. Many United Church congregations are organizers of all-candidates forums, and they encourage their members and adherents to participate and take seriously their right and responsibility to be a part of the democratic process. The physical location of local polling stations in our churches helps us to strengthen the message and to encourage participation.

For a number of years, I served in a suburban congregation here in the city, Rideau Park United Church on Alta Vista Drive, which is a regular polling station for the elections, and indeed, the hosting of election day prompted a greater sense of involvement in the electoral process.

It appears to me that a couple of options could be considered. The first is the severing of the requirement that the regular polling stations be in the same location as the advance polls on the day before the election. The other option is to adjust the hours even by one hour. A 1 p.m. start would allow for more congregations to be able to transition into making their space available.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Reverend.

Colleagues, we're going to start our first round of questioning. It will be seven minutes long. I'm looking for hands to go up.

Madame Robillard, you're up first. You have seven minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Lucienne Robillard (Westmount—Ville-Marie, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

To begin with, I would like to thank our guests for appearing before the committee today. If I understood you correctly, you all seem to be of the same opinion and that is that having two additional polling days would have a major impact on churchgoers.

And yet, when the minister appeared before us and outlined his bill, he made particular mention of the fact that currently there are three provinces that have Sunday as a polling day. I can remember him referring to Manitoba and Saskatchewan. Quebec does not use Sunday as a polling day, but Sunday is used for advanced polling which takes place the week prior to election.

So I would ask each of you the following question: if you have any experience of polling in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and perhaps Quebec, what is the impact of voting on Sundays?

• (1120)

[*English*]

The Chair: Madam Robillard, is that for any particular witness?

Hon. Lucienne Robillard: For each one.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. McDonald, you're first.

Mr. Jamey McDonald: In the Baptist Church of Canada we say to our people that they are free to exercise their conscience, and so on Sundays they have a choice of engaging or not engaging. We have encouraged our people to use the Sunday as a day of rest and worship, saying you have options to go on other days. So make your choices, but understand that Sunday is not a favourable day to us. Our people are free to make choices, but we advise them to use other days.

So it has not destroyed us, but we have encouraged them to use other days.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Lucienne Robillard: In provinces where there is Sunday polling, do people turn out to vote?

[*English*]

Mr. Jamey McDonald: On Sundays?

[Translation]

Hon. Lucienne Robillard: Yes, in Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

[English]

Mr. Jamey McDonald: I cannot comment on that. I don't know that answer, my friend.

Hon. Lucienne Robillard: You don't know, okay.

Mr. Doug Cryer: I can answer the question indirectly by the poll that I just mentioned to you that we conducted on our members. It had 84% of them disagreeing to having the advance polls open on Sundays.

We're a federal organization and so we monitor more closely the federal activities, which is why we're here. And I couldn't comment on voter activity at the provincial level.

The Chair: Reverend.

Rev. Lillian Roberts: I'm not able to say that the United Church has made a response in any of those provincial contexts. I think the reason we wanted to make a response today is our concern that making it more difficult for churches to participate by being physically available as polling stations sends a message that somehow churches are not being invited to be partners in the civic process and responsibility. That's what we would be concerned about.

[Translation]

Hon. Lucienne Robillard: Ms. Roberts, could you elaborate on the recommendation you made to our committee?

[English]

Rev. Lillian Roberts: There are two possibilities. The second was simply to move the polling time one hour later, which would allow for Sunday morning worship and activities to be concluded in a church building and for the building to be open by one o'clock rather than noon.

The other option is to sever the requirement that the advance poll be in the same location as the regular poll. As in many cases now, the advance polls are not in the same location as the regular polling station on election day, and that would normally, then, free up church buildings to be available for the regular election day process without having to also be available on the Sunday for the advance polls.

[Translation]

Hon. Lucienne Robillard: When the Chief Electoral Officer came and testified before this committee last week, he referred to the obligation to vote on the eve of polling day, in other words on the Sunday prior to an election. The bill stipulates that all polling stations shall open on this day, just like on polling day. He also said that this would be impossible in several locations, especially in places where people come to vote at the town church. As a result, the Sunday polling location would have to be different from the Monday location, which would present an additional difficulty.

Are you following me?

[English]

Rev. Lillian Roberts: I'm not sure what would be the additional problem by having another location.

•(1125)

[Translation]

Hon. Lucienne Robillard: To begin with, it would be hard to get voters to understand that on Sunday, they are able to vote at a particular location and that on Monday, they would have to vote elsewhere. Secondly, the same would be true for electoral employees. Thirdly, the process is not the same, which is more of a technical issue. Basically, the Chief Electoral Officer told us that currently polling day is Monday. However, several polling stations are located in churches, especially in rural areas, which would be a problem if polling were to be held on a Sunday.

Do you agree?

[English]

Rev. Lillian Roberts: The problem with Sunday is that they cannot have enough physical space available until they conclude their Sunday morning activities, so they cannot accommodate the space needed for the polls to happen within the church. It is a problem.

[Translation]

The Chair: Ms. Robillard, I am sorry to interrupt you.

[English]

We're out of time, but I will allow Mr. Cryer a short answer, please.

Mr. Doug Cryer: It gets to the heart of the issue we're concerned about, that there are already activities happening on Sundays that are recognized nationally in Canada, and that this is a day of worship for Christians. For Christians to accommodate a new activity on their day is a major accommodation on our part, which is why we would recommend that we not have full advance pollings on the Sunday before an election.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Reid, please, seven minutes.

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

I don't anticipate using all seven minutes, Mr. Chairman. Would it be acceptable to you and to the committee if, in the event that I end early, we go to Mr. Lukiwski to finish off the time slot?

The Chair: Is everybody in agreement?

That's what we can do. We can share your time.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you.

Thank you to our witnesses for coming here.

I have two things I want to do. One is to make a comment of what I would consider a gentle disagreement, in particular with what Mr. McDonald and Mr. Cryer said, and then to turn to a specific question.

It seems to me that there is a fundamental distinction between voting and work for a Christian. If you are an Orthodox Jew the definition of work and what you ought not to do on Shabbat is quite specific. On the Sabbath you can't, for example, use a writing instrument and mark a ballot, but that's not true in the same way for a Christian.

On drawing on my own experience, I remember talking at one point with the former Swiss ambassador to Canada, and he was describing to me his experience as a child growing up in Switzerland. Of course they have elections and referendums on a very frequent basis, several times a year, and he told me, Sunday was the day we went to church and then went to vote. At least in their culture—and he came from a Protestant canton in northern Switzerland—they didn't perceive these as being a work activity, an intrusion on the Sabbath. I just mentioned that to say that there are other countries where they've managed to find a balance.

The question I had is of a very specific nature, and it relates to the small and usually starting congregations, often very lively congregations. I've been to many of them that have met in places like a meeting room in a hotel, and school gymnasiums and auditoriums are popular. I've never really thought until now about the arrangements they as lessees make with the lessors, and I understand the fear of losing that particular space on a particular Sunday, but I'm inclined to think that they would be making a multi-Sunday agreement. They wouldn't walk in each time not knowing what they'll be doing one, two, three, or perhaps even ten or twenty Sundays in advance. It would just be a logical thing to work that out with the institution that's renting to them.

Am I wrong in that assumption? I'm assuming that Elections Canada would simply find those facilities unavailable, and in fact the relevant congregation would in fact have locked up that particular room. But I stand to be corrected.

Mr. Jamey McDonald: In many of our cases something like Elections Canada would trump the church service, and we have occasions where congregations are told the facility is not available next week because when we share with another church, it's a case of our church needing it, so you're out. I would imagine, but I can't speak absolutely, Mr. Reid, that Elections Canada would trump a church service in the minds of many places—schools, community halls.

• (1130)

Mr. Scott Reid: Is there actually something in the legislation that allows Elections Canada to do that?

Mr. Jamey McDonald: Good question, but I don't know the answer.

Mr. Doug Cryer: I actually checked it out with Elections Canada. It's up to the returning officer in each riding to determine the polling locations in that riding, and it's done on a negotiated basis.

I can tell you anecdotally that any regularly scheduled activity is often pre-empted by a polling station, whether churches, aerobics, or scouting. Whatever the regularly scheduled activity, it's often pre-empted for the polling station. I'm telling you that anecdotally because I've heard numerous instances of that happening. I don't have statistics for it, but it seems to be a common enough experience that other activities are set aside for election day.

Mr. Scott Reid: It sounds to me that, at the very least, there's a need to ensure that this sort of thing is prevented from occurring. I can certainly see how it would be an intrusion if a congregation were to find themselves bumped out of a facility.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Mr. Lukiwski, do you want to share time? You have three minutes.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Regina—Lumsden—Lake Centre, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

And thank you all for coming before us this morning.

I have a couple of quick questions.

Mr. McDonald, you mentioned in your presentation that approximately 30% of Canadians on Sundays express their desire to attend a service of their choosing, which obviously means that 70% of Canadians do not. On this intrusiveness of which you speak, that may be an inconvenience or an intrusion upon a religious day for 30% of Canadians, there is always a balance. That's what I'm trying to get at. There's a balance between what we're trying to do in this bill, which is to increase voter turnout across Canada, to increase the level of engagement with citizens in the voting process, but there is always a balance against whether we are intruding upon religious services or the religious beliefs of individuals.

Personally, I can tell you that during election campaigns I don't do any direct campaigning on Sundays, no phone calls, no door knocking, nothing. I do that out of respect, quite frankly, because I consider it to be a day of rest.

However, do you not also believe that individuals have the freedom of choice to determine themselves whether or not Sunday would be an appropriate day for them to cast their ballots? I have many people in my riding who have told me, similar to what Mr. Reid was saying in citing the Swiss example, that Sunday tends to be the best day for them, because number one, it's a family day. If they have voting-aged children, they encourage them to participate in the voting process, and many of them have told me that after their church services, regardless of what denomination, they make it a point, as a family activity, to go and vote.

I wonder what you have heard, or what comments you have. It seems to me that it's a matter of freedom of choice for individuals. If they choose not to participate on a Sunday, they do not have to, but those families who find it more convenient and view it as a family activity actually prefer the Sunday option.

I'd like to get a few comments from all of you, if I could, starting with you, Mr. McDonald.

Mr. Jamey McDonald: You raise a very good point. There is freedom of choice. But even in choices, we often have our choices chosen for us. You determine what hours the polls are open. You determine what days they're open. So there are already choices made before we get to make our choice. I'm simply trying to contribute to the discussion of what days we will choose for people to vote on, and I'm saying I'm not convinced that Sunday is a good day to include as a day of choice, since there are six other days of the week and 148 other hours of the week to vote.

I hear your point and I think there is some basis for saying that in other cultures and other countries there is a history of Sunday voting, but heretofore it has not been a Canadian tradition. In fact, you alluded to the fact that the Canada Elections Act requires that you remain silent for a day before the election, if I understand the law process, so I'm thinking, is this not a good thing to have a day of pause even between the campaign and the actual election day?

The Chair: We are over time, but I'm going to allow short answers from the witnesses. But members might want to consider the time factor when they ask their question.

Mr. Cryer, please.

Mr. Doug Cryer: We have freedom of choice right now without this legislation, so we'll have freedom of choice if this bill is passed. But it is more than that; it's intrusion into regularly scheduled activities that is also of concern. Right now we have freedom of choice to go shopping on Sunday, but if your church building is going to be used by Elections Canada, then your choice is limited and you have to make other choices based on what somebody else has given to you.

Also, don't forget about the get-out-the-vote activities. Political parties will use Sunday as an activity to phone their supporters, e-mail them, door knock, and do everything they can to get the vote out on a Sunday when people seem to be at home, so our concern is that this will become a full get-out-the-vote activity. In that case we'll have the freedom not to answer the phone, but it might be ringing an awful lot.

• (1135)

The Chair: Reverend Roberts, would you like to make a short comment, please?

Rev. Lillian Roberts: In terms of the United Church context, many of our members would indeed choose to vote on a Sunday. That's not the issue I am trying to raise. It's more about use of buildings.

The Chair: Thank you.

Monsieur Paquette, for seven minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

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

I would like to thank you for your highly interesting presentations. I admit that I was at first surprised to see that churches were slated to participate in this consultative process. I find your contribution very enriching as far as information gathering is concerned.

The bill under consideration creates a new form of advanced polling. As several of you have mentioned, conventional advanced polling includes polling stations that can be set up more or less anywhere, but there would be no obligation to find a large number of polling stations. I think that at the last meeting, there was mention of 60,000 polling stations. If an additional conventional advanced polling day would be added, the problem would not be as bad as you have made out, because there would perhaps be no need for polling stations in places of worship.

Moreover, you have raised the issue of Sunday worship which may be disrupted, regardless of where the polling stations are

located, simply because people would be encouraged to vote on a Sunday.

I would like to come back to the location issue. Could you instruct the people in charge of administering your places of worship to refuse to rent space to Elections Canada, whether be a church, a temple, or a mosque? When Elections Canada asks you to rent out space, as churches, could you instruct your administrators, for want of a better word, to refuse to rent out your premises, or does the law compel you to do so?

Could the various churches you represent refuse to rent out their premises on the Sunday prior to an election because doing so would otherwise cause too much inconvenience?

[*English*]

Mr. Jamey McDonald: Thank you, my friend.

In the Baptist tradition, we would not rent to Elections Canada at all. That's not our tradition. But the issue for us is that some of our churches are using public facilities that would be disenfranchised by somebody else's decision.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Paquette: So it's not just a matter of places of worship, but also of the premises you need to conduct the activities associated with worship.

[*English*]

Mr. Jamey McDonald: Exactly.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Paquette: Could your churches instruct their administrators—I don't know what to call them exactly—to refuse to rent out premises to Elections Canada? Having said that, we're talking about 2,000 locations.

[*English*]

Mr. Doug Cryer: Anybody can say no, but people want to participate in community activity and there's a proud heritage of doing that. So to take something away that churches and communities have come behind in the past is unfortunate.

So they can say no, but they would rather say yes and have it on other days.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Paquette: Ms. Roberts.

[*English*]

Rev. Lillian Roberts: Certainly they could say no, but I would echo the point that churches do want to participate in the process. They want to be seen by their communities as being active partners in the democratic process, so they would want their buildings used.

The other thing I might say about rental space is that in our experience United Church congregations often rent these spaces at a discounted rate. Elections Canada pays at a good rate, so if you're the person making the decision on who you want to rent to, that may have an influence.

•(1140)

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paquette: I'd like to come back to the second point, and that is religious worship. Canada's Chief Elector Officer drew our attention to the fact that since it was an advanced poll, even if polling lasted all day and was just as important as the general election the following day, the same rules would not apply. For example, as far as solicitation and signage are concerned, there are no guidelines. It's quite possible that what is actually not allowed on the day of the general election would be permitted. You might end up having campaign signs and election posters in the vicinity of churches and candidates shaking people's hands outside the church door.

Would that be acceptable for those individuals attending your various churches on Sunday who go there to worship? Wouldn't that be an irritant? My question is directed to all three of you.

[English]

Mr. Jamey McDonald: Just quickly, my friend, the Baptist tradition very strongly separates the political electoral issue from the religious issue. We allow no signs on our properties. We do not distribute signs from our properties. We do not allow people to make election speeches in our churches.

Mr. Doug Cryer: The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada regularly publishes an election kit for churches to make sure they're all aware that churches are places for non-partisan activity and that no signage or promotion of particular political parties should happen in the church building.

Rev. Lillian Roberts: That would be echoed in the United Church, that it be non-partisan, which usually means that there are no signs available.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paquette: Mr. Cryer, I really appreciated you mentioning the fact that the day of worship varies depending on the religion. You referred to Friday for Muslims, Saturday for Jews and Sunday for Christians. At the end of the day, shouldn't we simply ban polling at places of worship so that a clear distinction is made between religion and civic spaces? Shouldn't the law state that no church shall be rented out as a polling station, and that a distinction must be made between the religious and civic spheres? I'm asking you this question in the context of the questions you had in relation to potential disruptions on days of worship.

I don't know if any of you wish to comment on that.

[English]

Mr. Doug Cryer: I believe most religious communities would want to be active participants in community life and in civic engagement. So we can ask that question, why rent in religious facilities, but that's not at the heart or the intent of religious communities.

As I think I pointed out just in observation, there are already advance polls on Fridays and Saturdays that do affect Muslim and Jewish communities. If you had regular advance polls on Sunday, perhaps there would be seen to be a measure of fairness that every religious group is being hit on one of their days. So in that sense, I have to be honest; if it were just an advance poll, we may have

debated more about this issue. The real issue, though, is that it's all polling stations on particularly that Sunday before. That's what has a significant impact on our community.

The Chair: Colleagues, I'm going to have to end that round. I do hear people getting their questions answered, which I suppose is the key point.

Mr. Angus, you're up. You have seven minutes.

Next round will be five minutes, and I will hold people to that.

Mr. Angus, please.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for coming today.

I think this discussion is a very profound one. The question of how we encourage more people to vote is certainly a profound question, as is whether or not our Sunday becomes the means to do that. I personally believe that if we got politicians out of the gutter, off the spin, and off the attack ad, maybe more people would want to vote. The question is whether taking Sunday will do that.

What we're seeing from Elections Canada is that they expect a marginal result at fair cost. I don't think cost is really the issue—if it is the issue—of getting people to participate, but they're not seeing, on this final Sunday, much of an impact in terms of getting the recalcitrant voter to show up.

We have to be very clear as to what we're talking about. We're not talking about an advance poll; we're talking about full-out voting, all the bells and whistles. Regardless of whether you allow signs on your property or not, they will be up on the property, because that's what is done at polls. People might have the choice not to vote, but they won't have the choice not to receive all the phone calls and the bother they get from the big-party machines, because that's how elections are run.

So I'd like to ask you simply, for the impact that it's going to have for faith groups and for people who see Sunday as their one day, are we crossing a social Rubicon here that you think needs to be examined more closely before we simply rubber-stamp this?

•(1145)

Mr. Jamey McDonald: Mr. Angus, thank you.

I would like to speak qualitatively; I do not have quantitative evidence. The Baptist General Conference of Canada highly respects the federal government. We believe it is the power that governs our nation. When this act comes to us we feel disrespected in that the one day that we observe would suddenly be marginalized and treated like any other day. So on a qualitative basis we would see this as an indicator of a disrespect from our federal government.

Mr. Doug Cryer: I'll give you the observation of David Macfarlane, who spoke to me personally. He's our national initiatives coordinator. He meets with pastors from every evangelical denomination possible all across Canada. It might be too strong a word, but he said that this would be seen as another reversal, or another strike against the Christian community. He believes, from his conversations with pastors all across Canada, that they would react more negatively than favourably to this.

Rev. Lillian Roberts: The United Church is very conscious that we live in a multicultural and interfaith kind of context. I don't think we feel threatened by the idea of people being allowed to vote on Sunday. But we do want to be conscious that in many communities the churches and other religious meeting places are partners in the process. We want to facilitate that dialogue and that partnership to help people have a sense of ownership about what's happening through the democratic process in their community.

Mr. Charlie Angus: I'll follow up on that issue of interfaith. In my community it was pointed out by a former minister whom I knew that we have four congregations. I thought we only had three, but he included the coffee shop as the fourth congregation. He said if he actually had his way, he felt that was congregation he would like to spend his time with.

When he said that, I recognized there was an element of truth that is often overlooked, that people, whether or not they go to church on Sunday, see Sunday as a special day. Regardless of their faith background, it is a day of rest, it's a day of choice for family. My colleagues from the Conservatives say they could choose to vote. They certainly could choose, but they often choose to create a sphere that is not impacted. I would like to get back to the reality that we are now proposing, that they would be getting their doors knocked on, that they would be phoned, that they would be called to come out and act as volunteers—because these are the people who are the volunteers for election campaigns, these are the people who work for Elections Canada.

In your experience, whether or not it is a Christian denomination or whether it's the Sunday coffee crowd or the people who go to their camp with their kids, do you feel there's a sense of a possible backlash, of a growing cynicism? I know it's hard enough knocking on doors with some people sometimes when you're a politician. I certainly wouldn't want to know what the response would be on a Sunday, when people see this as their one time alone. Do you feel there might be a cynical backlash towards politicians in general if we put out the big party machine on a Sunday?

Mr. Jamey McDonald: Mr. Angus, that's my first point, it would have a severe irritation factor in the community that I'm part of, irritation.

Mr. Doug Cryer: If the intent is to increase voter turnout, you don't want to cause an irritation to the group, or at least one group, that you're trying to get out. I'd certainly like us to consider advance

polling on other days, even the full week before elections. If we're not overly concerned about cost as the major issue but we're looking at different avenues to get people out to vote, then perhaps we could examine the costs of opening up advance polls from Monday to Friday, the day before, or holding the election on Monday and Tuesday, have the two election days. There are so many other possibilities. We just don't have to encroach on Sunday, which is recognized as a common day of rest, if not in legislation, at least in people's attitudes.

• (1150)

Rev. Lillian Roberts: What comes to mind to me is the conversation years ago about Sunday shopping. Our denomination's stance was that it's not about preventing people the possibility of the choice that they want to shop on Sunday, but what are the implications for those who are mandated to be engaged or work because the activity is going to be made available? I think that's what you're raising. I think certainly, yes, there would be, in some of our communities, a sense that this is an imposition on not just worship time but, as you stated, a time that families hold as sacred out of whatever week they have and the relationships that they want to cherish.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Angus. You were actually under time. I'm going to offer you a bit of time here because I've given everybody else an extra minute. If you wanted to ask one short question to one witness, I'll allow that.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Mr. Cryer, I'll follow up with you.

It was Madam Roberts who pointed out that when Sunday shopping was raised, people said, well, don't worry, if people don't want to work on Sunday, they won't have to" I've never seen a single mother who was ever given that option, and I know many kids in my community who spend their Sundays without their parents because they are working on Sundays.

The question I have is for people in workplaces who right now have the legal right to vote on Monday. How many of them do you expect will actually have the right to go to vote on Monday when their boss says, "You can take Sunday to go to vote. That's when you're going to vote, because Monday is a day of work."

I'd like to know whether you have a perspective on that scenario.

Mr. Doug Cryer: Yes. I can just agree with you that any time something like this happens, some people have a choice and others haven't. In the case of people who are forced to live on minimum wage and are forced to work on Sundays, we have the choice to visit those stores and visit those minimum-wage workers on Sundays. It's the same with voting opportunities. We have a choice of whether or not to vote. We don't have a choice of who comes to our door or how many phone calls we'll receive.

I think that is enough said.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you.

The Chair: Colleagues, we're going to go to our second round. I'm starting to hear similar responses. There is a theme in the questions and a theme in the responses, so I'm going to ask members to go to a new topic or a new questioning theme, if you can.

This round I'm going to suggest we stick to four minutes, given the time; we have other witnesses. If you don't have any questions, that's just great.

We'll start with Madam Redman.

Madam Redman, is four minutes fair?

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

I unfortunately had to step out. If it's possible in four minutes, I'd like to share my time with my colleague Ms. Brown.

My question is probably on just a slightly different tack from those most people have been taking. I have to thank you so much for coming, because I think this really underscores the need for consultation so that.... Wildly held assumptions obviously don't hold true.

I taught Sunday school at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church for 18 years. I know that one of the huge issues—and it's an ongoing issue for my congregation—is engaging young people. It's a huge concern for me, as a member of Parliament, that we continue to engage young people.

I know that from your faith communities you probably have the same concerns. Have you reflected upon or can you give us any insight into what we can do federally as members of Parliament to engage young people, so that they do come out to vote whenever that opportunity is offered?

Mr. Jamey McDonald: As a quick and dirty response, I appreciate members of Parliament going to our schools at grades five, six, and seven to teach into the lives of young students the value of civic duty. I encourage you to think not just of 18-year-olds but of eight-year-olds.

Mr. Doug Cryer: I've volunteered to teach at my children's civics class when they raise political issues. I think that's a great opportunity for members of Parliament to visit all their high schools and help promote.... The students are more likely to vote for people with whom they have some kind of identification or personal contact. So I would encourage MPs and candidates to go into the schools to raise awareness among youth.

Rev. Lillian Roberts: I would echo that: to take whatever opportunities are available to connect with young people.

I think particularly of an organization provincially called the Ontario Youth Parliament, where out of the Christian context young people come together both regionally and provincially to participate in mock governments. As someone who has been a sponsor of that program, I would say that we sometimes have great difficulty finding MPs who can make themselves available to come and explain how the process works.

•(1155)

Ms. Bonnie Brown (Oakville, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Again, thanks to everybody who came.

We've had a pretty good discussion about the facilities issue, and I thank you for being so open about that. It doesn't seem to me to be very convenient to try to mix these two activities in the same space on the day that has traditionally been set aside for worship.

I'd like to move to the people, though. I want you to think about the congregations you're most familiar with. It would seem to me, knowing my volunteers in my riding and the people I know who serve in the polls, that they're often the same people who are volunteering at the church. I can think of two Sunday school teachers; I can think of a lady who takes care of dismantling the altar on Sundays and freshening up the flowers, etc.

I'm also thinking about the people who work in the polls, many of whom are elderly, many of whom are retired. On that one voting day, they work from about 7:30 in the morning until about 10 o'clock at night, and they are absolutely whacked out. I'm worried about their trying to do that two days in a row, when they're already maybe 75 years old—and healthy per se, but with that kind of stress.

Then I'm thinking about my volunteers, many of whom are full-time workers with children who take a day of holidays on election day to work all day, trying to do that on Sunday and Monday, etc.

I want you to address that people factor.

Mr. Jamey McDonald: Speaking on behalf of Baptists...amen.

Mr. Doug Cryer: Advance polls are, in my opinion, the solution to this. The more advance polls, the more opportunities to vote, the better. They don't have to be the full-blown advance polls. You could have limited advance polling. That limits the volunteers and it makes more opportunities available.

I'm happy with any other time of the week. I think it solves everybody's problems.

Rev. Lillian Roberts: I think there needs to be opportunity to look at whether you do need to pull on the same people to work both days. It could be considered that there would be others, but I would echo that indeed those who volunteer in the community are often those who have a particular set of religious values that they're living out in the midst of their public life, and those are the people we're tapping most heavily.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Madame Picard, you have four minutes, please.

[Translation]

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

Thank you for being here. You provided us with some very interesting information. I'd like to tell you about a particular experience I had. I've run in five elections, and in the last two, candidates from my riding who turned up at the steps of churches following a religious celebration or mass, were literally chased off the premises. Churchgoers found it highly disrespectful when candidates bothered them and wanted to shake their hand to get their vote following a religious celebration, Sunday mass, or a period of prayer. People were annoyed and found it disrespectful, so much so that the priests, reverends, or parish heads called for a ban on this type of practice because it was terribly disruptive to worshippers. My riding is both urban and rural, and it seems to be the case in every parish.

I don't agree with Mr. Lukiwski who said that polling day is a family activity. It's already a tight squeeze in most polling stations and the lineups are quite long, so much so that people often have to sit down while they wait to vote. I have trouble imagining families with babies cradled in their arms waiting to exercise their right to vote. Indeed, as far as I'm concerned, Sunday is a family day and a day where people take part in other activities aside from going to vote.

People already have enough time to cast their ballot. Currently, in Canada, you have 36 days to vote. You can go and vote anytime in the returning officer's office, you can vote by mail, there are advanced polls, and then there is also election day. Why add yet another day on Sunday? What's more, there are all of the election workers my colleague referred to who are there two days in a row and who only have one day, Sunday, left to go about their religious and family activities. This would be taken away from them. And I also think we might end up losing volunteers. You're talking about three long days of polling. I agree with you in that civic and religious activities must be separated.

• (1200)

[English]

The Chair: A very short answer, please.

Mr. Jamey McDonald: I think we would agree. Concerning local churches, in my tradition we encourage our people to vote, but we do not tell them for whom to vote, and we like to keep that separate. We do feel that the including of Sunday voting would be an infringement on the freedom we have on that day to think and to pause and to reflect.

So thank you for your comments.

Mr. Doug Cryer: I have just one comment about the irritant of having candidates outside of a church building.

The EFC publishes an election readiness kit that stipulates that the only activities that are permitted in a church legally, or from Revenue Canada's point of view, is an all-candidates debate, where every single candidate shows up for a comment forum together, not on separate days of the week. They all have to be together. It has to be a forum in which all of them can participate in agreed-upon formats.

The Chair: Reverend.

Rev. Lillian Roberts: There is concern that people have time to be family, but I would also say that in our United Church tradition,

which has often been engaged in public policy, there is a concern that people link their faith with public decision-making. So it's not all a bad thing to have people associating the physical church or faith presence of a community with involvement in the political process.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you very much, colleagues.

Mr. Angus, you have the last question, please, for four minutes.

Mr. Charlie Angus: I will not need four minutes for this. I think it's fairly simple.

We're looking at a bill that's fairly technical. The question of adjusting that final Sunday really isn't on the table. It will come forth when we look at it line by line. The question is, is the rest of the bill workable? Are the other options for the extended advance polling workable, from your perspective? And on the question of turning the last Sunday into a full-out election Sunday, when it comes before us, it becomes a yes or a no option whether to support that part of the bill or not.

I think I've heard a general sense, but you have offered recommendations. At the end of the day, is the recommendation on Sunday yes or no?

Mr. Jamey McDonald: No.

Mr. Doug Cryer: No.

Rev. Lillian Roberts: No.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, colleagues. That ends our questioning for these witnesses.

On behalf of the committee, I want to thank the witnesses for coming out today. It's been very, very helpful.

We will suspend the meeting for two minutes to have the witnesses remove themselves from the table and to get the next group of witnesses up.

•

_____ (Pause) _____

•

• (1205)

The Chair: Colleagues, we'll bring the meeting back to order and begin with our second group of witnesses today. We have two witnesses.

Actually, I'm just going to turn the table over to you for a time. Please introduce yourselves and the group you represent. If you have an opening statement, feel free to do that. I'll keep that to two minutes, probably.

Ilona Dougherty, please, you're first.

Ms. Ilona Dougherty (Executive Director, Apathy is Boring): Hello; my name is Ilona Dougherty. I'm the executive director of Apathy is Boring.

Apathy is Boring was founded in January 2004 by three young Canadians who were tired of seeing their peers feel disconnected from our democratic system. It's a national, youth-led, non-partisan organization that aims to use art and technology to re-engage youth in the democratic process. After gaining notoriety through well-received get-out-the-vote campaigns during the federal elections of 2004 and 2006, Apathy is Boring continues its year-round work on democracy projects that create dialogue between youth and their political leaders.

For nearly four years now, Apathy is Boring has been working towards empowering youth, statistically the least likely to vote, with the tools to inform themselves, a venue for dialogue, and an edgy and straight-talking approach. Using concerts, a clothing line, a media outreach campaign, and an informative website, Apathy is Boring has been able to reach over 500,000 young Canadians.

We know that young people are disconnected from our traditional political institutions, so we use social networking, music, and clear, accessible information to reach our generation, providing them with tools to get involved in civic life and the democratic process and particularly encouraging them to vote.

Apathy is Boring has established itself as a respected voice on youth engagement. We have been recognized and supported nationally by a diverse cross-section of NGO, corporate, and celebrity partners, not to mention ongoing recognition by the Canadian media. As a result, Apathy is Boring has begun to bridge the gap between youth and politicians, helping youth join the political dialogue once again. A great example of this is my presence here today.

The fact remains that young voters are not opting into our democratic system. Youth are disengaged, and we should make every effort possible to involve the next generation. Voting is only a small part of this issue, but it is a critical low-risk entry point for youth to show their willingness to be active citizens. Apathy is Boring believes that democracy should evolve, and that democracy should involve an opportunity for ongoing dialogue with citizens, particularly those often marginalized by society.

We must ensure that not only do we reach those youth who are readily accessible—often the over-engaged—but we must also work hard to reach out to unengaged youth, who often do not have their voices heard. Unless we encourage youth to opt into the system at a young age by voting, they have a much lower chance statistically of becoming engaged at a later stage of their lives. Apathy is Boring believes in accessibility in offering youth as many options to get involved as active citizens as possible.

The question I leave you with is this: will this bill truly expand the opportunities of youth to become active citizens in our democratic process? If we don't address the issue of youth engagement now, we will not have a representative democracy worth worrying about 20 years down the line.

I've given all of you today our youth-friendly guide to intergenerational partnerships. Hopefully today is the beginning of an intergenerational partnership in which we truly will be looking at youth engagement in voting and how we can make strides to that end.

Thank you very much.

• (1210)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Dougherty.

Mr. Anderson, please go ahead with your opening statement.

Mr. Rick Anderson (Representative, Fireweed Democracy Project): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ilona is just proving, I think, that apathy is not totally boring.

My name is Rick Anderson. I spent a few years around here, about a decade in the 1980s, as a pretty active, younger Liberal, and most of the 1990s as a pretty active, less younger Reformer, a combination of resumé credentials that has managed to aggravate many of the partisans of both of those organizations.

More recently what I do in terms of my political activity is through an organization that I started, called the Fireweed Democracy Project, which is loosely aimed at addressing the range of issues that are generally gathered under the umbrella of the democratic deficit and working with people across party lines who share a common concern for strengthening the democratic qualities of our national institutions and electoral processes.

With respect to the bill before you today, I would just offer three brief comments.

First of all, I think it goes in some very positive directions.

Secondly, just as a warning note, I think there is a larger problem than has yet been publicly acknowledged by Elections Canada or by the Canadian body politic of cheating in national elections at the local level. Those of us who have been involved in internal party politics for years know that this is not entirely uncommon in the internal contests that occur in parties, and I think in the opening up of the rules in terms of people being able to show up and literally testify as to who they are, swear out an affidavit, and so on, and get themselves on the voters list, we are approaching the edge of going too far and putting temptation where we should be careful not to put it. To my knowledge, this problem has not been studied in any detail by anybody yet, but somebody should start taking a look at it, because I think we're going to start finding ourselves embarrassed by things that we learn after the fact in elections in this country.

Thirdly, the progress that this bill represents in terms of facilitating people's access to the voters list and opportunities to vote in terms of advance polling is positive. They address what I would call "the convenience factor", which is the business of making it easier for people to access the polling station and the vote at times that are convenient for them. But they don't actually address—neither could this bill, really—the more contextual issue, which is, I think, the larger issue driving declining turnout patterns and what Ilona here is calling apathy, which is this larger sense of people being disengaged from the process, and that leads me into areas such as electoral reform, the sense that people have that their vote doesn't count, because literally, mathematically, in half the ridings of the country that's true.

Thank you.

• (1215)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Colleagues, we have time for one seven-minute round, so I'm going to encourage members to share their time, if you feel that you need to ask or other members of your party need to ask.

We're going to start with Mr. Bagnell. You have seven minutes in total, please.

Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.): I have one question, and then I'll see if other members of my party have questions. It's for Ilona.

My first comment is that I've had a lot of interaction with your organization. You do some great events, and also I've received a lot of written things. I certainly commend you for this effort. Someone needs to do it, and you guys are doing a tremendous job right across the country.

My question is, why do young people not vote; and what specific, concrete actions can we as a society take, and specifically can we as federal politicians take, to get a larger turnout of youth vote?

Ms. Iona Dougherty: There are several points to that question. One is that young people are democratically involved in a lot of different ways, but there's a disconnect between traditional political institutions and the places where young people are. We really encourage members of Parliament and all of our community leaders to go to places where young people are and make sure there is a dialogue not just during election time, but all year round, between youth and members of Parliament. Often members of Parliament feel really distant. We don't feel we can access those people who are making big decisions on our behalf.

Another critical point is that young people don't feel that the business, especially of federal politics, affects their lives. There's a real disconnect in terms of their day-to-day lives and how they feel federal politics impacts them, so when voting comes around, it doesn't feel important. They don't really know why it's that important.

I think a third thing would be civic education. There is a lack of understanding and knowledge of what our democracy really is. There's also definitely a lack of opportunity for young people who are not engaged and who do not step up necessarily to the opportunity right off the bat to become engaged in democracy in ways that feel comfortable and interesting and dynamic to them.

I would encourage members of Parliament to both come to our events and dialogue with youth that way and also make sure that you are really reaching out to young people. We have a worksheet on our website with about ten tips to get young people to get out to vote. I would encourage you to read that as well.

Ms. Bonnie Brown: I'm very interested, Mr. Chair, in Mr. Anderson's allusion to the idea of cheating. I am also concerned about that fact. I'm wondering, with his experience inside political parties, whether he would agree with me that a lot of it has to do with the opportunities provided by a totally inadequate and inaccurate list; in other words, a list that has far too many names on it—names of people who moved away ten years ago and no longer live at that

address. Has he ever identified that from his position working inside a party?

Mr. Rick Anderson: Of course, I would hasten to add that I have no direct experience with cheating.

Ms. Bonnie Brown: I didn't think you did, but I mean as an observer.

Mr. Rick Anderson: I have heard people, all too casually and with too much level of detail, talk about it. I believe from my experience that it's not as uncommon as we would hope. There are many ridings, of course, where the result is not close enough for this to be particularly material, but there are many ridings where that's not true.

On the question of a permanent voters list, first of all, as a general proposition I think it's a positive step that we've established a permanent voters list rather than the "hurry up and create one out of nothing" exercise that preceded that. On the other hand, the sources of it and the scrutiny it's given between elections are really quite varied and uneven in their quality. I think it may behoove voters, the parties, the candidates, and the participants in the process to spend more time—or maybe Elections Canada to spend more time—validating and double-checking the information that's there.

I think it's better done this way than it was in the past, but the opportunities for false names or erroneous names to be on the voters list have expanded. I think it's time to spend some time addressing corrective measures.

• (1220)

Ms. Bonnie Brown: You would agree with me that work on the list—the improvement, the corrections, etc., that could be done between elections—might actually have a bigger effect upon raising the percentage turnout than anything proposed in this bill by expanding voting opportunities.

Mr. Rick Anderson: To the extent that there are names on the list that shouldn't be there, and that therefore, if they were taken off, you would have a higher proportion of eligible voters voting at the end of the day, I guess that's correct.

Ms. Bonnie Brown: Thank you.

The Chair: There remain not quite two minutes.

Madame Robillard, please. You'll have a minute and a half.

[*Translation*]

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

I am very pleased to see that here is a group which cares about the participation of young people in our democratic process. I would like to congratulate you as well for having provided us with a translated document.

First, I would like to know whether your organization is also based in Quebec, because I have never heard about it. Second, do you believe that extending the advance poll period by two days will lead to an increase in the number of young people who vote?

Ms. Iona Dougherty: I came from Montreal today. Our offices are located at the corner of Pine Avenue and Saint-Laurent Boulevard.

[English]

We're in your riding, actually, and we've worked really hard, or closely

[Translation]

with English and French groups. Most of the young people we work with in Quebec City are anglophones, but we also work closely with the Forum jeunesse de la région de Québec, which works with young francophones. Both groups work together.

I believe that accessibility is very important for young people.

[English]

I myself have had times where I missed the advance polling days and then election day. Because I work with Apathy is Boring, I was doing television interviews somewhere other than my riding, and then, oh, oh, what do you do? So I know that with the transient nature of youth, often being in one place on a specific day is challenging. Advance polls happen in advance, so you don't necessarily think about it when those days are happening. So I think accessibility is really critical, and I know personally I would have taken advantage of polling the day before the actual federal election several times if I'd had the opportunity.

Just to raise one other point about the voting list, the transient nature of youth is a problem, and one of the main reasons, I think, logistically that youth aren't voting is that they don't have proof of residence when they're at university. There's a major issue, I would argue, there around youth and their transient residences.

The Chair: Thank you. That ends that round.

Mr. Preston, you're up, and I notice that you want to share with some of your colleagues.

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): I will certainly share with my friends, because they're sharing desserts with me—one way to my heart, apparently.

First of all, thank you both for coming. Your views on the subject are both diverse but coming at it from the same way too.

I agree with you that apathy is boring, so I'll say that. You mentioned something in your speech about—I don't know if you called it civic literacy, but it's a term we have used too—the teaching of what's going on out there. I do a fair bit of work with youth who don't understand what I do as a member of Parliament. It's kind of an after-the-question. What's this other thing you're doing, Joe? It's a real educational piece, and I think that has to happen.

But on the topic of the bill that we're talking about here today, I mentioned it in the last meeting. We had some other witnesses, before you, today. I'm not sure if you got to hear what they were saying, but I keep saying we just can't keep doing the same things and expect it will get better. I think that's really what both of you are saying.

Is this the absolute solution? I think not. I've not heard that from either of you. But at least it's a step forward. As you said, if you'd had another opportunity day, you might have taken it. I've heard that same anecdotal evidence in my own riding from not only youth but hard-working business people who have said, “You know, I just

didn't have the chance to get away from the shop today. If I'd had another day, I might have gone.” But it's still not the answer. It's a convenience factor. This one addresses a bit of the convenience factor. It's not everything.

Mr. Anderson, you mentioned some of the integrity issues. It really doesn't address those all that clearly either, but we have other pieces of legislation that are trying to do that.

I'd like to ask you a bit more about that convenience factor. I come from a rural riding, and for youth in rural situations, it's a transportation issue in a lot of cases. This gives them one more advance poll at least closer to home. In most cases, advance polls are many hours or at least an hour away from home. This gives them one day of an election process with a convenience factor, that they're now close to home.

Can I get you to comment on that, and then I'll share time with my colleagues.

• (1225)

Mr. Rick Anderson: As I said, I think that's a positive thing. I think it can only help, so it's quite a positive step. As I also said, I think we should be careful to understand the difference between improving the convenience factor of voting versus increasing the contextual issues.

I think the larger part of the reason people are not voting in the numbers that we might wish they would vote is a weakened motivation for participation. I wouldn't probably call it apathy, because I think you find lots of people who have quite strong views about politics and are actually quite well informed who don't bother to vote. To some extent that is about convenience, so the steps you're talking about in this bill to make it more convenient for people to vote or to get on a voters list and be eligible to vote are positive steps. But I think, for the larger part of the 35%, give or take, of Canadians who are not voting, it's not a convenience factor.

Ms. Hona Dougherty: There are three things I would like to raise. The first is that we need to look at civic education of individuals in the 18- to 35-year-old bracket who are not voting. That's a major issue and something we're trying to address.

Also, a big question is where are the polling stations? Are they on university campuses? Are they in buildings where young people go and where they feel comfortable going?

Third, I think the issue of technology is critical. Sure, an advance polling day in person makes a difference, but I would believe that a lot of my generation feels that technology can play a role and should play a role in our democratic process.

Mr. Joe Preston: Thank you.

The Chair: Monsieur Lemieux.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, CPC): Thank you for your presentations.

Actually, you might have just answered one of my questions: when you're focusing on apathy in youth, how do you define youth? Did you say 18 to 35 years old?

Ms. Iona Dougherty: Yes, 18 to 35.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Do you find that their particular circumstances play a role—for example, if someone is single, someone is married, someone is employed, someone is unemployed, a student versus employed? What has your experience been on that?

Ms. Iona Dougherty: Students are more transient generally. Once you get a job, you tend to stay in more or less the same place.

But no, it's not an issue of “maturity”, that all of a sudden you get married, buy a house, and you're going to be more involved. Socio-economic realities do have an impact on civic engagement; however, it's more about your first voting experience. If you don't have a good first voting experience when you're 18, or soon after, you are statistically less likely to be involved throughout your entire life.

We're talking about a generational issue here. In 2006, give or take 36% of young people voted. If we look 20 years down the road, that's what we're looking at in terms of the number of citizens who will likely be participating in elections. It's generational.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: I was only going to comment that I think the intent of the bill would be advantageous to youth. If there is a factor of maturity that plays in there, there's a certain sense of confidence you need in order to tell your boss that you're going to vote, as opposed to waiting for your boss to ask you if you've voted yet and to give you a couple of hours off. So a certain amount of maturity and confidence goes together there.

I was also reading that one challenge in youth participation is in the area of conflicting commitments. By providing additional opportunities to vote, there's less opportunity for things to conflict all the way through.

•(1230)

Ms. Iona Dougherty: Totally. I think accessibility, along with more opportunities for young people, really does help, given, as I said, the transient nature of our lives.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Paquette, you have the floor.

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

Thank you for your presentations. To begin, I must say that the Bloc Québécois has a very active youth forum and, indeed, I believe that all political parties are responsible for awakening the political interest of young people in the places where young people are to be found. In fact, Elections Canada presented us with a study which concluded that the likelihood of people voting is higher if people are interested in politics. So as a political party, one of our duties is to awaken young people's interest in politics.

At the end of your brief, you ask a question which specifically concerns the bill:

[...] will this bill truly expand the opportunities of youth to become active citizens in our democratic process? If we don't address this issue of youth engagement now, we will not have a representative democracy worth worrying about 20 years down the line.

You pose the question, but you don't provide a very specific answer.

I would like to come back to the aforementioned study because it looked at many elections and concluded the following:

The first result suggests that the huge turnout gap between the youngest and oldest generations is unlikely to be reduced by an extension of advanced voting, since it is the oldest citizens who are most prone to taking advantage of such measures.

The study adds that an additional day of advanced voting might increase the turnout of young people, but not enough to reduce the gap between the participation rates of different generations.

A lot has been done over the years to accommodate seniors: polling stations were set up in seniors centres, revisit offices, and voting by mail was made easier. Many measures were taken to help seniors, and very few, in fact, almost none except for a bit of publicity, for young people.

In our youth forum, the idea came up that Elections Canada should be obliged to open revisit offices and polling stations in universities and post-secondary institutions, so that you would bring the election to the young people instead of the other way around.

I would like to know what you think of this idea.

Ms. Iona Dougherty: That's a very, very good idea. You have to come to us, and not always expect us to go to you. This is one of the most important issues being discussed at Apathy is Boring.

Mr. Pierre Paquette: Do you have any other suggestions? I talked about what the political parties could do; you also referred to that. How can Elections Canada do a better job of promoting voter turnout among our youth? I know that that is a concern. I know that they rely on advertising to a large extent. Are there any other methods they could try?

Ms. Iona Dougherty: I don't think that advertising works very well.

[English]

We have to make better efforts to reach out to youth, and the way we're reaching out to youth is by trying to be cool and trying to speak in their language—without actually succeeding.

[Translation]

I think that advertising needs to be...

[English]

We need to improve it and

[Translation]

by using technology. It is really important to find out where the young people are and

[English]

take the information that is important to share with these young people to them, rather than, as I said, always asking them to come to us.

[Translation]

I think that is really important.

Mr. Pierre Paquette: Thank you. I don't know if Ms. Picard has...

Ms. Pauline Picard: Thank you very much, it is very interesting.

I see another way of doing that: making people aware at a young age of their responsibility to vote. We have to get young people to understand that it is a civic responsibility. I have a friend who teaches political science in a CEGEP. She tells me that the young people who are enrolled in political science do not even know the difference between the provincial and federal levels of government, that have no idea at all who their provincial or federal members of Parliament are, and that they often confuse these individuals with municipal government representatives, such as mayors.

Now, it is all very well for us as members to try and increase public awareness... I have been a member of Parliament for 14 years. My friend told me that the students have trouble pronouncing my name. And yet, I often appear at many events and take part in a lot of activities. Education must, first and foremost, start at home. If parents are not interested in politics, never listen to the news, do not read newspaper articles and don't know what is happening in the Middle East, then obviously young people will not be motivated to turn out and vote and choose an elected representative who is going to be able to meet their needs. We have to educate our young people about the role that they will have to play in society. Based on the information that I have received, this is a big area of concern.

You also referred to technologically advanced polling, which is indeed a good way of encouraging our young people to vote. That is where matters now stand. We are behind because our young people today are born into technology. They operate solely by using computers and new technologies. The impression I get from them is that going to vote is not revolutionary. Maybe they consider it a waste of time. They do not see it as taking action. Now, if they were to take action via a website, things would probably be different.

● (1235)

[English]

The Chair: Please give just a very short answer.

[Translation]

Ms. Iona Dougherty: Technology is really crucial. As far as I am concerned, I use my computer five, six, seven, eight or twelve hours a day. And the same is true for all young people. Education must start at a young age, but the 18- to 35- year-old age group is also a problem. We need to look after that generation.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

I'm sorry, I have a time factor, a time squeeze here.

Mr. Angus, please.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I commend your work with youth. I speak in schools all the time. I find that students are not the disengaged, layabout louts that some older people like to say. In fact, I find I get better questions in any school than I've ever had in an adult debate. The question is how we make the links so that they become members of the body politic in an active way. I think there are major gaps there right now.

My question to you is fairly straightforward. My colleague Mr. Preston asks how it is that we can continue to do the same thing over

and expect it will get better. I guess I would look at it slightly differently: we do the same thing over, and it's getting worse. It gets worse every election.

The idea of advance polls is something people really support. It is positive for the people who are out working, who are travelling; advance polls are excellent. But there are people who, no matter how many advance polls there are—you could put one outside their house—still will not vote. So we have to find ways.

This bill is fairly limited. It's talking about a certain amount of advance polling and then it's talking about a full-out "election Sunday". The cost we're looking at for the election Sunday—Elections Canada says it will be a marginal result in terms of numbers.... Are there not better ways that we could engage people than making the final Sunday a full Sunday vote? Is that the one way to get people out, or should we be putting those resources elsewhere?

I put that question to both of you.

● (1240)

Ms. Iona Dougherty: I don't think this bill alone is addressing the issue; however, as I said, increased accessibility, in my mind, is always positive. The more opportunities you have, the better.

That's great, but we're not addressing the real issue of the disconnect between our traditional institutions and an entire generation, the 18- to 35-year-olds, who are not connecting with those institutions. I think this is a very small piece of the puzzle, and a lot of outreach and education needs to be done.

But there are also logistical issues, as I mentioned. Where are the polling stations? How are we using technology? There is a bunch of questions, which we need to be addressing as well, that this particular bill doesn't address.

The Chair: Mr. Anderson.

Mr. Rick Anderson: I couldn't agree more. There is only so much to this. It really is a problem of convenience.

I run a technology company here in Ottawa, with lots and lots of younger software developers on our staff. I have sat in our cafeteria talking to them on election day, having spent the days before and the weeks before with them following what's going on, expressing strong points of view. I have sat with them at lunch on election day and asked whether they had voted yet, and they've said they weren't going to vote. They know I'm going to give them the four hours off. They can take the rest of the day off and go to vote; they're entitled to it. They're not going to bother, and it's because they think "it doesn't matter".

It's not simply about the hours of the polling stations and the locations of the polling stations. We can improve those things; this bill does that. It's actually about things such as the excessive partisanship that people see in modern politics, not just in Canada but in other countries as well. It's a real turn-off to young people, to informed people, to literate people, to engaged people, to people who care about the issues.

They also look at the media covering ridings and saying, “Here’s a swing riding”, meaning the one they live in is not a swing riding. What does that mean? It means the outcome is not in question. This is a legacy of the first-past-the-post voting system, which casts half our ridings as being non-contested effectively in an election campaign.

People are not stupid. They get that the vote doesn’t actually matter that much in those locations, and so even though they may support a party or a candidate, they then think they needn’t bother, because they know their person is going to win or their person is going to lose. We can only address that with a more comprehensive approach to electoral reform, which I know is not what’s on the table here.

So I think where the bill is going is good in terms of making it easier for people to access the electoral system. What somebody needs to think about is how to start addressing the motivational gap and the interest and relevance gap that informed people are forming about modern politics.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you.

Mr. Anderson, I’m sure you’re going to be coming back for one of the other votes and bills we’re dealing with, because you raised the issue of cheating. It was raised here in Bill C-31. Elections Canada did an extensive study. They found one case in the last three elections, and they did a fair amount of study, so either you believe their methodology and their work or you don’t. The result was that we had a bill that disenfranchised a million people because we were going to get tough on voting.

I guess the question I’d put to you is, having seen the Ontario election.... I was at polling stations on election day when people were being turned away from voting because they were suddenly not on the Elections Ontario list, even though they had lived in their riding their entire lives. I saw another person with a passport being told, “A passport? That’s not adequate ID”; people who have come out to vote being told they can’t vote because they don’t meet the new “get tough on voting” requirements. Those are people I met on the following days in Tim Hortons saying, “To hell with it. If you don’t want my vote and don’t need my vote, I can do better things.”

Elections Canada hasn’t shown us where this massive fraud has taken place, but how do we balance this so that the people who want to vote aren’t disenfranchised from voting?

Mr. Rick Anderson: It’s a very good question, Mr. Angus. Sometimes I find it surprising how rudimentary so much of it is.

The banks seem not to have too much difficulty knowing who I am. The passport office seems to be pretty good at it. I run, as I said, a technology business. We do business with hundreds of thousands of Canadians through a website, and the incidence of fraud is maybe 1% or 2% there. It’s real, it exists, but we know how to deal with it. We know how to address it, we know how to suss it out, and we know what to do when we encounter it—who to call and what to do with particular cases. Somehow in politics, when we get our civic hats on and are talking about voters lists and so on, we deal with more antiquated processes, and I have a harder time making it easy for people to do something.

How easy is it for all of us to get a credit card? It’s very easy, but you have to prove who you are and establish certain real things about yourself. We know how to do this in our society; it’s not a difficult or unusual proposition. But somehow in the electoral sphere we find it complicated, and we can’t find that easier balance you’re talking about: how not to obstruct legitimate people who deserve legitimate access to a voters list while somehow being smarter and more adept at identifying cases where there’s probably not a legitimate situation.

• (1245)

The Chair: Thank you.

Colleagues, we are finished that round, and I’m going to cut it off right now.

I want to thank the witnesses for coming today. It has been very enlightening testimony. We certainly appreciate it.

We’ll take a one-minute break so that we can excuse our current witnesses and get the next witnesses to the table—one minute, colleagues.

• _____ (Pause) _____
•

The Chair: Colleagues, let’s resume the meeting now.

I want to welcome our witnesses. I’m going to give you a minute or two to introduce yourselves. If you have an opening statement, please make it as short as you can, because we’ll have time for one round of seven minutes.

I will go past one o’clock. I apologize to colleagues for that. We’ll just see whether we can maintain a quorum for gathering evidence.

If you have questions that you want asked but feel that maybe you can’t stay, please give them to one of your colleagues, and we’ll make sure those questions can get answered. I offer my apologies, but we will be going over.

I want to give members a bit of notice that on Thursday I will be asking the committee to review the budget of the committee, for witnesses’ expenses for Bill C-16.

As I’ve mentioned before, the Ethics Commissioner would like to meet with the committee. I have some suggestions for that, but I want members to think about it.

As well, I would like members to consider striking once again the subcommittee that worked on the forms and the code of ethics last year. We should strike it again. The forms are in, and I would like that committee to review them and make recommendations to the main committee.

The last thing before we get on with our witnesses is that Monsieur Miron has invited the committee to go to visit his facilities. You have two choices of dates before you. I will ask you for a decision on that at the beginning of the next meeting.

Colleagues, I’d rather not discuss it now, if we don’t have to; we could discuss it at the next meeting.

But yes, please, Madam Redman.

Hon. Karen Redman: My question was whether the steering committee is going to meet, because I still have a motion before this committee that hasn't been dealt with. I'd like some indication as to when we would deal with it.

The Chair: All right. I waited for the steering committee members to contact me. No one did. What I could suggest to you, Madam Redman, is that after the meeting I will agree to contact the steering committee members and initiate it from the chair, since no one called me about it from the floor.

•(1250)

Hon. Karen Redman: Marcel Proulx is travelling this week on House business, but I would fill in for that position.

The Chair: Perfect. Then perhaps we'll plan on that for next Wednesday.

Very quickly, Mr. Angus.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Just for clarification, since I will have to leave, we will not be doing any committee business?

The Chair: We will not. It's evidence-gathering only.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Okay, thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Angus, if you have a question that's pressing and you have to leave, I'd be happy to ask the question for you. Thank you.

Again, I'd like to welcome the witnesses to the committee.

Mr. Foster, perhaps you would introduce yourself. If you have an opening statement, keep it to one minute, please.

[Translation]

Mr. Joe Foster (Chair, Federal Council, Green Party of Canada): Good afternoon everybody.

[English]

Good day. Thank you for allowing me to be here.

My name is Joe Foster, and I am chair of the federal council for the Green Party of Canada and also the shadow cabinet advocate for human rights. Formerly I was the shadow cabinet advocate for democracy and good government. I think there's a difference between those two things.

I am pleased that we are able to speak to you today. I have just a few quick comments as introduction.

I do think this bill misses the mark in terms of improving voting. There is much more to be done. I had the good fortune to listen to the other two groups earlier this morning, and I hope there'll be some time to comment on those things.

I did a straw poll last night among some friends—I don't think any of them were Green—and to my surprise they were quite against increasing the number of voting days. They said we can go to the returning officer, we have the advance polls, and we also have the polling day itself. But the most cogent comment made was that if you increase the voting day to include Sunday, the usual moral suasion that surrounds "Have you voted yet today, and if not, are you going to today?" disappears. People can say they'll do it tomorrow, but *mañana* never comes. So I think that is a major issue.

Hopefully I can talk about young people—I think the young people who need to be targeted are below the age of 18—and about getting them interested in democratic responsibility.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Gardner, please. Welcome.

[Translation]

Mr. Gilbert Gardner (General Director, Bloc Québécois): Thank you.

We believe that what the bill sets out to do is commendable, but that the ways proposed of achieving this are totally inappropriate. It has already been observed in the past that more advanced polling does not necessarily lead to an overall increase in voter turnout. What is observed is merely a transfer effect. A second polling day will keep voter turnout stable. One may argue, in other words, that voted turnout will remain the same, except that it will be spread over two days.

What do the studies tell us? Studies conducted by Elections Canada in no way point to the number of polling days as the issue at hand. The two main reasons for poor voter turnout—and these are the reasons most frequently given—are, firstly, voter perception that politicians are dishonest and corrupt, and secondly, the belief that voting is a pointless exercise.

Now then, regarding the belief that voting is pointless, fortunately the Bloc Québécois has been on the scene since 1993. This is given hundreds of thousands of Quebecers an opportunity to freely express their conviction that Quebec must become a sovereign nation.

When it comes to people abstaining from voting, there are two reasons that come into play. Once again, the various scandals that have occurred, whether it be the sponsorship scandal, Airbus, or some other incident, have had a considerable impact in enumeration areas where traditionally voters have supported federalism. In the last two elections there's been a participation rate of between 40% and 45% which confirms the reasons outlined in the various studies conducted by the Chief Electoral Officer. The other tactic employed by voters to abstain is to spoil their ballot. Of the 118,000 invalid ballots cast in 2004, 58% were cast in Quebec. So that's also something to consider. I'll come back to more concrete proposals for increasing voter turnout later.

[English]

The Chair: *Merci.*

We're going to have time for one round, colleagues. We'll do the same thing; just share your time, if you need it. If you don't need it, just pass on it.

Madame Robillard.

[Translation]

Hon. Lucienne Robillard: Thank you very much for being here today. I have two specific questions for Mr. Gardner. You're from Quebec, and I'm sure you know how things work at the provincial level. In Quebec, advanced polling does take place on a Sunday. The official polling day is Monday. Have you had an opportunity to compare voter turnout at the provincial and federal levels? Our advanced polls takes place on Friday, Saturday, and Monday. In Quebec, it's on a Sunday. Have you observed any difference in participation rates?

• (1255)

Mr. Gilbert Gardner: I don't have that information. I'm not aware of these figures.

Hon. Lucienne Robillard: Do you think such a comparison might be useful?

Mr. Gilbert Gardner: Indeed, one solution could be to conduct advanced polling based on the current rules, and not the rules set out in the bill, in other words several advanced polls could be held in the same location, which is the case with traditional advanced polling. People would be informed that they are able to take part in advanced polling.

Hon. Lucienne Robillard: We have had no hard and fast evidence presented to us to date that adding these two days will increase voter turnout. If we had proof that Sunday is a better day, we could move the advanced polls from Friday to Sunday. For example, young students don't go to university or CEGEP on Mondays and they vote in greater numbers on Sundays. However, we still don't have any evidence that adding or changing days is necessary.

Do you understand what I'm trying to say?

Mr. Gilbert Gardner: Yes, I do.

Hon. Lucienne Robillard: Do you think that the Chief Electoral Officer should, for example, test this approach in a federal by-election before applying it across the board? We still don't have any evidence, as members of the parliamentary committee, on which to base our position on this issue.

Mr. Gilbert Gardner: One of the solutions we wanted to put forward was to allow the Chief Electoral Officer to do trials during by-elections. The problem of voter turnout is worse during by-elections.

Let me remind you of three by-elections that were held: Témiscamingue in 2004 with 29% voter turnout; Lévis in 2004 with 24%; and Berthier in 2002 with 28.6%. That is a real voter turnout problem. If you look at voter participation rates in Canada from 1896 to 2006, you see that the variations are not large. There were peaks at 80%, but the average voter turnout rate remains consistent at around 60% or 70%.

However, by-elections present a real problem. Let's allow the Chief Electoral Officer to do some trials according to the objectives and the mechanisms provided for in the act during by-elections. Then, the real impact could be measured more scientifically. All studies have shown that distance between the place of residence and the polling station is a more important factor in voter turnout than the number of hours the polls are opened.

Hon. Lucienne Robillard: Wouldn't a pilot project conducted strictly during a by-election falsely represent what actually happens during a general election? I don't have any scientific proof, but I've always heard said that during by-elections, voters are less motivated because they're only voting for a representative in their riding and not for a government. So the voter is less motivated when not choosing a government. You know full well that sometimes voters vote for the local candidate, sometimes for the local party and sometimes for the next government.

Mr. Gilbert Gardner: I start from the premise that voter turnout is a problem mainly during by-elections. With respect to general elections, consider the statistics since 1896: the voter turnout rate has been relatively stable. Moreover, declining voter participation rates is a major trend that has been observed internationally and in the western world.

We therefore do not think that the provisions of this bill will counter... There are other solutions. Let me give you one example. We acted quickly in response to requests from seniors by allowing them to vote in their place of residence or by setting up revisal offices and polling stations in senior centres.

We complain about voter turnout among young people. For a significant number of months, students often live in university and college dorms. Why not require Elections Canada, for a much lesser cost than what this bill would entail, to set up revisal offices and special polling stations that would allow a student from Sept-Îles who attends Laval University to vote in his riding of Sept-Îles by way of a special vote during the advanced poll period? In my opinion, such measures would bring young people closer to the electoral process.

We moved quickly to correct the situation for seniors. However, we continue to complain about the low voter turnout among the young, even though we have taken no practical, simple or concrete steps to allow them to exercise their right to vote.

• (1300)

[English]

The Chair: *Merci beaucoup.*

Mr. Lukiwski, please.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Thank you, Chair.

Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you very much for coming.

I have a couple of comments, and then maybe I'll ask you to respond. I'm referring to all of our witnesses.

I want to re-emphasize the fact that this bill was introduced for one primary purpose—namely, to try to increase voter turnout. That's something that I think all of us around this committee table can agree on: if we increase voter turnout, that's a good thing, and it's just a matter of do we get there. Many of our witnesses have identified other areas—the root cause behind voter dissatisfaction, apathy, that type of thing—but the fact remains that I have yet to hear anyone say that increasing the number of opportunities to cast ballots would actually have no effect or a detrimental effect on voter turnout. Many have argued that there would be a marginal increase in voter turnout. Nonetheless, everyone seems to agree that giving expanded voting opportunities would probably increase voter turnout.

Now, if someone wants to do a cost-benefit analysis after this is all over—i.e., we increased voter turnout by 1%, but it cost us \$32 million, so is it worth it?—then fine, we can have that discussion. But again, I want to focus in on the fact that we are trying to do something in this legislation, and that is to find some way to start to increase voter participation.

I can give you an observation here, although maybe not exact statistical information, about information that comes from Saskatchewan, which is one of three provinces, as I'm sure you're all aware, that allow advance polls on Sunday. In Saskatchewan we just had a recent provincial election, and advance polls were open on Sunday. The information I have is that the number of ballots cast in the advance poll was higher on the Sunday than on any other day of the week.

To me, this reinforces what I've been hearing consistently in my riding: people like the idea that they have the ability to vote on Sundays because they have more time, or usually they have more time. The majority of people have more access, more free time. Many people in my riding have consistently stated—whether or not they have an objection to voting on a day of rest, or whether or not they think there's an intrusion on their religious opportunities to worship—that they like the fact that they have more time available to them to vote on Sunday. Most of the people I've surveyed really seem to appreciate the fact that this is different from a normal advance poll. The Sunday immediately preceding the general election would have polling stations at all the regular voting locations, as opposed to a normal advance poll.

Mr. Preston already alluded to the fact that in rural Canada many people have to travel an hour, and sometimes more than an hour, just to get to an advance poll location. Yet this bill suggests that on the Sunday immediately preceding voting day, all normal voting locations will be open. So rather than having to travel an hour or an hour and a half to an advance polling location, they could probably travel five minutes and get to a poll.

Others argue, and perhaps rightfully so, that this means in effect two days of full voting as opposed to one. Well, be that as it may, it gives people more opportunity to cast a ballot. We've heard from witnesses previously that if they'd had this opportunity before, probably they would have voted.

So I guess my comment is that although this may not be the panacea for all that's wrong with the voting system...and there are many things wrong, I suppose, with the electoral or political system these days. Mr. Gardner mentioned a few of them, and why people are dissatisfied and perhaps choose not to vote. While there are many other reasons or root causes for voter dissatisfaction, would you not agree that this bill perhaps, in some small measure, will actually increase voter participation?

● (1305)

The Chair: Mr. Lukiwski, you first offered it to all the witnesses. Did you want to direct it?

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: I would like comments from Mr. Foster and Mr. Gardner.

The Chair: Mr. Foster, would you care to go first, please?

Mr. Joe Foster: Thank you very much.

As I already mentioned, my reaction is no, I think there's a possibility that this would actually decrease motivation. One thing to consider is that they already think the government wastes money. Spending another \$34 million on another day in an election, with all sorts of increased problems, finding people to man the stations, security over the two days, and so on....

I think the image that's being provided is that it's a gimmick to try to get people out when they're not really wanting to address the real issues that you could really ask people about in a citizens forum. I hear a lot of guessing here—we think this might happen, we think that might be the case—but we don't know. And I don't think this standing committee has the time or resources to do that. A citizens forum would do that.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Gardner, please.

[Translation]

Mr. Gilbert Gardner: You can operate by trial and error in life. You try to solve the problem one way, and if that doesn't work, you try something else.

I'd like to refer to two studies by Elections Canada that I would urge you to read. You have in your possession the document entitled *Potential impact of extending advanced polling on voter turnout*, which clearly states:

The fact that advanced polling is facilitated does not have a significant impact on people who do not follow political news events.

Another study by Carleton University and the University of Toronto which involved a scientific poll of over 2,000 people, including a pool of voters and a pool of non-voters, explored the reasons why people do not vote. Not having enough time to vote, either at advanced polls or on voting day, was never cited as a reason for not voting.

Let me give you another example. During the last election, in the riding of Louis-Hébert, the turnout for advanced polls was 19%. It was believed that the turnout on polling day would be 80%, or an increase of almost 150%. Well, that's not what happened. Instead of voting on polling day, people voted in advanced polls, and the total turnout was 60%, just as in previous elections. The overall turnout rate didn't change because of the advance polls. Voting patterns simply shifted.

If you want to shift things around, you're free to do so, but in the final analysis you will not achieve your objective which is to increase voter turnout. The studies you have before you indicate that it won't happen.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[English]

I'll offer the last spot to Madam Picard.

[Translation]

Ms. Pauline Picard: I have a brief question for you, but I want to share something that came to mind following what Mr. Lukiwski said.

He was saying that people like to vote on Sunday, that it was an emotional thing. If you have any studies to the effect that people like to vote on Sunday, instead of adding days, why don't we have them vote on Sundays rather than Mondays? "D" day should be Sunday.

In other democracies, D day is Sunday. If you think that we'd have a better voter turnout if election day was on a Sunday, according to the studies you've seen, it could be done on a Sunday.

I'd like to address my Bloc Québécois colleagues. You cited the main reasons for lack of interest and you made certain suggestions such as requiring Elections Canada to locate revisal offices in universities and CEGEPs, which is something I agree with and which has been requested by many students. You also proposed putting a pilot project to the test during by-elections.

Do you have any other suggestions for us?

• (1310)

Mr. Gilbert Gardner: There was another idea that was mentioned, and it particularly targets youth, who should be targeted. All studies show that political parties play a critical role in terms of actual voter turnout rates. The efforts of political parties during the election campaign and on voting day can actively affect voter turnout. We would like to suggest that the date of birth be included on the voters list. That would allow for targeted communications and mailings in accordance with voters' concerns.

Quebec election laws allow political parties to list birth dates on voters lists. At the federal level, this is prohibited. The returning officer has the voter's date of birth, but the political parties do not. I think that this approach would also allow political parties to send voters more targeted messages and to conduct more targeted

operations at exit polls, and do so more effectively. I think that's another approach that we could take.

However let me add a comment, even though the comparison may be tenuous. In Quebec, municipal elections take place on Sunday. We often hear said that the closer a voter is to services offered by a level of government, the more he or she will participate and be interested. Let me remind you that in Quebec, the voter turnout rate for a municipal elections is about 50%. The rate is declining and yet, those elections do take place on Sunday.

I won't even mention school board elections. Last time around, the turnout rate was 8.8%. Obviously, not all voters have children and not all of them are concerned by these issues. At the municipal level, even in municipalities where the percentage of property owners is very high, voter turnout is no higher. And yet, this affects their interests and their wallets.

[English]

The Chair: Colleagues, that sums up the rounds of questions. I want to thank our witnesses very much for coming out today and offering their testimony. I appreciate everybody's kindness in allowing us to go a few minutes of overtime. I think it shows great respect for the witnesses and great desire on behalf of committee members to get the evidence they need.

I assure the witnesses that members of the committee who had to leave will have the opportunity to see the minutes of this meeting. So your testimony won't be lost on them either.

Colleagues, thank you very much. The next meeting is on Thursday. We'll deal with some business at the beginning.

Seeing no other business today, I hereby adjourn the meeting.

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

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

**Also available on the Parliament of Canada Web Site at the following address:
Aussi disponible sur le site Web du Parlement du Canada à l'adresse suivante :
<http://www.parl.gc.ca>**

The Speaker of the House hereby grants permission to reproduce this document, in whole or in part, for use in schools and for other purposes such as private study, research, criticism, review or newspaper summary. Any commercial or other use or reproduction of this publication requires the express prior written authorization of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Le Président de la Chambre des communes accorde, par la présente, l'autorisation de reproduire la totalité ou une partie de ce document à des fins éducatives et à des fins d'étude privée, de recherche, de critique, de compte rendu ou en vue d'en préparer un résumé de journal. Toute reproduction de ce document à des fins commerciales ou autres nécessite l'obtention au préalable d'une autorisation écrite du Président.