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Wednesday, August 26, 2009

—
Chair

Mr. Larry Miller

Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food

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• (1550)

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order. I'm sitting in for chairman Larry. My name is Mark Eyking.

I welcome the witnesses here today.

We're hoping to be done at five o'clock, but I'm just letting the witnesses know that we have a little business we have to finish first before we go to the witness list.

If I may, we have a motion brought forward by Mr. Storseth. Could he read the motion, and then we can deal with the motion, debate, and vote on it.

Mr. Brian Storseth (Westlock—St. Paul, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to read my motion into the record. I would also like to say at the start that I have some concerns with the process I had to go through to get this motion on the table, but that's something I think would be best dealt with when we have all the regular members of the full committee here, so I'm willing to leave that until later.

My motion would read:

That the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food would like to commend Sheila Weatherill, the independent investigator into last summer's listeriosis outbreak, for her excellent work and, consequently, the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-food is of the view that no public inquiry is necessary.

In support of my motion, Mr. Chair, I would like to quote Mr. Easter's own words, in discussion of the avian flu public inquiry, when he was the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food:

All another inquiry would do is rehash what has already been rehashed and for which recommendations have already been made. All it would do is cost more money. All it would do is tie up agency personnel who should be acting on recommendations instead of shuffling paper around.

Those were Mr. Easter's own words. The fact of the matter is that this government has already taken the issue seriously and conducted a lessons learned report. The food safety subcommittee has listened to over 50 hours of testimony from 77 witnesses, which resulted in 878 pages of documentation. As well, an independent investigator interviewed and met with more than 100 people first-hand who had knowledge of the events of last summer and compiled 5.8 million pages of information. In fact, Mr. Chair, the only individual of all of the witnesses we had come forward to ask for a public inquiry was one who clearly had a partisan Liberal affiliation, Mr. Amir Attaran.

From that, I submit my motion to the committee.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Is there discussion on the motion?

Mr. Bellavance, then Mr. Lemieux.

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance (Richmond—Arthabaska, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I would like to briefly repeat what I said in the *in camera* session. I want it to be on the record.

This motion is an absolute contradiction of what is stated in the Agriculture Committee's report. For many weeks, the Subcommittee reviewed the listeriosis issue. Mr. Storseth is well aware of the fact that the majority of the members of this committee specifically recommended that the government hold an open and transparent public inquiry, because of the gaps in Ms. Weatherill's mandate that had been noted.

Congratulating Ms. Weatherill for her work and saying that, because of that, there is no longer any need to hold a public inquiry is a complete *non sequitur*. We are having trouble understanding why Mr. Storseth has tabled this motion today. I believe the only reason why it is coming forward is the fact that, for once, the Conservatives have a majority on the Committee and will be in a position to win the vote on it. However, that in no way changes the conclusions of the report tabled by the Agriculture Committee in June, before the end of the last parliamentary session, in which the government was again asked to focus on the need to hold a full public inquiry on the listeriosis crisis which, I would remind Committee members, resulted in no less than 22 deaths.

It seems to me there is no room for petty politics on an issue such as this.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Thank you, Mr. Bellavance.

Mr. Easter.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I don't want to spend too much time on this motion either, but I do want to make a couple of points and strenuously oppose it.

I will say I am disappointed that the government members engineered the committee this way, so that they could get a motion of this nature through. We understand that, but I think it is against democratic principles the way they've engineered this. Clearly, this motion is all about some kind of secretive government at work. They don't want Canadians to know what really happened with the listeriosis issue that caused 22 deaths. What this motion today is about is messaging, not substance, and this is the operating agenda of this Conservative government. It's about messaging, not substance. It goes to the heart, I would say, of the Harper propaganda machine to try to leave the impression that the facts are different from what they really are.

I'll make my point. I can see after this motion goes through, Mr. Chair... And you've seen the ten percenters coming from Conservative members across this country. I understand ten percenters are propaganda pieces. That's not what they were designed for in the beginning. I get about five in my riding a week from seven or eight different Conservative members, clearly propaganda. What they will do in this propaganda machine they're running over there—at taxpayers' expense, I might say—is they will be quoting this line: “The Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-food is of the view that no public inquiry is necessary.”

That will be in their ten percenters, to try to leave the impression that the committee's subcommittee, which Carolyn and I sit on, didn't call for that, when in fact they did. Actually, the full committee—and I'll read it into the record—after months and hours of hearings, passed a motion, recommendation one, as follows:

The subcommittee recommends that the government call for a fully transparent and independent public inquiry, with all the powers provided under the Inquiries Act, into the actions of the federal government, its agencies, and departments in relation to the events leading up to, during, and subsequent to the listeriosis crisis of the summer 2008.

The reason that motion is there, based on the evidence we heard, Mr. Chair, is that the investigator—who did a very good job in terms of her investigation, was critical of the government on a number of points—didn't have the authority to investigate the Prime Minister's Office or the Minister of Agriculture's office or the political people pulling the strings, like some of these minions sitting behind the Conservative members over there from the PMO who are pulling their strings.

So that's the reason for the public inquiry.

I'd just say, Mr. Chair, that this is all about the messaging, and the reason it was set up this way today.... I understand the parliamentary secretary is next on the list; maybe he could answer the question. Did the Prime Minister order Larry Miller to stay away today so that we'd have to put the Liberal in the chair, so they'd have the majority? Is that the way you manipulated the public again? Because that's what you're doing. You're messaging. This is what it's all about. To message and confuse the Canadian people, they set up this committee. Where's the chair? It didn't happen at other committees. At other committees, the normal chair chaired.

• (1555)

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, CPC): Chair, I have a point of order.

Hon. Wayne Easter: And the ministers came at other committees.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: I have a point of order, Chair.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Are you finished, Mr. Easter?

Hon. Wayne Easter: No, no. I'm just about done.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Well, Mr. Lemieux, you're on anyway.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: I'm just addressing a comment that Mr. Easter made. Mr. Easter knows that committees are responsible unto themselves. No one was involved in Mr. Miller's being away; it was his schedule. He is far away from here right now and he was unable to get back, Chair, and Mr. Easter knew that. He knew that early on.

Thank you, Chair.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): I have to say a few things. We can continue with this debate if that's the will of the committee, but just so you know, Mrs. Swan came here to speak today but she has to leave at 4:45 p.m. She has an international flight to catch. I want the committee to know that. If it's the will of the committee to keep debating this motion, at the end of the day we're going to hear less from witnesses.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Just to conclude, Mr. Chair.... I wasn't finished with my remarks; that was a point of order.

Just to conclude, we recognized that. It's why we wanted the witnesses first. But as you see, the government members put this motion first to try to limit our debate on it, because as I said, it is manipulating the message to confuse the Canadian mind when in fact the full hearing called for a public inquiry.

The last couple of points I would make is that under subsection 106(4) of the Standing Orders, when four members of this committee asked for this hearing today, that set the timeframe. For whatever reason, the chair is missing. And now, the government members—I would imagine at the behest of the PMO—have managed to try to manipulate the message.

The bottom line for me is, what has the government to hide? What have they got to hide? Why do they not want a public inquiry into government responsibility on this issue? The full report is in the House of Commons. Maybe some day we'll get the opportunity to debate it there. We'll have to see the government's response to it.

So with those remarks, Mr. Chair, I strongly oppose the games the Conservative members are playing and the motion as proposed.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Thank you, Mr. Easter.

We now have a list of four.

I think, Mr. Lemieux, you're next.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: No, Chair, I—

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Then we have Mr. Christopherson, Mr. Shipley, and Mr. Bellavance.

There's a point of order.

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance: I would like to come back to what I was saying earlier about how this contradicts the report passed by the Committee before the end of the last parliamentary session. I would like to put a question to the Clerk in that regard. I am wondering whether Mr. Storseth's motion is actually in order. Decisions made by the House must be in keeping with what is decided in committee. The first recommendation of the report which was tabled in the House of Commons calls for a fully transparent public inquiry.

Once a report such as this has been tabled in the House of Commons, can the very same Agriculture Committee then turn around and say exactly the opposite?

In my opinion, this motion should be declared out of order, because the Committee already decided to call for a public inquiry. How can we now come along and say that there should not be one?

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Thank you, Mr. Bellavance. I understand that clearly.

Does the clerk want to make a comment?

My understanding from the clerk is that the report, even though it was presented, has not been adopted in the House.

• (1600)

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance: It was passed by the Committee and tabled in the House. We considered it in committee and it was passed, not only by the Subcommittee, but by the full committee as well.

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): The clerks are not sure on this ruling; they're going to check. So we'll hold that and maybe they can check on it, and we'll continue with some of the discussion.

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance: Would it be possible to suspend debate on this motion and introduce it at a subsequent meeting, once the ruling is known? That way, we could hear our witnesses and continue our work.

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): You're suggesting that we suspend until they come back, and then we go right back into it? How long do you think...?

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance: We will be discussing something about which we do not yet...

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): They've just said it will be five to ten minutes. Is it the will of the committee that we do that?

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Mr. Chair, I think we can continue. I have my comments to make as a speaker while the clerk is investigating.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Mr. Lemieux.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Thank you very much, Chair. I'd like to make a few comments related to what Mr. Easter said.

I did smile somewhat when he spoke about us, the Conservatives, having orchestrated this meeting. This meeting wasn't called by the Conservatives; it was called by Mr. Easter himself, or by four members of the opposition, actually. So I think that needs to be brought to light. We have agreed to have this meeting. We have nothing to hide. We are in this meeting right now.

I'd like to address the point regarding the motion. There are actually a few things.

First, it's important to note that the food safety committee listened to over 50 hours of testimony from 77 witnesses and that this resulted in 878 pages of documentation. So a thorough review was done by the food safety subcommittee.

In addition to that, four lessons learned reports have been written. There was also, of course, the study done by the independent investigator, Sheila Weatherill, who interviewed and met first-hand with more than 100 people who had knowledge of the events of last summer, and she compiled 5.8 million pages of information.

In all of that, no one asked for a full public inquiry except one single person, only one witness. Out of everything I just listed—the lessons learned report, the report issued by the food safety subcommittee, and Sheila Weatherill's report—only one person even mentioned a full public inquiry, and it was a partisan, a Liberal supporter, who has given financially: Mr. Amir Attaran.

Mr. Bellavance is smiling now, because he knows. He takes exception to the fact that we've inserted that we don't feel that a public inquiry is necessary. He's saying, well, certainly the committee felt that at the time. They simply outvoted the Conservatives at that time. So I think it's a bit unfair to say, or to give the assertion or the view, perhaps, that the entire committee supported that recommendation, because clearly they didn't. That's why we ended up submitting our own report, to contrast the report submitted by the full committee.

I want to go on to mention why we feel a public inquiry is not necessary, and it's somewhat linked to Mr. Storseth's motion.

The motion that is in front of us today is not the full motion that he submitted to the clerk. So I would like to make an amendment to Mr. Storseth's motion—you can consider it a friendly amendment—simply to reinsert what he originally had in his motion.

The original part of the motion stands:

That the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food would like to commend Sheila Weatherill, the independent investigator into last summer's listeriosis outbreak, for her excellent work

My amendment is to add the next sentence:

Ms. Weatherill's in-depth examination has provided Canadians with a complete and comprehensive review of the events of last summer and recommendations that will improve Canada's food safety system. Due to this extensive review,

That would end my amendment, and then we'd go to the main motion:

the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food is of the view that no public inquiry is necessary.

It was the original motion. The clerk should have a copy of it.

The key point I want to make is that not only did Ms. Weatherill do a full and comprehensive review of this situation, of the food safety issues within Canada, but there were many other reviews and reports, lessons learned reports, done as well.

When you look at all of this, when you look at the big picture, definitely it has been reviewed to its full extent. As I mentioned, that's why no full public inquiry is necessary, because a thorough review on many different levels, involving many different levels of government, has already been done.

•(1605)

I will end there, Mr. Chair. Thank you. I have my amendment to the motion, on which, hopefully, we will eventually vote.

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Do we have that? Can you make out his amendment?

A voice: It's the original motion.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): It's the original motion.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: It is.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): So I guess we'll be reading how the motion is going to look with this amendment. Right? And then we'll have a discussion on the amendment.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Isabelle Duford): Do you want me to read it again?

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Yes, perhaps you could read the new version and how it's going to be.

The Clerk: The original motion read:

That the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food would like to commend Sheila Weatherill, the independent investigator into last summer's listeriosis outbreak, for her excellent work

Then the amendment begins:

Ms. Weatherill's in-depth examination has provided Canadians with a complete and comprehensive review of the events of last summer and recommendations that will improve Canada's food safety system. Due to this extensive review

—and then we go back to the original motion—

the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food is of the view that no public inquiry is necessary.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Okay, you have read the amendment with the new motion. What I'm going to do, if there's discussion on that...

Mr. Christopherson, you're on the list. So if you want to speak first, you may.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Well, I don't want to speak to the amendment, but to the main motion, Mr. Chair. I'll wait until it's amended.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Okay.

Does anybody else want to speak on the amendment?

Mr. Easter.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Yes, Mr. Chair. Maybe the parliamentary secretary could tell us this.

The amendment just adds a few words; I disagree with them, and we'll be voting against them.

The original mandate for Ms. Weatherill was basically that after she had written her initial report, she would run it by certain witnesses for editing in terms of their testimony. And I think we should all understand at this committee that these hearings that Ms. Weatherill held were not transparent, in the typical fashion of this government. They were not transparent; they were held in secret.

We don't know who the witnesses were. We don't know what they said. But we do believe they had the opportunity to edit their remarks prior to their being made public. And we do know—

Mr. Brian Storseth: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, it's one thing for Mr. Easter to constantly attack, to come out here and attack the PMO and the Conservatives and all of that. But when he constantly goes after Ms. Weatherill, an independent investigator and one of the most highly respected women in Canada year after year, constantly calling her into question throughout every committee meeting we've had—

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): That is not a point of order.

Mr. Brian Storseth: Here's why it is a point of order, Mr. Chair, if you would just bear with me for one more second.

Ms. Weatherill said, regarding her investigation: "I have been able to conduct my investigation independently and impartially. There has been no interference from any party whatsoever."

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): It's not a point of order.

• (1610)

Mr. Brian Storseth: It's just fact, Mr. Chairman.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): I'll remind the committee, if we can move along here, just to speak on the amendment. Make it quick so we can get the motion done, because the clock is ticking.

Is there anybody else on the amendment?

Hon. Wayne Easter: I didn't finish my remarks before I was interrupted, Mr. Chair.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): I'm sorry, Mr. Easter.

Hon. Wayne Easter: It goes to my point that we do not know who the witnesses were. All we've seen is a report, which, at the end of the day, supposedly could have been edited by those witnesses.

Again, it goes to the heart of this government: secrecy and cover-up. That's why I oppose this motion. We don't know what happened.

I think her report is very good in terms of some of its recommendations. But we really don't know in full context what the witnesses said. We don't know if 20 of them maybe called for a public inquiry and she just didn't put that in, because she was under pressure to report to the minister, who would make the decision whether or not the report would be made public.

So again, it goes to the heart of this government: secrecy, lack of transparency—and, I would submit, a cover-up.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Is there any more comment on the amendment?

On the amendment, we'll go to Mr. Shipley and then to Mr. Bellavance.

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I can hardly believe what I'm hearing. Mr. Easter is actually saying to our witnesses here from the CFIA and the union, and to all the other witnesses we had, that actually...

And I would ask them, has your testimony been altered?

Mr. Easter is making a statement that Ms. Weatherill actually went ahead and altered the statements of our witnesses.

Hon. Wayne Easter: No.

Mr. Bev Shipley: You did so.

Hon. Wayne Easter: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, it says right in the terms of reference for Ms. Weatherill that she is to...and this was my question to the parliamentary secretary. I didn't say they were edited, but she was to provide copies.

An hon. member: You just did.

Hon. Wayne Easter: No, I didn't say they were edited. She was to provide copies to those witnesses to see if they wanted them edited. That's the case, and it's right in the directions to Ms. Weatherill.

Did she or did she not? Is what we're getting the original or is it not? The parliamentary secretary should be able to answer that. That was what she was allowed to do.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Chair, I'll answer the question.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Sorry, Mr. Shipley has the floor.

Mr. Bev Shipley: All I'm saying is that basically you've put a cloud over the witnesses, without a doubt, and I find that reprehensible.

She also said in her report that she's been able to conduct her investigation independently and impartially, that there's been no interference from any party whatsoever, including all the witnesses. And it's important to point out that everyone who was asked to participate agreed to be interviewed, and they were. That's in the final report.

I find that those comments that are coming to discredit not only Ms. Weatherill but also the witnesses are something that I guess you have to expect from the opposition and how they operate, because the editing of the witnesses' report would be a serious offence, if that were the case.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Mr. Bellavance, on the amendment.

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance: With or without the amendment, I still believe that this motion is out of order. Now that you have been talking with the clerks, are you able to announce your ruling as to whether Mr. Storseth's motion is in order or not? We could then put it to a vote and hear from our witnesses, in the little time remaining.

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Thank you, Mr. Bellavance. I think the timing is right.

If you don't mind speaking on the...

You go ahead. You're doing a good job.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-François Lafleur (Procedural Clerk): Mr. Bellavance, as regards Mr. Storseth's motion on the public inquiry, we are aware of the fact that the Committee report contained a recommendation in that regard. The report also contains a number of other recommendations and, in that sense, it is much broader than just the question of the public inquiry, if I may put it that way.

Furthermore, it does happen on occasion that, as a result of certain facts, a committee or some of its members change their mind. From that perspective, the motion can also be considered to be in order. For example, a private member's bill introduced very early on in a parliamentary session could be defeated, but then reintroduced subsequently with the same wording. In other words, an initial decision is made during the course of the parliamentary session and, subsequently, the same bill with the exact same wording is introduced a second time. In that case, we are talking about a situation where members are voting twice on the same motion or wording; there is no problem under that scenario.

I realize that, in this case, the motion is a little different and is not worded in exactly the same way. However, the Committee report has not yet been passed by the House. I want to come back to the explanation I gave earlier. Certain events or other arguments may arise that prompt the Committee to propose something different. Far be it from me to make such an assumption here. But that is what is on the table at this time. In that respect, it cannot be said that the question to be decided is exactly the same. As a result, the motion *per se* is in order.

• (1615)

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Mr. Bellavance, are you clear on that? Were you finished, Mr. Bellavance? You had the floor.

So we're voting on the amendment.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Chair, if I could just add to what the clerk said, this is why the amendment I'm making is actually important.

When the committee finalized its report, it had not seen Sheila Weatherill's report. Her report had not been delivered. A piece of the puzzle was missing, information was missing. That follows right in line with what the clerk was saying in that not all the information was available at the time. Because Sheila Weatherill has now published her report, we now have access to more information than we had before. So my amendment draws attention to that fact, to the excellent report that she did, that it was a thorough investigation, that she made several very important recommendations to improve food safety, and in that context there is no need for a public inquiry.

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Thank you.

Let's have a vote on the amendment. It's the same procedure. Those in favour of the amendment?

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance: Mr. Chairman, could we please have a recorded vote?

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Yes, sure.

(Amendment agreed to: yeas 6; nays 5)

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): This brings us back to the main motion. I think Mr. Storseth will say the final words on the motion so we can bring it to a vote.

Mr. Brian Storseth: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I would just like to clarify a couple of things as I wrap this up. I listened intently to Mr. Easter's comments, and he talks about this being all about messaging. I don't know about his side, but our side is here to talk about food safety, and that's why we have shown up at every one of the food safety committee meetings. The Conservatives have had representatives throughout the entirety of those meetings, unlike the Liberal Party, who couldn't even be bothered to stay for all the witnesses of those meetings.

He talks about the ten percenters. We've got proof right here of Liberal ten percenters from Newfoundland being sent in to Barrie. Canadians are tired of all this talk out of one side of your mouth and then not walking it on the other side.

The other point, Mr. Chair, is that the last time the minister came to the subcommittee to talk about food safety, Mr. Easter ceded his questions. He didn't even fulfill his last round of questions. He gave them up. What were you going to do with the second hour, if you had it? We need to make sure we clarify for Canadians what has really happened in these committee meetings, and that's why I wish every single one of those committee meetings was televised so it could be seen how the opposition sometimes treated our witnesses in those meetings.

I think it's very important, now that we have the report from Ms. Weatherill, that the Standing Committee on Agriculture gives its opinion on this report. When we submitted our report, because the opposition treated it as a partisan football and wanted to get it out before we broke from the spring session, we didn't have a chance to see Ms. Weatherill's report. We're trying to have due diligence here; we're trying to do the right thing. That's why I think it's important that we have this conversation. I think this motion is very important.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): I forgot you, Mr. Christopherson, so if you want to say a few words, go ahead, and then we'll cut it off there.

• (1620)

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you, Chair.

I will not belabour the point, but I'll just put three very quick points on the record.

First of all, I'm not a member of this committee—I'm here subbing for my colleague—but I have been here for the entire meeting—in camera and in public—and I can tell you, in my opinion, there's clearly a whole set of political gymnastics happening on the part of the government. In my opinion, they clearly did contrive to have the permanent chair absent, requiring a member of the—

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: On a point of order, Chair, that is not true.

Mr. David Christopherson: That's not a point of order.

Then, by virtue of—

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Mr. Christopherson, you've got the floor.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you, Chair.

Then the Liberal vice-chair, it was necessary—

Mr. Brian Storseth: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair. Just so Mr. Christopherson doesn't get himself into any more trouble than he already is in, you cannot refer to what happened in an in camera meeting. You cannot. That is a point of privilege to members of Parliament. It has happened once already on the opposition side; we let it go by. He's clearly referred to what happened in an in camera meeting and that is very inappropriate.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Good point. I think I heard it from both sides, and I think we should all be reminded that whatever happens in camera stays in camera.

Mr. David Christopherson: I hear the point, Chair, but I do not accept that it was some kind of secret. As far as I know, you're still in the chair, and as far as I know, Larry Miller's still not here. Unless I'm in some kind of alternate universe, that's the reality in public, and it has nothing to do with what we talked about in camera.

Now, if I may proceed, we can get on with the witnesses. Thank you.

The vice-chair is now in the chair, and the purpose is that it now gives the government de facto majority control. That is not reflective of the House. The Canadian people did not elect a majority Conservative government, and if they wonder what it will look like if they ever do, watch the roughshod that's going on here.

That leads me to my second point, which is also the reason I'm going to vote against this motion. And the government is making sure that we're voting on this first. At the end of this, it says there's a view that we don't need a public inquiry. They say there's no need for a public inquiry because of, what, 50 hours, 878 pages of documentation? Yet not one of them is saying that this meeting shouldn't happen, that somehow this expenditure of time and money and effort is okay. The reason they'll make it okay, Chair, is that by passing this motion ahead of time, no matter what information comes out of the questioning, even if the public concludes by watching that it's obvious we need a public inquiry, the position of the committee will have already been taken. That's going to happen because the government members are going to ram this through using their artificial majority.

My last point is that if we really wanted to have the most productive meeting, then we would have ensured that Ms. Weatherill was here to present her reports, since she's done all that work, and secondly, that the minister was here, since most of the unanswered questions, or many of them, are around the actions of the government, and specifically the minister of the day.

Thank you, Chair.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Thank you very much, Mr. Christopherson.

We're going to bring this to a vote. I'd like to hear from Mrs. Swan this afternoon before she leaves, so let's make it quick, if you don't mind, Mr. Lemieux.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: It will be quick, Chair. I just want to address what Mr. Christopherson said.

The first thing is that the opposition set up this meeting. We voted in favour of it, but they're the ones who called the meeting.

Second, I don't understand why he's up in arms over commending Ms. Weatherill, as the independent investigator, on the excellent report that she did.

Third, the opposition is calling into question her very credibility, and I say shame on them for that. She is an independent investigator, and her own comments state, "I have been able to conduct my investigation independently and impartially. There has been no interference from any party whatsoever." She also pointed out that everyone who was asked to participate agreed to the interview. Chair, her credibility is being questioned here by the opposition, and it's inappropriate.

Fourth, Mr. Christopherson has said many times that he's not part of this regular committee and he wasn't here for the previous meetings. That's absolutely right. He doesn't really know what he's talking about, because he was never part of the food safety subcommittee and he was never part of the agricultural standing committee. So it's fine that he vents like this, but I want to draw to the public's attention that he hasn't sat in on any of these meetings. He has no idea what he's talking about.

Thank you, Chair.

Mr. David Christopherson: Mr. Chair, all my remarks were about what happened today, and I've been here for every moment, so put it where it belongs.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): I think that was a little heavy, Mr. Lemieux, but anyway, let's bring this to a vote. Of course, we'll probably get a recorded vote, as usual, if the clerk will go through this.

• (1625)

The Clerk: Is that the will of the committee?

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Is it the will of the committee that we go to a vote?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Clerk: Would you like me to read the motion?

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): We'll do the same procedure as before.

The Clerk: The motion as amended reads as follows:

That the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food would like to commend Sheila Weatherill, the independent investigator into last summer's listeriosis outbreak, for her excellent work. Ms. Weatherill's indepth examination has provided Canadians with a complete and comprehensive review of the events of last summer, and recommendations that will improve Canada's food safety system. Due to this extensive review, the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food is of the view that no public inquiry is necessary.

(Motion as amended agreed to: yeas 6; nays 5)

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Okay. That's it for that.

Mr. Lemieux.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Thank you, Chair.

I would ask that this decision be reported to the House at the first available opportunity.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): At your request.

Now we're going to go to witnesses.

A voice: Is it agreed to?

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Are all agreed to take this to the House? It's a standard procedure.

Do we vote on that too?

I'm sorry, there is no consent.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Chair, do we need a vote? Then I put forward a motion that the passage of the previous motion and its contents be reported to the House at the first available opportunity.

Mr. Brian Storseth: Mr. Chair, I want it to be clear that this is the opposition stalling this meeting. There have been many issues we've lost where we've still agreed to use the traditional procedure of this—

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): We're going to try to move on the best we can here. Let's bring it to a vote.

The vote is that we report it to the House at the first opportunity.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 6; nays 5)

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): We have only 35 minutes left for this meeting. We were notified that Ms. Swan, the president of the CFIA, has a few minutes. There are also some other witnesses who are not going to speak but are available for any comments.

We'll start off with Ms. Swan, followed by Mr. Kingston, and then see how it goes.

Ms. Carole Swan (President, Canadian Food Inspection Agency): Thank you. Good afternoon, Mr. Chair and committee members.

As noted, I will have to leave at 4:45 p.m. However, Dr. Brian Evans, who is the executive vice-president of the CFIA, and other senior officials are here to answer the committee's questions as long as you would like to have them here.

I have a few brief remarks. I want to read into the record a few of the activities that the CFIA has been undertaking.

We have taken immediate action to investigate the circumstances of the outbreak and find ways to improve our food safety system to reduce the likelihood that similar tragedies will happen.

Our activities have included tightened and improved food safety controls in federally registered plants that produce ready-to-eat meat products. The enhanced requirements focus on early detection, reporting, and the control of listeria risks by both government and industry.

Ready-to-eat meat plant operators are now required to conduct more rigorous mandatory listeria testing and immediately report any positive findings to the CFIA.

We are verifying the effectiveness that plant operators take to respond to positive listeria findings, plus reinforcing and strengthening our verification of industry control measures through a program of environmental and end-product testing. To support this initiative, the CFIA is training its staff to implement these new directives effectively and consistently.

We are also ensuring that listeria controls in imported ready-to-eat meat products are equivalent to the new Canadian directives.

The agency has also convened an academic advisory panel to provide expert advice on a variety of topics. One of the first key tasks of the panel was to review and comment on the new listeria directives.

We have also increased laboratory capacity and research into the development and validation of rapid test methods, and there is ongoing work to increase capacity to conduct genetic fingerprinting.

• (1630)

[*Translation*]

In terms of more recent actions taken, both the Weatherill report and the report of the Food Safety Subcommittee put special focus on greater collaboration between all of the players in food safety.

The CFIA is working to improve collaboration with other jurisdictions, as evidenced by the work that is underway with the provinces to refine the Foodborne Illness Outbreak Response Protocol, to make it more effective. To exercise our ability to work more tightly with other food safety partners, five mock FPT food safety exercises have been conducted.

A federal/provincial/territorial food safety committee has been established which will develop action plans in three key areas: enhanced surveillance, pathogen reduction in meat and poultry and a common national meat hygiene standard.

The CFIA Meat Hygiene Manuals have been updated and are now being prepared for publication.

With the understanding that industry is a key player in the food safety system in Canada, the CFIA is working with an industry working group on Industry Best Practices for control of *Listeria monocytogenes*. The target date for this group to report is fall 2009.

Canada has further formalized working relationships with the US Food and Drug Administration to both share information on food safety investigations and recalls and to collaborate on food safety initiatives of joint interest, such as risk profiling and fresh fruit and vegetable safety.

In addition, we have entered into an agreement on the sharing of training materials to ensure a consistent approach to best practices.

[English]

Mr. Chair, the CFIA acted to address the food safety concerns of Canadians. Much good work has already been done, yet we would be the first to acknowledge that more remains to be done. We will continue to work with our food safety partners to review and consider the reports of the subcommittee and of the independent investigator. These reports have guided and will continue to guide our future activities in these areas.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Thank you, Mrs. Swan.

We're now going to go to Mr. Kingston for 10 minutes.

Mr. Bob Kingston (National President, Inspection Supervisor, Canadian Food Inspection Agency (Burnaby, B.C.), Agriculture Union): I don't think I'll be needing 10 minutes.

Since the report came out and since the inquiry and this body of inquiry took place, quite frankly, given what CFIA have to work with, I think they've made a Herculean effort to bring about the technological changes asked for. I think if you look at their history, though, you'll find that's an ongoing practice. They've never been shy about bringing in new technology to achieve these things, and that wasn't our main concern from the beginning.

Our concern still remains that they have a very limited budget. I know they will always have to put on the best face, and I expect that in terms of dealing with what they have, partly because that's their job and partly because there's an issue of public confidence. But the fact still remains that they have seen no increase in resources, which, at the end of the day, is going to define what they can and cannot do in a lot of these measures.

In fact, some of the measures they've brought into place since all of this are more work intensive and the new practices require more time of each inspector to be devoted, and there are no additional inspectors put in place. As a matter of fact, I've shared with CFIA management some of the actual staffing level reports coming from the regions in the very area where this tragedy originated, and they're still showing massive overburdens on the inspectors. I think any objective view of this would agree that when you have inspectors who are assigned anywhere from five to seven plants—and that's still going on—then you have a problem.

While they're doing everything they can within their confines, we've seen no commitment whatsoever.... There have been recommendations from the parliamentary committee that there be a joint look at resources, both what's available and what needs to take place, and there was the recommendation in the Weatherill report

that an independent third party take a look at this in terms of both what's needed and what's available.

Without that taking place and without a commitment to live up to the findings of that review, we think it's just a matter of time before you see it happen again, quite frankly. We don't think there's any other way it's going to go. Unless we hear a strong commitment that if these reviews of needed resources show that it's true they need help, they will get it, then this is all a waste of time.

I think admirable changes have already been made. I think they are good to the extent they can be put in place and delivered on, but without additional resources, it's just a matter of time before it happens all over again.

• (1635)

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): That's it. Thank you very much, Mr. Kingston.

I'd like to let the committee know that we also have Mark from the Public Health Agency here. He's not making comments, but he's here to answer questions, so for anything on the health side, he's available.

Because we have to wrap up at five o'clock, I have a suggestion for the committee. If it's all right with the committee, each party would have five minutes, and that will pretty well get us close to five o'clock. If that's agreeable to everybody, we'll go with that, with the usual list. We'll go five minutes for each party.

Mr. Bellavance.

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance: Is there unanimous consent to extend the Committee meeting by 30 minutes?

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): There's a problem for the chair. I have to be out of here at 5:10 or 5:15 at the latest to catch a flight—unless you could take the chair, and then it would be up to the witnesses if they could stay. Originally we asked them to stay until five o'clock, but if they're willing to stay a little longer and you could take the chair, I see no problem at all.

Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: On that, Chair, given the fact, again, that Ms. Weatherill is not here and the minister's not here, is there an interest on the part of the committee to agree to hold a follow-up meeting where we can continue these discussions? I mean, 22 people died. Five minutes each is not really a lot of time on that, and two of the key people in these discussions are not here.

So it would make sense, if the government's serious about having these hearings mean something, that we would do a follow-up and guarantee that those two people are there.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Thanks for your comments.

Let's get on with the questioning. We're not into debate, we're into questioning. We have witnesses here.

Mr. Lemieux.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: I understand, Mr. Chair, but I just want to point out that this was a rather inappropriate statement made by Mr. Christopherson. As I pointed out, he was not here during all of the discussion we had as a subcommittee. We did a full subcommittee study and report on this issue, and we discussed this at the agriculture committee—

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): I'm not going to have—

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: But Mr. Chair, I'm just pointing out that he's making it sound like nobody is making any time. We are definitely making time today, and we've made time previously.

I think Mr. Christopherson should guard his comments.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Okay. You two are finished. We're going to move on to questioning.

Mr. Valeriote, you're first. You have five minutes.

Mr. Francis Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Thank you.

Mr. Kingston and the rest, thank you so much for taking the time to come before this committee today.

Mr. Kingston, you made two comments that are echoing in my mind right now: one, short of resources and inspectors; and two, just a matter of time that it's going to happen again.

It's for that reason, really, that we were compelled to request this meeting today. We're convinced that of all the recommendations that have been made through the various reports that have been presented—in fact, this Conservative government is failing to really implement any of the recommendations—that's of concern to us, that you lack the resources.

I'd like you to comment particularly on an understanding we have that in fact the human resources that you have, the number of inspectors that you have, somehow defies numbering.

Ms. Weatherill's report says, and I'm quoting at page 39, “we were unable to determine the current level of resources”. Yet on May 14, 2009, in the House of Commons, this is what the minister said: “We are in the neighbourhood of 3,228 inspectors. I have seen numbers that roughly half of those are involved in meat, but of course that number expands and contracts...”

Could you clarify for us in some way what exactly is happening? My sense is that somebody is being misled, and it's either the Canadian public or the investigator.

Mr. Bob Kingston: Well, I guess it depended on what question you asked.

For example, 3,200 is the total number of a category, a classification known as EG. All of the people in CFIA who are

part of the technical category come under that 3,200 number. Whether they're working on soil sampling for golden nematode, certifying log houses leaving the country, or working in a lab somewhere testing seed germination, they all come under that 3,200. So that was where you got that number from.

We had tabled at one time the number of working-level food inspectors where that's the focus of their job. The other thing we tabled to the inquiry was the number of inspectors, city by city, who are actually involved in the program under discussion, which is the processed meat products inspection program.

Now, let's say you asked the agency specifically how many inspectors you have in the field carrying out processed meat inspection. I'm telling you right now that I could sit down with folks from the agency and come to a hard and fast number within half an hour. There is nothing magical about that. It just depended on what foot they wanted to put forward, and I'm not saying CFIA; the questions were coming from various people on the committees, various politicians, and so on. I guess it depended on what they wanted to express. That's why the numbers were so vastly different.

As to why Ms. Weatherill could not categorize that in a way that made sense in her report, as I commented earlier, it escapes my ability to comprehend why that wasn't done, because those numbers aren't secret. Yes, they fluctuate to a minor degree from day to day and from season to season. That's to be expected. But the numbers really aren't that hard to come to.

● (1640)

Mr. Francis Valeriote: So are you saying that it's possible she didn't ask the right question and didn't ask the right person when trying to determine those numbers, hence her inability to give a finite number?

Mr. Bob Kingston: Without knowing exactly who said what to her, I can only speculate. But yes, it's certainly possible.

Mr. Francis Valeriote: Okay.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): You have one more minute.

Mr. Francis Valeriote: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I read with interest a comment made by Rick Holley of the University of Manitoba. He's a member of the CFIA scientific advisory panel on food safety. When he was asked whether we're better off today than in the summer of 2008 with respect to food safety, he's quoted as saying, “Oh, hell no.”

If scientists who have a role in advising the CFIA have little confidence in the government's efforts to improve the food safety system, my question is, first of all, why should Canadians have any more confidence? And second, can you explain why you think Mr. Holley would have made that comment?

Mr. Bob Kingston: No, that would be unfair. I couldn't. I've had a couple of discussions with the gentleman, but it wouldn't be fair for me to try to figure out why he made that comment.

Mr. Francis Valeriote: Can anyone in CFIA, any of you guys, explain this?

Dr. Brian Evans (Executive Vice-President, Canadian Food Inspection Agency): Honourable member, Chair, I'll do my best.

I believe that Dr. Holley's—

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): You have a short time to do it. I'm sorry about that, but it's the way she rolls here.

Dr. Brian Evans: Yes.

Dr. Holley's comments, when viewed in their totality, are reflective of the discussions we've had at committee, and they are about the fact that food safety is not determined by any one point of inspection. While a lot has been done and a lot of changes have been adopted, and the food safety system has been turned upside down, Dr. Holley is very adamant about the fact that food safety in Canada is a reflection of intensive agricultural production, animal feed systems, in terms of what gets recirculated in animal feeds in terms of bacterial pathogens, and the scope of what Rick is talking about is part and parcel of what we, at CFIA, are taking on with the panel to re-look at the entire food system.

So that's where Dr. Holley is coming from. His three key points remain that Canada needs a surveillance system for food-borne illness at a level that we currently do not have; his view is that Canada needs to rethink how food is produced in Canada, if it really is serious about food safety, and how we measure food safety in Canada; and that Canada must also address the issues around multi-jurisdictional attributes of food between federal and provincial. That's where Rick is coming from, he's very open about that, and we are fully engaged with Mr. Holley, as we are with the balance of the academic panel.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Thank you very much, Mr. Evans.

We're going to go to the Bloc now, with Mr. Bellavance.

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Kingston, in the aftermath of the listeriosis crisis, someone that the Committee is fairly well acquainted with, but does not see often enough for its own liking, stated that the different departments are like an orchestra whose musicians have never played together. Do you agree with that statement? Mr. Ritz is the one who said that.

When he made that statement, what crossed my mind was that what is really missing is a conductor. Ms. Weatherill's report, even though we deplore the fact that her investigation was carried out behind closed doors, does contain some interesting recommendations. She spoke, in particular, of a lack of leadership, especially on the part of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

However, the Minister is shifting the blame, saying that it's like an orchestra that has never played together, as if there had never been any food safety issues in Canada previously, which is completely untrue. Indeed, in the late 1990s, the Auditor General made recommendations in that regard, in the wake of incidents involving food toxicity.

So, there was no one leading the orchestra and there still isn't. Since the report we have been discussing today has now been issued, in your capacity as representative of meat inspectors, do you think that there will finally be some leadership?

•(1645)

[*English*]

Mr. Bob Kingston: Given the strength of that recommendation in the report, I don't see how it couldn't happen, quite frankly. That same sentiment was what brought about the creation of CFIA, for those of us who were around. I know there are several at the table who will remember all that.

Departments, they're territorial by nature. They spent over a decade trying to work out the responsibilities of both communication and operations with respect to food safety, leading up to the creation of CFIA. It's because they could not work it out that they finally decided to create an agency and bring them all under one tent.

So that sort of human nature aspect to it has not changed, not from the perspective of the representatives who watch this stuff take place. I know there was a protocol in place that all the parties were supposed to become aware of and follow. I'm as aware of the fact as much as a lot of people that this simply wasn't followed in this case. If it had been, some of these glitches, in terms of apparent missing leadership, might not have happened.

Again, a lot of good work comes about following these types of crises, but it has to be followed up on. Obviously, the protocol that came about because of previous situations never was given the full life it deserved when the crisis happened. What would be a shame is if we just kept creating more of these animals without ever actually bringing them to life and making sure everybody's aware of what to do and how to follow them, and who, in fact, has the responsibility.

I think the recommendations in the report are pretty clear on the need for leadership and who takes the lead role in each situation, but I think this might have been serious enough that the players may get pretty serious about following it, and I certainly hope they do. I'll tell you, the workers in the field need to know that. As the report indicates, the people in the field level get really busy when this stuff happens—they know their job—and then they start looking for direction. If it's not there, you've got big problems. So I hope that never happens again.

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance: In front of the Subcommittee, you said that the lack of resources and inspectors to adequately perform the work was one of the gaps at the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. There was the example of Maple Leaf, where a single inspector was responsible for the entire plant. A number of witnesses called primarily by the government side told us that, even if there had been more inspectors, it would not have been possible to avoid the listeriosis incident.

I also note that, in her report, Ms. Weatherill talks about increased spotchecks in processing plants. Based on your experience, would it be possible to increase the number of *ad hoc* inspections with the current inspector complement, or will additional resources be necessary? There is only one recommendation dealing with the need for additional resources.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Make it short, because we just have a minute.

Mr. Bob Kingston: Given the current resource level, it would be impossible to increase ad hoc inspections. You're talking about a simple process where the inspector shows up unannounced, walks through the plant, gets a general overview of what's going on, can look at a few records and do spot-checks. Current inspection staff are encouraged to do that when they have time. The fact is that they don't have time.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Thank you very much.

That wraps up the time for the Bloc, and we're going to go to the NDP and Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you all for your attendance today.

As has been noted, I'm not a member of this committee, so I'll deal with what I do know, which is what is in front of me. What I heard Mr. Kingston say, I thought, was shocking. It should shock and scare everyone—and I wrote it down—that “it's just a matter of time before you see it happen again”.

We even know from the report that politicians have accepted that, “Although safety is a relative notion, since there is no such thing as a zero risk, members still believe food produced in Canada remains among the safest in the world.”

What I'm hearing, Mr. Kingston, is that if we don't get dramatic change, in your opinion we're going to see something preventable and similar happen again. Yet if resources are invested, recognizing that zero risk is not attainable, you would then feel differently about making that statement.

Am I correct in interpreting your statement to mean that if nothing further is done from today forward, it's your prediction—representing the people who are on the ground, the inspectors and others—that we're going to see a similar preventable incident?

• (1650)

Mr. Bob Kingston: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Mr. David Christopherson: It's terrifying.

Mr. Bob Kingston: The workload that's given to the staff right now is at a point where it's always a matter of what you aren't doing today. There's just no way you can get all of your job done, so you have to cut corners and make choices about what you can't do. You always try to do that in a risk-based perspective, but at the end of the day, there are parts of the program that just can't be delivered.

Mr. David Christopherson: The statement in the committee's report that we're “among the safest in the world” is certainly what I grew up believing, but there were cuts made in the mid- and late-nineties, particularly to food inspection. In your opinion, given some of the increases to resources, how close are we, relatively speaking, in terms of our food safety today versus where we were before the cuts of the nineties?

Mr. Bob Kingston: Well, it's hard to say. Where are we today? We have better technology—again, living within your means.

If you'd walked into a federally inspected plant a few decades ago, there were inspectors all over the place in every aspect of the production of the products, and you don't see that now in any way, shape, or form. So they do rely on technology.

The problem with the sole reliance on technology is that it's after the fact, so you end up investigating why things happened instead of preventing them from happening. You can learn through the after-the-fact analysis how to do preventive measures, but at the end of the day, you're still chasing after things, whereas the presence of inspectors has been shown, time and time again, to actually bring about more prevention and more change in culture within the plant and in practice. It modifies individuals' behaviour on an ongoing basis.

So it is hard to equate the two, but I think that given the speed and, as Dr. Evans mentioned earlier, the way agriculture runs today, the way food is produced—the massive volumes, the massive distribution that takes place—prevention has to be a focal point, not just finding out how things happened after the fact. The presence of inspectors does make a big difference in that regard.

So if you want to keep up with modern trends, it's not only about the technology, but also about having people on the front lines to make sure things are done in the best possible manner on site.

Mr. David Christopherson: I suspect that if we ask Canadians whether this is a priority in terms of their tax money, they would think so, especially as they think about feeding their kids.

To be fair, Dr. Evans, the statement has been made that it's only a matter of time before it happens again. I did pose the question about a similar preventable incident, and the answer was pretty clear: yes. You can appreciate how that's very jarring, if not outright frightening. What would your answer be to that same question, sir?

Dr. Brian Evans: Thank you, honourable member.

I guess the short answer is always the reality that there are no guarantees, even in food safety. We've talked in front of this committee about the fact that, as Mr. Kingston has mentioned as well, we invest our efforts at multiple points, not just at inspection, when meat is produced. Safe food comes from healthy animals, and a critical component of how we produce safe food in this country, as I believe this committee heard from others involved in on-farm HACCP, on-farm food safety, is that you have to manage risks at all points of the production system.

Mr. David Christopherson: Sir, I'm sorry to interrupt. Forgive me for being so rude. I have such limited time.

I accept—I think we all do; it's in the report—that zero risk is impossible. On the other hand, now we have the representative of the inspectors on the ground saying a similar preventable incident will happen. Narrowly, do you agree with that or not, and why?

• (1655)

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): You have only half a minute, and then we have to move on.

Mr. David Christopherson: That's why I jumped in. I'm sorry.

Dr. Brian Evans: I appreciate the intervention.

Again, I'll be very clear with the committee, as I have been on multiple occasions, that in our circumstance, as to the view of Mr. Kingston that inspectors in and of themselves can prevent this from happening, they are a critical component of what we do. They very much are. I think Mr. Kingston would be the first to say that the skill sets, the competencies of our inspectors today are at a higher level than they've ever been. So again, we bring that each minute of every hour of every day that we work in plants. We recognize the consequences that we are managing, and we work hard to make sure these consequences don't happen again.

We remember what happened a year ago. Our agency has deeply embedded that into the culture of our organization. We are committed to doing the best we possibly can for Canadians, because Canadians expect no less.

We will use technology. We will allocate resources to the fullest extent we can where risk exists. But if you're asking me whether we can prevent recalls, no, we cannot. Can we prevent food-borne illness from happening at any point in the future? No, we cannot, because we know that, again, the vast majority of food-borne illness doesn't occur at the point of production. In fact, the statistics very clearly indicate internationally, in every country around the world, 85% to 90% of food-borne illness is a result of mishandling or abuse of food subsequent to its production.

So I can't give an iron-clad guarantee to this committee or to Canadians that we can prevent every food incident from happening, but I can assure you that we are doing everything possible to ensure the consequences are mitigated.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Thank you, Mr. Evans.

We're going to go to the government now.

Mr. Richards, you have five minutes.

Mr. Blake Richards (Wild Rose, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today, for making yourselves available, and for your patience in letting us get our agenda sorted out.

Unfortunately, as we sit here today, as is usual with the opposition parties, they're talking out of both sides of their mouths. On one hand, they've done everything they can to try to discredit, devalue, and undermine the work of the independent investigator; and then on the other hand, they've now called this premature meeting to discuss the report, which was released only a very short time ago. The government certainly intends to act on the recommendations, but as we all know, there hasn't even been a meeting of Parliament since the report was released.

On one hand, they're trying to discredit the work of the committee and the work of the independent investigator, while on the other hand they're calling this meeting, using taxpayer dollars to bring us all back here to Ottawa a couple of weeks early, on very little notice, and then, of course, turning around and accusing the government of not making people available, and so on, when there was very little notice given.

As usual, they're talking out of both sides of their mouth. To me, it's very plain from the start that the Liberals and the opposition parties are more interested in scoring political points than they are in improving our food safety system.

That said, I have a few questions. I'll direct them to the members of the CFIA, to Dr. Evans or anyone else who'd like to answer.

First of all, would you say that Canada's food safety system is stronger today than it was a year ago?

Dr. Brian Evans: Yes. Because of a number of factors, our food safety system is stronger today than it was a year ago. I would also say to this committee that it will be stronger a year from now than it is today.

It is imperative, again, as we've talked about in front of this committee and in front of Canadians, to recognize that risk is not static. The nature of risk is not static. Therefore, it is incumbent on us to be vigilant and to continue to adapt our inspection systems and our inspection capacity to address those risks by using the best available science, and in comparison to other countries, the best practices available to do that. That is part of our ongoing commitment as an organization, to make ourselves better each and every day.

Mr. Blake Richards: I certainly appreciate that.

We've talked about the independent investigator and the great work that was done, we passed a motion here, and we've seen a good list of recommendations that we feel can really improve our food safety system, yet we have the opposition parties' trying to undermine that work. That's very unfortunate. Would you agree that the independent investigator did an in-depth and comprehensive review of what happened during the summer of 2008?

Dr. Brian Evans: Having testified in front of the investigator, I feel that the investigator was extremely competent and extremely thorough and examined a wide range of issues beyond listeria that are integral to food safety. Again, I would indicate that the investigator's efforts, complemented by the work of the Subcommittee on Food Safety, complemented by the work done by the Province of Ontario and the reports done by us and by our federal counterparts at PHAC and Health, are all important pieces of the work that needs to be done in order for us to continue to move forward on food safety in this country.

• (1700)

Mr. Blake Richards: Would you say that the independent investigator has made some insightful recommendations on improving Canada's food safety system, and could you highlight a couple of the key recommendations that you feel are most important?

Dr. Brian Evans: Again, I think what the investigator has done is bring a focus to a number of critical issues. First and foremost, she did identify issues around coordinated response and relationships, which are absolutely critical, as the investigator herself stated in her report, and as I believe the committee stated in its report as well. We recognize that food safety is a shared responsibility in Canada, and unless every part of that system is doing its part, there are vulnerabilities that exist. I think her emphasis on ensuring that there is good coordination, good leadership, a clear understanding, and good operationalizing and implementation of protocols so that people are aware of their obligations and exercise them appropriately is essential for food safety.

She touched on areas, again, around capacity, and collectively we agree that in order to provide the best possible food safety system in this country we need to continue to look at ways to both maximize our existing capacity and ensure that we can bring additional capacity to addressing some of those issues. She spoke openly about the issue of communication and the fact that knowledge is very important—knowledge on the part of consumers—and that knowledge on the part of others as well, in terms of their obligations, is equally important.

So I think she touched on a number of very important areas for us and for others in the food safety system, and we are committed, as

CFIA, to work collectively with all of our partners to ensure that we can give those outcomes.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thanks very much for your comments and your answers to the questions. We appreciate that you share this government's agenda to make sure we have a safe food system.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Thank you, Mr. Richards.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Chair, did we get agreement to extend the time? We have no problem—

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): I'm just coming to that, Mr. Easter, yes.

Hon. Wayne Easter: I have a suggestion that I think we could agree on, Mr. Chair.

Could the committee agree on giving the clerk direction that during the week of September 14 to September 18 we hear from Ms. Weatherill and the minister on this report, where they're at and where they're going? That gives them both ample time. I don't think we need a motion on it. I think we could certainly agree. That's well into the future. Parliament will be sitting. It won't be inconvenient to anyone. We really need to hear from the minister and the special investigator as a committee.

So could we give the clerk direction to that regard? Is there disagreement?

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): Order.

Unless it's a big problem, this is looking at our future business. Unless there's a consensus here....

We're not going to debate on this, Mr. Storseth, Ms. Bennett, Mr. Easter.

Listen, if there is consensus that they will be our first two witnesses when Parliament reconvenes, so be it. We're not going to debate. If not, we'll just move on, and Mr. Bellavance will take the chair.

Is there a consensus on that?

An hon. member: No.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): There's not a consensus.

Hon. Wayne Easter: The government's opposing.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Mark Eyking): So if I may, is it the will of the committee to extend this—if it's all right with the witnesses, of course—for another round of five minutes for each party? Is there consensus there?

Mr. Bellavance, do you have another Bloc member who will ask questions for your party?

That being said, will you take the chair?

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. André Bellavance): Thank you.

I would like to thank Committee members for agreeing to extend the meeting out of respect for our witnesses, who have not had that much time with us. This way, our meeting will be a little more productive.

Mr. Easter, for five minutes.

• (1705)

[English]

Hon. Wayne Easter: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm shocked, actually, that the government doesn't want to do some planning for the first week that Parliament is back to hear from the minister and Ms. Weatherill on an issue that 22 people died from. Anyway, that's beside the point.

To my questions, I guess they are mainly to you, Brian.

There is some discrepancy in the protocols now in place, and it could even just be a matter of interpretation. On April 29, when the Minister of Agriculture was before the committee, he stated:

If a plant finds any positive test, they are now required to immediately report that positive to the CFIA. These results are immediately submitted for further laboratory testing. In fact, results from those accredited labs will be sent back directly to the CFIA, not the processor.

Then this incident happened at the Hamilton plant. In the documentation Maple Leaf sent out on the nine wiener products recalled at that Hamilton plant, their tenth point was:

When did you notify them?

To that they said:

We notified the CFIA on July 14, upon obtaining lab confirmation of a positive environmental test on a single line at the plant and advised them of the actions we were taking to address the situation.

So it seems to me that the protocol the minister said was going to be applied is not being followed. There seems to be some discrepancy here. Maybe it's a matter of interpretation.

Dr. Brian Evans: I certainly thank the honourable member—

Hon. Wayne Easter: I guess I'll put it this way, if I can simplify it.

Dr. Brian Evans: Sure.

Hon. Wayne Easter: When the positive test was found in the lab, on the line, they seem to have waited a period of time before notifying you. That is my interpretation of this.

Dr. Brian Evans: No, in actual fact, if I could be very clear on that, while it is true that the sample, the swab you're making reference to, was taken, the reality again is that they did notify us immediately upon return of a positive lab result. Now, again, this

touches on the issue that from the point of sample taking to the point of reporting, there is a period of time necessary for the lab testing to take place.

But they fully met the requirement of the listeria directive, which is to notify us of every positive result on a contact surface or in the end-product. They met their obligation in that regard. The follow-up, which they did, then requires them to do further testing to demonstrate that there is no persistence and that their sanitation protocol is working, and that was undertaken by them. And on the basis of a second contact surface positive, they went to an immediate test and hold of all product—which again is what the protocol provides for.

Hon. Wayne Easter: So that is a new procedure, an upgraded procedure, from what happened a year ago?

Dr. Brian Evans: Correct. That is the new directive brought in by CFIA last fall. As I say, it was part and parcel of making sure the product was contained early. And in fact, the recall was issued in the absence of any reported illness from our counterparts at Public Health.

Hon. Wayne Easter: On the CVS issue, we had discussions when you were before the Subcommittee on Food Safety. We were informed at committee that there really was no report on the pilot. Yet Ms. Weatherill, in her report, states:

We were told that an evaluation of the CVS pilot was prepared but was not discussed throughout the CFIA hierarchy.

We heard that, because these essential steps were not taken, gaps between the *Meat Hygiene Manual of Procedures*—the regulatory framework—and the CVS were never identified and, therefore, not resolved.

Again, there's a discrepancy between that and what I think we were told at committee. Certainly the CVS pilot was implemented back quite a time by the previous government. I think the intent was that the pilot would be evaluated to see if it worked, what could be learned by that process, so that better procedures could be brought into place. I find it hard to believe there's not a report written and that the evaluation isn't available to us. When Ms. Weatherill talks about it in her report, she certainly states there was one prepared, but it was not discussed through the CFIA.

What's your view? What happened here?

• (1710)

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. André Bellavance): Please give a very brief answer, because Mr. Easter's time is already up. I will give you a chance to answer, however.

Dr. Brian Evans: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[English]

I'd certainly benefit from rereading the testimony, but I think the question that was posed, honourable member, if I remember correctly, at the time we appeared was whether there had been a third party formal evaluation of the CVS program. We testified at that time, quite openly and honestly, that we had not submitted it to a third independent party.

I believe that in the combing of all the evidence on the part of the independent investigator it was recognized that there had been an internal assessment—and I would ask Cam to validate that—but that was not reviewed by senior management in the organization. We recognize that, and this is one of the areas we have taken on board to ensure that with these inspection programs, when there are changes, there is a third party validation and that they are formally assessed.

With respect to the manuals of procedures, I think we provided testimony prior to the conclusion in June that the manuals of procedures have in fact been updated in their entirety. We blitzed the manuals of procedures for the meat program. They're presently completing translation and posting. So they are now being brought together and that information is being provided to our operational staff.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. André Bellavance): Thank you.

Mr. Malo, for five minutes.

Mr. Luc Malo (Verchères—Les Patriotes, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Kingston, I have a brief question for you as a follow-up to the answer Mr. Evans gave Mr. Richards a little earlier, when he said that the situation has improved, compared to a year ago, and that a year from now, it will be better still.

In your opinion, will it indeed be possible, one year from now, to say that things have improved compared to the current situation?

[English]

Mr. Bob Kingston: I don't have quite the crystal ball Brian does, but I'd say that I would hope so.

From last year to now, in certain areas, they've improved. The positive requirement for a plan to report and the clarity around that and the requirement for third party labs to submit results back to CFIA are very important steps. So those things have improved safety.

I think the requirement for inspectors to validate through their own testing is an important step. The requirement to review daily listeria records of the plant is a very important step as well. These things are all good. Every one of those requires more time from an inspector than they were expending before. My problem is, given the mathematics of the situation, that means something is being dropped somewhere.

Yes, in terms of listeria, it's being shored up to the extent possible with the existing resources, but you're robbing Peter to pay Paul; you have to. They have no choice. That's my concern.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Malo: Mr. Raizenne, we were talking earlier about the many players involved in this issue. Can you tell me what more the Public Health Agency of Canada, for example, could be doing to prevent crises such as the one caused by the listeriosis outbreak?

Dr. Mark Raizenne (Director General, Centre for Food-borne, Environmental and Zoonotic Infectious Diseases (CFEZID), Public Health Agency of Canada): Thank you very much for your question.

The Agency's focus is prevention and it tries to respond. By the time an illness has been detected or recognized, the contamination is already present. In terms of prevention, information has to be prepared in cooperation with CFIA staff and our public health colleagues, that information being aimed in particular at the most vulnerable populations and individuals at high risk of food contamination.

• (1715)

Mr. Luc Malo: In order to avoid fatalities, is there something you could have done differently during the last crisis?

Dr. Mark Raizenne: That is an academic question.

Once there has been an outbreak, the important thing is to focus on containing its impact and determining exactly what occurred. We are talking about a vulnerable population that had been exposed to the products we examined when the listeriosis crisis arose. Had it been a non-vulnerable population, there would not have been such a high mortality rate.

It was an unfortunate situation, because a vulnerable population was ultimately the one most exposed to these products. As far as we are concerned, what is important now is to ensure that, in future, seniors, pregnant women and people with a weaker immune system have access to information to help them make the right decisions.

We also want to work with health care professionals, to be sure that there are clear lines of communication. We discovered that, when the outbreak occurred, there was a lack of communication with public health authorities who are responsible for keeping the general public informed. That is what was reported.

Mr. Luc Malo: Is the Agency carrying out tighter monitoring now?

Dr. Mark Raizenne: We intend to work even harder in this area. All the information that we have collected, as well as material published by Health Canada, now appear on our websites, where people can access it. As Ms. Weatherill pointed out, particular attention must be paid to communication with a view to prevention.

Mr. Luc Malo: In your opinion, who should be in charge of coordinating all of this communication, which seemed to be lacking? In the wake of the outbreak, do you have the sense that there is now greater cohesion and better information sharing? This issue and others have clearly pointed to gaps within the Agency with respect to the way in which information is handled and managed. Have there been any improvements in that regard?

Dr. Mark Raizenne: That is, of course, something that we identified. We looked at the lessons learned from the outbreak through the different agencies. We then set about developing a risk communication plan and identified very specific communication products aimed at the most vulnerable populations. Developing information is one thing, but we are now looking at the most effective way of ensuring that it reaches its intended audience and that people understand what the risk is.

This afternoon, we said that it is impossible for there to be zero risk, and that people have to recognize that fact. Dr. Evans could provide more information in that respect, but I can tell you we are certainly working in closer cooperation now than we were previously.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. André Bellavance): Please be very brief, Mr. Evans.

Dr. Brian Evans: I simply want to add a quick point.
[English]

One of the areas around that communication—because, obviously, public health starts provincially; the investigations are done by local public health, and information flows through the provincial system to the federal system for that analysis—that we can share very openly with the committee is the fact that subsequent to the events of last year we have met on several occasions now with the new chief medical officer of health in Ontario, Dr. Arlene King, to talk about how we work together between Ottawa and Toronto, and our local people in Guelph at our area office met with her on several occasions as well. We have run five food safety simulation emergency exercises across the country now, including one in Ontario, to actually work the protocols, work the communications protocols and the coordination protocols. All of those activities again, which have been recommended both by the committee and by the independent investigator, is work that we have undertaken to do and we will continue to do.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. André Bellavance): Mr. Christopherson, I just want Committee members to know that, because the answers were a little longer, everyone will have about seven minutes. So, I will give some additional time to the NDP and the Conservatives, if everyone agrees.

Mr. Christopherson, you have the floor.

• (1720)

[English]

Mr. David Christopherson: I won't be complaining, Chair. Thank you.

Thank you very much, Dr. Evans.

I want to return to the question I asked earlier, and I realize it's an awkward one and difficult to answer. You're saying no? Okay. Then I won't feel guilty at all about asking.

I was really shaken. I've got to tell you that I was shaken to the core to hear someone of Mr. Kingston's responsibility make the statement that he did. I want to be fair to you and be clear about how you would characterize those comments, because I think it's

important. I would suspect that it may get a fair bit of attention, and the public is going to be a bit jarred by hearing that.

Again, his quote was that "it's just a matter of time before you see it happen again". I asked the question, and my question was very specific and clear, was he talking about similar preventable incidents? He was very clear in saying yes. We've already accepted that zero is impossible, so please do me a favour and don't go into that world about.... We all get that, that it's not possible. But that's very different from what Mr. Kingston said.

So what I would like to hear from you, Doctor, is, do you think that he was being over-the-top fearmongering, whether deliberate or not, or do you believe that he was accurate and that we ought to be as frightened as I think anyone who hears that would be, or is it somewhere in between? If it's somewhere in between, please elaborate, sir.

Dr. Brian Evans: I will do my best to be brief and to answer directly.

We do recognize that the report of the subcommittee, the dissenting report of the government, and the report of the independent investigator all underline the issue of resource capacity to address risks in the appropriate way. We recognize that the learned group that has heard that has spoken to that issue. And we have made a commitment to make sure that from our perspective in addressing recommendations from the various reports, we do our very best to demonstrate the resource capacity of the agency against the demands that we have against our program standards. And that will come out where it comes out.

The other point I would make, though, about this issue of whether it is only a matter of time is this. The best way I can answer your question is to say that at the end of the day—and I suspect Mr. Kingston has spoken to this issue several times before—it's not an absolute number of inspectors that will prevent this from happening again. It is the reality that we have invested in training, which was an issue raised before by the committee. In March this year, subsequent to last year's events, we had 325 staff trained on the new listeria requirements at the operational level to bring those into effect through the verification activities. We trained 20 internal inspectors in CFIA to provide ongoing inspection and mentoring to front-line staff in these areas. We also took on the training that was requested by this group in their report and by the investigator around training in the incident command system to make sure.... As Mr. Kingston has talked about, prevention is critical, but at the same time, you have to have a response capacity for those events that do happen. Again, I come back to the point that the focus around the table for the past period of time has been listeria, and I hope nobody ever believes that listeria is the only threat to food safety. We do deal with E. coli, salmonella, and campylobacter, and there are other pathogens that can play.

We have an increasingly vulnerable population in terms of allergenicity who we must be very conscious of in terms of food safety for those people who have allergens. We deal with the reality of a different culture in the world today. We have to deal with deliberate threat. Even in the reports yesterday there were reports of tampering with a food cereal in British Columbia. And we all see the issues with candies at Hallowe'en and turkeys at Thanksgiving. We have to be cognizant as to how we prevent and deal with those activities as well.

Again, I'm not trying to say that events won't happen, but we have to look at the broad scope of food safety challenges out there and make sure that our attention on listeria is appropriate and it's vigilant. But please don't expect that we're going to turn a blind eye to those other risks as well, because those can also have very serious health and social consequences and economic consequences for Canadians and our markets internationally.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you, Doctor.

I have to tell you, those are your words, and it'll be up to people watching and the media how they slice it, but I think they would have preferred to hear you say something about his being way over the top and that nothing like that's going to happen. I have to tell you, sir, I didn't hear that. But that's just me. We'll see where it goes from here.

To be fair to Mr. Kingston, he did talk about limited budgets and he did talk about the fact that it wasn't just his inspectors. So in fairness to that issue and to the way you're phrasing it in terms of resources, let me ask you this question. Has the government indicated to you that they will be providing new funds as a result of all this? Do you have new money coming, and if so, would you detail that for us? And further, if there is new money coming, what heightened assurance can you give us as a result; or are there no new resources, which would be another matter entirely?

• (1725)

Dr. Brian Evans: Again, I'm not sure I'm in a position to comment as to whether or not more resources will be made available by Parliament.

Mr. David Christopherson: No, but as of today, have you heard indications from the minister or from the PMO, from anywhere on high, that there are new resources coming in here to deal with the issues that Mr. Kingston and you, to some degree, have raised, which are very much related to resources? So that's my question.

Dr. Brian Evans: Again, my answer back is simply that we have been asked to contribute to the government response to the staff report and to the report of the independent investigator. At this point in time, we can't speak to whether the government will make recommendations that support resources or don't support resources. That's not an issue we can comment on.

Mr. David Christopherson: So if I can, then, sir, when you make the statement, as you're entitled to do, that it's better than it was a year ago and it'll be better a year from now, you're saying that sort of in the blind without really knowing whether there are going to be new resources. You're predicating that on new systems, new something, but not new resources. That's what I'm hearing, sir. If I'm wrong, please correct me.

Dr. Brian Evans: No, I believe that what I have heard repeatedly from the government, and previous governments as well, is that they view food safety for Canadians as a priority. We do know there are processes that we as a department or agency contribute to, both in cycle for budget and external to the cycle in terms of submissions for the consideration of the government. And we at CFIA will contribute to the fullest extent possible to those processes.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. André Bellavance): Your time is up, Mr. Christopherson. Thank you.

Mr. Shipley.

[*English*]

Mr. Bev Shipley: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, witnesses, for coming out.

Just to be really clear at the start or as a quick preamble, Mr. Easter continually says we engineered the meetings. I think it's fit for the Canadian public to know that in fact, when the chair knew he would not be here, we offered to arrange different dates. That offer was not accepted by the opposition, and so here we are today. It was not engineered; in fact, it was engineered by them.

Second, the other comment keeps coming forward, and I know Mr. Christopherson brought it up. We talked a lot during our subcommittee, meeting after meeting, about the significant loss of life, the 22 people who died because of this and the significant debt that is felt toward those families. But I really want to be clear here. Just so that we know, Mr. McCain, in a recent editorial, said Maple Leaf was responsible for the loss of 22 lives. I quote: "We were accountable for the death of 22 Canadians." So I don't think we need to be spending a lot of time pointing fingers and trying to instigate new.... I think what we should be doing is what we are now here for, and that's seeing what we can do to improve the process.

So I want to follow up on Mr. Christopherson's comments regarding resources, and I'll go to Mr. Evans—or maybe it's Mr. Prince, I'm not sure. When I look at a chart here regarding inspectors and inspection staff at the Canadian Food Inspection Agency from June 1997 to March 2009, if we start in 1997, the previous government actually cut the total number of inspectors. They did that for two to three years before they got even, and then there was an increase.

So I think, Mr. Christopherson, in terms of your comment on resources, I can just refer to the chart. In March 2005, there were 5,858 inspectors. In March 2006, that went to 6,121; in 2007 to 6,585; in 2008 to 6,961; and in March 2009 to 7,053. Then it is further broken down into inspection staff and field inspection staff. So each of those numbers has continually increased.

I'm not saying those are perfect numbers in terms of what should be there; I'm just asking, have we put resources forward? We have, and I think that's acknowledged by these numbers.

I also want to thank Mr. Kingston for his comments, because what he's really done is acknowledge—even though the report has just come out and the minister hasn't had a chance to respond to it yet, and he will be responding—the significant improvements that have actually been happening under the minister's direction, in collaboration and working with CFIA.

There are significant, significant improvements that have happened since the listeria outbreak and Ms. Weatherill's report has come out. One, the environmental testing that was scrapped by the previous government is now back in place. We recognize how important that is. I think one of the other ones, too, is that there have been positive tests, but there was no requirement. And I'd like you to just confirm that there'd been no requirement for the industry, in this case Maple Leaf Foods, to report a positive test. Now I understand that if there are positive tests, those have to come forward and be reported by industry to CFIA.

Can you confirm that?

• (1730)

Dr. Brian Evans: Just to be clear, there has been a regulatory requirement in legislation for mandatory reporting of product positives. That has existed for an extended period of time.

Where we did not have that obligation on the part of industry was for the environmental testing, and that speaks more to this issue of prevention and how we get early detection and early assessment to determine there's not a persistent infection in the plant. So what did change with the new directives last fall was making the environmental testing mandatory, in terms of all positive results, to supplement what we were already getting on the end product.

Mr. Bev Shipley: I'm glad our minister has actually brought that back into the process and made that improvement.

Can you talk to me about your industrial working group? There will be a report coming out in 2009, this fall. And you're hoping there will be work with the U.S. in collaboration on food safety issues. Can you talk a little bit about those two things, please?

Dr. Brian Evans: If it pleases the member, I would ask Paul Mayers to respond to the question, please.

Mr. Paul Mayers (Associate Vice-President, Programs, Canadian Food Inspection Agency): Thank you very much for the question.

Indeed, while we established a number of mandatory obligations through our directives, we didn't stop there. We've also worked with the industry. And we have to commend the industry for its leadership in recognizing that in addition to the mandatory obligations that we've set for them in terms of listeria controls, there are further

opportunities to explore how the industry can collectively work to identify additional means of improvement. That's what the work of the industry working group has been, to develop best practices for the control of listeria in meat processing. Here they're looking beyond those areas where we've established specific obligations. They're looking at issues, such as environmental testing in the plant environment away from food contact surfaces, that might ultimately contribute to food contact surfaces becoming contaminated.

So we're very keen to support the industry in undertaking that type of work in the interest of continuous improvement, and we look forward to their report. Frankly, we're interested in how we can assist the industry in systematizing those improvements as well, complementing the obligations we've placed on them.

Mr. Bev Shipley: Thank you for that.

I think all of us understand there's a partnership in prevention here, and industry has to play a very, very significant role in that prevention.

Speaking on that, and just to follow up, are the standards being applied by Canada for listeria aligned with international standards?

Mr. Paul Mayers: Indeed they are. Until recently, international standards in terms of listeria control didn't exist. But I am pleased to say that this summer the Codex Alimentarius Commission adopted standards for listeria control, and those standards are directly aligned with the standards established by Health Canada in terms of foods that both can and cannot support growth of listeria monocytogenes. So Canada's standards are directly aligned with the current international standards.

• (1735)

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. André Bellavance): That is all the time you have, Mr. Shipley. Thank you very much.

I am certain that, within a relatively short period of time, we will again be discussing this issue.

Mr. Valeriote, do you have a point of order?

[English]

Mr. Francis Valeriote: No, it's not a point of order, but a question of the chair for some clarity regarding a question asked of the chair earlier by Mr. Easter. I'm wondering if I might ask you, sir, a question of clarity.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. André Bellavance): Yes, you can ask me a question.

[English]

Mr. Francis Valeriote: Okay.

We understood that Ms. Weatherill couldn't be here today but had given further dates. We understood that Minister Ritz couldn't be here today. He certainly did not decline coming in the future, though he did not give future dates.

We've heard things like that there are shortages of resources and inspectors, and that it's just a matter of time before it happens again. I think Mr. Evans said he's not sure if the resources will be made available or not. I would suggest, sir, that the answer to these questions necessitates the attendance of both Ms. Weatherill and Minister Ritz.

I understood there was a request that there be a consensus that these two witnesses be invited for the first week we're back, between September 14 and September 18. Do I understand, sir, that the government has agreed to that, or did it disagree with that?

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. André Bellavance): When I was not yet in the chair, I had understood there was no unanimous consent to decide today to call those witnesses in the first week that we are back. However, nothing prevents us, as a committee, from tabling a motion or coming back to this issue subsequently. My understanding was that unanimous consent had not been given to invite those two witnesses in the first week following the reopening of Parliament.

[*English*]

Mr. Francis Valeriote: Through you, Mr. Chair, could I ask them again? For the record, would they consent to the invitation of Ms. Weatherill and Minister Ritz, given the answers we've received to these questions today?

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. André Bellavance): I can certainly ask again, but the answer that was already given was that there is no unanimous consent.

Mr. Lemieux.

[*English*]

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Chair, what I'd like to say is that in principle it's not a problem. But I think we're going to be returning in the fall. We will have our full committee here. We have people here now who are not members of our regular committee; they don't know what we've done, where we've been, or where we're going.

We already have some studies under way. My recommendation, Chair, so that we don't enter into a long debate over motions right now, is that when we come back in the fall, we review our future agenda as we always do as a committee, that all committee members participate in that process, and we can set our schedule when we come back in the fall. I think that's very appropriate.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. André Bellavance): There is no unanimous consent, Mr. Valeriote, which brings this discussion to a close.

As I was saying, within a relatively short period of time, it is quite likely that we will again be discussing this important issue.

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to the witnesses for their patience and for their valuable testimony.

Thank you as well to Committee members.

The meeting is adjourned.

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