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Chair: Ms. Ruby Sahota



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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number three of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

I'd like to start the meeting by providing you with some information. This is especially for the new members.

The committee is now sitting in a hybrid format. You can participate in person or by video conference. Witnesses must always appear by video conference. All members, regardless of their method of participation, will be counted for the purpose of quorum. The committee's power to sit is limited, however, by the priority use of House resources, which is determined by the whips. All questions must be decided by a recorded vote, unless the committee disposes of them by unanimous consent or on division. Finally, the committee may deliberate in camera, provided it takes into account the potential risks to confidentiality inherent in such deliberations with remote participants.

Today's meeting will be made available via the House of Commons website. As a reminder, the webcast will always show the person speaking rather than the entirety of the committee.

To ensure an orderly meeting, I'd like to outline a few rules for everyone to follow.

For those participating virtually, members and witnesses may speak in the official language of their choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting. You have the choice of English, French or the floor at the bottom of your screen.

Before speaking, click on the microphone icon to activate your own mike. When you are done speaking, please put your mike on mute to minimize any interference. As a reminder, all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair.

Should members need to request the floor outside your designated time for questions, you should activate your mike and state that you have a point of order. If members wish to intervene on a point of order that has already been raised by another member, you should use the "raise hand" function. This will signal to the chair your interest to speak and create a speakers list. To do so, you should click on "participants" at the bottom of your screen and click on the "raise hand" function.

When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. Unless there are exceptional circumstances, the use of headsets with a boom microphone is mandatory for everyone participating remotely.

Should any technical challenges arise, please advise the chair. Please note that we may need to suspend for a few minutes as we resolve those technical difficulties to ensure that members are able to participate fully.

For those participating in person, proceed as you usually would when the whole committee is meeting in person in a committee room. Should you wish to get my attention, signal me with a hand gesture, or at an appropriate time, call out my name. Should you wish to raise a point of order, wait for an appropriate time, and then clearly indicate to me that you wish to raise a point of order.

With regard to the speakers list, the committee clerk and I will do our best to maintain a consolidated order of speaking for all members, whether they are participating virtually or remotely.

Today I'd like to start by welcoming a new member to our team. Mr. Daniel Blaikie will be joining us permanently, I believe. He will be replacing Ms. Blaney who will be missed, of course. I had a conversation with her yesterday. She also said that she will miss being on this committee. At a future time we may have her back; time will tell, I guess.

We were very busy in the first couple of meetings—I'll put it that way—and weren't able to do proper introductions of our wonderful clerk and our analyst. A new analyst has joined the team. I was hoping that they could perhaps introduce themselves to the members properly.

I apologize for not being able to take the time to do this at the last meeting because we had to get into committee business.

We will start with Mr. Justin Vaive.

Please introduce yourself to the committee and then have the analysts do so as well.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Justin Vaive): Hello, everyone. I'm the clerk of the committee. I have been the clerk of the PROC committee since the beginning of this Parliament, so I'm now into my second session with the PROC committee.

• (1110)

Mr. Andre Barnes (Committee Researcher): I work for the Library of Parliament and have been on PROC since 2010. I'm looking forward to this new session.

The Chair: He has a lot of experience.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Excellent.

I have a point of order.

The Chair: Yes, go ahead.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Thanks very much, Ruby.

I have been sitting on a few other committees, and one of the concerns I have is the speaking list. I know it's very difficult when we're holding meetings in hybrid style. Seeing what's happening in the room versus what's happening on the screens, I am wondering what the mode will be when it comes to making sure.... Who is going to be drawing together that speakers list and moving forward from that?

I have seen from other committees that there have been a few issues, and I want to address that to see how we will be proceeding with the speakers list.

The Chair: At the beginning of the meeting, I mentioned that the clerk and I will be maintaining a consolidated list. That will include that we are going to monitor the hands. I have my screen open to see how the hands go up virtually and the order of those who speak in the room.

Of course, just like you raised a point of order, you can always unmute your mike and raise a point of order.

The clerk and I are in constant communication throughout the meeting; we have a method through which to communicate. If he sees that I may have missed somebody, or somebody else is to be sandwiched into the order, then he lets me know immediately and I follow the advice of the clerk for that order.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Thank you very much.

The Chair: We will continue with the introduction of our new member to the analyst team.

[Translation]

Ms. Laurence Brosseau (Analyst): Hello, my name is Laurence Brosseau.

I have been working at the Library of Parliament for three years now. I have worked on several committees, both on the House and Senate sides. I am pleased to join the team at the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs as an analyst.

[English]

The Chair: Laurence, thank you so much for being a part of this team. I know that everyone has seen you work on other committees, but we're really pleased to have you aboard and our committee looks forward to working with you.

Ms. Laurence Brosseau: Thank you.

The Chair: Moving on to committee business, we have a few notices of motions that have been given to this committee. We have three motions on notice, including one that was just put on notice

this morning. On the order of those motions right now, one is from Ms. Petitpas Taylor, and two are from Ms. Blaney. Since Ms. Blaney at this point is no longer a member of this committee, those two are going to be considered null and void at this time.

I want to mention, though, that one of her motions talked about a study of election ideas or an election during the pandemic. I did have an opportunity to speak with the Chief Electoral Officer last week in reference to the report that Elections Canada has submitted to the House of Commons, which is entitled "Special Report of the Chief Electoral Officer: Administering an Election during the COVID-19 Pandemic". This report has been circulated to all members of the committee.

Essentially, it's a 27-page report—at least in the English version—and it makes three different recommendations. In my conversation with the Chief Electoral Officer, he was extremely eager to come before this committee to give us his thoughts on the report and to allow us to ask him any questions that we may have regarding the report or elections in the future. The reason he is so eager is that we're in a minority government situation—and I guess I don't need to really explain that—so they need to prepare, and oftentimes they need to prepare a lot sooner than we would think. They need to start getting the wheels in motion. Allowing him to have some insight into what our thoughts on this committee may be would really help form their perspective as to direction.

He's really ready to come in, and regardless of what study we move forward with or what the committee decides today, it's oftentimes very difficult to get witnesses in on a last-minute notice. I wanted to let you know that he is willing to come in Thursday if we were to move on a study related to that, but right now we do have Madam Petitpas Taylor's motion on the floor.

I see that we have some hands up, so I guess I'll put it out to you as to what direction the committee would like to move in.

We have Mr. Turnbull and then Mr. Blaikie.

• (1115)

Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I welcome Daniel Blaikie. We're glad to have you.

I put a notice of motion in just before the meeting. I worked on it late last night. It borrows a bit from Rachel Blaney's motion, which would be null and void.

The wording has been slightly adjusted, but I'd like to read it into the record and then maybe give a short synopsis of why I think this should be the priority for this committee, if that's okay.

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Here's the motion. I think Justin distributed it about 30 minutes before the meeting, roughly speaking. I'll just read the English. My French is horrible—my apologies—so I'll read it in English.

Mr. Todd Doherty (Cariboo—Prince George, CPC): I have a point of order, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Doherty.

Mr. Todd Doherty: I apologize to Mr. Turnbull. I have a question.

Before he gets into his motion, I want clarification on the comment regarding Ms. Blaney's motions being null and void. It is my understanding that once a motion has been tabled, regardless of the person's being on the committee or not, it is the committee's business. It's the committee's business to do whatever they so choose with it. Another member of the committee who is still on the committee can then choose it, or the committee itself could then vote and say, yes, we still have those three motions here although that member is no longer part of this committee. If it is the committee's will, they can still choose to adopt that motion. It doesn't just arbitrarily become null and void.

I believe it is the committee's business to be able to do that. Through you, Madam Chair, I was wondering if we could get clarification from the clerk procedurally.

The Chair: I sought clarification before this meeting. Maybe I should give a more fulsome explanation. My apologies for that.

Since the motion that was adopted in the House changed the PROC membership by replacing Ms. Blaney with Mr. Blaikie, the notices of motion standing in Ms. Blaney's name are null and void, but should another member wish to have her motions considered, new notice would have to be given unless the committee is prepared to waive the notice requirement.

Mr. Blaikie is next up to speak as well. I'm assuming there would be some interest in reviving the subject matter of Ms. Blaney's motion. Of course, any other committee members are free to do that, as well.

Mr. Clerk.

The Clerk: Madam Chair, for the benefit of the members, I wish to underscore the distinction between motions that have been moved, which, as Mr. Doherty rightly stated, are then the property of the committee.... Consideration of those can be continued, and then ultimately voted upon.

In the case of the two notices of motion that were received from Ms. Blaney, they were only notices of motion. They hadn't yet been moved. *House of Commons Procedure and Practice* states at page 1062, "Notices of motions issued by a Member who is no longer a member of a committee become moot."

In this case, if there is someone on the committee who would like to re-offer those notices of motion from Ms. Blaney, they can do so. As the chair has indicated, they would then go through a 48-hour notice period, just as any substantive motion would, unless there were unanimous consent of the committee to proceed immediately. It's in the hands of the committee.

• (1120)

Mr. Daniel Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): On that same point of order, Madam Chair.

You will forgive me as a new member of the committee, who is not exactly familiar with all the routine motions that have just passed recently. I know that on other committees the notice requirement stands unless there is a substantive motion that pertains directly to the business before the committee.

In this case, if we were discussing committee business, it seems to me that unless that rule doesn't apply, it would be in order for any one member of the committee to re-move the motion that Ms. Blaney had presented to the committee simply because we're discussing committee business at this time.

Unless there's something I don't know about PROC, it seems to me that it would be perfectly in order to move the motion that Ms. Blaney had presented, given that it relates to the business before the committee.

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Blaikie, you can definitely do that in committee business. That's why I mentioned that. I'm assuming that you will probably be doing that when it is your turn. It's appropriate to do so since we're trying to figure out at this point in today's meeting which direction we should be heading in as a committee, and what issues we should be exploring.

Mr. Turnbull, you have the floor.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I am moving Ms. Blaney's motion with a few changes. Notably, one would be the timeline, which needs to be a bit shorter, because this is such a high priority:

That the Procedure and House Affairs Committee conduct a study of the challenges posed to the normal conduct of federal elections by the COVID-19 pandemic and identify the measures to be taken to adapt the approach and conduct of a General Election to preserve the health and safety of all Canadians. This study should begin with the top priority on a review of the recommendations made by the Canada's Chief Electoral Officer in the Special Report of the Chief—

The Chair: Mr. Turnbull, I know you keep getting interrupted, but there's a lot of static from your microphone. I'm concerned that the interpreters may be having a difficult time because of it.

I know in the past that unplugging one's microphone, and re-plugging it back in has helped. Could you give that a try?

We can't hear you, Mr. Turnbull.

• (1125)

The Clerk: Mr. Turnbull, it still is problematic, so we'll have an IT ambassador reach out to you to try to help you figure out what the problem is.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Can we suspend for a moment while I get this resolved?

The Chair: Yes, I was just about to suggest that. Let's suspend for a few moments.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Point of order.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: My apologies, everyone. I've never had any problems with my headset before.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Point of order.

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Why would we suspend when we have another member who is waiting to bring forth or talk about a motion? Why would we just suspend at this point?

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): I'll answer that point of order if I could, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Yes, I guess I can give my opinion at the end. Go ahead.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: It's been normal practice in this committee, absolutely, that when any member drops out we will suspend until every member can be present. Just because Mr. Turnbull—

Mr. Todd Doherty: All right, fair enough. Thanks, Mark.

The Chair: I was just going to say that when someone has the floor, I need to allow them to finish making their complete thought before I move on to the next person. If a person, as stated at the beginning, isn't fully able to participate, then we allow them to get the help that's needed. I would do the same for you, as well, if you had the floor.

Let's hope it only takes a few moments.

• (1125) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1140)

The Chair: Sorry for that interruption, but we know these things happen from time to time.

Without further delay let's get back to Mr. Turnbull so we can get somewhere today.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'm sorry, committee members, for the technical difficulties. They really were beyond my control. I think I had just worked too many hours and the Surface tablet was overheating. That's what IT said; there were just too many things open.

My apologies for that.

I will pick up generally where I left off. I can't remember exactly. Would you like me to start from the beginning? What makes the most sense?

The Chair: The beginning is what I'm seeing signals for.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Okay.

My motion reads:

That the Procedure and House Affairs Committee conduct a study of the challenges posed to the normal conduct of federal elections by the COVID-19 pandemic and identify the measures to be taken to adapt the approach and conduct of a General Election to preserve the health and safety of all Canadians. This study should begin with the top priority on a review of the recommendations made by the Canada's Chief Electoral Officer in the Special Report of the Chief Electoral Officer: Administering an Election during the COVID-19 Pandemic

—that's the name of the report the chair was referring to earlier—

and shall proceed to studying additional and related challenges. The committee should hear from witnesses including but not limited to: (i) Canada's Chief Electoral Officer, (ii) provincial Chief Electoral Officers who have already run elections during the pandemic, (iii) Public Health officials, (iv) advocates for those who face barriers to voting; (c) that the committee report its findings to the House no later than November 16th, 2020.

The Chair: Okay.

Do you wish to speak to this motion? How is it different?

I guess they are very minor differences from Ms. Blaney's motion. I have them out in front of me and I didn't get a chance to look at your motion.

• (1145)

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: I don't think it's substantively different from Rachel Blaney's original motion. It does shorten the timeline slightly. It prioritizes the recommendations in the report, some of which suggest that some legislative change may be required.

I read the report last night from the Chief Electoral Officer on administering an election during the COVID-19 pandemic. I think three important recommendations thus far have come out of the working group they've formed. I have a bit of a summary of those. Essentially, it's extending the voting period. It's looking at how voting in long-term care facilities can be better managed to preserve the health and safety of our seniors and those individuals working in those facilities. It's also adjusting the adaptation power that the Chief Electoral Officer has to adapt procedures during an emergency situation like the one we find ourselves in today. I think those are high-level and pressing concerns, it seems, with the thought that an election could be approaching at any time. We don't know when. It's a minority Parliament. To my understanding, it is PROC's duty to review these reports that are produced by the Chief Electoral Officer. It seems that given the unknown of an election, we probably should tighten the timelines slightly.

The other thing the motion did was to take out some of the very specific topics that were included in Rachel Blaney's original motion. That's not to say that we shouldn't study those; I just wanted to keep it general, because I think we may want to cover a considerable number of other topics. I figured the motion would be easier, hopefully, to get through this committee and get support for if we took out some of those specific topics and left it open for us to have further discussion on how we undertake that study as a committee. Obviously, we can look at many topics. I know that the pandemic's circumstances are impacting a lot of polling locations, predominantly at public schools. We're going to have to think a lot about how an election happens when we don't have those locations to use, potentially. There are also the mechanisms to keep voters and poll workers safe. Obviously, social distancing within those locations will change the operation of them.

I saw statistics that the issue of voting by mail and the capacity to do that is also being flagged for further study and discussion. On evaluating possible changes to the Canada Elections Act, I think we should be staying neutral at a time like this. Those recommendations are being made to us as a committee, but we need a fulsome discussion and study on those recommendations to either endorse them or not. In some cases, we may want to recommend something slightly different from what's been proposed. I think that's our duty.

I think all of this is couched within what I see as the most essential process for our democracy—namely, that people can exercise their right to vote, and do so safely, within a pandemic. We're all committed here. I know that as PROC members and members of Parliament we want to keep Canadians healthy and safe above all else. I really think we need to have a tightened time frame on this for perhaps at least a portion of the study. I think this work is high priority given the current circumstances and a minority Parliament.

I'll stop there for now. That was some of my rationale for why I think this should be the top priority for us.

Thank you.

• (1150)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Turnbull.

We have a speakers list going. We have Mr. Blaikie, Ms. Vecchio and then Mr. Doherty.

I did want to just give a little bit of feedback on what you said. When I spoke to the Chief Electoral Officer, I mentioned that there is a motion on notice to study an election held during this pandemic, and I'm sure, if he comes to our committee soon, he'll let us know in person as well, but he did urge us to try to dispose of the recommendations they made and to give comments and feedback on them as soon as possible.

Even if we were to take on a larger study with your timeline, Mr. Turnbull, or with another timeline—whatever the committee decides—he was hoping that at least those recommendations could receive feedback from this committee as soon as possible, even if we were to carry on with a longer study.

Go ahead, Mr. Blaikie.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you very much.

I want to start by maybe giving a little context to where this motion comes from on the NDP side. In addition to having a couple of other critic portfolios, I am the NDP's democratic reform critic. Back in June, I wrote to all the parties, to the various democratic reform critics and a member of the government, expressing concern over what was then on Elections Canada's website, which was essentially just a kind of advisory that the pandemic posed a lot of challenges to running an election under the current legal framework for elections.

The website went so far as to say that Elections Canada has had, since its inception, the power to essentially nullify the writ, either in particular ridings across the country or in entire regions of the country, if they don't feel satisfied that they can deliver an election according to the legal requirements of the Canada Elections Act.

I found that quite alarming, because whether it's a particular riding, a set of ridings across the country or entire regions of the country, not only would it be unfortunate if Canadians in those areas weren't able to avail themselves of the opportunity during an election to decide who they want to have representing them, but I think that could also become politicized very quickly by certain people at the time. I'm not saying who it might be, but any political actor might at that point decide that it's in their best political interests to attack the legitimacy of the electoral process rather than compete

within the rules. This is something that is very important to avoid, whatever your political stripe or orientation within Canada. I think we can all agree that we all want to have the rules of engagement at election time be clear, and we want political parties and political actors to be competing for the support of Canadians within an established framework, rather than trying to get political advantage by attacking the legitimacy of the framework itself.

I found that quite alarming. I wrote the parties. Unfortunately, I didn't hear back over the summer. That letter included an invitation to begin discussions on some of these questions in coming to an agreement on the best path forward. Without hearing back on that letter, our next step was to try to bring it in a more formal way to a committee of the House—PROC obviously being the committee of the House it would go to—in order to try to get some action on the file. That's where Ms. Blaney's motion came from. It came from that letter seeking some way to move forward in this parliamentary session.

That's the background.

In terms of which motion we proceed with, I'm going to start by saying that my preference is still with Ms. Blaney's motion. It's not because I don't want to consider the recommendations of the Chief Electoral Officer. I think those are important and should be an urgent matter of business within the framework of that study. I do think that while Ms. Blaney's motion does raise some particular issues that are worth studying, it's very clear that the study would include but not be limited to those items. I think we have the latitude we need in order to be able to pursue right off the hop a detailed study of the Chief Electoral Officer's recommendations.

One of the issues of concern—and I don't think this is on purpose—is one of the things that I note about the shorter termination date for the study in Mr. Turnbull's motion. While with Ms. Blaney's motion we would have the flexibility to issue an interim report that might address exclusively the content of the Chief Electoral Officer's recommendations, Mr. Turnbull's motion would effectively end the entire study that early.

When we look at the sitting calendar in terms of the days remaining, I'm not sure there are enough days to do justice to the subject matter, particularly not if we consider Ms. Blaney's motion for a moment. Some of the things that are in there go above and beyond, and I think part of the role that PROC can play here is to go above and beyond what Elections Canada was doing. It was doing its job, and I have confidence in Elections Canada to do it well, but Elections Canada doesn't provide advice to political actors on how to campaign, for instance.

• (1155)

That's something we all do and something we all know how to do. We may do it in slightly different ways, but to be able to have a discussion not only with non-partisan officials but also among ourselves as partisan political actors, about how we campaign and what kinds of campaigning practices might be acceptable in the context of a pandemic in which normal campaigning practices, we might all agree, are important—or that PROC might recommend that we suspend, or alter to make sure that we're not trespassing on public health measures—is also very important.

I think the original motion that was on notice with the committee provides a little more latitude in timing, without making the object of Mr. Turnbull's motion impossible. It rightly names, for the sake of transparency for Canadians who will be following this, some of the particular items concerning which PROC can add a bit of value, if you will, to what Elections Canada is doing by considering some of the more partisan elements of campaigning and elections during a pandemic.

It also gives us a little more time to play with, which does not in any way prevent our reporting on an interim basis on such items as the recommendations of the Chief Electoral Officer, which we might consider to be more urgent.

I'll put on the record just a little bit of puzzlement—and I look forward to some clarification from the Chief Electoral Officer when he has occasion to come to the procedure and House affairs committee—about the urgency to hear from PROC on his recommendations.

It's not because I don't agree that we need to move quickly on this; I absolutely do. I would have preferred our being able to start on it in the summer, frankly. All three of his recommendation areas involve legislative changes, and of course those aren't going to happen by a recommendation from PROC; they're going to happen when the government introduces legislation. I presume that once the legislation passes second reading in the House of Commons, if it does, it will come to PROC, and at that moment PROC will be seized with the question we really need to discuss, which is the government's legislative response to the Chief Electoral Officer's recommendation.

It's not that I think it's premature for PROC to be considering those things, but I wonder at the urgency of PROC's needing to report on them before we have a sense of what the government is going to do and what kind of legislation they'll be drafting to meet what they see as being the legislative commitments that come out of those recommendations.

We actually do have a little more time and wiggle room, then. It would be different if the government had already tabled legislation, but I think PROC is going to have not only this opportunity, but also the opportunity that study after second reading would afford, to consider those recommendations—and with the benefit of knowing what the government's concrete response to them would be.

The Chair: Let me interject with a quick question for you, without your ceding the floor, Mr. Blaikie.

I am wondering about the timeline. I have heard from Mr. Barnes, the analyst, that November 16 would be very difficult.

November 23 they could make work—not that I'm suggesting, nor is he really suggesting, that date. He is just saying that from a logistical standpoint they could possibly make it work, but November 16 they cannot.

I completely understand what you're saying about the legislation. That legislation would be then coming to this committee as well.

Would you want to entertain amendments to Mr. Turnbull's motion—I am just wondering—or do you want to procedurally go through voting eventually? We have a speakers list, and obviously we won't go to voting until everyone has spoken, but I don't know whether, before you speak or—

• (1200)

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Sure.

What I might suggest for the sake of expediency—and of course I'm not prejudging the reactions of any member of the committee.... My sense is that we might find agreement more quickly if we were to seek unanimous consent to dispense with Mr. Turnbull's motion, move Ms. Blaney's motion, and consider it adopted.

Then, within it we can begin talking about the parameters of the study, including hearing the Chief Electoral Officer on Thursday and trying to get going as quickly as possible in order to be able to issue an interim report, if we see fit after hearing from the CEO of Elections Canada, on a more expedited basis that speaks directly to his recommendations.

That's just my sense of how we might find agreement more quickly and use this meeting time to flesh out what the study looks like. It is, however, something that I believe would require unanimous consent, not simply a vote.

I would, then, put that to the committee, Madam Chair, if it's all right with you and if we could get unanimous consent for it. If we can't, then we can begin figuring out how we dispense with the various motions before us.

The Chair: Yes, absolutely.

Next on the speakers list is Ms. Vecchio, and then Mr. Doherty and Dr. Duncan.

Perhaps we'll move in that order and see what they have to say.

Mr. Todd Doherty: I have a point of order.

The Chair: Mr. Doherty.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Madam Chair, just before Mr. Blaikie cedes the floor, I have a question for him.

At the very beginning he talked about Elections Canada and the legitimacy of the writ in certain electoral districts.

My understanding of what he was saying is that if they feel they can't conduct an election safely, they can suspend the writ or make the writ null and void in certain electoral districts.

Did I hear that correctly? Before he cedes the floor, I just wanted to ask that question and perhaps give him an opportunity to explain this a bit further.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Sure.

The Chair: I guess that's a friendly question. Perhaps Mr. Blaikie would like to shed some more light on it. I'm sure we could also ask the Chief Electoral Officer when he's eventually before the committee, because this question is interesting.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: The answer is yes; you did absolutely hear that right. I haven't checked the website recently, but certainly it was published in June on the Elections Canada website. If you go to their main site, then click on their COVID-19 tab, and read what they have there, you will see that they do draw attention to that power.

It doesn't take a lot of imagination to think of what would happen if the election results were substantially similar to the election results we saw in the last election. In 30 ridings across the country, you had Elections Canada saying that they just couldn't meet the administrative requirements of the election. Then you would have a situation where some party may be asked to form a government based on an incomplete House of Commons. The way those seats would have landed, or will ultimately land by the time whatever wave we're in passes, and Elections Canada is able to hold that election, could substantially change the balance of power in the House of Commons and which party could enjoy the confidence of the House of Commons in order to govern.

This is not an academic question. I think we can all imagine the worst-case scenario of how belligerent certain political actors might be on that point, and might rightly be. It seems to me that this would be a scenario where it's not just a case of blind partisanship, depending on the scenario. There could be real, legitimate concerns about whether you could really ask a party to form a government if there's an extant 30 seats, and we don't know how they are going to land. That could be the difference between having party A form a minority government, or party B having a majority government.

Those are very different scenarios. You would be depending on—and this is not to cast aspersions on Elections Canada at all—a non-partisan organization making decisions on an administrative basis that would suddenly be determining indirectly very substantive political questions. I don't think that would be healthy for the country.

That's why I have felt for months now that there is a real sense of urgency. This is something we have to get right. I think some of those questions go beyond the scope of Elections Canada review.

On the same website, if you go to the same tab, what you will find is the task that Elections Canada set for itself, and rightly so. First, they looked at what they can do within the current legislative framework, what kinds of amendments or alterations they can make to their processes in order to more successfully run an election, given the public health constraints within the current legislation. Then they set themselves the task of asking about some quick and dirty legislative amendments that Parliament might be able to make in a hurry to make it possible for them to have a better chance of running these elections.

That's different from what I think the committee really ought to be doing. That is part of it. It's incumbent upon us to try to facilitate Elections Canada's quick response as quickly as we can so that they feel they can move forward with that. Obviously, there's a role for government in that because they need to present those legislative changes, but beyond that, I think there's then the question of how you ideally run an election inside of a pandemic rather than just how we do a rush job of making it possible.

Elections Canada has to do that because Elections Canada isn't in control of when the next election will happen. We are. It's incumbent upon us to figure out how we can hold an election safely within a pandemic and to figure out the timing of that.

We could go on about this. Frankly, I think the House of Commons should do a much better job at codifying the confidence convention. We're seeing some of that play out on the floor of the House of Commons today. There is no reason that the confidence convention has to be so opaque and open to interpretation.

In Britain, in 2010, they made it very clear in their own Standing Orders that nothing is a confidence vote unless you have a non-confidence motion. There are two forms that a non-confidence motion can take. They are stipulated in the Standing Orders. If a motion isn't one of those two motions, it's not a confidence motion.

That's a great way not to have a surprise election, and, frankly, in the midst of a global pandemic I think Canada's Parliament should be doing a far better job of making sure that we don't have an election by accident. I think it's shameful that we haven't got it together to do that and that the kinds of games that are happening on the floor of the House today are going on.

● (1205)

That's not a separate conversation, but it is a longer conversation than the CEO of Elections Canada is asking us to have. Yes, we want to be able to address his recommendations on an urgent basis, but there's a lot more work for us to do and there are a lot of things to consider when we talk about elections, not only how you have them but how they're triggered in the context of a pandemic.

I think Ms. Blaney's motion establishes a sufficiently wide scope while pointing out some of the important things that we have to do and, importantly, it allows us a little bit more time.

If the chair would agree, I propose that we test the committee now for unanimous consent to dispense with Mr. Turnbull's motion, lay Ms. Blaney's motion on the table, and see if we can come to some form of quicker agreement on this.

The Chair: I think we might be able to build consensus. I don't know, but it's always good to have consensus whenever we move forward in a united way. I think that's always the ideal way, but there is a list of speakers and I know they've been patiently waiting for some time. I can see perhaps how there could be frustration if they don't get their say, so I would like to hear from Ms. Vecchio, Mr. Doherty and Dr. Duncan, and hopefully they can shed some light through their remarks as to what their thinking is and help us.

Ms. Vecchio.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Excellent. Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

To start off with Member Turnbull's—Ryan's— motion that he put forward today, I see exactly what he was trying to do and I respect that. We do need to have some guidelines specifically for the Chief Electoral Officer, because as Daniel said, we don't want things to lead to what they could—so I think it's very important that we do debate and discuss some of these issues that could come up.

As a former chair—and I am very grateful that Ruby brought it forward—I am very concerned about that deadline. I do not see it as something that would work for this committee, especially when it comes to translation and everything that's going on. As a former committee chair, I can tell you it was delayed quite a bit. I recognize that I was not the chair of PROC and I know that there's probably precedence given to this committee on making sure that things are being translated and a variety of things of that sort, but I just do not see how a November 16 timeline could even possibly work.

We also have to recognize that during that period of time, although we are doing with hybrid sittings, we are going to be looking at Veterans' Week, so we are talking about reporting and tabling a report to the House of Commons on November 16 when we actually have only 18 sitting days between now and then, if you're counting Veterans' Week as a potential sitting week, since we have the ability to do hybrid sittings. I just do not think that we would be able to turn around a fulsome report on what we're really looking at.

I would therefore like to move an amendment, and it's specifically to the date. I would like to change the date for report—

Actually, I'm going to wait for that and pass that back because I know that Todd does want to speak on this as well. I will just roll back on that comment, and I will not be moving an amendment at this moment.

I think those are some of the concerns. I have a great concern and therefore I think we need to have that additional three to four weeks to be able to do the work that we need to do.

I do not think we are going to be looking at a report for which we're going to have unanimous consent on every single issue. There's going to have to be not only one draft but also a second draft. There will have to be translation, and if we're really looking at the inner workings of Parliament, it's just not going to do that bit. Those are the concerns that I have there.

When I look at the whole of Ryan's motion, I do see that it is satisfactory in most cases, but I think we also need to get a lot of work done. We know that prorogation should be coming up in the next

week as well, so there are many priorities that this committee must study.

I will now turn over the floor, but thank you very much for listening to my comments.

● (1210)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Vecchio. I appreciate those comments. It gives us a better sense of which direction to head in.

Mr. Doherty.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I apologize to my colleague publicly for calling “inaudible” while we were live.

Both motions are obviously very similar in scope. My concern is the timeline of Mr. Turnbull's motion. While bringing forward a motion that is more streamlined, I will give him that, and focuses more on what the Chief Electoral Officer's report is, in his intervention Mr. Turnbull talks about a fulsome study. I'm not quite sure that, given the timeline of November 16, we would be able to come to a fulsome study as such. Therefore, my concern in regard to Mr. Turnbull's motion would be that, first, the timeline is too short.

Madam Chair, I know you spoke of the urgency the Chief Electoral Officer expressed to you. Again, with the information and the intervention that Mr. Blaikie brought forth, I would be more inclined to support dispensing with Mr. Turnbull's motion and going with Ms. Blaney's. Perhaps we can come to a friendly amendment on a timeline and agree as a committee that we are focusing on the Chief Electoral Officer's recommendations sooner rather than later and we can do an interim report on what the Chief Electoral Officer's three recommendations are.

I see an issue in terms of setting a definitive timeline for November 16. We need to make sure we hear what the Chief Electoral Officer brings forth on Thursday and decide at that point whether we are going to see ourselves in a four-to-six meeting study. We also know that we have provincial elections taking place in my province of British Columbia currently, where we moved our voting day, our e-day, to a weekend. Saskatchewan is undertaking theirs next week. As well, we have the history of New Brunswick's election. It would give us a little more time, again not being so rushed; but to really develop that witness list, too, I think individual groups or parties will have an opportunity to expand the witness list.

Again, as we are in unprecedented times, we need to make sure that we're not putting undue pressure on our analysts to quickly turn around a hastily done study just for the sake of expediency here or because we feel that the Chief Electoral Officer is expressing some concern in terms of time. It's our duty to make sure that, as Mr. Turnbull said, we are doing our job. We owe it to Canadians to make sure that we're looking at most or all areas of this and our concerns. We do not want to put Canadians' health and safety at risk.

I appreciate Mr. Turnbull working through the night to put forth this motion. It is well meaning. However, we have a motion before the committee, and on Mr. Blaikie's side, I think if we can come to some friendly amendments on that, we can dispense with Mr. Turnbull's motion and then work to try to right-size Ms. Blaney's motion to something more amenable to the committee and get to work on it as soon as possible.

• (1215)

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

That helps a lot. We're hearing mostly issues with a timeline, and having a fulsome discussion on this.

Ms. Duncan, followed by Mr. Turnbull.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair. I'd like to thank all my colleagues for their very thoughtful comments, and Mr. Turnbull for bringing forward his motion.

I am concerned, as we are in wave two. The numbers are clear. We need to do everything possible to protect Canadians, particularly our most vulnerable. We have to recognize where we are. We are in a minority government, and confidence votes are going to come up now and again. It's absolutely incumbent upon us that we hear what planning is in place for an election, and to protect our democratic institutions. They have to be fully functional as we fight this pandemic.

In the spring, we had to be prepared for whatever the fall brought. In this second wave, we have to be prepared now for whatever comes. It's going to be really important to hear what measures Elections Canada is putting in place, so that Canadians can express their democratic right.

Members of the committee are talking about timelines. Could we think about an interim report due by November 23? The reason I say this is that we are in wave two. If you look at the case numbers, they're hovering between 2,000 and 2,200 in the country. Those are real case numbers from 10 to 14 days ago. We don't know where those numbers are going to go. It is the job of this committee to make sure that we are prepared should we have to go into an election and do so by protecting the health and safety of Canadians.

I would like to suggest that we keep Mr. Turnbull's motion, and we add an amendment to have an interim report.

• (1220)

The Chair: Mr. Turnbull, go ahead, please.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thanks, Madam Chair.

I appreciate the discussion and the thoughtful remarks from my colleagues, in particular Ms. Duncan in suggesting that we could build in an interim report deadline. Perhaps amending this motion would enable us to get some unanimous consent on it. It sounds to me like we're all amenable to the general idea of studying this as a first priority, which is great to hear.

Perhaps I was being a little overly ambitious for even our most dedicated House of Commons staff. They work around the clock and serve and do amazing work, so my apologies for that. However, I do think Ms. Duncan makes a really good point, that maybe we could have an interim report due on November 23 and then leave the study end date blank, perhaps. Just take that out.

To Mr. Blaikie's point, there may in fact be numerous topics that require significant debate and that will take us a little bit longer. Perhaps I was being overly ambitious in thinking that we could do all of this by November 16. My intention was really to respond to the CEO's request for a swift response, which I think...given some legislative changes that may be necessary. I get Mr. Blaikie's point that some of that may come to us anyway in second reading. I think having us discuss the recommendations, both non-legislative ones and legislative ones potentially, would be advantageous. To be able to respond and provide some feedback or guidance within a fairly compressed time frame would serve the immediate needs of the Chief Electoral Officer, who is really under the gun. If I were the person responsible for having to make sure we could have an election at any time and ensure that Canadians could exercise their democratic rights safely, I certainly would hope that a parliamentary standing committee would respond to my request for swift guidance. I think it is our duty as members on this committee to respond to that.

I think Mr. Blaikie made a really good point. I actually had a quote from the Toronto Star that I think quotes the Elections Canada website that essentially says, yes, the writ could be withdrawn. This is deeply concerning for me. If public health experts thought Canadians were being put at risk unnecessarily, they could withdraw the writ. This has never happened throughout history, as far as I know. It would be a pretty large failure of our democracy, in a way. I think it's our responsibility to step up and respond to this request.

So I hope this motion can stand with an amendment. I know that I can't amend my own motion, but Ms. Duncan has already suggested, I think, an amendment that might help us reach consensus.

Thanks very much.

The Chair: Mr. Clerk, perhaps you could help us here. We're at the end of the speakers list. We have a motion on the floor. It was introduced, debated and...amended?

Can he not amend it himself? Would somebody need to move a formal amendment and then we vote? How do we move on?

• (1225)

The Clerk: Madam Chair, if the committee does want to have an amendment to Mr. Turnbull's motion, Mr. Turnbull as the mover can't move that amendment. It would fall to one of the other members of the committee if they so wished to provide some sort of amendment to it.

The Chair: Dr. Duncan, you have your hand up. Could you provide us with an understanding of what the motion would now be?

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to add a friendly amendment that I hope Mr. Turnbull would accept. As people talked about timelines, I would hope that we could add an interim report by November 23. I'm hoping that might allow for a consensus around the table.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Just the last sentence would be changed: "that the committee submit an interim report to the House no later than November 23, 2020".

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Exactly. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Madam Chair, if I may....

Is there a speakers list? I'm sorry.

The Chair: There isn't. You would be the next person on the list.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Just to be clear, let's do a walk back on the time frame. The interim report would be due on the 23rd. Again, I would like to just walk back with the clerk or the analysts on the time frame. If the 18th was really pushing it, how does adding five more days make that big a difference? At the very least, would it not be best to push it to the first week of December?

Again, we are studying, and we want to give ourselves four, five or six meetings between now and then to study this. Then we have to agree and meet with the committee again on the text of the interim report. Then it goes to translation, and then we bring it back to the House. I'm just saying that by adding an additional five days or spreading it into the first week of December, I think we're probably better off. I think we should go to the clerk or to the analysts to see if more time is needed.

The Chair: Andre, I know from the email you sent me that you said the 16th would not be possible. Did you want to give us some input?

Mr. Andre Barnes: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Just to elaborate, I sent an email to the chair about the study as set out in Mr. Turnbull's motion. The concern that was raised between my colleague Laurence and me was that if the Chief Electoral Officer comes on November 22, which leaves November 27 and 29 for meetings, at which we would get more testimony. We would then need to consider the report on November 3.

The Chair: I'm sorry, Andre. I think you mean October 27 and 29. You said "November".

Mr. Andre Barnes: I'm sorry about that.

The committee would need to consider the report on November 3 and November 5. That then would need to be translated at some point. There is a break week, a constituency week from November 9 to 13, when the House wouldn't sit and this committee probably would not meet, so the reporting deadline would be hard to meet. As for making it a longer study, the library really doesn't have an opinion on that, but only to say that the original motion would have been very tight, simply because of translation.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Madam Chair, could I then suggest that we come to an agreement on a friendly amendment and go with the original date of December 11 that Ms. Blaney suggested? That would give us ample time, because, again, as we're discussing, we may have more witnesses and more questions for the electoral officer, which would take longer. That would give the clerk and analysts more time to prepare this report and still be on a timely basis.

• (1230)

The Chair: I guess there's a friendly amendment, and there's another friendly amendment. With that date—hold on, I have in front of me—of December 11, would that be to conclude the full study or would that be just to report back with an interim report?

Mr. Todd Doherty: I think as we move forward I would say that it would be for the interim report. As we move forward, we might find that we have moved substantially forward with the information we need, so that we may be able to wrap it up sooner rather than later. As in most studies that take place, sometimes you do a study and it's cut and dried, and sometimes you do a study where there are more questions, such as what Mr. Blaikie raised in his intervention.

I think that if we can take care of the concern that our analysts have about the timeline and also look at the electoral officer's concerns, and move to take it at least into December, that would give us all enough time to digest what we're going to hear. The committee can debate the information that is brought forth. We can actually do a fulsome study, as Mr. Turnbull said in his intervention, on the issues potentially affecting Elections Canada in conducting an election during COVID. I think we can do a far better job—that's expected of us—if we push it a bit further.

The Chair: Perfect. I think we're going to get somewhere.

We have about half an hour left of the scheduled time. Next on the speakers list is Ms. Vecchio, Dr. Duncan and then Mr. Turnbull.

Ms. Vecchio.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Thank you very much.

I'm just looking at the subamendment, basically, that Todd is making to the amendment put forward by Kirsty. I think we really do have to look at those time frames. A lot will be coming our way. We'll need to do a lot of reviews as part of our job here. So I understand this, but what will the interim report's focus be? Will it be just these three things? Will we then be adding additional work to this? I'm just looking at that and thinking about what the interim report will be versus the final report. I'm looking at those December deadlines. I know it's tight regardless, but I also recognize that if we continue to add to this, saying that once we have this interim report....

If we continue to prolong this study, my concern is that we won't get to these other important studies as well. I just want to discuss that a little bit. What are we looking at trying to fulfill?

The Chair: It is my understanding that the interim report would mainly be focused on the three recommendations from the Chief Electoral Officer. Then the rest of the study, whatever the scope and topics the parties wanted to look at and invite witnesses on, would be the larger study that would continue.

We have Dr. Duncan, Mr. Turnbull and then Mr. Blaikie.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you, Madam Chair, and my colleagues.

I'm concerned because, as a member of this group, we have to be ready for whatever comes. This is a novel virus. We do not know what will happen. When I look back to August, the cases across the country were in the low 300s. As I mentioned, they're up at around 2,000 to 2,200 right now. We also have to remember that there is a lag time here. The numbers we're seeing are from 10 to 14 days ago. I think it's important we keep in mind that asymptomatic spread is still a threat. This is a virus that still hospitalizes people. It still kills people. It's still challenging to treat. It's still disrupting the world.

These outbreaks follow a predictable pattern. People increase their number of contacts. Restrictions relax. Weeks later, cases rise. Hospitalizations rise. More deaths occur. We know that some provinces are having a harder time than other provinces.

I come back to the fact that we could see an election just because we have a minority government. We have to be ready. I think the sooner we can get some recommendations, the better. In the spring we had to be ready for whatever the fall would bring. No one knew if there would be a second wave, or if there would be a second wave with the flu, but we had to be ready. I think we have to be ready now.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

• (1235)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Turnbull.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you.

I appreciate all of the comments. I'm still working towards consensus here. I think perhaps some recommendations or some friendly amendments can still be made. In an attempt to do that, maybe I'll make a suggestion.

Why can't we have two timelines? One would be for an interim report that would really respond to that first report from the Chief Electoral Officer, which we've already received. It has become public. I think we need to respond to those three main recommendations and give some feedback and guidance on them. Perhaps we could do so if we were to add language in the middle of the motion that would maybe commit to a timeline of December 1. That, I suggest, would be the latest we should be aiming for in terms of an immediate response to the CEO.

My understanding, Madam Chair, is that there are more reports coming. The Chief Electoral Officer will in fact be submitting a second report in the future. Is that not true?

The Chair: Yes. There will be a report on the 2019 election.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: We can continue this study as long as it takes. I have a note here that the last study was done in the 42nd Parliament. That was after 42nd general election, and it had 34 meetings spanning October 2016 through June 2017. Obviously, no one here wants necessarily wants to have that many meetings to review these reports per se, but for as long as it takes, this committee should be digging into the details of how to conduct the safest and most efficient possible election whenever it occurs.

I know I'm not allowed to move this amendment, but perhaps there's another member of my team who would be willing to move it. I would certainly consider it friendly.

Mrs. Vecchio.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: On a point of order, Madam Chair, I note that we've heard subamendment after subamendment. Could we clarify what is being swallowed and what's not? That's part of the issue here, because we've got all of this going on, and Ryan, you're doing a great job. I know what you're trying to do, but we're going back and forth. Let's figure out where we're at, at this specific moment, and what is actually a friendly amendment? What are we looking at, and what are we trying to amend at this very specific point?

The Chair: Obviously, we started with the suggestion from Mr. Blaikie to withdraw this motion, and then we moved to Ms. Blaney's original motion. That was if we get through the procedural aspect of voting on this, and that's where we would land, or if Mr. Turnbull were to withdraw his motion.

On the friendly amendments that were made to Mr. Turnbull's motion, one was made by Ms. Duncan, and that was to have an interim report by November 23, and then leave the end date of the actual study open.

There was a subamendment moved by Mr. Doherty to move the date to December 11, which would be a deadline for the full study.

We are now hearing from Mr. Turnbull as to perhaps another date. I'm not sure. He's about to say something.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: I think we have to look at where we're moving forward.

I'm looking at Daniel, knowing that he was requesting unanimous consent for a motion. He had that request, and we were going through the speakers list, which had been exhausted. I want to go back to the actual procedure as to how we should go through this.

A motion has been put on the floor, followed by an amendment, and right now we've got all this fuddle duddle.

The Chair: The speakers list was exhausted, and then Mr. Doherty put his hand up to move a subamendment to the amendment, but otherwise I was going to move to a vote on the amendment that was proposed. However, Mr. Doherty raised his hand, so I decided that we shouldn't move to the vote without hearing from Mr. Doherty. He then moved a subamendment, and now there's some debate on that subamendment.

There's a speakers list that has started since that subamendment was introduced. That's where we're at.

• (1240)

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: I want to look at the family tree of amendments. That's all. Where are we going, and what is the amendment?

The Chair: We're on the subamendment that Mr. Doherty—

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Are we voting on the subamendment right now?

The Chair: No, we're on a speakers list on the subamendment right now. The speakers are Mr. Turnbull, Mr. Blaikie, and I believe Ms. Petitpas Taylor removed her hand, so it will be Ms. Duncan.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I appreciate Mrs. Vecchio's comments. I realize it's a bit confusing, because there are a lot of amendments and subamendments being proposed. I'm making an attempt to get us to collaboratively work together and find a timeline that works for everybody.

Hearing all of those concerns, I suggest that we add a reference to an interim report to the line in the motion that reads, "This study should begin with the top priority on a review of the recommendations made by Canada's Chief Electoral Officer in this special report". We could add, "with an interim report due no later than December 1." Then the motion could continue as is, "And, shall proceed to studying additional related challenges."

We could also take out the timeline at the end of the motion, which originally said November 16. That way there would be no end date specified to the overall study, but there would be a commitment to an interim report that responds to the immediate needs of the Chief Electoral Officer, which is our responsibility as committee members to meet that request.

The Chair: I know it's very confusing sometimes with all of this formality. We could probably come to a conclusion more easily if we all had a conversation the normal way people have conversations.

I apologize also. The speakers list I mentioned earlier has Mr. Blaikie, then Mr. Doherty, and then Dr. Duncan. That is who we still have on the speakers list. I'm still really optimistic that by the end of the scheduled time maybe we could have the vote and have some decision made.

Mr. Blaikie.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Given the discussion, my impression is that there's nothing in the scope of Ms. Blaney's motion that isn't covered by Mr. Turnbull's motion, and that the committee has agreement on that. If we propose to look at any of the elements that were

mentioned in Ms. Blaney's motion as part of this study, nobody is going to be citing the terms of reference of Mr. Turnbull's motion as a reason why we wouldn't be looking at things in Ms. Blaney's motion.

I'm more concerned about getting the study started than I am about belabouring these details. I take the point that we want to get back to the House quickly on the Chief Electoral Officer's recommendations. I still think we might be making too big a deal of that, frankly, because the recommendations of the Chief Electoral Officer and our views of them are going to be superseded by the government's legislation. The government is the one that has to draft the legislation, and our opinions about what legislative changes should be made, or whether the Chief Electoral Officer has made good recommendations don't generate any legislative proposals in themselves.

At the end of the day, it's the government that's going to decide what legislation it wants to put to the House. I can do it in a PMB, and we can talk about this three years from now. It's the government that's going to decide ultimately what we're actually—

The Chair: You are a realist.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Well, look, we're on a short timeline, and it's up to the government to get this done. When it decides to do it, that's what we're really going to be considering, and that's where we're going to get into the real details, notwithstanding whatever was in the Chief Electoral Officer's report.

I think studying it is good because it will prepare us to have an informed opinion on the proposal by the government, but the real decision-making happens once the government has tabled the legislation, and it has gone through a second reading debate in the House.

I'm not too hung up on that. I'm not clear on what the subamendment is and what the amendment is. I think we need some guidance from the chair on what the date is, but in principle, if the idea is that we want as a committee to report back to the House with something on an interim basis by December 1, that's fine by me. If we're not determining an end date for the study at this point, then I'm comfortable picking an interim date in December. I just think we should report something back to the House before we rise for Christmas. As long as we're on track to do that, I'm flexible.

I'm hearing from the analysts the challenges of a mid November date, so I think Mr. Doherty was quite right to suggest pushing it into December. Whether it's December 1 or December 11, I'm agnostic on that. I think it's important that we get something on the table before Christmas, and I don't want to be too restrictive about that.

If we hear good things, and we come to conclusions about things that aren't within the scope of the specific recommendations by the Chief Electoral Officer, I would like those things to be included in the report we table prior to Christmas.

I'm offering that up. With the time remaining—I know that given the IT restraints, it's not easy to just extend the meeting—I think it's important that we get to a decision.

Let's have some kind of interim date in December. Let's not put an end date on the study. Let's not restrict the interim report to the specific recommendations of the Chief Electoral Officer, but let's understand that this is a priority for the committee and that we will be addressing those in the interim report. If somebody can find the wording for that, let's get it passed and carry on.

• (1245)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Blaikie.

I think Mr. Doherty might be our saving grace at this moment. There was an interim report date suggested of November 23. That was Dr. Duncan's first amendment. Then a subamendment was moved by Mr. Doherty for December 11.

I'm hearing some agreement at least between the NDP and Mr. Turnbull on not really being fussy about the date. If it's December 1, that would be okay with some members as well.

Mr. Doherty, you are next.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Thank you, Madam Chair.

It sounds as though we have somehow been able to come to a consensus, but I feel it is important to bring this up. Pardon the partisan comments, but the only people talking about the potential for a snap election really are our Liberal friends on this committee, so it would beg the question of what they know.

The concern is here, and our friend Ms. Duncan rightly spoke about our concern for Canadians going to the polls. It could also be said that if the government were so concerned about sending Canadians to the polls...well, by-elections were done and all of a sudden you're trying to get your by-elections done quickly, so where is that same concern for those Canadians who have to go to elect a candidate in those ridings?

The only people who seem to be thinking that every time the opposition speaks or opposes something or brings forward a motion in the House, all of a sudden it has to be a confidence motion, are the Prime Minister and the government. I'll leave it at that.

The challenge we have at this point is that we have this motion and the Chief Electoral Officer has expressed some concern as well.

Madam Chair, I think we are okay and Mr. Blaikie is all right with the amendment that Mr. Turnbull has brought forward. I'll remove my amendment from the floor and go with what Mr. Blaikie and Mr. Turnbull have come to an agreement on.

The Chair: Perhaps you can move—I don't know if it was ever formally moved. It was just discussed. Maybe the clerk can help us with that, and maybe if everyone is okay with that, then it doesn't really matter at the end of the day.

Maybe, Mr. Doherty, what you could do is withdraw your subamendment and resubmit a subamendment with the date of December 1.

Would that be needed, Mr. Clerk, or could we just...?

Mr. Todd Doherty: Madam Chair, I think what Mr. Blaikie was mentioning was that he was endorsing my subamendment to go into December, but he did agree with Mr. Turnbull, just as long as we

are agreeing that we are going to get to work now and then have to report back in whether the first week or the week of December 11.

I think, Mr. Turnbull, you suggested December 1. Is that correct?

Mr. Blaikie, you were in agreement with that? You are okay with that?

Then, Madam Chair, I move a subamendment to replace the final line of Mr. Turnbull's motion—"Monday, November 23, 2020"—with the words, "Tuesday, December 1, 2020". The committee's interim findings would then be reported to the House no later than December 1.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Doherty.

Mr. Clerk, could we have a vote on that subamendment, please?

• (1250)

The Clerk: The vote is on Mr. Doherty's subamendment.

(Subamendment agreed to: yeas 11; nays 0 [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: Mr. Clerk, does the subamendment make the original amendment null and void then?

The Clerk: No, strictly speaking the committee would now have to adopt the amendment as amended, so this would be back to Ms. Duncan's amendment, which has just been amended by Mr. Doherty's subamendment.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: I have just a quick point of order. I am wondering if we might be able to do this by unanimous consent instead of by recorded vote.

The Chair: Is anyone opposed to the amended amendment?

(Amendment as amended agreed to [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: The official date for an interim report is December 1.

Yes.

The Clerk: The committee would also need to agree to the motion as amended.

The Chair: Is there any opposition to the motion as amended?

(Motion as amended agreed to [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: It is carried. This will be our first study.

Mr. Todd Doherty: On a point of order, Madam Chair, maybe this can be considered at a later date, but I would suggest that while we are dealing with the motion right now on the study we've just agreed to undertake, we put an end date on it.

Do we all agree that we're just going to undertake the study and will see where it takes us, or are we going to commit to an end date?

The Chair: At this time the motion didn't commit to an end date, but I absolutely think the committee may want to put one in at some point, so that this doesn't go on forever.

The subcommittee on agenda could make a recommendation on it after it has received each party's list of witnesses. We then might I have a better understanding as to how much time we would need for the complete study.

I would propose that we first and foremost hear from the Chief Electoral Officer on Thursday, since he is on standby and is willing to come, and that the committee decide on a date by which to submit proposals for all witnesses.

We have the next meeting filled, but we would have to decide on next week at this point and on when the committee would like that deadline to be, so that we can get the ball rolling and hold a discussion concerning how many witnesses to have.

In the past what we've done is to group them by themes and have panels according to those themes of the study. Of course, you could suggest what those themes are and how you would like them grouped, and the clerk and I would do our best to make sure that we move accordingly.

Mr. Blaikie.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you.

I was just going to say that I think, given that we're trying to get this study up and going quickly, we may want to choose witnesses for next Tuesday already but may not want to feel that we've established a final witness list by then.

It might be prudent to have a preliminary witness list submitted by the end of the week, or even by Thursday, if we understand that we're just submitting a few names to get started. Then we could talk about a deadline for filing a final witness list. That might at least allow us to get started with filling slots for Tuesday and Thursday next week.

• (1255)

The Chair: That's a great suggestion, Mr. Blaikie.

I think the clerk has something to add.

The Clerk: I was just going to make the point that the motion you've just adopted, as it's worded, gives me some witness material to work with already. There is reference to the Chief Electoral Officer, to the provincial chief electoral officers who have had or will be having elections soon, as well as to provincial public health officials and then advocates.

It's really on that fourth point that suggestions of names might be provided to me by the end of this week. Those would be useful, but at least the other ones give me material to get working on to send out invitations.

The Chair: Mr. Clerk, are you saying public health officials and "advocates for those who face barriers"? Is that what you're suggesting?

The Clerk: Yes. I'm just looking at the wording of the motion you adopted. Its item (i), which talks about Canada's Chief Electoral Officer, item (ii) about provincial chief electoral officers who have already run elections, and then item (iii) about public health officials. There are, then, people whom we can start with.

In the meantime, any other suggestions of specific witnesses you have can be provided, if this is amenable to the committee, by the end of this week. That would be of great assistance.

The Chair: Are you okay with our saying that it by the end of this week? Are you okay with a Friday deadline? What time would you like it to be?

The Clerk: Would 12 noon be acceptable to everybody?

The Chair: Is the committee okay with Friday at 12 noon?

Sorry, somebody said there was a challenge.

Mr. Doherty.

Mr. Todd Doherty: The only challenge with that is that we have two provinces holding elections right now. Their officials would be tied up for at least the next two weeks.

I would maybe put them in as placeholders, understanding that in B.C.'s election, they're still saying that it could be up to two weeks or three weeks before everything is counted. I don't know how Saskatchewan's is going to be, but I think as long as the committee is amenable to having those two groups and officials from those provinces added to this study at a date to be determined when they're available, I think they would provide great insight for this committee. I don't think they'll be able to report to the committee within the next couple of weeks.

The Chair: Absolutely. This is just a preliminary list, so you can have another list that follows, but you can also add them to this list and we can schedule them out a little bit further when they would have time. They might not even have time to respond.

Mr. Tochor wants to add something.

Mr. Corey Tochor (Saskatoon—University, CPC): Yes, coming from the great province of Saskatchewan, which is less than seven days away from its general election, I think probably the most useful witnesses would be chief electoral officers of New Brunswick, obviously, which just went through an election during a pandemic; Saskatchewan, currently; and B.C. To Todd's point, I think that at the very least we need to hear from these people for sure, and as we know with elections, the work in those offices doesn't just end on election day. There's a ton of work afterwards.

We'll need to have a little bit of flexibility to make sure that we get Saskatchewan's Michael Boda, hopefully, to attend and take part as a witness. I think that would be very helpful for this report.

The Chair: Absolutely. Maybe if the committee is willing, we can work around their schedule at some point and perhaps try to schedule a meeting outside of our permanent time. I'd be open to that if all the members are, so we get all of those important witnesses in.

I believe Ms. Vecchio has something to say at the end.

• (1300)

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Just carrying on with what Corey said, I also think it would be a great opportunity, post-election, because we're going to be having the Chief Electoral Officer this Thursday. On Monday, we're going to be having those two elections going on, and I think that after getting reports following those election days, we should really be asking what some of the hurdles were that they didn't even see coming.

On Thursday, he's going to share with us everything he has prepared for, but then we need to see the actual results and the hurdles that arose and the different things that he put into place. I would really like the opportunity to call him back as well as a witness so we could discuss post-election.

Thank you.

The Chair: Absolutely. I will make a note of that. We'll let him know that we want him to come back to report on those by-elections after the fact.

I think we have agreement at this point that by Friday noon we'll submit our preliminary witness suggestions, and then obviously there's an opportunity after that point to submit other suggestions. Then committee members can decide if they want a cut-off date for any new suggestions, because I think Mr. Doherty had mentioned that he does want some kind of end in sight, or some kind of scope to this. We know that we could go on forever, really. It's such an interesting topic.

Good work, everyone. Thank you for all of your great input that got us to this point. I look forward to seeing you on Thursday and getting started with this study. Have a good rest of your day.

The committee is adjourned.

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