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Chair: Ms. Ruby Sahota



Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

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• (1100)

[English]

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

Welcome to meeting number four 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 following the motion that was adopted in the House on Wednesday, September 23, 2020.

The committee is now sitting in a hybrid format, meaning that members can participate either in person or by video conference. Witnesses must 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, however, limited by the priority use of the House resources, which is determined by the whips. All questions must be decided by a recorded vote unless the committee disposes of them with unanimous consent or on division. Finally, the committee may deliberate in camera, provided that it takes into account the potential risks to confidentiality inherent in such deliberations with remote participants.

Today's proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website. I remind members that 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 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 at the bottom of your screen of either floor, English or French. 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. I remind members that all comments made by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair. Should members need to request the floor outside of their designated speaking time for questions, they should activate their mike and state that they have a point of order. If a member wishes to intervene on a point of order that has been raised by another member, they should use the "raise hand" function in the toolbar below. 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 to ensure that all members are able to participate fully.

For those participating in person today, 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 you can call my name. Should you wish to raise a point of order, wait for an appropriate time and indicate to me clearly that you wish to raise a point of order.

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

As I said, today is meeting number four of the procedure and House affairs committee. It's Thursday, October 22, and today we have Elections Canada witnesses before us so that we can start our study off right. We have Mr. Stéphane Perrault, the Chief Electoral Officer; Michel Roussel, deputy chief electoral officer for electoral events and innovation; and Anne Lawson, deputy chief electoral officer of regulatory affairs, who has been before this committee many times.

Before we start with opening statements, I do want to let the committee know that the other witnesses we have contacted so far are the New Brunswick chief electoral officer and the Prince Edward Island chief electoral officer. They are currently conducting a by-election with special COVID-19 provisions. We have also contacted the Saskatchewan chief electoral officer. They have all responded positively and wish to come before the committee on October 27, which is next Tuesday's meeting. Hopefully the members will be pleased to know that we have a fair number of witnesses who are already interested in coming before the committee.

With that said, we will give our witnesses five minutes for introductory remarks.

Monsieur Perrault.

• (1105)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault (Chief Electoral Officer, Elections Canada): Thank you, Madam Chair. I'll try to be brief.

Thanks for this opportunity to speak today with the committee regarding my recommendations for legislative change in the event of a federal election during a pandemic.

Elections Canada has been working in consultation with public health authorities to develop an operational approach to delivering an election during a pandemic. This includes several measures currently being implemented in the by-elections under way in Toronto Centre and York Centre, such as physical distancing measures at the polls and, of course, the distribution of protective equipment for poll workers and voters as well.

The act provides the authority for me to make a number of adjustments to the electoral process to facilitate these measures, and I'd be happy to talk about that later on. However, there are a small number of areas where legislative change is, in my view, desirable.

First I am recommending replacing ordinary polling day, which is Monday of course, with a two-day polling period on Saturday and Sunday. Instead of a single 12-hour polling day, electors would have the opportunity to vote over two eight-hour days, and we can come back to those hours later on. This would allow for a steadier flow of electors over two weekend days, encouraging physical distancing, as opposed to the clustering of electors that takes place at the polls at the start and finish of a Monday workday.

Weekend voting would also assist in securing polling locations such as schools, and in recruiting the very large number of poll workers who are required to run a federal election. For some electors and candidates, weekend voting may be in conflict with days of religious significance. However, the two-day period, in addition to other voting options, would provide flexibility.

As a result of weekend voting, I'm recommending certain related changes to the advance polling days and hours. I'm not going to get into this in my remarks, but perhaps we can come back to that.

I also suggest that mail-in ballots be accepted until 6 p.m. eastern time on the Monday immediately following weekend voting, provided that they were mailed before the close of polls on the weekend. This would account for the fact that mail is typically not delivered on the weekend and that we expect to receive large numbers of mail-in ballots.

A second major element that I recommend addressing in legislation is voting in long-term care facilities. I am seeking flexibility to allow Elections Canada to work with long-term care facilities across the country to deliver tailored voting services that suit their unique circumstances, which may vary considerably from one location to another.

Now I'll switch to French.

[*Translation*]

The third and final element I am recommending relates to my power under the act to adapt its provisions in case of an emergency. Currently, this power may only be exercised for limited purposes. I am requesting greater flexibility to adapt the act as needed in the pandemic context in order to handle unexpected situations that will inevitably arise.

I have opted to limit my recommendations to a small number of changes that are directly related to the delivery of an election in a pandemic and have stayed away from any other recommendations that may require more extensive debate. I will be submitting a sec-

ond recommendations report in due course to deal with other improvements to the act, unrelated to the pandemic.

Although the recommendations I have outlined today are limited in scope, their implementation nevertheless requires changes to operational processes and IT systems that will require some time, and will, especially, have to be rigorously tested. Therefore, I urge Parliament to swiftly consider them.

In order to assist the committee, you will also see that I have submitted model legislation that could accomplish these objectives—a temporary statute that would supersede or adapt some of the provisions of the Canada Elections Act only for the next general election, leaving the electoral regime unchanged once the pandemic period is behind us.

Finally, I note in closing that the act currently provides for an election period lasting between 37 and 51 days. I have not recommended any change. However, if an election is called during the pandemic, I strongly encourage the government to set the longest possible election period. I would say that of all the points I mentioned today, the length of the election period is the most important factor in achieving success. This would not only assist Elections Canada in dealing with the logistical challenges of a pandemic election, such as the hiring and training of workers, but also allow time for the processing and mail delivery of the several million mail-in ballots that we can expect in a general election during the pandemic.

• (1110)

Madam Chair, I would be pleased to answer questions from committee members.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, including for providing us with your opening remarks in advance.

We'll start with the first round of questions. The first round will be six minutes each, and we will be starting with Todd Doherty, please.

Is Mr. Doherty here?

Mr. Todd Doherty (Cariboo—Prince George, CPC): Yes, I am.

The Chair: There you are, yes.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Thanks, Madam Chair.

Mr. Perrault, have you consulted with the Prime Minister on how a snap election would be conducted?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: No, I have not consulted with the Prime Minister in that regard. I have spoken with Dr. Tam of the Public Health Agency of Canada and had discussions with the Privy Council Office. In the spring or early summer, if I remember correctly, I spoke with the minister responsible for democratic institutions.

Mr. Todd Doherty: What concerns did Dr. Tam have with respect to a snap election's being called?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: We didn't discuss specific concerns. We talked about the necessity of ensuring that the measures we would take to deal with the health circumstances were appropriate and that our teams worked closely together in that regard. That is, in fact, what has happened.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Should the government have fallen yesterday, how prepared would you have been to go immediately into an election?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I think we have to be honest here: A national election is a logistical feat in the best of circumstances, and these are not the best of circumstances.

That said, we would have delivered an election. It would, in my view, have been a successful election, and it would have included all of the health and safety measures that have been recommended to us and that we have prepared for.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Have you met with your provincial counterparts who have either undertaken an election during this pandemic or are currently in an election cycle now?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I have, indeed, spoken with the chief electoral officers of New Brunswick, Saskatchewan and British Columbia.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Have they provided you with any reports at all on the challenges they have faced?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Well, we certainly have shared our perspectives on the challenges that we are facing. I spoke with the chief electoral officer of New Brunswick after their election, who was able to share some morning-after insights on her experience there, yes.

Mr. Todd Doherty: A pandemic election would obviously increase the number of mail-in ballots—as you said, the millions of votes that would be required to come through the mail-in process. Have you consulted with Canada Post about its ability to process mailed ballots on a larger scale given an election cycle?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: We have an ongoing relationship with Canada Post, and Monsieur Roussel and his team have been speaking with Canada Post in that regard.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Is there a specific plan?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: There is no particular concern with the delivery of mail. I understand that there have been some challenges with packages and parcels delivery, but not with the delivery of mail.

One of the plans we have is the MOU we signed to make sure that we can have prepaid postal delivery of the envelopes. We have an agreement with Canada Post in that regard.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Do you have any concerns with mass mail-in balloting in Canada in ensuring the safety and security of the electoral process?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I don't have concerns about the safety and security of mail-in ballots. I have to recognize that this is a challenge. We have a system in Canada where mail-in ballots for local electors is extremely exceptional. In the last election, we had 5,000 or so Canadians mail in their ballots—Canadians who were in their ridings during the election—so we don't have extensive mail-in experience. We are working to improve that, of course, and

as we go on in the coming months, we will build on that experience.

My concern is more operational than it is about security. We've never had any concern in that regard.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Have you spoken to or do you plan to consult with the chief electoral officer of New Zealand about their election and how it was conducted?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: We've had some exchanges with them, and now they are just off an election. I note that in New Zealand—and you may want to invite her. Her name is Alicia Wright—

Mr. Todd Doherty: She's on our list.

• (1115)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Okay, good.

They had postal voting, but they restricted postal voting to people with health issues. It was not postal voting at-large.

Mr. Todd Doherty: The concern that I'm seeing in my province of British Columbia, where we go to the polls on Saturday of this week, is that according to the information coming out of the office, is that we may not have the results for weeks, and possibly not even for a month, or going into Christmas.

Extending the election period, as you're suggesting, to 51 days.... Have you considered what the time frame would be for the official results to be announced, given the scope of a federal election?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: There is a difference between the B.C. system and our system. In British Columbia, electors can vote at any place in B.C., within the province, at all times, so they have a fairly extensive use of special ballots for that purpose, whether it's by mail or in person.

That requires a verification process that takes place I think something like 14 days after a polling day. They will experience some very significant late results. That is not something that we would see federally, though if we had millions of votes by mail we could have a result delayed by a few days, but not by anything close to—

Mr. Todd Doherty: Not weeks or months.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: No.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Next we have Dr. Duncan, please.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to all of the witnesses for being here today and for the tremendous work you do on behalf of all of us.

I'll begin with a few questions.

Could you table with the committee all the names of the health officials you have consulted with and the dates of each consultation? That would be a yes or a no, please.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I'm sorry, but I don't know the answer to that question, because my team has consulted with health authorities and there are several members in that team. I don't know whether they have records of all of those meetings. I had discussions with Dr. Tam once, on September 2, but before and after that, there have been discussions between the teams and email exchanges.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Could we get a list of all the consultations that have been taking place between those teams, please?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: We certainly will do our best to have as comprehensive a list as possible.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you so very much.

Could you also table with the committee all health and safety measures related to COVID-19 that were implemented in each of the Toronto Centre and York Centre by-elections, please?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Certainly, we can do that.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you so much.

Could you also table with the committee for each measure you implemented during the by-elections, how the Canada Elections Act gave you the authority?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: We can describe that. In many cases, there is no specific mention, so there's general authority, but we can certainly put together a table that has that information.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you, I ask because I know you were worried about areas where you lacked the authority.

The other thing I would ask is, could you also table with the committee any changes that you wanted to make during the by-elections but could not because you did not have the legislative authority?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: There were none, so there would be nothing to table.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Okay. That's helpful. Thank you so much.

As of last night, there are over 80 outbreaks in long-term care in Ontario. British Columbia had the highest number of outbreaks in long-term care facilities yesterday. I'm wondering what consultations have been done with long-term care....

Can you table with the committee those consultations that have taken place and also let us know what types of residences you have consulted with, please? I ask because there are different types of long-term care and different types of residences.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: So, to manage some expectations here, there are over 5,500 long-term care facilities in Canada according to StatsCan, and I understand that number to be a fairly narrow definition of long-term care. In the Elections Act, the use of that language is much broader and includes places where seniors live. We are talking about many thousands of locations. We at headquarters do not consult directly with those offices. That is the role of returning officers during an election—

• (1120)

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Could I address that? Could you table with the committee what consultations have taken place, understanding that there are retirement homes, there's long-term care and

there are—I will quote—"group homes". What consultations have taken place, please?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I can do that, but again, to be clear, this will include only two electoral districts, because these consultations take place during an election, at the outset of the election, between returning officers and their local communities.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: That would be helpful. Thank you.

I have a question regarding polling station hours and the reduction from 12 to eight hours in the advance polls. In a community like the one I serve, where people often work two or three jobs, this could be a real hardship. Also, if it's happening during a pandemic and we'll want to spread out the voters and avoid clustering, I'm wondering why we would be reducing the hours, please.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: That's a very good question and I have to confess that there is no easy answer to it. Basically we would be moving from 12 hours to 16 hours, so we'd be extending the hours.

We would have two days of weekend voting. For most people, that would facilitate voting.

Why would we have eight hours instead of 12? Our expectation is that 12 hours of work by poll workers with a mask and a face shield on would make for some very difficult working conditions. We've had some anecdotal evidence from discussions with returning officers in the two ongoing by-elections at the four days of advance polls that this is very difficult on the poll workers. I am concerned with maintaining the capacity of those poll workers and not having them walk out on us on polling day.

It's a balancing act that we're trying to do. We think we can reduce the hours but increase the number of advance polls. That's to maintain or ideally increase the capacity if we have the recruitment. For the weekend voting, we would increase the voting hours.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: I have just one last question, if I may.

I would ask if you could table with this committee what measures were taken during the two by-elections to ensure the safety of the poll workers and also particularly in long-term care how you protected the residents and staff.

Thank you.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I will, certainly, with pleasure.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Monsieur Therrien.

[Translation]

Mr. Alain Therrien (La Prairie, BQ): Good morning. Thank you for your extremely enlightening presence.

Earlier, you said that if an election had been called yesterday, you would have been able to meet the challenge. I think there's no doubt about that. But what would your biggest challenge have been? I understand that you wanted a longer election campaign so that you could be better prepared for election day.

What do you think your main challenge would have been, if it had happened yesterday?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: It depends on several factors, including the duration of the campaign. However, the main concern is probably the recruitment of staff. We need to recruit some 250,000 people for a national election. This is a huge effort, and the effectiveness of our services depends on it. So that would be my main concern.

If an election were called tomorrow morning, I would also be concerned about our ability to serve voters by mail to the level they expect. If we had difficulty providing sufficient mail-in kits, voters would have other options for voting. We would then give priority to those with health problems. This is what was done in New Zealand, where only voters with health problems could vote by mail.

So there are ways to manage problems. What I'm saying is that an election would be possible and safe, but not without difficulty.

Mr. Alain Therrien: I see.

Voting by mail is new, isn't it?

Was it possible to vote by mail in the last election?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Yes, absolutely. It dates back to the 1930s or 1920s, I don't remember. Before I was born, in any case. You could vote by mail. However, it is used very little. We received about 55,000 ballots in the mail, 35,000 of which were from Canadians overseas. So it's a very small number.

• (1125)

Mr. Alain Therrien: Help me understand this. Let's assume that the two days of the vote take place on the weekend and that your recommendations are respected. People could vote by mail and you would receive all of this. Then there would be a very high number of mail-in votes, which could change the look of the election, obviously.

What do you think the percentage of mail-in votes would be?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: We estimate that approximately 4 million to 5 million voters would vote by mail.

Mr. Alain Therrien: That's quite a large number.

So we call an election, and on Saturdays and Sundays people vote.

What do we do with the ballots? Do you count them on the spot or send them elsewhere to be counted?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: The strategy for handling such a large volume of ballots is to count most of them locally, as a team. Dividing this into 338 counting teams, this would be done locally. Ballots would also be sent to Ottawa, but that would be a minority.

Mr. Alain Therrien: I see.

Let's say I'm a candidate—I plan to run again in the next election—and the polls close on Sunday around 5 or 6 p.m., after eight hours of voting. When and how would the votes be counted? In how many days would we have the results?

Please answer as precisely as possible.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Okay, I'll be very specific.

A few days before, the outer envelope can be separated from the inner envelope. I will set this period during the election; this is what is normally done. There are two envelopes in a mail-in ballot: an outer envelope with voter information, a bar code and signature, which are security measures, and the inner envelope, which is anonymous. You can start preparing for the separation beforehand, but the actual vote count would probably start on the weekend and continue on Monday. Even if the period is not extended by the change I am proposing, the count would probably take an extra day or two.

Mr. Alain Therrien: I see. So it's still a reasonable period.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: That's why the work is divided into 338 teams. We can assume that there will be 10,000 or 15,000 ballots per riding, which is manageable. We're not talking about millions of ballots.

Mr. Alain Therrien: I understand. Thank you for this information. I am particularly grateful for it, because we are really in an unprecedented context.

You said you wanted to adapt to the different realities that exist in Quebec's nursing homes, the CHSLDs. What are they?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: At the moment, there are seniors' residences or long-term care facilities that you can't get into. In some cases, there are restrictions on access, but this is not the case across the country. The magnitude of the pandemic and the way places are structured varies from place to place.

In some cases, long-term care homes would only proceed by mail-in voting. This is what will happen in the Toronto by-elections. The local care home authority in Toronto has decided that their staff will distribute the forms. In other cases, there are on-site voting sites, which are not mobile for health reasons, but the candidates' representatives are not on site. I would like, as much as possible, to have these people vote before the last day to minimize the risk of problems.

Currently, the law provides for voting in mobile polls to take place on election day. Holding a poll in CHSLDs and other similar facilities involves a lot of last-minute work.

Mr. Alain Therrien: All right. You've opened the door to my next question, which is about fraud....

[English]

The Chair: That's all the time we have, unfortunately, but you can get it in in the next round.

Mr. Blaikie, go ahead, please.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): Thank you very much.

We have heard some people say in recent days that Elections Canada is conducting by-elections during the pandemic, so, obviously, it's possible to do these things. We've heard people say there are various provincial elections happening, so, obviously, it's possible to hold a federal election.

I just wonder if you could speak a little bit to the complexity of having to monitor the public health orders in 13 different jurisdictions across the country and the effect of the pandemic being stronger in some places than in others over a large territory and large number of jurisdictions versus the very real challenges of running a provincial election or even a by-election during these times.

• (1130)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: That is a very lengthy question. I'll try to answer most of it in the time allowed.

I'll give you a good example. In Brunswick we have only 49 seats provincially and only 10 seats federally. In New Brunswick returning officers in many cases had to assist in delivering vote-by-mail kits and recovering them. That can be done in a province the size of New Brunswick with 49 seats, with 49 returning officers. If you have only 10 seats as you do federally, or if you have larger province as you have with northern Quebec, Ontario or most of the provinces, that is not feasible.

There are different challenges. They had a short election period. That added to their burden, and I'm hoping for a larger one.

If you look at the current by-election in Toronto, that is an entirely different setting. I can tell you that 50% of the workforce in those by-elections comes from neighbouring districts. That is not an option that we have in a general election. When I talk about recruitment challenges, that is a concern. It is not a concern in a by-election, but it would certainly be in a general election.

Finally, you mentioned the different jurisdictions and the public health authorities and the different measures. That's quite right. We do have to work with the provincial and local health authorities and follow and adjust our operations to the evolving procedures and controls that will inevitably vary from time to time during a federal election.

There is a challenge that exists at the national level that does not compare to it provincially or locally.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: When Elections Canada launched its special task force that came up with the recommendations you've highlighted in your presentation today, they posted on their website as part of the statement explaining why that task force was there, that Elections Canada has an authority that it's never used before, in conjunction with public health officials, to recommend to the Governor in Council that an election writ be withdrawn either in a particular riding or a number of ridings, possibly regionally, if the public health challenges exceed Elections Canada's ability to safely meet the requirements of the legislation.

Could you flesh that out a little? Presumably, some thinking has been done about what that would look like if such a situation were to occur. Could you speak a little to the conditions that you think might precipitate such an extreme action? Also, what would that look like practically speaking if there were 30 ridings where that

were to occur during a general election? Would the election simply be held later? What is the thinking in terms of the consequences for the general election that would proceed and result in some candidates being elected as members, and Parliament having to make do without other members?

What would that scenario look like in your view if Elections Canada were in the position of having to make use of that authority?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Before I get into explaining those scenarios, I think it's fair to say that it would be an extreme situation and one that we would not do lightly. We've never done it, and we've faced very significant challenges in our history and have never cancelled an election. If you go to the authorities in the act, it's an authority that's riding-by-riding appreciation, so it's not for general use.

On a riding-by-riding basis, if the conditions are such that, in my view, it is impractical to conduct the election—and it's a very specific criterion—then I may recommend to the Governor in Council that it be cancelled.

It can also be postponed by a week. That is perhaps less likely in a pandemic situation, because that is not likely to change all that much in a week. In all likelihood if that were to occur, the writ would be withdrawn and replaced within three months by a new writ.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: In the meantime there would be no member for that riding. Is that correct?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: That is correct.

There would be a vacancy for that riding.

As I said, it's a practical test. Can I offer voting services? Do I have access to polling places, to poll workers?

In all likelihood, if there were an extreme case of a shutdown and people were told by public health authorities to stay home, then that would prevent me from having access to poll workers and offering services to voters, who would be largely at home. That's a very extreme scenario.

• (1135)

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Okay.

One of the other issues that's come up is the question of voter disenfranchisement, or people not participating in the election because of fear of coming out during a pandemic.

Do you have information from other jurisdictions or have any estimates been made of the likely impact of the current conditions on voter turnout? Is there any thinking about which kinds of people are mostly likely to stay home and choose not to vote, as opposed to those who would be most likely to go out to cast their ballot despite the circumstances?

The Chair: Unfortunately, Mr. Blaikie, that's all the time you have, but I wanted your question to be completed at least. Mr. Perrault has that question, and perhaps he can shed some more light on it throughout the course of the meeting.

We've moving into our second round of questions. We will begin with Ms. Vecchio for five minutes, please.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Thank you very much.

Thank you very much to the Chief Electoral Officer for joining us today.

This is a very important topic at this time and we just don't know how the cards will be played.

I want to focus on the senior aspect of this. In your report you noted that approximately 50% of the people working in our polls are seniors. We also have to look at palliative care, hospitals, long-term homes and all of those things.

Let's start by looking at the polling stations and the workers in the polling stations. Many times with the logistics involved, you'll have two people sitting at a table. What is the idea of having people sitting at these tables together? Do you have any thoughts on rapid testing? How are you going to keep them safe, or are you looking more at the distancing where they are two metres apart and working together?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: That's a very, very good question.

We will be shifting in the pandemic to a single poll worker. This is a model that's in use in other jurisdictions. We will not have two poll workers sitting next to each other during the elections.

The poll worker functions and the poll clerk functions would be combined and we'd have a single person. That person would be equipped with gloves, masks, sanitizing lotion and a face shield—everything they needed to maintain safety.

There would be, for integrity reasons, a supervisor walking around and looking at what's happening at the different tables, so we would be reducing the proximity of workers.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Excellent.

In looking at this, people talk about clusters.... In our polling stations, where we have six to eight different polls in one location, some of the concerns I have is that there would still be a number of people who have to go to those polling stations.

We talk about having the one person at the table, but another concern that we have to look at is with regard to scrutineers. Many parties will have scrutineers coming throughout the day. What are your restrictions on scrutineers going to be?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I will require scrutineers to wear masks at all times, like poll workers. We will want to make sure they maintain a distance from the poll workers and voters. They will be present, but within some parameters.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: That's good to know.

Looking at some of these polling locations, currently there are many churches, municipal buildings and things of that sort that are not open to the public. What are your plans that if something.... I mean, here in Ontario—Ottawa of course, and Toronto—they don't have a lot of things open. However, I'm looking even in my own community, and the churches are not open; there are no members of

the public allowed into schools and municipal buildings, if it's not by appointment or they're in class.

What are your options there?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: There are two aspects to that. One is making sure that we have polling places that are large enough, which will be one of the challenges we'll be facing. We want to have distance between the tables and so forth, so we do not want cramped polling locations.

In terms of accessing those locations, a good example is what's happening right now in Toronto. The public health authorities have made it clear that while access to certain buildings is restricted, it is not restricted for the purpose of conducting the election. We are limiting the number of people present at one time during the election in the polling places, but those places are accessible.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: I have a question on that right now. For instance, in my city, where we're already past these stages, our arenas are still not open. Our arena has 10 polling locations there.

What would you do with those types of sites where these municipal buildings are still not open to the public?

• (1140)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I can't say for sure because we would be engaging your local health authorities, but if it happens in the way it has happened in Toronto, we would have access to other places that otherwise would not be open to the public for the purpose of conducting an election. Given the need for the place, given the distancing measures and the other safety measures in place, there would be parameters around that in order to try to get access to those places. I can't promise that we would; that's part of the challenge. We would have local returning officers, with our assistance, working with local health authorities to negotiate those aspects.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: I know my time is coming to an end, but when you do this recruitment—as I indicated, many of these poll workers are elderly—you also have to look at the training. What types of on-hand training or virtual training will you have, because you have to recognize with seniors that sometimes that can be a difficulty as well? What types of training would you have for these persons, so they can get the type of training they need with safety measures taken into consideration?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: There are two aspects there. One aspect is the learning, the online learning system, which we're currently developing and will put in use when it's ready. Meanwhile, we'd do as we're doing in these by-elections. We're having small group training sessions. We're reducing the number of people present to ensure distancing. However, that does require more training sessions, more trainers, so those are some of the challenges.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Next, for five minutes, we have Mr. Turnbull, please.

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

Thanks, Mr. Perrault. I really appreciate your being here and all the incredible work that you do. I recognize the challenging position you're in with the incredible responsibility of being ready for an election at any time.

There is one question that I have. I know from your opening remarks, and in your report that I read through, that you've asked for an expansion of adaptation powers. I want to understand that a little better. Can you explain to me what flexibility you might require or need over and above what you have currently?

The other similar but related question is, how do you anticipate using that power if it were given to you?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: The current adaptation power is quite wide, but it is restricted to varying provisions of the act in order to either facilitate the vote or facilitate the count. It does not directly deal with matters, for example, of safety or security.

For example, right now in Toronto we have voting in person in two long-term care facilities, and the candidates have agreed that they will not send their scrutineers there because for health reasons that's not practical, but that's based on the agreement of the candidates.

I cannot adapt the act to enforce that except in a twisted way, for example, to say that were it not for this, then there would be no vote and therefore restricting access is, in fact, facilitating the vote. I am not sure that's really what was intended. I want to make sure that, where it is necessary for health reasons, I can adapt the legislation.

In terms of how we do that, if you look at our website, you will find that whenever there is an adaptation—and in every election, whether it is a by-election or general election, there are always adaptations—we provide text of the adaptation with the justification for the adaptation in both languages, so there is transparency on that, which is available for everyone to look at.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you very much for that.

I have one other question. I know that in your report you've indicated that about 47% of election workers are over the age of 60 years. I retained that fact and I thought that I didn't know that before. Does this inform your recruitment strategy, given the fact that elections requiring individuals from an older population means that you may in this case have to target a different group of election workers? I don't know how you've adapted to that, but can you speak to that a little bit?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Certainly. We will certainly adapt our messages to recruit younger workers or a broader range of age groups.

The key there for me is really to vote on the weekend, because as long as we're voting on Monday, our basic population for workers is retirees and people who do not have a job, and some students who may be available, but we are quite significantly constrained in who we can hope to recruit when we're voting on Monday. That's one of the driving factors for having voting on the weekend, to have a broader pool of potential workers.

● (1145)

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Okay, I've got that.

I should have made my point more clearly, but given that the public health risk is higher for people who are older in age, do we envision more of those potential election workers not being willing to actually take on those roles, given the pandemic, and therefore

do we need to be targeting a whole different age category altogether potentially? Do you foresee that as being—

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Absolutely. We have surveys showing that older workers are less likely to want to work in this election than they were in the last election, and we have comparative surveys to that effect.

We are seeing recruitment challenges in Saskatchewan as we speak. Whether or not those are tied to the age group, I don't know. Saskatchewan does not have weekend voting as B.C. does.

Absolutely I expect this to be a challenge, and we will need to target and recruit differently.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you.

What variations do we anticipate in long-term care facilities? I know you're asking for flexibility there.

I recognize that the state of different long-term care facilities will be different, but what real flexibility do you need to adapt to those facilities? Can you give us some idea?

I know one of my colleagues asked you to table some documents about any consultations you've done, but can you give me an example of a variation that, again, you might not have the flexibility to account for right now?

The Chair: That's all the time we have, unfortunately.

I want to give it back to Monsieur Therrien. I know he had a question earlier.

I don't know if you would remember that question at this point, Monsieur Therrien, but you have two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I would like to come back to the situation of CHSLDs in Quebec and seniors' residences elsewhere in Canada. You said that one of the problems was that there might be people there who could serve...

[*English*]

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Moose Jaw—Lake Centre—Lanigan, CPC): Madam Chair, I have a point of order.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Lukiwski.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: I'm very sorry, Mr. Therrien, for interrupting. I don't normally do this.

I'm just checking on this, Madam Chair. I don't have a copy of the complete speakers list in front of me, but I thought that in the second round there were two Liberal and two Conservative questions. You're now appearing to be in the two-and-a-half-minute round, which is the third round of questions. Did we miss my question or am I wrong?

The Chair: No. We haven't missed your question. It will be coming up. This is the effect of the motion that we passed during routine motions, wherein we moved up the two-and-a-half-minute rounds.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: You're right. I'm very sorry. Yes, I completely forgot about that. My apologies.

My apologies to Mr. Therrien.

The Chair: No problem. We'll restart the clock.

They're sandwiched in the middle round, so there will be a Conservative and a Liberal round after the Bloc and NDP.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Thank you so much.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Therrien.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: The best part of a sandwich is always in the middle.

Mr. Corey Tochor (Saskatoon—University, CPC): I like this new guy and how he thinks.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien: May I continue?

[*English*]

The Chair: Go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien: Thank you.

The problem that can occur in seniors' residences is fraud. I'm raising the issue. There are people who do not have the intellectual capacity to vote.

Did you plan for all political parties—fraud makes no winners—to send a representative to watch the voting process?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Voting in long-term care and seniors' homes can vary considerably. For example, in Toronto, the majority of long-term care homes have opted for mail-in voting. In this case, staff simply distribute the application forms. They are filled out by residents, who sometimes receive assistance. Essentially, staff act as a conduit for the mail-in vote. This is not much different from a situation where residents would ask their children or a family member to help them.

In other cases—I'm thinking of two places where there is a mobile polling station—it's done by workers at the centre, but it's done by people who have been trained by Elections Canada to make sure the process runs smoothly

• (1150)

Mr. Alain Therrien: I see.

Who verifies that people who are going to vote by mail are able to do so?

I'll give you an example. I once ran in an election, and when I was visiting care homes, I saw someone who wanted to vote for Duplessis. It is well known that he died in 1959.

So, how do we make sure that the individual who votes knows what he or she is doing?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: We have no way of doing that. Our election workers do not subject voters to any tests of intellectual capacity. There is no such test, as far as I know, and it is not done in any democracy that I know of.

The test is whether the voter shows a willingness to vote, and this is the only test we can perform. There is no IQ test for—

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Perrault.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien: That's not what I meant. I was simply saying that, in this context, fraud is easier with mail-in votes.

[*English*]

The Chair: Next we have Mr. Blaikie, for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you very much.

I want to come back to the question I was asking before. We've heard a lot about what Elections Canada is doing to try to be compliant with the public health orders of the various jurisdictions in which you have to run an election, but beyond that, there is the question of the challenges the pandemic poses to all sorts of people, whether it's people living with disabilities or people in indigenous communities, where we've heard a lot about the challenges of the pandemic in those communities.

Those are all things that may cause people to choose not to vote. To what extent is it part of Elections Canada's mandate and what planning are you doing to help promote turnout in difficult conditions to ensure compliance with the public health orders?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I think that basically our role with respect to turnout is making sure that people have the right information about the process. The evidence is that there is a connection between the amount of information, the amount of understanding they have about the process, and their willingness to participate.

We would not get into the motivational aspects. Motivational aspects are for campaigns to do; it's not the business of Elections Canada. But one of the things we would certainly be doing in this election that is unique is properly informing electors of all of the safety measures that are in place, so that they feel comfortable going to a polling station and voting. That clearly is our role, and that we have plans for and a very specific campaign to that effect. That is an important factor in making sure that voters are not afraid of voting.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Has there been any work done to identify demographic groups that might have more systemic challenges to voting—the homeless population, as an example—during the pandemic? I mentioned earlier the indigenous communities who have tight travel restrictions and are worried about people coming in and out of their communities. Recruiting poll workers, for instance, might be more of a challenge there.

Has Elections Canada tried to identify particular groups that may face additional barriers to participation in the election? What work are you doing in order to mitigate those barriers?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: At this point, we are and have been conducting surveys of the general population. We have that broken down into certain categories, such as age groups. We could provide that information to the committee, if it is interested.

Ultimately, a lot of the work is a matter of local adjustments. We have community relations officers. As I've said and as you've noted, things will vary considerably. An election in New Brunswick and an election in Montreal or Toronto are very different things. It's the same in northern or remote areas, where you have indigenous communities. This is something that has to be managed locally with community relations officers and the returning officers to make sure they can offer the service that meets the circumstances of the voters.

Again, to me, this speaks in part to the length of the election. Let's say you have a 36-day campaign and it's a snap election. As a returning officer, when the writs are issued you don't yet have an office and computer equipment. You're far away from reaching out to those communities. You have to find polling locations. You have to find poll workers. That's why—

• (1155)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Perrault.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Thank you.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: If I may, Madam Chair, can I make an official request for the information that Monsieur Perrault indicated? That would be great.

The Chair: Absolutely.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Lukiwski, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Thank you very much.

Good morning, Monsieur Perrault. It's the first time we've had an opportunity to speak, so I guess the first thing I should say is congratulations on your appointment. In years past, I had the pleasure of meeting and speaking with and working with two of your predecessors, Monsieur Kingsley and Monsieur Mayrand. I'm certainly looking forward to working with you in the future.

My first point—I have several, and I'll try to be succinct—is just an observation, sir. You made a recommendation that the writ period should be longer rather than shorter. You did so because it would assist Elections Canada and your officials in the logistics of operating an election. I would simply point out to you, sir, that normally the government of the day sets the date of the election and the writ period, unless of course it goes to the full term, at which time the automatic voting date provisions will kick in. But if a government chooses to call an election prior to the fixed election date, normally they do so because they are ahead in the polls. It seems to follow, then, that if this were the case, they would have a shorter rather than longer writ period to take advantage of their popularity at the time. I would suggest to you, sir, that you and your officials be prepared—that whenever the next election is called, it will be a shorter writ period rather than longer.

My questions deal primarily with the mail-in ballot provisions. First, have you developed a best guess yet, sir, as to how many mail-in ballots you might be receiving?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Yes. According to surveys and based on what we're seeing elsewhere, we're looking at around four million to five million, but more likely four million, mail-in ballots. That is a considerable undertaking.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: It most certainly is. Thank you for that.

My question then turns more to the security and integrity of the mail-in ballots. You will be mailing out ballots to those Canadians who request them. That's the process.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Correct.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: What are you planning to...? I'm not as much concerned about what happens when Elections Canada receives the ballot. I have full confidence in you and your staff to maintain the integrity of the ballots. You're not going to lose any ballots. You'll count them accurately. That part, I believe, will be in good hands. I'm more concerned about what might occur when the ballots are mailed.

How do you plan to ensure the integrity of the vote—i.e., if a ballot is mailed to a certain individual and someone perhaps steals that ballot from the mailbox? How do you preserve the integrity and security of that vote? For example, are you asking recipients to send in one or two pieces of identification with their ballots, such as photo ID or that type of thing?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Those who apply for special ballots do have to provide pieces of ID. They provide those pieces of ID with their application form. When we send out a ballot, first of all we strike the name of that person off the list so they are marked as having received a kit and they are, in principle, not allowed to vote at a polling station or a polling place unless there are exceptional circumstances where that may happen.

The kit includes an outer envelope with a bar code that is identified to that elector, and when the elector prepares their vote they put their anonymous ballot in a black inner envelope and put that inner envelope into an outer envelope. On the outer envelope there is a declaration they have to sign, so we have the elector's signature and their information. We need to make sure that all of that information and the bar code match this information that we have from the application form.

So a verification process takes place. Once it's confirmed and we receive the ballot, we separate the two envelopes, and then the inner envelope, which is unmarked and anonymous, is set aside for the appropriate electoral district. That's how security is ensured.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Perrault.

Next, we have Mr. Alghabra for five minutes.

Hon. Omar Alghabra (Mississauga Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

It's good to see you, Mr. Perrault.

I have a question for you about the matter of moving an election day to a weekend. I see the rationale behind it. It makes sense, except we have a weekend vote through advance voting.

Can you tell me why we need two weekends to cancel the traditional Monday voting?

• (1200)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Absolutely.

Whether we need it or not, I think it is extremely useful mainly for three reasons—not in any particular order.

The first reason is to have access to locations. There are locations like schools that will not be available on a weekday during a pandemic. No school will give us access to their premises with children in the school. That's a major consideration.

The second consideration is poll workers. We cannot recruit on a Monday and hope to recruit younger working-age Canadians in the same numbers that we can on a weekend, so the recruitment consideration is critical.

The third has to do with distancing. Providing two days allows us to spread the vote. If we vote on a Monday, there will be distancing. That distancing will take place in lineups on the streets in the rain or in the cold, so it will be safe, but certainly more unpleasant for voters who have to line up two metres apart on the sidewalk.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Thank you, Mr. Perrault.

Those are all good reasons, but I feel they would be addressed by having the advance voting on a weekend and maintaining another option of voting on a weekday.

As somebody who represents a riding that has a lot of condo buildings, those condo building spaces may not be available on weekends, because the party rooms or whatever facilities are usually booked on weekends.

I see the reasons, but I feel they would mostly be addressed by having advance voting on a weekend and then Monday. I guess we'll see where the discussion goes.

My other question is to follow up on Mr. Turnbull's question on the adaptation. Your recommendation is to suspend, I think, section 17. Can you put a frame around it instead of a blank suspension? For example, there's a power for adaptation to allow more electors to vote. What other framework would you recommend that we put around that adaptation instead of just a blank suspension?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Just to be clear, I wouldn't recommend suspending section 17; I would recommend expanding it somewhat.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: I'm sorry, yes, so instead of a complete suspension, if you were to put a framework around it, what would it be?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: There is a framework around it the way it's drafted, the way we recommend it, and it has some limitations.

For example, for good reason it does not allow me to extend the polling hours beyond certain hours. There are limitations there that I think are healthy, because there can be a lot of political pressure locally for extending the hours for one candidate who wants to get out the vote more.

If you're not prepared to use the language I'm proposing—and I have language in my recommendations report—then I would suggest as an alternative that you add to the reasons for the adaptations, which are currently for facilitating the vote and the count, “or the safety of voters or workers”.

I think if you were to do that, you would probably cover the needs I have.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Madame Chair, how much time do I have?

The Chair: You have a minute and a half.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Talking about an additional four million mail-in ballots, do you see any need on the legislative end to give you new authority or new power to manage this significant increase in mail-in ballots?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: No. Thank you for offering, but the challenge is one of logistics, not legislation. I think the challenge is less counting than it is processing the request. We currently have a largely manual process for processing the request, and we need to shift to an automated one. We're working on some online solutions for that to automate the application process.

As I said, if there's an election before that and if we can't service every elector, then we will have to prioritize and remind voters who are healthy and who have no special circumstance that they can attend advance polls and regular polling days. These will be safe locations. It's a communication aspect as well.

• (1205)

The Chair: Thank you so much. That's all the time we have.

I've tried to be a little bit flexible for everyone in this last round. We'll go back and start from the beginning at the top of the second round since we have quite some time. It looks as though everyone has a lot of great questions. I'm sure you have more. We will go back to Mr. Tochor for five minutes.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Thank you so much for your time. I feel for you. I hope you're up to the challenge or that you like challenges, because holding an election during a pandemic is not going to be easy. There are going to be outcomes of this that are concerning, I think, for me and for Saskatchewan and, to a certain degree, for Alberta. If there are questions about how legitimate this election is, there are going to be revolts. The west right now has the feeling of alienation. If there's a feeling that this election wasn't run fairly or that there were any shenanigans, I suspect it's going to be bad for our country. I'm just warning all members here to think about that, think about our country, because I'm not sure if it can handle it.

One of the concerns I have is with the mail-in ballots from overseas. What is the plan in that regard?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: That is the one thing that would not be affected by the pandemic essentially. We had an entirely mail-in process for the last election. I think there were concerns about having millions of overseas voters. The reality is we had 35,000. This could increase or not. I have no indication one way or the other but the numbers were relatively small. There is nothing in the spread of those ballots that indicated any special concern in terms of the integrity. The experience has been largely positive. That's one thing that I think would not be affected by the pandemic.

Mr. Corey Tochor: The concern I have is specifically with Hong Kong. Right now, mainland China controls the mail system in Hong Kong. If we have hundreds of thousands of Canadians who are being threatened by mainland China and its controlling of the mail, I have serious concerns about that.

Coming back to our soil, what's the plan if we have someone test positive, be it a worker or a...? We know there's going to be a voter who attends a voting station and who is diagnosed with COVID afterwards. What do we do with that voting station?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: We have a procedure in place. First of all, we will have contact tracing. On a voluntary basis, voters who come in will be asked to provide basic information that we can then provide to public health authorities. I have to say that an issue like that is first and foremost a health issue. The first thing that has to happen is that the local staff will have to contact the local health authorities and deal with it as a health issue in the same way that if there's a fire, they call the fire department; they don't call Elections Canada.

Depending on the circumstances...we will of course follow the guidance of local health authorities. That's why it's important in a pandemic election that there be clear connections—contact established locally—between the health authorities and the returning officers so that they know who to call during the election and what process to follow. That will follow depending on the authority in charge. We can't have a plan that's identical necessarily for all places. This may entail, for example, shutting down a returning office for a day or for some hours until it's cleaned and then we would have to resume operations or shift operations outside. There are things that we can do remotely. There are a range of circumstances, but the basic point is that returning officers and their teams have access quickly to the local health authorities to help manage the situation from a health point of view.

Mr. Corey Tochor: These are all precautions that are going to tax your resources.

Going back to the cost of the election, do we have a rough idea of how much more this election would cost versus the last one? Do you have the resources—

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: We have some elements that we—

Mr. Corey Tochor: —at your disposal to make sure you have the ability to conduct it?

Go ahead.

● (1210)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Apologies for that.

From a financial point of view, we have access to resources that we need. We know, for example, that the total cost of the protective measures, the masks and the sanitizer lotions, as well as the costs of the additional health campaign and the costs related to prepaid postage, are roughly \$50 million. That's an additional cost.

The rest we don't know, in the sense that we don't know if we're going to be voting on Saturday and Sunday or Monday: What are the implications of that? We don't know our success in terms of recruitment and the implications of that. There are variations that we can't actually put a dollar on and that will depend on the circumstances. At this point, we've identified some \$50 million in addition....

Mr. Corey Tochor: Democracy is expensive, but it's very valuable.

Thank you for all of the work that you're doing. I appreciate it.

The Chair: Thank you, Monsieur Perrault and Monsieur Tochor.

Next up is Dr. Duncan, for five minutes, please.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Perrault, thank you so much. You're so gracious with your time this morning.

I'm very worried about schools, like you are, and ensuring the health and safety of our children. On e-day this Monday, can you confirm that no schools are being used?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: No schools are being used. Even if we wanted to, they would not allow us near the school.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you. I'm really relieved to hear that.

The question I would have next is, how are you coping with getting locations?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: We are finding alternative locations that are not necessarily usual locations, like ballrooms—that's an example. I think earlier there was a discussion about some places being closed. You can't rent a ballroom to organize a wedding in Toronto right now, but we can rent those same places to organize an election. We've had coordination between the landlords and the public health authorities so that they are reassured we can get access to those places to hold the election. We're using community centres quite a bit—these types of locations—and some private hotel locations.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you.

You mentioned contact tracing. Testing, contact tracing and isolation are keys to keeping people healthy and safe.

In some areas, contact tracing is suspended. How are you dealing with that? If people are signing in, showing that they've been there, and contact tracing is suspended, how do we ensure the health and safety of the people?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I think I have to manage expectations here. We can collect information and make it available to the local health authorities, but contact tracing is a health matter. It's not something that our poll workers can do at the same time as running an election.

We'll be very clear with each local health authority as we begin the election that we can do our part by collecting the information and making it available quickly, but we do not have the capacity to then pursue the contacting. We could do some messaging on our website and we could do some local generic messaging, but individual contacting is a different matter.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Oh, that's very much a public health issue; I just wanted to raise the issue that in some locations contact tracing is halted. I think that's important to note.

The last question I would ask is that we have some pandemic hot spots in the country, certainly Toronto, Ottawa, Peel, for example, but within those hot spots, there are areas that are even more vulnerable. Where you have high-density housing, you might have multi-generational...there are communities that are more at risk. There's a testing rate for the city, but in some communities that testing rate of positive cases is going to be much higher.

How do we ensure that the people in these communities stay healthy and safe during an election, as well as being able to exercise their right to vote?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I think the solution there, apart from local knowledge and local contact, is offering a range of voting options. For those electors who are vulnerable, those electors who either have COVID or are at risk of having COVID because of where they are and who they've interacted with, it's to reinforce the importance of alternative voting options, such as mail-in ballots.

We have messages to reinforce that, to make sure that electors have a range of options to vote in a way that is safe.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you.

I'm going to ask, then, how do you ensure in communities where there are multiple languages, and in communities where there is a

high percentage of first-generation families, they will have the information to exercise their right to vote during a pandemic?

• (1215)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I think that's an excellent point.

We carry information on a broad range of languages. I don't have the specifics, but I'll be happy to provide that information to the committee on the different ways we communicate to the different ethnolinguistic groups in Canada. I'd be happy to provide more detail on that.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: I would ask that you do table that with the committee.

With that, I will say thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Therrien, you have the floor.

Mr. Alain Therrien: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Perrault, I'm going to come back to what you said earlier, that you don't give IQ tests to voters. That wasn't the point of my comment at all. I was a member of Parliament in Quebec City, and when we were drawing up electoral lists, we took great care to consider people who were unfit because of significant cognitive problems. We made sure that they were not on the electoral list.

Do you also do this?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: The criteria for incapacity were declared unconstitutional a long time ago and are no longer in the Canada Elections Act. Therefore, there are no criteria for incapacity in the act.

Mr. Alain Therrien: I see. So, if I were in a CHSLD and if I were mentally lost, you would allow me to vote by mail. You know what I mean. It's very sad, but it's a reality. There are whole floors of patients in this state.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: The act provides a mechanism for voting, whether or not we are in a pandemic context. In long-term care facilities, voting is usually done in mobile polls. When people are bedridden, they go from bed to bed to collect ballots.

In the context of a pandemic, the way ballots are delivered will change. These people have the opportunity to vote and they are not tested. The law is very clear on this.

Mr. Alain Therrien: Fine. I just want to know.

This means that an attendant could be responsible for picking up the ballots, as you suggested earlier. He or she could distribute letters to these people, fill them out and send them to Elections Canada.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: The attendant would assist in completing the application forms, as you say. Kits would be sent to the voter, and the voter would have to complete the ballot. There are provisions for assistance for an elector who has difficulty completing the ballot and returning it.

This is the legal regime that Parliament has adopted and that has always been applied; it is not new.

Mr. Alain Therrien: I know that, but I'm sharing a concern with you.

If there are more mail-in ballots, there may be—I'm using the conditional here and I'm not pointing fingers at anyone—less certainty that these people are able to vote and that they are the ones who did. That means there would be a risk of fraud.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I would say to you that these risks are not greater in the current context.

The people you have in mind already vote with assistance. So it's no different. What would be different this time is that people who are able to vote and carry out all the activities of their daily lives would choose to vote by mail because they would rather not go to a polling station. There will certainly be more people doing that.

Mr. Alain Therrien: I'm not saying you're out in left field—

[*English*]

The Chair: That's all the time we have.

Thank you, Mr. Perrault.

I know that you were trying to respond to this question quite a few times, but we have gone over the time there.

Mr. Blaikie, you are next for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you.

Mr. Perrault, in your legislative proposal in your special report, there are some clauses around the coming into effect and the timing of the coming into effect, such that if these legislative proposals were passed and receive royal assent and an election were to happen within a certain time frame of royal assent, these provisions would not apply.

I take it to mean that the start date of an election, therefore, is an integral part of the question of the proper conduct of a federal election. Is it a fair claim that it matters when the election starts for how you would proceed vis-à-vis the changes in rules that Parliament may make?

• (1220)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Certainly an election delivered after these changes would have some improvement vis-à-vis an election delivered without these changes. That is a fair statement. I'm not sure I'm catching the gist of your question though.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: I'm trying to establish, first of all, that it matters when the election starts, from the point of view of the conduct of the election overall.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Of course.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Canada's confidence convention is notoriously uncodified. We saw some of that even this week in the latitude the Prime Minister has, for instance, in deeming any vote a confidence vote. In the last Parliament—where it mattered less because it was a majority Parliament—some nights we would vote through the night on hundreds of estimates votes. Some people are of the opinion that any one of those votes is a matter of confidence and could cause an election. Others are not of that view.

From the point of view of Elections Canada, if Parliament were to adopt a more rigorous concept of the confidence convention in order to give more predictability around when an election might start, and if that latitude were limited in some ways so that we could have a better idea of when there was a real election threat happening, would that be helpful in the planning of an election—without speaking to the substantive merits of those changes?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Yes, this would involve a range of considerations that go well beyond an election itself.

The Chair: There is some interference here.

You can start again, Mr. Perrault. I'll add time on.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Thank you.

I'm just putting a large caveat around my answer, which is that this goes well beyond the electoral administration. There are issues about the Westminster model that are not—

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Certainly. I'm not asking you to speak to those substantive matters.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I'm not saying whether or not I support such a measure. Of course, it's easier to run an election in a fixed date context or a more predictable context than a less predictable one, obviously.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you very much.

Do I have a little time remaining?

The Chair: No, we're over by a little bit. Thank you.

Next we have Ms. Vecchio, please.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Thank you very much.

I'll continue with some of the thoughts that Tom and Mr. Therrien had on this.

I'm looking at some of these things we're talking about, like mail-in ballots and take-away voting packages, if that's going to be an option. My parents always tell me not to say how old they are, but my parents are in their eighties. They do not use online services. I go over there and do the services for them. What do you have available?

We have to recognize that seniors right now have been isolated in their homes. There are few people coming in and out of their homes. What do you have for somebody who has moved or needs to register because they have come into a new voting district? What do they need to do? When it comes to document uploads, what are you doing there when it comes to providing the the identification and proof of address if somebody is trying to register to vote?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: There are a couple of aspects to your question. I hope I'll be able to answer them.

On the basic point—which is a very valid one—we would never move fully or exclusively to an online application. There always has to be a telephone interaction with a real person or service point interaction for people who do not have access to a computer or who are not literate in using it. It's about adding channels, not removing channels.

For the online application system, voters would upload their identification documents as they do right now when they register online. We already have this process in place for registering. We do not have widespread online application available for special ballots for most Canadians, although there are technical exceptions.

I'm sorry, I think there was a third component to your question that I may have lost.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: This is one of the things I want to focus on. Going through the CERB programs and different things like that—and I think every member of Parliament would be trying to be there for their constituents—we're going to see the same matter where we have people who need assistance to register. They will need that type of assistance.

As I have said, people have been isolated. There really isn't that opportunity to go into peoples' homes to assist them because of the concerns about COVID-19. I understand that we want to make it as easy as possible, but if a senior is isolating and does not have the ability to go online and upload it and does not feel comfortable going to an Elections Canada office, what are their options for getting a ballot?

• (1225)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: They can register by phone, but they will still have to provide documentary proof of their identity. They will have—

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: How can they do so, then?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: They will need some assistance. They will have to mail in some copies of their documents. I recognize this will—

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Okay, so, they don't have computer access or the computer access is limited. I don't even have a printer in my home because nothing seems to ever be compatible. What are we going to ask these seniors to do? If they aren't able to leave their homes and they are not able to use the computer, how can they get their ballots?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: If you look at the by-elections, you will see that we've been working with the local administrators and their staff in assisting the residents with that. There's no doubt that we will need that degree of collaboration because we need to maintain the safeguards around how we vote, and we need to find the right

balance. However, if we cannot have access to the residents, then we will need to rely on the assistance of the workers there. I recognize that, in some cases, the workers are stretched and this will be a challenge. That's the reality in which we find ourselves.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Let's say that my sister wants to register my parents. Would she be able to take their identification and go to the Elections Canada office? If she is feeling safe, would she be able to go there and present so that she could make sure that a ballot is then sent to my parents? It's just a hypothetical question.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: She could, but she would have to make sure that the information is completed and that your parents have signed the documents before she carries them there.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: We're talking about her going to the Elections Canada office, picking up the appropriate forms, going to my parents' house to get them signed, and then going back to that Elections Canada office to make sure that happens. So it would be two trips. Is that what we're looking at? I use my parents because I think there are so many parents out there.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: It's not necessarily two trips. She could assist your parents to make an application by phone, receive a kit or go online to fill out a PDF—assisting your parents because I understand that your parents may not be at ease doing that—to make an online application to the extent that it's available at the time of the election.

The application for the kit itself, for the form itself, could be obtained. She would then assist them in filling out the information and mail it back to the returning office if it's a paper version or carry it back. Then the kit would be mailed to your parents. At that point, they would fill it out and mail it back, or somebody could help them return it. There are different scenarios there.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you to both of you. It's a very important question.

Next we have Mr. Turnbull for five minutes.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thanks, Madam Chair.

Thanks, Ms. Vecchio, for those questions. I really appreciate them.

I think we're all concerned about voter turnout should there be an election during a pandemic. Many figures throughout society have been echoing the statement “Stay home. Wear a mask. Socially distance. Stay safe.” Essentially, we're saying, “isolate”. Physically coming out to vote will certainly make many people in our population uneasy, specifically the immunocompromised and potentially seniors and individuals with disabilities. We know that racialized and low-income communities and indigenous communities have been impacted disproportionately by COVID-19.

My question is this: How do we ensure confidence in electors during an election, such that we can counteract some of the messages that we've been putting out there for a long time, to ensure a high voter turnout?

Mr. Perrault, I want to ask you whether you have a campaign strategy that encourages that level of confidence that I think we need to sustain the level of voter turnout, which we all want to see in our democracy.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Absolutely. You raise very valid points.

We will have a campaign, and that's an additional element. Normally, we have a voter information campaign about the basis of where and how to register and vote. In addition to that, we will have a separate campaign to explain the safety measures at the polls and also to invite voters who have concerns to contact us to get more detail. In those campaigns, you need to send out some basic, clean and simple messages about health and safety, and at the same time inform people that there's more information and what the different ways are to reach us for additional information. That's a major part of our efforts as we plan for this election.

• (1230)

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: I would just say from my perspective that it seems to be a little bit more than information that we need to provide. We need to instill that confidence and to ensure that people feel motivated to come out to vote.

Anyway, maybe we can dig into that some other time, but I have another question about campus voting.

Although many classes have transitioned to online learning, there are still many students living on campus and in residence. I'm wondering why we wouldn't also have for students a similar strategy to what you're recommending around long-term care to ensure that students across the country can have the same opportunities to vote.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I want to make an important distinction here. We've said that for this election, in a pandemic, we would not offer on-campus voting. By that we mean on-campus voting for out-of-home electors, students who reside away from the campus who would be voting in their home riding.

Now, there are, as you say, residences. There are students who live on campus. To the extent that there are significant numbers, that's the work of returning officers in preparing for the election. There can absolutely be some local polling. In the same way if there's an apartment building with people who reside there, we will have polling or voting services that are of a regular nature. They're not out-of-district voting services. These are students who reside there and we'll offer them services.

So it's not correct to say there will be no voting on campus. There will be no services for out-of-district electors on campus.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Okay.

I want to ask you about patterns of voting behaviour based on what we're learning from the two by-elections. To my understanding, those by-elections officially happen on Monday, October 26. Leading up to election day, what have we seen in terms of voting behaviour? Can you give us any statistics or any insight into the differences we're seeing during this pandemic?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I can. I'll ask Mr. Roussel to add information, if he feels that's useful.

They're low-turnout elections. It is not unusual for by-elections to be low-turnout. It's hard to make predictions. We are seeing, for example, in the two electoral districts, roughly 2,000 vote-by-mail requests, but half of them are from outside Canada. These are people who are away from the country but are resident in the districts. That's about 1,000 for both districts, which is, I would say, a relatively low uptake of voting by mail.

I draw no lessons from that for a general election. It's very, very difficult to make those connections. In the same way, we don't have any recruitment challenges, but that's because of the district we're recruiting from, which is Toronto. We can't draw lessons from that.

I think we have to be very careful before we draw lessons from by-elections.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Perrault.

I think there is still some interest. Would you like to go into another round or deal with committee business at this time?

Mr. Todd Doherty: Yes.

The Chair: You'd like to go into another round?

Mr. Todd Doherty: Yes.

The Chair: Okay. Perfect.

Next up is Mr. Doherty for five minutes, please.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Perrault, has there been any modelling of how many cases might be impacted in places like Ontario or Quebec, where things have gotten really bad?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I'm not sure I understand the question.

Mr. Todd Doherty: In Ontario and Quebec, the COVID epidemic is increasing. The numbers are increasing, correct? Have you done any modelling of how you would conduct an election there? Is there a threshold for the number of cases or deaths, where...? Have you done any of that estimation or modelling?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: No. It's a good question, but that's not the way we would operate. The question for us—it's a proxy for your indicator—is do we have poll workers? Do we have locations? If health authorities are allowing people to go out of their home to attend things like grocery shopping and work activities, then I expect that we will have voters and we will have workers—

• (1235)

Mr. Todd Doherty: But my point, Mr. Perrault, is this: If the numbers are skyrocketing and there's the threat of a snap election... That's why we're here, as there's a concern that we could be in an election phase. We had a confidence vote yesterday. We seem to be getting these confidence votes more and more. How many deaths would be acceptable to the government if...? Would it be 30, 50, 200, or in the thousands?

I would think that, if the threat were in the thousands, perhaps the government wouldn't be so quick to threaten an election, and the communication between you, obviously, and the PMO wouldn't be so quick. But if the threats are in the dozens, if the numbers are at a certain point, does that go into your consideration of Canadians' safety and security, or are your concerns purely with the safety of the poll workers and the ability for them to conduct an election?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: No. I want to make sure that I'm clear here. My concerns about safety are for all Canadians, voters and poll workers. The point I was trying to make is that the rates of infection will impact public health authorities' directions, and it's those directions that will impact our decisions, so indirectly, you're quite correct, in that rates of infection, as they climb, could trigger situations where we are not in a position to run an election—

Mr. Todd Doherty: Are you in a position to advise? Do you have that threshold where you're in a position to advise the PM that it's not a time for—

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: That is the role of public health authorities. That is not the role of Elections Canada. They will advise on what behaviours are acceptable or advisable—

Mr. Todd Doherty: Right.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: —during the pandemic, based on the rates, and those behaviours will inform our ability to safely conduct an election. It's indirectly related, of course, but it is not a model in which we use numbers to declare our ability to run an election.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Okay. I'm not asking you to comment on this. Rather, it's my comment, then, that it would be safe to say it was fairly reckless for the Prime Minister to suggest a confidence vote yesterday and possibly throw our country into the middle of an election during a pandemic if he hasn't consulted with our chief health officer, Dr. Tam. Do you get the sense that the Prime Minister has a threshold for cases and deaths that he would be prepared to risk?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I cannot speak for any prime minister, minister or MP.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Okay.

In the case of the foreign elections that have taken place, such as in New Zealand, you said that you haven't consulted broadly, but what were some of the concerns in, say, New Zealand over the course of their election? Are you able to provide some of those concerns they had, the challenges they faced?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: As you may know, there was a decision in New Zealand to postpone the election. I don't know the details of the legal mechanism they have there; that's unique to their circumstances. New Zealand has a population of just under five million, so it's not unlike British Columbia, for example, in terms of popula-

tion size. They had a very, very, very low rate of infection, I think lower than any jurisdiction's in Canada, perhaps, except for P.E.I.—I'm not sure about that—but there were very, very few cases.

The circumstances there were favourable, but they had extensive health and safety measures in place to ensure the safety of the workers and the voters, so they ensured that they could deliver the election.

The Chair: Thank you.

Next we have Mr. Bratina.

Mr. Bob Bratina (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.): Thank you very much.

This is a very interesting and informative session. I really appreciate the information that we're getting.

My origins are Croatian, so I was asked to [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] with regard to the Croatian elections. The Canadian government at the time did not allow balloting to take place at the Mississauga consulate or the Ottawa embassy. In a few short days, we managed to resolve that, and it seems to me that as we were going through that procedure, it had something to do with provincial regulations. Therefore, the federal government was responding to those and not at first allowing the voting to take place, and then it allowed voting to take place.

It was resolved, but I am still seized with the matter of whether provincial directives can have any impact on how the federal planning takes place. Could you comment on that at all?

• (1240)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I can, certainly more so than on Croatian elections, I have to say.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Technically, provincial rules do not bind federal authorities. There are legal exceptions to that, but as a broad principle, that's a fair statement. That is not to say that we cannot choose to abide by the provincial rules. When we're delivering an election, one of the challenges is understanding the various rules in place. I think it's also fair to say that electors would expect to find at any federal polling station or returning office the same kinds of measures that are imposed provincially, based on the local health authorities and the pandemic situation there, which varies, as we know, quite considerably, between areas of the country.

For us, it's critical that we take into account how Canadians in their local circumstances are being directed and that we don't ignore the directions of local authorities. While we may not be technically bound by that, I don't think Canadians would be reassured or would understand why they would have a completely different experience when entering their polling station than they do when going grocery shopping, for example.

Mr. Bob Bratina: In the same vein, this matter was brought up earlier, but I'd like to address it again. What sort of circulation among ethnic media is done with regard to the Canadian federal election?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I will be happy to provide that information. There's quite a bit of detail on that. We cover I think 18 ethno-linguistic media. However, rather than mislead the committee in details, we'll provide those details subsequent to my appearance.

Mr. Bob Bratina: I appreciate that. Thank you very much.

The fact is that often within those communities things travel more by word of mouth than by fact. In this case, we were severely criticized as a government for not allowing this vote to take place, when it seemed to be a bureaucratic stumble that was quickly resolved.

I would appreciate hearing back on that and the reassurance that you've just given us that we do take strong measures to see that those communities have the right information.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Yes, I'll get some information back to the committee on that point.

Mr. Bob Bratina: Those are my questions, Madam Chair, and I'll be pleased to move on.

The Chair: Thank you.

Seeing that about a minute is left, I was wondering if I could get in a quick question.

Earlier you mentioned that Canada Post was fairly efficient with the mail. They're having some issues with packages. I heard on the news today that they are warning people to get their Christmas packages out now, because there are no guarantees.

I see you have a requirement that the mail-in ballots be received by a certain day. Have you thought whether that date of receipt could be changed to a mailing date or a post-dated date, just because you never know down the road if Canada Post's circumstances may change and might not guarantee getting these in within a certain time. I'm just hoping voters would not be disenfranchised because mail is late.

What are your thoughts on that?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: As part of my recommendations, we think that the mail should be allowed to come in a day after polling day to provide additional flow for the return envelopes, provided however that the mail has been in the hands of Canada Post before the close of polls. Of course, we don't want people to be voting after the polls have closed and then sending in their ballots.

Assuming we have our recommendations, we would allow extending the receipt of ballots one day after the weekend voting.

● (1245)

The Chair: Correct me if I'm wrong. The polls would close on Sunday and you would receive mail-in ballots up until the Monday. However, what if people had mailed ballots before the close of polls but you didn't receive these by the Monday? Then what happens?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Then those would not count, unless the legislation is relaxed further than is being recommended. You could consider adding some more days. However, at some point we probably do want finality. That's what we have at every election. There are late ballots, and they do not count. We have to draw a line in the sand as to where counting stops. I'm proposing to extend that one

day beyond polling day, but of course I'm happy to consider other measures that Parliament will want to propose for that.

The Chair: Thank you to the committee for your indulgence.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Madam Chair, I recognize it may be on our agenda to have 15 minutes of committee business, but I'm wondering if our time isn't better spent continuing with the current round of questioning.

I would just put it to the committee that, if it's okay with our witness and the committee, we spend the next 15 minutes continuing with the current round of questioning, instead of releasing our witness and going to committee business.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Madam Chair, agreed.

The Chair: Absolutely. That is fine with me. As long as you have questions, I think it's really important for us to get those answers.

Monsieur Therrien.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Are you able to assess the impact of all this on voter turnout? Do you have specific targets, or will it depend on the pace of the pandemic at election time?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: There are too many factors at play for us to predict the turnout rate. I don't have a target or indication at this time. We can assume that there will be a lower participation rate, but that's an assumption.

I don't think that was the case in New Brunswick, where there were a lot more advance polls. I expect the same thing for a federal election. We're going to have to increase services to respond to advance polls to the extent that we can recruit people.

I will be very interested to see what happens in British Columbia and Saskatchewan. This will give us a good indication, perhaps better than the New Brunswick election.

Mr. Alain Therrien: From what I understand, your biggest challenge is hiring staff. I'll come back to that.

I have one last, very simple question. Suppose Justin Trudeau decides to call an election. He may or may not seek the advice of Health Canada. Either way, if an election is called, you don't have the mandate to oppose it on the grounds that the situation is too serious. You will have to carry out the mandate given to you by the Prime Minister.

Did I understand you correctly?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Yes, absolutely. My role is to organize an election when it is called.

Mr. Alain Therrien: Fine. Let's hope it will go well and that everything will run smoothly, maybe in three years or even before.

I have no further questions. Thank you very much.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Blaikie.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you.

I'm happy to take the balance of Mr. Therrien's time, if he's okay with that.

The Chair: Sure, go ahead.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: You were very clear in your presentation that it's Elections Canada's opinion that maximizing the writ period under the current legislation would be advantageous to pulling off an election successfully, but it's not in your legislative proposal, which I recognize has a sunset clause.

I'm wondering if you could speak to the reasons that you didn't propose, in your example, legislation under the condition of the sunset clause that the writ period be designated at the current maximum, which I believe is 51 days or somewhere thereabouts. Could you give us the reasons? Maybe I would also ask if you could comment on whether or not you would look favourably on the committee's recommending in its interim report that the legislation be altered to require that longer writ period.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: My only reservation is that we don't know when it's going to be called, and there may be, for example, Christmas or other circumstances where it may be a necessity to vary the duration. Outside of a fixed-date election, I think there has to be some flexibility. I would look favourably, if that's the will of the committee, on extending that period to have a minimum of more than 36 days. That is something I would look on favourably.

If I may, on that, the challenges of recruiting were raised earlier, but another big challenge with a snap election is that returning officers would have to open their offices. They don't know in advance when that would happen. We have to equip the offices to be functional, and then they need to find polling places in time to prepare the voter information cards indicating where the polling locations are. So, there's a very, very tight period in a short election scenario to get all of these things done. Any additional time at the outset would allow us to secure locations, prepare the VICs and recruit. It would also allow the mail-in ballots to be processed.

Quite clearly, I would look favourably if it were a longer period. If there's a desire to do so, yes, I would welcome that.

• (1250)

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: I just want to come back to the question of advance polls. From what I gather in your proposal, you're not talking about substantially changing the provisions for advance polls. I'm wondering if you could give us insight about whether or not it would make sense to have more advance voting days in the current context or to move the usual Thursday/Friday advance polls to a separate weekend to spread that out. What might the advantages of that be, and why wasn't that part of your initial recommendation?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: What I am recommending is that, if we have weekend voting instead of Monday voting, we move back the advance polls by one day so that we can complete the list and make sure that we strike out the names of people who voted in advance.

From an integrity point of view and the capacity of managing that, I recommend that we move it back one day.

I also recommend that we reduce the hours, because we're finding out that it's very tough on poll workers to work 12-hour days even without a mask on. With a mask and a shield on, I think that would be difficult.

Within that framework, there's nothing that prevents me from adding polling locations, so to the extent that we are capable of doing that, our goal is to maximize advance polling opportunities, not by adding days—because four days is already quite significant—but by adding polling locations so that they're closer to electors. I think, if you go outside urban areas, you'll find that advance polls are not always convenient for voters because they're away, so adding locations is a very important target, if we can do that.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Next we have Mr. Lukiwski and Mr. Tochor sharing their five-minute slot.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you, Monsieur Perrault.

My question is regarding election workers. You've already identified that it's going to be a challenge this year because many of our election day and poll workers are older and may be somewhat reluctant to come out this year because of COVID concerns.

Also in past years, even when there wasn't a pandemic, we've always had problems getting election workers. It's been quite common for the DROs to contact election candidates within a riding association to see if they can suggest names.

I'm asking you, sir, if you have any plans to try to address the situation of perhaps a lack of election workers for this upcoming election, whenever it may be called, including whether or not you've even considered increasing the pay of poll clerks and workers to try to attract new blood. What are your thoughts on that?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: There are recruitment strategies, and we've talked about that, and we'll try to target other audiences. If we get this weekend voting, we'll have a larger pool of workers.

As for the pay, we are making recommendations to Treasury Board to modernize and upgrade the tariff of fees. If that doesn't get done before an election is called, I do have some discretion to vary the tariff of fees. I've done that in these by-elections.

When combining the role of the poll clerk and deputy returning officer, I'm asking them to do more and to do more in a harder conditions, so I'm upgrading their salary a little bit for that reason.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Thank you.

I turn it over to Mr. Tochor.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Thank you.

My questions concern the improvements to the act, and I hope we really do have a chance to look at the improvements before we go into an election.

I believe in Elections Canada. I believe in you, in your ability to hold a fair election, but if we don't get a chance to make those improvements, especially to the emergency powers, what happens when a province, unfortunately, goes through a very severe outbreak and has stay-in for its population? If we don't have the improvements, and we go back to whatever has been passed, what happens? What tools do you have at your disposal if a stay-in order has been issued for an entire province?

• (1255)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: It's important to clarify one thing. Regarding long-term care, which includes in our legislation seniors homes, I'm asking for flexibility—which I currently have, in a way, through the adaptation power.

I'm asking for it because, given that I know in advance that I will adapt a law, out of deference to Parliament, I'm saying put the flexibility yourself in that legislation. If there's no bill or the bill doesn't pass, for that measure, which in my view is a critical one, I do have an adaptation power.

Mr. Corey Tochor: What about the general public, if everyone has to stay at home?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: If everybody has to stay at home, that is basically a catastrophic scenario. That raises the question of section 59. Sorry for being technical, but section 59 is the recommendation to cancel or postpone an election. If I don't have poll workers, and voters and everybody has to stay at home, I simply don't have an election.

What I've said on that point before is that Canada is not a vote-by-mail, wall-to-wall country. That is not our service. Our regime contemplates a range of voting options. It's one thing to have some restrictions and some limitations, but conducting an election entirely by mail is not what this legislation contemplates.

In your dramatic scenario, this would bring up the question of the use of the power to recommend cancelling an election on a per riding basis.

Mr. Corey Tochor: In that scenario, let's say a stay-in order for the whole province of Ontario has been issued. Do we push back voting in all of those ridings for a month until hopefully we get a handle on the pandemic? How do you see that playing out? It's happened already this year.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I don't know that there have been any circumstances this year where I would be prevented from running an election, or maybe at the outset of the outbreak when there was more confusion amongst the population.

In your scenario, if I recommend to the Governor in Council to cancel the writ, it is the decision of the Governor in Council. They must, by law, call a new election for those districts within three months. Technically, then, the scenario can be repeated if it's not better in three months.

That is the absolute worst-case scenario in the books.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Let's hope and pray that doesn't happen.

Once again, thank you for the hard work you and your staff are doing to make sure we have fair elections in Canada.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Alghabra is the last speaker. I'll ask for your patience for about 30 seconds after, so I can make an announcement.

Go ahead, Mr. Alghabra.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Perrault, let me correct myself. A colleague reminded me that we are in a pandemic, so condo facilities would probably still be available on weekends because there are no events being held.

You saw how I asked about the weekends and election day. I am concerned about completely removing election day as a Monday because of the traditions and perhaps people being away on weekends, etc. How would you feel if we added the weekend before election day, as you propose, but also kept Monday with shorter hours? How would you feel about that?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: This is something we have considered and decided against because of the difficulty of having the polling location.

Let's say we get access to a school on the weekend for a particular area. We will not have that school for the Monday, so we will not be able to pursue the voting operations. Then we also face the recruitment challenges of having a very large number of workers available on a Monday. For that reason, I've decided to recommend having entirely weekend voting, keeping in mind there is weekday voting at advanced polls. It would be on my recommendation that these be the Thursday and Friday prior to the proceeding weekend, so there are two days of advanced voting that are not weekend days.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: I have concerns about people's awareness. As we know, as humans we may procrastinate sometimes. We may wait till election day and some of the mail-in ballots may still arrive on Monday. Anyway, I think it's interesting for our committee to study this.

This is my last question for you. Obviously, it is Elections Canada that regulates the conduct of candidates and parties. Have you thought about regulating how candidates conduct their campaign within a pandemic?

• (1300)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: We do not have any authority to regulate how candidates campaign during the pandemic. I want to be clear about that. There are rights to campaign in the act, for example accessing buildings such as apartment buildings. There are limitations in these provisions for health reasons. That's governed by the Elections Act.

Our role is inform candidates and landlords, and sensitize candidates to that. We've also taken measures.... For example, you will all know, having been candidates, that you need 100 signatures. That can be a challenge. In the by-elections, we have single-page signatures. That was recommended by the public health authorities, so that we don't pass around the same page from one elector to another.

We are assisting campaigns in that way, but we don't have the authority to regulate their behaviour.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Don't you regulate campaign expenditures and advertising, etc.?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: That is all in the legislation. That is not something that I would seek powers to adapt. That belongs to Parliament, in my view.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Okay.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Perrault, and your whole team. I always feel more confident about our elections after you—

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Sorry to interrupt, Madam Chair. I know you're going close quickly and adjourn, but I would like to make a suggestion, Madam Chair, for your consideration and that of the entire committee.

We've had an excellent discussion today. We heard some good recommendations by several members. In my opinion, it would behoove this committee to get a final study tabled in Parliament before we rise this Christmas. There is an opportunity, of course, for the government to enact legislative changes. Whether they wish to do so or not is strictly up to them, but if they are considering any legislative changes to the Elections Act, it might be helpful if they could refer to our report.

Whether or not they choose to accept any or all, or reject any or all of the recommendations we may provide is up to the government. I would suggest we plan to try to complete our study and have a report tabled prior to the Christmas break this December.

The Chair: Absolutely. I couldn't agree more. I think it's only helpful if we can provide our feedback.

According to the motion that has passed to allow for this study, we are required to table an interim report by December 1. I understand that you're saying we should complete the study and give

more recommendations beyond what was requested by Elections Canada.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Madam Chair.

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Doherty.

Mr. Todd Doherty: I want to echo the comments by Mr. Lukiwski. This has been an excellent conversation and was respectful from all our colleagues.

We talked about it in our previous meeting, and I am wondering if we could ask Mr. Perrault if he is willing to appear before the committee after the next provincial elections are finalized. If any other concerns come up, we may be able to question him on those. It is germane to the discussion and to the report we will be filing.

The Chair: Mr. Perrault, we did discuss at our previous meeting our desire to have you back, perhaps from time to time, but at least once. There are by-elections that are going to happen, from which I am sure you will have lessons learned, and there are provincial elections that are taking place. I'm sure you are communicating with those partners as well.

You have never declined an invitation from this committee before. Hopefully you will be available.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I hope I never do decline an invitation from this committee.

I will make myself available, of course. It is my pleasure.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I guess the witnesses can be dismissed at this point.

All I have to say to the committee is that I may have misspoken a little about Saskatchewan's chief electoral officer being available for the next meeting on October 27. It looked like we were going to be able to secure one hour with Saskatchewan, but [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] Saskatchewan being available for November 3. We are still working on that; the clerk is helping us to work on that.

I want to remind everyone that tomorrow at noon your preliminary witness lists are due. Please get those to us as soon as possible, so we can try slotting in more people for the 27th and onward.

Thank you. Have a great rest of your day.

The meeting is adjourned.

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