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Chair: Ms. Ruby Sahota



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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order. Welcome to meeting number 31 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

The first hour will be public with the Chief Electoral Officer, appearing on Bill C-19. For the second hour, the committee will move in camera to continue consideration of its draft report on its prorogation study.

The public portion of the meeting will be webcast on the House of Commons website. Today's meeting is taking place in hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of January 25, 2021. Therefore, members can attend in person or virtually.

All the members today are attending virtually, so please be mindful that the meeting is taking place over the Zoom application, and that you are not permitted to take any screenshots or photos of your screen.

I will remind all of you to make sure you have your interpretation on the language you are going to be speaking. It is okay to choose the floor language, if you're going to actually...

Do we not have a floor choice anymore? What's happened to that?

Mr. Daniel Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): We do indeed, Madam Chair. That's usually the one that I'm in, and it seems to work well for interpretation, enabling switching between languages.

The Chair: It is not showing up on my application today, so that is very weird. It usually does, and that just threw me off. I will figure that out later.

You have the choice of English, French or floor; I just don't today. With the latest Zoom version, you shouldn't have to switch back and forth. If anyone has a point of order, just unmute your microphone and state that you have a point of order. We have a list of questioners today, so we will have our regular rounds for questions.

Before us today, we have our Chief Electoral Officer. Long time no see and welcome back to our committee, Monsieur Perrault.

With him is Michel Roussel, the deputy chief electoral officer; and Anne Lawson, the deputy chief electoral officer for regulatory affairs.

Welcome back to committee. It's been a long time since we've seen all of you, and we're very happy to have you with us again.

I believe there are opening statements for about 10 minutes.

Mr. Perrault, I'll let you begin.

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Perrault (Chief Electoral Officer, Elections Canada): Thank you, Madam Chair, for the opportunity to speak with the committee today about Bill C-19.

Given where we are in the parliamentary calendar, I want to start by saying a few words about our electoral readiness before addressing certain aspects of the bill.

Over the last year or so, we have undertaken extensive readiness activities, not only to prepare for the next election, but also to adjust to the circumstances of the pandemic and ensure that voting can take place safely.

We continue to engage a range of stakeholder groups across the country, as well as with a network of federal, provincial, territorial and indigenous health authorities. We have adjusted voting operations and procured a full range of protective equipment to ensure the safety of electors and workers at polling stations.

We have also prepared a range of service options to deliver the vote in seniors' homes and long-term care facilities, based on local needs and circumstances. It is these institutions that will choose the options.

Since last fall, we have dramatically increased our capacity to process mail-in ballots, and we have developed, tested and implemented an online vote-by-mail application system. Finally, we have planned for the deployment of drop boxes inside all polling places to help ensure that postal ballots can be returned in time.

I note that all of these measures are possible under the current regime, without Bill C-19, with some adaptations that I am empowered to make.

With this, Elections Canada is in a relatively good position to administer an election under the current regime, despite the challenges inherent to the pandemic, which is not fully behind us.

[English]

In early October I recommended a limited number of amendments to the Canada Elections Act to facilitate election delivery in a pandemic and improve services to electors. Among them was the replacement of the traditional polling day, which of course is Monday, with a two-day weekend voting period.

Bill C-19 proposes, instead, to retain Monday voting and add Saturday and Sunday. I certainly understand the intention behind having more voting days. As I indicated when I appeared before you last fall, this was, in fact, my initial instinct, but after careful review, I recommended against it. This remains my recommendation today. Let me explain.

Three polling days over a weekend and a Monday will increase the risk of labour shortage and limit the number of polling places available for the full voting period, in part because in a pandemic, schools will generally not be available on the Monday and places of worship on the weekend, or at least part of the weekend.

This will result in increasing the number of voters per poll and will not facilitate distancing. Fewer polling places will also result in electors having to travel farther than usual to cast their votes, especially in rural areas where they may have to vote outside of their town or in places that may not meet accessibility standards.

I invite members of the committee to amend Bill C-19 to provide for a two-day weekend voting period or else to simply stay with the traditional Monday. Either solution would, in my opinion, result in better services to electors.

Before concluding my remarks, I would like to draw your attention to one item that is not currently contained in the bill, and it relates to the collection of signatures for candidate nominations. This matter was raised during the Toronto by-elections and discussed, I should say, several times, at the advisory committee of political parties after I had made my recommendations.

The act requires that signatures be collected by candidates from 100 electors, each in the presence of a witness. This will be more challenging, of course, during a pandemic. Currently signatures can be collected electronically but not without difficulty, given the legal requirement to have a witness. A more user-friendly electronic solution is possible, but that would require an amendment to the act to remove the witness requirement, as is the case in some provinces. It would also, however, involve developing new systems and business processes. Given the time this will require and the investments, this is something that should be considered more in the long term and not as a quick and temporary solution, certainly not for the next few months.

As a temporary solution, the committee may wish to consider reducing the number of signatures required for a candidate nomination so as to limit in-person contact. I note that most provinces and territories require significantly fewer signatures. For example, Ontario only requires 25. Some have as few as five signatures.

• (1110)

Thank you for inviting me today. I welcome your questions on these matters, and of course, any other matter addressed in the bill.

Madam Chair, when we spoke last week, you suggested that I bring potential written amendments to the bill to support the work of the committee, which is somewhat unusual. I do have amendments and I'd be happy to share them through the clerk, if that is the wish of the committee. I'm in your hands in that regard.

Thank you.

The Chair: [Technical difficulty—Editor] here on such a short timeline, my comment was not so much that they have to be formally written amendments, but whether you had any supplemental material to help the members.

Originally, it was planned that you would be appearing perhaps on the same day that we would be starting clause-by-clause. It would be useful to have it on hand, if requested by members, so that you could email it in both official languages immediately at that time rather than having to get back to us.

If the members wish, that can definitely be circulated to all of them.

Mr. Blaikie.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you, Madam Chair.

This is just to say that if Monsieur Perrault has amendments drafted, I would certainly be happy to receive them. If there are no strong objections from committee members, perhaps those amendments could be circulated as soon as possible.

Thank you.

The Chair: If members wish, when we are on clause-by-clause, they can move those amendments as is or incorporate them into their own amendments. Do with them whatever. They're just advice to the committee.

We'll move on to the official rounds of questions, starting with Ms. Vecchio for six minutes.

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

Thank you very much to all of the team that has come from Elections Canada.

Mr. Perrault, I really appreciate your coming and speaking on this bill, and thank you very much for bringing that additional information to this committee.

I'm actually just going to start off with some more simple questions, because I think there has been a lot of discussion on what we're looking at in terms of the length of a writ. That has been a discussion on whether there should be a shorter or longer writ. I know there really hasn't been something specifically determined here.

At the end of the day, who is the entity that decides whether it is a 35-day, 47-day or 50-day writ? Would that be the Governor General, the Chief Electoral Officer or perhaps somebody coming from public health, or would that be the Prime Minister?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Legally, the writ period is, under the act, between 36 and 50 days. The Prime Minister makes a recommendation to the Governor General for the duration and the timing of the writ. It is within the same recommendation as the date of the writ that the duration is set. That's set in an order in council.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: What is your recommendation when we look at this? I'm sure, over your time, there have been multiple elections happening.

I'll ask quite frankly: Have you spoken with the chief electoral officer from Newfoundland regarding the recent election in that province?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: We've had some very brief exchanges. We helped them with some public inquiries during the election as they were struggling a little with the volume of phone calls.

However, in terms of the duration of the writ period, no, we have not had a discussion.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: I'm just looking at that, because we know there has been so much confusion built out of it. What is your recommendation when you're looking at a writ period? Do you think it should be longer or shorter?

I know there are so many processes being changed potentially, such as mail-in ballots and all these things. Do you think the time limit should be extended, or should it be shorter during this time so that you can do your job?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: As I think I indicated when I appeared in the fall, there is merit to a longer writ period in a pandemic, because everything takes more time. In terms of recruiting and in terms of finding polling places, it does take more time. Within the parameters of the act, in my view, a longer period is preferable.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: You were talking about locations, too. When you're talking about those two- to three-day writs, that's exactly what I've been looking at within my own hometown. Many of the facilities that are being used are perhaps churches, schools or community centres. We have lots of concerns there.

Have you been hearing back from any of your people on the ground who are trying to get these places set up, about any of the frustration that they're finding in trying to find centres or getting a place for three days?

• (1115)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: We've had ongoing work done by returning officers since last fall. They've periodically engaged with a range of potential... I believe there are over 23,000 locations that they've been contacting. In some cases, a small number are confident that they can offer their location. In other cases, they simply do not know, and some have said no. There's a range of uncertainty. Of course, that will evolve as the pandemic evolves.

We'll see, but there is ongoing work by returning officers to re-visit polling places to make sure that they have a range of options for an election.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Perfect.

We're talking about not only accessibility but social distancing and all of those things. At the end of the period, when the election is over, will there be enough room to ensure that scrutineers, people

like that, can view the counting? How are you going to ensure that we can continue to do all of the business we need to do, in perhaps a very small location, if this is an issue? What are some of the options you're looking at?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: We have to ensure that locations are large enough to accommodate not only the vote but also the observing of the count. There will be some distancing, but remember that we will have some glass partitions so that observers can look through the glass fairly closely to make sure they can observe the count.

We will also have, of course, complete transparency and observations for the counting of the special ballots—the postal ballots—at the local returning office, as well as at our central offices in Ottawa for the national vote. We engaged with the advisory committee of political parties last week to explain the process that would follow to make sure they can observe the count.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: That's awesome. Thank you very much.

Ruby, I think I'm really close to my six minutes, so go for it.

The Chair: All right. Thank you.

Go ahead, Monsieur Lauzon, for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon (Argenteuil—La Petite-Nation, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam chair.

Mr. Perrault, thank you for taking the time to be with us today. This is the first time that you and I have met as you appear before us as part of our study. As Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Seniors, I am very concerned about the continued right of seniors to vote should an election be held during the pandemic.

We saw what happened in the U.K. with the new variant. We are in an unpredictable situation, and the role of government is to ensure that we are prepared for any eventuality.

Could you tell us how Bill C-19 gives you the flexibility to make voting safe for voters who reside in a long-term care facility?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: We've developed various options, assisted and unassisted, for in-person voting, but we won't have mobile voting. We don't want poll workers going from one seniors' residence to another or from one care home to another. There are over 7,000 care homes or seniors' residences in Canada, and every one of them has been contacted. Discussions were held with each of them to determine, on a preliminary basis, what their preferences would be. The result of these discussions will be repeated during an election period to see, depending on the evolution of the circumstances, what would be the best solution for them.

When I appeared before the committee in the fall, I said, and I repeated it earlier, that I could do this through adaptations to the legislation. It's unusual to plan adaptations to the law. They are normally due to things that happen along the way that we have to react to. In this context, given the magnitude of the adaptations and the fact that I was planning them in advance, I indicated this in my report and asked to have a parliamentary mandate to at least see if there was a negative reaction. I didn't see any. That's why I'm saying that if the bill passes, I'll have a clear mandate for that flexibility.

However, if the bill does not pass, due to time constraints, for example, and an election were to be called, the legislation still provides me with the tools to give me the flexibility to serve the residences in the manner they deem most appropriate to their circumstances.

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: Would Bill C-19 help you with your preparations, for example?

Could you already initiate processes that would make it easier for you and your team to deliver safe elections for the most vulnerable people, who are necessarily the most affected?

• (1120)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Let me be frank. What would make our job easier is a fixed election date. We don't have that. We don't have that, but we do have flexibility, and we are talking to the seniors' residences and the care homes.

What will vary, of course, is that we don't know when an election will be held. So we can't recruit or train people or give specifics.

The situation is even evolving on the side of these residences and centres. They have to wait. They have a range of options in front of them, which they're looking at, but they will have to wait until the election is called to confirm which option they prefer. At this point, there is a lot of flexibility, but not a lot of certainty.

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: There is much that is new, as this is a first-time event. The pandemic didn't come with a manual telling us how to manage it.

You had mentioned that you wanted a longer election campaign to be able to turn around and adjust. Under the current conditions, could a short election campaign still provide a safe election for all Canadians?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: This is indeed an important issue, one that I want to emphasize.

We have everything we need to make sure that the elections are conducted safely. Whether the election period is 36 days or 50 days, the polling places will be safe. We have the equipment, there will be distancing, and in the event that we run out of polling places, there will be distancing outside of those places. Even if that is not what we want, people would line up a little longer outside.

Security will not be compromised by a lack of time. Such an option is not on the table. We have everything we need.

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: I would like to come back to an issue that is important to me.

You said previously, in another appearance, that there was an opportunity to have voting over three days, in other words, a weekend and the Monday. I understand that it's evolving and that you've done your work, but I don't understand the statistic that more people would be present on two days than on three days.

Logically, it seems to me, if we have a pool of Canadians voting over three days, the distribution of votes is certainly over three days. So there would be fewer people and less risk.

Could you explain in a little more detail your logic when you say that there would be fewer people at one time over two days and that it would be safer?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Of course.

What I'm saying is that there will be no more distancing over three days if we have access to fewer places. There are limits to how far people can travel to vote.

First, if there are fewer venues and we have to concentrate the electorate because we don't have enough venues for all three days, we lose what we are trying to gain. It's hard to say exactly what would be best, but there isn't necessarily a gain to be made by adding a third day if there's a loss on the polling place side.

Second, the locations that won't be the usual locations at that time may be less accessible and further away. The three-day option is attractive. My first reaction when we looked at this option—

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: I don't want to interrupt you. However, on this point, you always say—

[*English*]

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: ... "if there are fewer polling stations". However, if we have the same number of stations—

[*English*]

The Chair: We will be moving on to Mr. Therrien for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien (La Prairie, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to extend my greetings to Mr. Perrault, Mr. Roussel and Ms. Lawson. I'm very happy that they're here today.

Mr. Perrault, you tabled a report on October 5. You came to see us and explained why we should have a two-day voting period on Saturday and Sunday. This would give us more space, provide a greater selection of locations and make the schools an option over the weekend. I'll let you address that.

The Bloc Québécois lobbied hard [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. We did so because you, the election expert, motivated us.

When we bring people of your calibre to the committee to discuss a topic that you know and know well, I think that we must listen to you. I lobbied hard for the vote to be held on Saturday and Sunday. You're going even further and saying that, if it can't be done on Saturday and Sunday, we should just do it on Monday. I completely understand your argument. At the time, I didn't understand it in that way, but now I understand it more and more. If you want a place that's available on Saturday, Sunday and Monday, the choice becomes more and more difficult and increasingly limited. As a result, this will keep people away from the polls. Is that right?

I understood that schools were more available over the weekends. However, you added that looking for availability on Saturdays, Sundays and Mondays will make the supply scarce and keep people away from the polls. That's what I understood. Is that right?

• (1125)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: That's right.

Recruitment issues will also start to come up. That's a challenge under any circumstances. However, in terms of polling stations, it's exactly as you said.

Mr. Alain Therrien: Thank you. I completely agree with you. I made this request my main focus.

I want to address the signature collection. You spoke about it briefly, because you didn't have much time.

We said that we could collect signatures electronically. You're proposing a more user-friendly solution. I'll let you explain it to us, because I somewhat understood your presentation. I want you to elaborate on this topic.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: It can be done electronically at this time, but it must be done in the presence of a witness. Right now, someone can print a form, sign it with a witness, take a [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

We could have a completely online system, without having to—
[*English*]

The Chair: We've been having some sound issues. It happened a couple of times, and I just want to make sure we resolve it before it happens again. It cut out a little when Mr. Therrien was speaking earlier and then again during the response. I want to make sure everyone is hearing everything clearly.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Justin Vaive): Madam Chair, we'll look into what's going on with the sound here in the room.

There has been a bit of a recurring problem in this meeting, which you and some other members noticed. It's something that's been happening in other committees as well. They're trying to address it.

For the time being, there's no quick fix. If there is any incomprehension because of those little glitches, witnesses and members may need to repeat themselves if everyone has not understood what is going on. That's the best we can do for now.

The Chair: I think, and we could pose the question to other members, that the disruption was very minor and that everyone still understood the flow of the conversation. I know I sure did, but I wanted to nip it in the bud before it became a bigger problem and we missed a big chunk.

That's good to know. If any of the members find that they have missed something, alert me and we can slow things down.

I'm so sorry, Mr. Perrault. I hope you remember where you were in your response. You had just begun. Could you start from the beginning?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I think I'll have to repeat a little bit.

[*Translation*]

To put this in context, I said that the electronic signature process was possible, but that it required a witness. This makes the process much more complicated.

If we want an electronic system—and I think that we should be looking at this over the longer term—we should first consider removing the witness requirement. Some provinces or territories don't have this requirement.

We should also develop business processes and an electronic system that works well. I would say that, with all the other things involved in elections, including the work with seniors and the system changes related to date changes—about 40 systems are used in elections—it may seem simple, but it isn't. I don't recommend doing this on a short-term basis, because there's way too much involved.

I'm saying that, if we want to reduce the burden and contact associated with signatures over the short term, we can cut back on the number of signatures. Most provinces and territories in Canada require far fewer signatures. Nova Scotia requires five, Saskatchewan requires four, Ontario requires 25 and Quebec requires 100. There's a whole range.

At the federal level, the requirement is also 100 signatures, but we could lower that number to [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] for example, or 25. This would ensure that the process is maintained, but without as many contact requirements at the start of the election.

In my view, the easiest way to minimize contact is to reduce the number of signatures.

• (1130)

Mr. Alain Therrien: Thank you. That's very clear.

I'll ask you another question. I've spoken to the minister about this situation. He considers you a very important part of the decision-making process. I just want to make sure that this is part of your authority under the act.

Suppose that it's June and an election is called. We're currently seeing cases decrease more and more. However, in September, who will determine whether we're still in a pandemic and whether Bill C-19 still applies?

Is it you? Is it public health? Is it the bill? How will this work?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: According to the bill, if it passes, I must consult with Dr. Tam and decide whether the accommodations are still necessary.

For example, if I still need to provide varied and specific services to each senior centre, even though infection rates have dropped, I can't say that we're finished with the pandemic. I'm still relying on exceptional measures.

As long as I need to use the exceptional measures in Bill C-19, it means that we're still in a pandemic situation.

Once I'm no longer considering this, and after consulting with public health, I'll issue a notice and the provisions will stop [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

Mr. Alain Therrien: Is the—

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Perrault. That's all the time we have.

Thank you, Mr. Therrien.

Mr. Blaikie, six minutes please.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

One of the issues that I think we've discussed before is the question of how many more people are likely to use special or mail-in ballots in the context of a pandemic election. Under the current process, if I understand correctly, people have to produce a copy of their identification for Elections Canada, which is as it should be. In the context of a pandemic election, there's concern that people who don't have access to a photocopier or a scanner or to the Internet may struggle in order to be able to get Elections Canada not only their application but also the accompanying supporting documents that prove their identity.

I'm wondering what plans you have for that. There has been discussion at committee before about the idea of authorizing staff at Canada Post outlets to essentially do the ID verification process on behalf of Elections Canada, so that they could certify the identity of the person who then puts the application in the mail at the Canada Post outlet and that part is done. Then the person doesn't have to interact with Elections Canada by Internet or have access to a photocopier. Their ID would have been established at the point of mailing in their application.

I'm just wondering what thinking has gone on by you and your office in terms of how to square the circle for voters who either don't have a reliable Internet connection or aren't able to access a photocopier or scanner, and how they would access mail-in voting in a pandemic context.

• (1135)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: It's actually a very interesting proposition. As you know, electors do have to produce a document form of an address even if that is only a letter of attestation, for example, for seniors living in long-term care facilities. It may not require a photocopy, but in some cases it will pose a bit of a barrier.

There is no legal impediment that I'm aware of—certainly not in our legislation—to having Canada Post employees validate the

identity and address of a person in-person, viewing their documents and then certifying that in a process that we could establish with Canada Post. In fact, there have been some discussions with Canada Post to that effect.

I cannot speak for Canada Post and to what extent they would be prepared to go there or what time they would require to do that. It's something that's being looked at, but I certainly cannot commit or say anything on behalf of Canada Post.

What I can say, however, is that the same kind of interaction is possible at the office of the returning officer, or there are sometimes in large districts additional offices for assistant returning officers. Though not as many certainly as postal outlets, there are places where people can go to and, in person, obtain a special ballot.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you very much for that answer. I appreciate getting your thoughts on the matter.

With respect to the special ballot when people receive it, we know that under the current rules, people have to have the spelling of the first and last name of the candidate in their district, which normally doesn't seem to have been that much of a problem, although I've certainly seen it sometimes where people know what party they want to vote for, or they identify the candidate in a way other than their first and last name. It seems to me that the magnitude of the problem increases proportionately to the number of people who are voting by mail, because they don't have the option simply to mark an X now on a fixed list of the candidates.

I'm wondering if there has been some thought given to the virtue of allowing people to identify candidates in a way other than the correct spelling of their first and last names. For instance, would having a party affiliation be good enough for the purposes of indicating intent on a special ballot?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: It is an important issue. I know that some jurisdictions allow the electorate to vote just by the name of the party with which the candidate is affiliated. It raises a question, to be frank, for the independent candidates, so that's something that you'll want to consider. I do agree that for many electors it makes it simpler and avoids the risk of a void ballot by having the option of expressing their voting intention by the party name.

I should note that if there's a spelling error, that is not sufficient to set aside the ballot. It has to be clear what the intention is, of course. A mere spelling error would not be sufficient, but in some cases, you're right. Some electors forget and they're quite certain of their party preference. That's certainly an option to avoid setting aside ballots in that case, but that would require a legislative amendment.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Okay.

In the exceptional case that some candidates share the same first and last name, how do people typically differentiate between them on a special ballot?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I have to say I don't know the answer to that. Perhaps Monsieur Roussel or Madam Lawson knows the answer to that.

Normally on the ballot, you would ask for an additional surname to identify the person, but on a special ballot, of course, that increases the risk of confusion and of the elector perhaps not knowing that additional surname. Again, that may be a good example, though rare, where the party affiliation would assist.

I'll take that under advisory. I would suspect that, in that case, the name with the combined party affiliation may be sufficient to identify the intention because the name is not incorrect in that case.

● (1140)

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Right.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Nater, you have five minutes.

Mr. John Nater (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Perrault and our guests from Elections Canada.

I have to apologize. There is a kindergarten class going on in the other room, and it sounds like they're singing a Father's Day song. I'll try to tune that out so that I'm still surprised on Sunday.

Thank you, again, to our witnesses. This has been a fascinating conversation.

I want to start out by saying a word of appreciation to you, Mr. Perrault, and to Elections Canada for the work that you've already undertaken leading up to a potential election by taking into account different mitigation measures if there is a snap election at some point. That kind of leads into my first question.

Obviously, this committee is actually moving heaven and earth, I would say, to get through C-19 prior to the House rising in a week's time. I just want to gauge your comfort level. Obviously, there are risks with this pandemic. There's never not going to be a risk when we're dealing with a global pandemic, but I just want to gauge your comfort level right now—if there was an election over the summer months or early into the fall without C-19 having received royal assent—with running an election under the current rules, taking into account, obviously, the adaptation measures that you've already noted.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: That is a very important message that I have for the committee and, of course, anybody listening.

We have taken the measures we feel are necessary to offer a safe voting environment. We've done that since last fall and since then, we've improved our capacity to deliver postal ballots and to process postal ballot requests. As I said in my introductory remarks, I think we are in a good position with all of this work now not only to offer a safe election, but also to offer good service [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] options to Canadians.

Now, that doesn't mean there will not be challenges. There are always challenges that we will have, and they're even more significant in a pandemic, but we are in a good position right now to deliver an election.

Mr. John Nater: Thank you for that. I appreciate that and I think that is a vote of confidence in your agency and something that we as parliamentarians, and as politicians [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] inform our public about the confidence we have in your agency.

If I have time, I will come back to some of the recruitment challenges, but I want to go back to something that's been talked about a few times already. I don't want to beat a dead horse, but I think it is an important issue. That's the two-day versus three-day versus one-day writ period. Obviously, your recommendation was a Saturday and Sunday. In C-19, the government has gone in a different direction with the Saturday, Sunday and Monday.

In your opening comments, you did note you would prefer either a traditional Monday or a Saturday and Sunday and not the combination of the two. I just wanted to clarify that, if given the choice, you would rather have a single one-day voting period on a Monday versus the Saturday, Sunday and Monday. Is that your position?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: That is the devil that we know—indeed. Yes, I think so.

I think there's also what we've seen since last fall, when I made my recommendations. It's been confirmed by a number of provincial elections. Not only is the uptake quite significant for postal voting, which we knew by surveys—it has also been demonstrated in the provincial elections—but there's also a significant uptake for advance polls. If an election were held today, we could expect that upwards of 50% of voters would have voted prior to either the weekend or the Monday of voting.

That's something that is quite significant that was not as clear when I made my recommendations last fall.

Mr. John Nater: Yes. I appreciate that.

That kind of leads in logically to my next question. Obviously, there are four days of advance polls plus however many days of polling we will have under Bill C-19, whether we stick with the three days or move to a single day or a single weekend. It goes back to the staffing challenges. I have heard anecdotally that, with the census, there has been a bit of a challenge in terms of recruiting people to fill these positions.

Looking at an election context, especially within a pandemic, I don't want to stereotype [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] volunteer or to work as elections officials tend to be slightly older than me, in that age cohort. I want to know what efforts the agency is making currently in terms of ensuring that there are appropriate staffing levels for four days of advance polling before an election day, regardless of how many and what challenges you're seeing. What might need to be done, legislatively or otherwise, to address that staffing challenge?

● (1145)

The Chair: You can answer that, but please be very quick. Unfortunately, we're out of time.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Just quickly, this is of course a big challenge. Returning officers are well aware of that. It's probably their main concern. In the last election, we were not able to recruit as many as we wanted to.

In terms of the age cohort for our poll workers, which is older than the average adult population, the progress of the vaccinations is helping in that sense. That's of assistance. We have also significantly increased the budget for advertising for recruitment. We will be making some efforts to assist returning officers to meet that challenge.

The Chair: Thank you.

Dr. Duncan, you have five minutes, please.

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

Good morning. Thank you for coming.

I think right now we're all encouraged by increasing vaccinations. In fact, Canada leads the world in first doses, and of course we have cases going down. However, things can change in a pandemic. Preparedness is everything when it comes to pandemics. My concern is really about protecting the health and safety of Canadians. I'm going to ask a series of questions, which will largely be "yes" or "no".

Is Elections Canada consulting and receiving guidance from the chief public health officer on running an election during COVID-19?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Yes—from all provinces and territories and also federally.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you.

Has Elections Canada included IPAC specialists in the planning of an election?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: IPAC...?

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Infection, prevention and control specialists.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: We get our advice from the public health authorities of the provinces and Canada.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you.

You have answered this, but I will ask again: Will Elections Canada be able to run a safe election should there be an election this summer or fall?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I have no doubt that we could offer safe voting, even in-presence voting, if there were an election today.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you.

Should there be a fourth wave, will Elections Canada be able to run a safe election? Answer yes or no, please.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I have no concerns in that regard.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you.

Is Elections Canada taking into preparation the possibility of the spread of variants of concern, including the delta variant? Answer yes or no, please.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: We are following closely, of course, what's happening in terms of the variants. The protective measures are the same notwithstanding the variants. We are introducing some rapid testing at our Coventry office to detect any possible cases emerging there.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you.

Right now, are you planning to have...? I'll come back to this. It's regarding schools.

Will there be capacity limits inside polling stations? Answer yes or no, please.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: The capacity will be dictated by the size of the polling place. As I said earlier, that determines the number of polling tables and the number of polling divisions. If necessary people would have to line up outside, so we'll make sure that, at all times, distancing is respected irrespective of the size of the location.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you.

Will Elections Canada have mechanisms in place to protect the health of election workers, yes or no?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Yes, absolutely.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you.

Will elections workers be required to have completed COVID-19 vaccines? Answer yes or no here, please.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: This is not a requirement at this time.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Will Elections Canada be providing COVID-related health and safety training for elections workers? Answer yes or no, please.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Yes, we will.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: I think you've mentioned this. Will Elections Canada install barrier protections in polling stations to protect poll staff, voters, campaign staff? Answer yes or no, please.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Yes, we have that.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Will Elections Canada have COVID-19 compliance officers inside polling stations, yes or no?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: The answer is yes.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Will they be at all stations?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: At all stations we'll have a person in charge of ensuring that the set-up respects the measures we have determined in accordance with the directives of the health authorities.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Will Elections Canada ensure, should contact tracing be required, that some information is collected?

• (1150)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: We are planning right now for contact tracing at all polling locations and returning offices.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you.

Is there a communications plan for how electors can vote during a pandemic election, yes or no?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Yes, there is.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Will that include what electors can expect at a voting station during a pandemic election, yes or no?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Yes, we have a safety campaign for voters to inform them of all the measures they can expect to see.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you.

In how many languages will election information be provided?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: That varies on the kind of information we have. I think it's 51 languages for basic information, but there are a range of products in a lesser number of languages, for example, in 16 indigenous languages.

We also will be using the CanTalk application that allows for, I believe, 24 indigenous languages as an interpretation service for electors who interact with us, for example, for special ballots.

Hon. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Duncan.

We have Mr. Therrien for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien: I must take at least 10 seconds to acknowledge the interpreter. Ms. Duncan put her to the test and she really rose to the occasion. Ms. Duncan, your questions were very good, but the interpreter did a magnificent job.

Hear, hear! I wanted to tell you this. I'll try not to speak too quickly.

In terms of an election call, you said earlier that you had to talk to public health in the event of an election. Is this done systematically? For example, as soon as the government calls an election, do you immediately call on public health to assess the situation? Is that how it will work?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Our working group is currently in regular contact with provincial and territorial public health authorities. This is an ongoing process. Yes, we'll be in contact when the election is called, to ensure that there aren't any changes.

We must also be able to anticipate. If the provincial public health department, for example, changes certain guidelines, we need to know. We already have a whole network of contacts in place so that we can find out about changing public health requirements.

Mr. Alain Therrien: I imagine that you talk to the Public Health Agency of Canada and then turn to the provinces and Quebec to find out which provinces have easier or more challenging situations. You then make adjustments according to the circumstances. Is that right?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: We must also find out, for example, whether any curfews are in place. This may affect voting hours. We must know to what extent. Right now, masks are required everywhere. Things are going well. It makes our job easier, in a way. If things start to loosen up in some places and masks are no longer mandatory, we'll need to look at this again. We'll keep encouraging

people to wear masks. If masks aren't mandatory in a province, we may not be able to require them. However, these types of adjustments must be made constantly in a pandemic.

Mr. Alain Therrien: Okay.

I'll move on to my last question.

In October, when you came to see us, you spoke about the difficulty of recruiting employees. How does having two days, Saturday and Sunday, instead of one day, Monday, make recruitment easier?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Some people won't be available all three days. People who work a regular weekday job won't be available on Monday. This means recruiting more workers to establish shifts for certain days and recruiting other workers for other days.

The number of workers needed is increasing. As I said in the last election, we were supposed to have 250,000 people, and we had 232,000. This led to shortages. Some polling stations opened later because of this, since workers didn't show up. That's a major challenge. In the pandemic situation, if we add the need to recruit more workers, this certainly makes things harder.

Mr. Alain Therrien: The fact that seniors have now received two doses of vaccine, in many cases, should take some of the stress out of this—

[*English*]

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien: Okay.

Thank you, Mr. Perrault.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Blaikie, you have two and a half minutes.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Monsieur Perrault, you've said more than once here today that you're confident, even under the current rules, that you could run an election that is safe from a public health point of view, but there's another important question that I want to put to you.

Strictly speaking, I mean, you can have an election [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] at 110% that was perfectly safe from a public health point of view. Safety from a public health point of view is one thing—it's very important—but the other thing that the committee was at pains to show, in both the main body of its report on the matter and in the very title, is that there are two things that have to be taken into consideration. The other is the likely turnout and people's comfort with voting, even if voting is safe.

There's a question about whether logistically it will be easier for people to vote under Bill C-19 in a pandemic context, and whether having measures like some of the measures in Bill C-19 would put people at ease and make them feel more comfortable about showing up to vote, either in person or voting by mail.

I want you to answer that other fundamental question, as I see it, in respect to Bill C-19. Do you think that Bill C-19 promises a salutatory effect on turnout and will help Canada have at least the kind of turnout that we've normally seen in elections?

Also, do you think there's a threat of a lower turnout [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] a non-Bill C-19 context to a Bill C-19 context?

• (1155)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: There are many factors that affect turnout, and we don't control a number of them. Motivation and whether there are circumstances that light a fire for voters are things that we don't have control of. What we are responsible for is limiting barriers to voting and making sure that there's a range of options for electors who face a range of lifestyles and life circumstances.

For elders, people in remote communities, vulnerable populations, students...for all of these, I can say that we have a range of service options. People who want to vote, whatever their circumstances, should be able to vote in the next election.

Now, Bill C-19, in some ways, gives me a clear mandate to do things that I'm already planning—as I said, the services for seniors in long-term care facilities. If the bill does not have time to pass, I will use the adaptation power.

I think there was a very good idea in this bill, which is the use of drop-boxes in polling places. It's something we can do and we plan to do. It does not require a change to the legislation to do that, but it's certainly something that emerged from the bill. As we looked at it, we decided that this is something we should be doing so that voters, if they receive a postal ballot and it is late in the campaign, do not need to worry about their ability to cast their ballot. There's a range of things we are doing that are very much mirrored both in the report of your committee last February and, in some cases, in Bill C-19 and that will assist in ensuring that voters can cast their ballots.

As I said, I think we are in a good position. It doesn't mean that there won't be challenges. I want to be clear that any election is a bit of a challenge and that in a pandemic it's even more of a challenge, but we have a range of tools to assist voters in these circumstances.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Perrault.

Mr. Perrault, do you mind staying another 10 minutes? We have some flexibility in our schedule today.

So that members are aware as well, we can go a bit past one o'clock today. I figure we might as well complete the second round with Mr. Perrault.

If you and your team would be willing to stay for 10 more minutes, we have two more questioners.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I would be more than happy to do so.

The Chair: Okay.

Next up we have Mr. Kent for five minutes.

Hon. Peter Kent (Thornhill, CPC): I think it's Ms. Vecchio.

The Chair: I'm sorry. Ms. Vecchio. I'll go to you then.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Thanks very much. I wasn't sure about this.

Mr. Perrault, thank you very much for being here today, because I think you've brought in so much commentary on what this could look like and what we should be looking at.

Of course, this is the first time we've had a chance to really discuss Bill C-19. The facts you brought out about a three-day writ versus a one-day writ and all of these different issues you're talking about are things that we need to really reflect on. At this time, I recognize that there are opportunities for questions, but I want to move a motion because, specifically after hearing you, Mr. Perrault, it gives us a good reason to make sure there are opportunities for other witnesses.

I had put this motion on notice on Friday. I would like to move the following motion:

That, in relation to its consideration of Bill C-19, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act (COVID-19 response), the Committee

(a) invite the following to appear as witnesses at their earliest opportunities and prior to clause-by-clause consideration:

(i) the Chief Electoral Officer—

Thank you, Mr. Perrault, for being here today. It's been useful.

—(ii) a panel consisting of the Chief Electoral Officer of Newfoundland and Labrador and the Chief Medical Officer of Health of Newfoundland and Labrador—

The Chair: Ms. Vecchio, could you slow down? You're going very fast for the interpretation.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Okay. That's not a problem. It continues:

(iii) a panel consisting of representatives of the Liberal Party of Newfoundland and Labrador, the Progressive Conservative Party of Newfoundland and Labrador, and the New Democratic Party of Newfoundland and Labrador,—

• (1200)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: I have a point of order, Madam Chair.

The interpreters can't keep up with Ms. Vecchio today. We didn't understand everything. There are points where the timing isn't right. [English]

The Chair: Okay. Maybe we can slow it down and start from the beginning.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Absolutely.

Ms. Sahota, I believe this motion should be on the notice already. It's there if anyone wants to refer to it, but I will start from the top.

I move:

That, in relation to its consideration of Bill C-19, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act (COVID-19 response), the Committee

(a) invite the following to appear as witnesses at their earliest opportunities and prior to clause-by-clause consideration:

(i) the Chief Electoral Officer,

(ii) a panel consisting of the Chief Electoral Officer of Newfoundland and Labrador and the Chief Medical Officer of Health of Newfoundland and Labrador,

(iii) a panel consisting of representatives of the Liberal Party of Newfoundland and Labrador, the Progressive Conservative Party of Newfoundland and Labrador, and the New Democratic Party of Newfoundland and Labrador,

(iv) a panel consisting of the Chief Electoral Officer of Yukon and the Chief Electoral Officer of New Brunswick,

(v) a panel of four federal returning officers, with one nominated by each recognized party—

As an aside, as you indicated, everything is going to have to be looked at. Although Mr. Perrault has been out there working with his people, it's really important that we also recognize some of those challenges.

It continues:

(vi) representatives of the Canadian Association of Long Term Care, and

(vii) a panel of professors Peter Russell, William Cross, Ken Carty, and Kelly Biddock; and

(b) invite appropriate technical officials from the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer, in addition to the usual officials from the Privy Council Office, to appear during clause-by-clause consideration.

Madam Chair, I believe everybody has this. There does not need to be a lengthy debate on [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. What I'm indicating is that we have just heard from our first witness today and, even from this, he is bringing forward some amendments because there are some issues he is noting. I think that's really important.

We know this legislation was tabled prior to our even setting down our report. We know that we have not had efficient or effective time to actually look at these things. When we hear from somebody like Mr. Perrault, who is saying this is something he is looking at, I think it is really critical that we don't just ram this through and say that it's not going to be a safe election. We've heard from Mr. Perrault that he is able to make it a safe election. I totally understand where Daniel was going with that there. We have to make sure it is democratic, but at this time I think it is essential that we listen to some witnesses.

Ruby, I'll turn it back over to you and perhaps we can have the opportunity to discuss this and take it to a vote.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: I was just going to ask you, Ms. Vecchio, if you would mind if we have the next questioner go ahead, dismiss our witnesses and then get back to your motion and decide what we want to do on that—debate it, vote on it or whatever.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Seeing that Mr. Perrault is here, I recognize the importance of hearing from him. We just need to make sure that we don't get into our report time. Thanks.

Whatever works for the committee.

The Chair: I just want to dismiss the witnesses. We have one more questioner. I'll dismiss the witnesses and we'll go right back to where we are here.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Yes, at your discretion. That's no problem.

The Chair: Okay.

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

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

Thanks to Mr. Perrault. I don't know where you are on my screen now, but thanks for being here.

I wanted to go back and ask you a quick question to get it out of the way, and then I have some more in-depth ones. In terms of the writ period, whether it's shorter or longer, can you confirm for me either way that Elections Canada has a mandate and a responsibility to be prepared for a safe pandemic election?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: That's absolutely correct, either way.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Great. Thank you for that. I appreciate that.

In terms of the voting period, I know that there's a little [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] or two days. I think you've suggested either the Saturday or Sunday or just reverting back to the usual Monday.

I know that this committee heard from witnesses who were adamant about having the Monday added on being very important from an accessibility perspective. I think that's why, in my view, the legislation coincides with what we have heard from witnesses: women, shift workers, people who rely on public transit to access polls and people with disabilities. Those are the people I think we heard from in the testimony given at committee.

Do you recognize the importance of ensuring that they have access to those polling locations?

• (1205)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Absolutely. It's a valid point.

Now, of course, whenever a writ is dropped, I will be writing to assisted transit authorities to make sure they're aware of the needs of electors. However, I recognize that for some electors, Monday may be preferable for those reasons. That's why I've put all the options before the committee.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Great. I appreciate that.

I had another question related to this. I know you've mentioned recruitment is a challenge. Obviously site selection, I think, in terms of voting places becomes a little more challenging when you need a Saturday, Sunday and Monday. First, is that because you're considering schools to be the primary places for voting?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: At the last election, 46% of polling divisions were in schools. That is a very significant proportion of the population voting in schools, yes.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: I got that.

The reason I'm asking is that I have specific concerns, and I think many of my colleagues would express these as well. With children and the new variants of concern, there is a higher incidence of cases of COVID-19 with the delta variant specifically within the younger age categories [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] population. Therefore there's some increased exposure risk associated with utilizing schools as polling places.

Are you putting in measures to decrease that exposure risk for children in those schools? This is if, in fact, you are going to use schools as sites.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: This will be school-specific. In any case, the returning officer will have to work with the local schools to decide whether or how the facilities can be set up to avoid commingling students and the general voter population. I expect that in a pandemic, many schools would not be open for us to use as polling places. Certainly in Ontario they've given that indication if it's on a Monday. Other provinces.... Manitoba has said the same.

When the election takes place, whether the vaccination is rolled out completely or whatever the situation is, I'm certainly not counting on schools. That's why we have to look at alternative places.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Okay.

The other point I wanted to make was this. Aren't some of the same challenges present with advance polling locations as would be present with Saturday, Sunday and Monday for the voting period itself?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: The main difference is that, in the last election, we had 6,000 advance polls compared with over 15,000 regular polls. The options are greater because there are fewer polls at advance polls. It's the same challenge but with fewer places to find.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Okay.

The other question I have relates to what you said, which is that we, obviously, anticipate an increase in the volume of mail-in ballots. You also said in your testimony here today that you have seen a significant uptake in the advance polls.

Would this naturally take the pressure off the voting period and allow for more distancing?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Certainly, the increase in advance polls is something we need to prepare for. It creates, of course, additional challenges because we have to recruit earlier and earlier. In every election, the increase in uptake reduces the time for recruitment, but it does take the pressure off regular polling days.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you.

The final question, if I may—

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

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Okay. No problem, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Perrault.

The Chair: I would like to thank all of our witnesses today: Monsieur Perrault, Monsieur Roussel and, of course, Ms. Lawson. Thank you all for being here today.

Now we will end our formal portion of the rounds of questioning and move back to Mrs. Vecchio's motion, which she just moved. If anyone wants to speak to that motion, please raise your hand. I see some hands up already.

Mr. Blaikie, go ahead.

● (1210)

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I have just a very few remarks. I'll start by saying I very much appreciate the sentiment of the motion and I think in an ideal circumstance it would behoove the committee to hear from the people that Ms. Vecchio has identified as potential witnesses.

I do think it's important that the bill be reported back to the House as soon as possible for the reasons I was mentioning earlier, that we've heard for a long time now from Mr. Perrault that he's confident Elections Canada can deliver an election that is safe from a public health point of view, but what remains is the question of whether or not enough Canadians are going to feel comfortable enough to vote. What C-19 offers for me, and one of the reasons it's always been very important in light of the CEO maintaining consistently throughout the entire pandemic that they could run an election that's safe from a public health point of view, is that I have tended to see C-19 and the virtue of legislative amendment as being more about ensuring that we actually get people comfortable with voting and that they can do that in ways that not only are safe but also feel safe to them and don't become a barrier to voting.

I know also in the example of Newfoundland it wasn't necessarily that Newfoundland couldn't deliver an election that was safe from a public health point of view. It was the perception of poll workers and voters that caused people to feel that they shouldn't be going out to the polls. What that would mean for the result of the election caused there to be a delay in the election day, in fact many delays, because people recognized that it's not enough to have an election that's safe from a public health point of view. You also have to have enough participation to make the results legitimate, or it wasn't worth having an election in the first place.

I see that as being the virtue of C-19 and that's why it's imperative that we deal with it and report it back to the House quickly. I would have preferred that we not have a months-long filibuster at the committee. It would have created a lot more time for us to consider C-19 properly, but I can't change the past. What I can do is play the hand dealt and to work at what I think the priority should be, which in this case is reporting the bill back to the House.

While I regret that we were tied up for a long time and we weren't able to do this important work in more depth, that's the situation in which we find ourselves. I also just don't have the same faith in Mr. Trudeau that perhaps my colleagues in the Conservative Party seem to have that he won't put his own self-interest ahead of the interest of the nation. If I really felt we weren't going to have an election this summer and that the Prime Minister could be trusted to do the right thing, then we wouldn't be on the timeline that I believe we are on, which is trying to get this bill in place before the summer, because I think it's very unlikely that we're coming back in September.

I don't usually play pundit. It's not a role that I'm comfortable in. I like to work to change outcomes and to decide outcomes rather than to comment on what other people are thinking or doing, but in this case, there are so many signs of a summer election, including the take-note debate tonight for MPs who have announced they are not running again. I can't fathom why a government would agree to that unless they had an intention of calling an election. There are a lot of signs leading towards a summer election. That's why I think it's really important that we get this bill passed and back to the House.

While I would really like to hear from these witnesses, I don't think we're in a position to do that. I think our committee has burned up the time that we would need in order to do that. The important thing right now is to get the bill reported back to the House in order to put Canadians more at ease with the options that they'll have for voting, and to make sure that they feel they're doing that in a safe way and that the legitimacy of the result isn't compromised by low participation. That's why I do not intend to support this motion. Although I think, ultimately, it would have been very nice to hear from these folks, I don't think that a realistic timeline allows for that.

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Nater.

Mr. John Nater: Thank you, Madam Chair. I will be brief.

First, I want to assure Mr. Blaikie that I, too, do not trust the Prime Minister. I, too, do not have faith in the Prime Minister, in terms of what he may or may not do over the summer months in terms of triggering a unilateral election during the summer months or early in the fall before the House of Commons returns. I just want to make sure that's on record, about my lack of trust or faith in Justin Trudeau. That was more of a side note.

Very briefly, in terms of this motion and the recommendations from my colleague Mrs. Vecchio, I think it's incumbent upon us as a committee tasked with reviewing a very important piece of legislation that we do our due diligence. We could have had these witnesses and we could have had this discussion weeks ago had there

not been a filibuster. That's the unfortunate effect that the Liberals placed us in.

I don't think we should let Liberal partisan games get in the way of us doing our job. That job is very simple: that we review this piece of legislation and make recommendations and amendments to the very best of our abilities. To do that, I think we need to do our job and hear from witnesses. It's a relatively pared down [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. It's not going to take weeks and weeks. I understand we're under the time crunch when the House of Commons will be adjourning for the summer.

Again, it behooves us to do our job and to hear from witnesses. We've heard from the Chief Electoral Officer and we've heard from ministers. We've heard the partisan spin from the minister, and we've now heard from the agency responsible. I think we need to hear from others as well.

I'm going to leave it there. I'm pretty good at counting, so it's pretty clear where this vote will go, but I do think it's important that we go forward with these witnesses. I will leave it there, and I will yield the floor.

• (1215)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Nater.

Madam Gill, go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill (Manicouagan, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to make a few points. First, I want to pick up on what my colleague, Mr. Blaikie, said. We need to move fairly quickly as a whole. We certainly don't want to filibuster. We want the work to proceed smoothly [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] months of filibustering in the committee. The work hasn't been very constructive. I still find it unfortunate that we're being asked to proceed very quickly after we took a fairly long break due to issues unrelated to the purpose of our work. That's the first point.

The second point concerns the motion moved by Ms. Vecchio. We're told that the government is giving several signs that it may want to call an election within a certain period. In my opinion, the fact that the government has certain electoral, political or partisan intentions shouldn't influence how we work in the committee. In my view, that isn't an argument for rejecting Ms. Vecchio's motion to hear from many more witnesses. It also isn't an argument for speeding up our work. Like Ms. Vecchio and other members, we would have appreciated hearing from other witnesses in the committee, including representatives of the Institut national de la santé publique du Québec.

We're ready to proceed with the clause-by-clause consideration because we want the report to be sent quickly. I also want to reiterate that neither the government's intentions with respect to the election nor the months spent failing to work as productively as possible on Bill C-19 should influence our decisions today.

Regarding the motion, I can't support it. However, perhaps we in the Bloc Québécois, [*Inaudible—Editor*] for other cases.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Gill.

Seeing as there are no other speakers to speak to this, we can go to a vote.

(Motion negatived: nays 6; yeas 5)

● (1220)

The Chair: Thank you.

I will now ask everyone to transition to the in camera portion of the meeting, so that we can wrap up our draft report on prorogation.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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