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OFFICIAL REPORT
(HANSARD)

Tuesday, May 3, 2005
Part A

—

Speaker: The Honourable Peter Milliken

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Tuesday, May 3, 2005

The House met at 10 a.m.

Prayers

• (1000)

[*English*]

PRIVILEGE

APPOINTMENT TO NATIONAL ROUND TABLE ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND THE ECONOMY—SPEAKER'S RULING

The Speaker: I am now prepared to rule on the question of privilege raised on Tuesday, April 12, by the hon. member for Red Deer concerning the government's disregard of a motion adopted by the House with respect to an order in council appointment.

I would like to thank the hon. member for Red Deer for bringing this matter to the attention of the House as well as the hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons for his intervention.

In presenting his case, the hon. member for Red Deer charged that the Prime Minister was in contempt of Parliament for disregarding the motion adopted by the House on April 6 recommending that Mr. Glen Murray's nomination as chairperson of the national round table on the environment and the economy be withdrawn. The hon. member for Red Deer argued that his privileges had been taken away because the Prime Minister had ignored the wishes of the House of Commons by appointing Mr. Murray to the position.

• (1005)

[*Translation*]

In order for the House to appreciate fully the context of the hon. member's question of privilege, I feel it would be useful if I summarized the proceedings leading up to it.

[*English*]

On February 17, 2005, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons tabled the certificate of nomination of Mr. Glen Murray as chairperson of the national round table on the environment and the economy pursuant to Standing Order 110(2), after which the certificate of nomination was referred to the Standing Committee on the Environment and Sustainable Development. Mr. Murray was subsequently invited to

appear before the committee to answer questions about his qualifications for the position.

On March 8, 2005, the committee adopted the following motion:

That, due to the fact Mr. Glen Murray has insufficient experience in environment related fields or study, this committee calls on the Prime Minister to withdraw Mr. Murray's appointment to the National Roundtable on the Environment and the Economy.

The chair of the committee, the hon. member for York South—Weston, informed the members of the committee that although the committee did not have the power to revoke an appointment, a letter would be sent to the Prime Minister advising him of the committee's decision.

On March 22, 2005, the committee adopted another motion to report its decision to the House and on March 24, 2005, the chair of the committee presented the committee's fourth report to the House. The House subsequently adopted a motion to concur in the committee's report on April 6, 2005. In the meantime, Mr. Murray's appointment had been confirmed by the Prime Minister's Office.

On April 14, 2005, the hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House rose to present the government's position with respect to the question of privilege. The hon. parliamentary secretary provided the House and the Chair with additional facts that he believed were relevant to the issue. He stated that the appointment was proceeded with on March 18, 2005, because the government understood from the chair's letter that the committee had completed its consideration of the matter and "in full knowledge that it did not have the power to revoke the appointment". He noted that it was only after the appointment had been finalized that the committee decided to report the matter to the House.

[*Translation*]

During my deliberations on this question of privilege, I reviewed Standing Orders 110 and 111 relating to the examination of order in council certificates of nomination and appointments by standing committees to refresh my memory as to their operation.

[*English*]

For the benefit of members, Standing Orders 110 and 111 were first adopted on a provisional basis by the House in February 1986 and made permanent in June 1987. Standing Order 110(1) provides for the tabling in the House of a certified copy of an order in council appointing an individual to a non-judicial post and its referral to a standing committee for its consideration.

Privilege

Standing Order 110(2) provides for the tabling of a certificate stating that a specific individual has been nominated for an appointment to a specified non-judicial role and the referral of this certificate to a standing committee for its consideration for a period not exceeding 30 sitting days. This is the mechanism by which Mr. Murray's nomination was referred to the Standing Committee on the Environment and Sustainable Development.

Standing Order 111 sets forth the terms of the examination of the appointee or nominee in the designated committee. In particular, the Standing Order restricts the examination to the appointee's qualifications and competence and provides for a specific time limit of 10 sitting days for the examination of the appointee or nominee in the committee from the first consideration and within the overall 30 day limit.

I would also like to refer members to page 875 of Marleau and Montpetit:

Appointments are effective on the day they are announced by the government, not on the date the certificates are published or tabled in the House.

Further, on page 877, it states:

A committee has no power to revoke an appointment or nomination and may only report that they have examined the appointee or nominee and give their judgement as to whether the candidate has the qualifications and competence to perform the duties of the post to which he or she has been appointed or nominated.

House of Commons Procedure and Practice at page 448, further states that the adoption of:

A resolution of the House makes a declaration of opinion or purpose; it does not have the effect of requiring that any action be taken—nor is it binding.

To conclude, it is clear from the above that order in council appointments are the prerogative of the Crown.

While the government can be guided by recommendations of a standing committee on the appointment or nomination of an individual, the Speaker cannot compel the government to abide by the committee's recommendation nor by the House's decision on these matters. I therefore find there is no prima facie question of privilege.

I thank the hon. member for Red Deer for bringing this matter to the attention of the House.

The Chair has notice of another question of privilege from the hon. member for Ajax—Pickering.

● (1010)

HOUSEHOLDERS

Mr. Mark Holland (Ajax—Pickering, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, earlier today I served notice of my intention to raise a question of privilege concerning a householder I had sent to my constituents in the month of April which was a 16 page booklet. I received a number of complaints from constituents telling me that inserted directly inside the householder was a piece of Conservative partisan material.

The item in question was a reply card apparently sent as a 10 percenter by the member for Vegreville—Wainwright displaying the Conservative logo and asking my constituents to send their address information to the Leader of the Opposition.

I am not sure what reason the member from Alberta has to communicate with my constituents but my point is that this

solicitation was inserted directly inside my householder and was an integral part of it. This caused confusion for many of my constituents, as well as upsetting them.

We have four opportunities a year to send out our message to all constituents and those messages are not to be filtered by media or opposition members. It is our opportunity to communicate directly with our constituents.

This parliamentary privilege is discussed at page 83 of the *House of Commons Procedure and Practice* and states:

Members are entitled to go about their parliamentary business undisturbed.

This incident has interfered with my parliamentary privilege to communicate with my constituents in an unfettered way.

Some of the householders containing the partisan material were sent to locked Canada Post superboxes. This confirms to me that the insertion occurred either at the House of Commons or somewhere in the Canada Post system. This material was not inserted after it reached the constituents' letter boxes and I think that is an important point to raise in this context.

Mr. Speaker, if you find that I have a prima facie case of privilege, I am prepared to move the appropriate motion.

HOUSEHOLDERS—SPEAKER'S RULING

The Speaker: Having recently been through a situation where a similar matter has been referred to the committee, I think the hon. member may have met the threshold that the Chair has established in respect of these kinds of mailings.

It is not clear to me what happened in this instance but there seems to be some confusion as to whether it was generated when this householder was put together or in the course of officials at Canada Post distributing it in the riding. Perhaps the committee will want to have a look at this, so I am prepared to accept the hon. member's motion now.

REFERENCE TO STANDING COMMITTEE ON PROCEDURE AND HOUSE AFFAIRS

Mr. Mark Holland (Ajax—Pickering, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I move:

That the matter of Conservative Party inserts in my householder be referred to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

● (1015)

The Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

The Speaker: All those in favour of the motion will please say yea.

Some hon. members: Yea.

The Speaker: All those opposed will please say nay.

Some hon. members: Nay.

The Speaker: In my opinion the nays have it.

And more than five members having risen:

The Speaker: Call in the members.

And the bells having rung:

The Speaker: At the request of the chief opposition whip, the vote on this matter is deferred until Wednesday at the conclusion of the time provided for government orders.

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

[English]

INTERPARLIAMENTARY DELEGATIONS

The Speaker: I have the honour to lay upon the table the report of a Canadian parliamentary delegation to Chile and Argentina from March 14 to 17, 2005.

Is the hon. member for Prince George—Peace River also proposing a motion today? If so, perhaps again he could tell me which number it is he is proposing.

Mr. Jay Hill (Prince George—Peace River, CPC): Yes, Mr. Speaker, as I did yesterday and as I will continue to do, I am seeking leave to move concurrence in the 35th report of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

The Speaker: The hon. member for Brome—Missisquoi is also proposing to move a motion. Perhaps he could enlighten the Chair as to which one he is proposing.

* * *

[Translation]

COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

JUSTICE, HUMAN RIGHTS, PUBLIC SAFETY AND CIVIL PROTECTION

Hon. Denis Paradis (Brome—Missisquoi, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I move that the fourth report of the Standing Committee on Justice, Human Rights, Public Safety and Civil Protection, presented on Friday, December 10, 2004, be concurred in.

The Speaker: The question is on Motion No. 6 under Motions on today's order paper. The hon. member for Brome—Missisquoi.

Hon. Denis Paradis: Mr. Speaker, first, I want to mention that I will be sharing my time with the member for Bourassa.

On September 23, the RCMP announced the closure of detachments in Coaticook, Granby, Saint-Hyacinthe, Lac-Mégantic, the Magdalen Islands, Baie-Comeau, Roberval, Rivière-du-Loup and Joliette. The detachments affected are located in remote areas.

The top brass at the RCMP maintains that this is a logical decision and the result of a change in vision and direction by the federal police force. The mayors of the municipalities in question, however, fear that the regions will be unprotected and that organized crime will have free rein.

The Association des membres de la Police Montée du Québec Inc. called for a federal inquiry into this matter, after this plan was announced last September. Like the mayors of the affected municipalities, RCMP officers feared an increase in the activities of organized crime, while the top brass talked about the federal

Routine Proceedings

police adopting a new vision and direction. They are not alone in condemning this situation; the Association des policiers provinciaux du Québec, the Fédération des policiers et policières municipaux du Québec and the Fraternité des policiers en Montérégie have too.

In early October, federal Liberal caucus members from Quebec also decided to ask the RCMP to reconsider.

This is important to me because it is a matter of public safety. I have met the coalition of mayors and, together, we decided on a strategy. Following this meeting, I wrote to my colleague, the chair of the Standing Committee on Justice, Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness and member for Simcoe North. I asked for the mayors to have the opportunity to be heard in committee. I am pleased to note that the committee agreed.

On December 7, 2004, the coalition of mayors appeared before the Standing Committee on Justice, Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness. They had the opportunity to share their opinion and ask that the decision to close the RCMP detachments be reviewed. At committee meetings and, then in the House, I spoke out against this situation.

At that time, they presented a very well documented report. They clearly demonstrated the threat posed by removing the RCMP from our regions, a concern that is shared by the Quebec Liberal caucus, as well as many of our colleagues in this House, and certainly some colleagues in the Bloc Québécois as well. The decision to close the RCMP regional detachments in Quebec needs to be reconsidered. We cannot allow our regions to be vulnerable to crime. Let me quote an excerpt from the mayors' report:

Criminals and organized crime have no regional, municipal or other boundaries and they do not need consultation studies or to testify before committees in order to act. They are wherever we are, seeking the weak link. Let us not allow them to take over our territory, because you can be sure they will take it, if they have not already done so.

On that famous December 7, when the mayors made their appearance, they were backed up by municipal councillors and reeves, as well as former MPs who had been actively involved in this issue. I would like to again congratulate and thank Diane St-Jacques, David Price, and Gérard Binet.

I also salute the mayors' coalition and their spokesperson, Guy Racine, for their excellent work.

● (1020)

When the mayors appeared before the Standing Committee on Justice, Human Rights and Civil Preparedness, they presented a very good report. They were well prepared and presented some solid arguments. The committee decided to follow their lead and recommend that the detachments be kept open.

The Standing Committee on Justice, Human Rights and Civil Preparedness therefore recommends the following to the government: "that the RCMP maintain the nine detachments in Quebec that were discussed during our hearings and that it agree to maintain or restore the critical mass of officers per detachment."

Routine Proceedings

Despite all these supporting arguments, Commissioner Zaccardelli turned a deaf ear. He even went so far as to tell the Standing Committee on Justice, Human Rights and Civil Preparedness that a police officer used to be able to process roughly 15 cases a year. Then he added that now they have changed their methods and it takes 15 police officers—according to the Commissioner—to handle one case. I have a great deal of trouble following this about-face.

I would like to make another point. The police must be present locally and seen there. They must be there and be visible there. I think it is important. If the police are never seen on the highway, some might be tempted to speed. So it is important to see the police.

They should be seen at the local level. Their presence has a dissuasive effect. I have been a member of this House for ten years, now. We have always been told at meetings how important the presence of police officers is for dissuasive purposes. I am not talking about community police. I refer to federal police, a drug, customs, national security and public protection network.

In my riding of Brome—Missisquoi alone, it is very clear that marijuana is being planted increasingly in the fields. What sort of message is being sent with RCMP officers being withdrawn from our regions.

In addition, my riding has 10 official border crossings, not to mention the unguarded roads where there is no customs officer. I worked as a customs officer while I was a student. When a person fails to stop at a crossing, who is to be called, now? The Sûreté du Québec officers are busy in their own jurisdiction with roads and crimes involving people or goods. Can the RCMP be present when a customs officer calls?

What do our American neighbours think of all this? They have beefed up security on their side with border patrols. I think the number of police present at border crossings and in the regions should be returned to what it was. The RCMP must be present locally to discourage crime and to keep an eye on dubious transactions, such as when homes are sold for cash at three times their price. Officers have to be part of the community. They have to be involved and act as the ear of justice.

As I said at the outset, I am sharing my time with the member for Bourassa. I give the floor over to him.

• (1025)

[English]

Mr. Jay Hill (Prince George—Peace River, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened with great interest to my hon. colleague's speech, but I want to ensure, as I will be doing every day that this charade continues, that the viewing public at home understands what is going on here. It is pretty simple. My concurrence motion, which is attached to a report—

An hon. member: It is irrelevant.

Mr. Jay Hill: Oh, really? The member says it is not relevant. It is very relevant to what is going on in this chamber. It is very relevant, because what is happening here is a refusal by the government to allow the democratic process to take place.

My motion would allow the opposition to have a designated opposition day, something the government took away from us. It unilaterally took that away from us a few weeks ago. The government has not re-designated any opposition days, and what is going on with these concurrence motions is not allowing that to happen. Why is the government shutting down Parliament?

[Translation]

Hon. Denis Paradis: Mr. Speaker, we are talking here about the RCMP. My hon. colleague need only look at the newspapers. This is a motion that I introduced on December 10, 2004. If he wants to take part in a democratic debate, this is the right place.

This is a debate that the House has every right to hold. It has a right to pronounce on this motion introduced by the member for Brome—Missisquoi. If the hon. member really wants to participate in a democratic debate, I would ask him to continue under our democratic rules and in the framework of the debate currently before this House about the reopening—I am not sure that he knows anything about it—of nine regional RCMP detachments in Quebec. So first of all, does my hon. colleague know anything about this?

Mr. Paul Crête (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I was very interested in what my colleague had to say. I know that on this issue, from the beginning, we have been up against the position of not only the commissioner but also the minister. The mayors and the committee have made a series of representations. We met with the minister. The most disappointing moment in this operation, in my view, was when the minister wrote a letter indicating her full support for the commissioner.

It strikes me today as important, therefore, for this motion to be debated and voted upon in the House of Commons. In this way, the government can be sent a very clear message. I hope that a majority in this House will tell the government that these detachments absolutely must be reopened.

During the work done by the border caucus, we realized, first, that there is a major problem with the open area that is left to organized crime and, second, officers are being withdrawn from the borders. The question I have for my colleague is about these two things. Should the minister not have faced the fact that not only do the current areas have to be covered but additional money must be obtained for the coalition to deal, for instance, with organized crime, rather than just robbing Peter to pay Paul. A way has to be found to provide all the services.

Does the hon. member agree with me that it is important that a majority in this House vote in favour of the motion? By doing so, we might prompt the government to change its attitude and show some respect for the will of the House of Commons in this regard.

• (1030)

Hon. Denis Paradis: Mr. Speaker, it is very important, indeed.

First I want to thank my hon. colleague from the Bloc for his comments. He is absolutely right, the regions are important. Senior RCMP officers absolutely must understand the dynamic in the regions.

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We run into the following type of question of interpretation. The Commissioner of the RCMP appeared before the committee and said that the deployment of police forces is his sole responsibility. It is his decision and no one else's. Not everyone agrees with him.

As elected officials in a region, we would not ask the commissioner to get involved in one particular case or another or to investigate a certain location. However, when it comes to the deployment of police forces, we, as elected officials, our committee, our House of Commons, have a say.

I want to come back to one of the points raised by my colleague, the issue of financial resources. The Commissioner of the RCMP assured us that it was not even a question of money, but a question of how things are done, according to his philosophy. He said he had enough money in his budget and that it was more a philosophical issue.

With his philosophy of assigning 15 police officers to the same case, in the same location, when in the past one officer handled 15 cases, I wonder where things are headed. We are heading toward an absence of police officers in the regions and it is the people living in the regions who will be penalized.

Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am rising to address this important issue for several reasons. First, I think we should congratulate and thank the hon. member for Brome—Missisquoi, who worked tirelessly on this issue. Of course, this is not a partisan issue. I was pleased to see the Bloc Québécois use an opposition day to debate it.

Policing and civil protection are not partisan issues. The role of this Parliament is to ask real questions from time to time and not to engage in petty politics or procedural wrangling, as the Conservative member likes to do.

I also want to speak as a former Minister of Citizenship and Immigration. Following the events of September 11, I wanted to implement an approach that would strike a balance between openness and vigilance. Of course, Canada is a very open country. It is a land that welcomes immigrants. However, we must also have the tools to protect our fellow citizens. This protection is provided through constant presence and work, particularly at ports of entry.

I must admit that when I look at the list of affected municipalities, namely Baie-Comeau, Coaticook, Granby, Îles-de-la-Madeleine, Joliette, Lac-Mégantic, Rivière-du-Loup, Roberval and Saint-Hyacinthe, I really wonder.

I am the member for Bourassa. I have been living in Montréal-Nord for 33 years, but I am also a native of the region of Joliette. Joliette had an RCMP detachment from 1949 on, and it did an exceptional job, particularly in the fight against organized crime and biker gangs. It definitely played a critical role in the protection of our fellow citizens.

I have a great deal of respect for the RCMP. In my role as special advisor for Haiti, I was able to see that the RCMP did a tremendous job at the international level, as it does, in some respects, at the regional and provincial levels. However, I fundamentally disagree with the minister, who thinks that we should adhere strictly to what the commissioner wants, and who says that if this is what the commissioner wants, then it must be good.

Commissioner Zaccardelli is a person who has accomplished a great deal for the RCMP, and an extremely competent one as well. But, philosophically, I do not agree with him on this issue. I think that, when it comes to crime solving, visibility and presence are essential. One needs only look at how huge Canada is. Naturally, as Mayor Guy Racine said, as we reduce our presence, organized crime will look for the weak link. In that sense, it is important and essential to be able to play our part in the field.

Many organizations and individuals are not pleased with this decision. We are talking about not only members of Parliament, and there are many of both sides of this House, but also, as my hon. colleague from Brome—Missisquoi indicated earlier, former colleagues of ours, like Diane Jacques, David Price and Gérard Binet, who have worked relentlessly on this issue. We are also talking about the mayors of the nine cities concerned, the prefects of the RCMs—because the RCMs of Brome—Missisquoi and Maskoutains are also affected—the Association des policiers provinciaux, the Fédération des policiers et policières municipaux du Québec, the Fraternité des policiers de la Montérégie as well as the Association de la Gendarmerie Royale du Canada au Québec. I think that we have to ask ourselves questions. It is not just a labour-management conflict. We are talking about people, the men and women who have worked in the field and who have to face what is going on on a daily basis. In our quest to protect our fellow citizens, it is essential that we consider this.

I agree with my hon. colleague from Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup. This House does have a duty to take a stand and it has to send a message to our government. We may not always agree philosophically but everyone in this place, including the government, of which I was part at one time, is working for the well-being of our fellow citizens.

There are important moments in politics when Parliament, this seat of democracy, must take a stand.

• (1035)

We must stand firm to launch this debate on the entire concept of vigilance.

After the events of September 11, billions and billions of dollars were invested in protecting entry points, for example. A great deal of effort was put into legislative reorganization in order to ensure they were well protected. The strength and ability of this country and this government lie in always striking a balance.

There must be justice, and justice must be seen to be done. I sincerely believe that we need to reconsider this aspect. There are, of course, several different schools of thought on this. Some would like to see all our resources concentrated in Drummondville, working on certain other aspects, but ready to be present in case of need. The reality is quite different, however. Suppose someone grows marijuana in this or that region, out on some rural route in St. Something or Other, or some very isolated spot. Simply because it takes so long to get to the spot, it becomes impossible to collect evidence.

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In my opinion, the role of the RCMP needs to be redefined. I would go still further and say that it is time the international aspect is also addressed. A great deal of resources have been invested in protection, billions of dollars. The RCMP needs to play a specific role internationally, but not at the expense of certain regions. The RCMP does its job in the field; we have no problem with that. Not only are they competent and upstanding, but they are also characterized by a professional conscience that does them credit.

Second, resources need to be redefined, and the tools created for such things as an international branch of the RCMP.

If one of these restructuring operations is not carried out at the expense of the other, we will never again be able to use the same excuse, or adopt the same philosophy, of the necessity to reorganize for improved performance, particularly where computer crime is concerned. There is one reality that remains, however: if there is one weak link in the chain, the first thing organized crime will do is to infiltrate it and take advantage of it.

I am aware of the extremely hard work put into this by my colleague from Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot. He has, moreover, been subject to threats as a result. This is indeed an important element.

Today what we do not need is any flag waving, any procedural games, any party politics. We all need to join together in order to tell our government that it needs to reconsider this. That is why I move:

That this question be now put.

• (1040)

The Deputy Speaker: The motion is that this question be now put. Resuming debate.

The hon. member for Shefford.

Mr. Robert Vincent (Shefford, BQ): Mr. Speaker, both sides of the House agree that these RCMP detachments should remain open. The minister is the only one who needs convincing. Until she is convinced, nothing more can be done. The commissioner is not the one making the decision, it is the minister. According to various sections of the legislation, she is the only person with that authority.

We can talk about it all day, but if the minister cannot be convinced, then nothing will change. If anyone should lobby someone, it is the Liberals who need to lobby the minister.

I support my colleague's proposal. I attended the same four meetings of the Standing Committee on Justice, Human Rights, Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness that he did.

I want to ask him the following question: does the minister agree with the committee?

Hon. Denis Coderre: Mr. Speaker, I note the member's enthusiasm but we have been working on this file for quite some time. It is not new to us. That is why I moved we vote on this immediately. We did, and I assure the House that various decisions were not made simply because the Liberals on this side of the House worked toward that end.

I agree with the member for Shefford. Parliament needs to send a message. I believe in the minister's sincerity, integrity and good faith. I may disagree—and this is inherent to politics—with some aspects

of her positions. The fact that Parliament may make such a decision will send a clear message.

I agree with him that this need not take all day. That is why I moved the previous question, so that we could vote on it and send this message as unanimously as possible.

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased with the responses given by the hon. Liberal members, especially the last one. However, I would like more details from the hon. member. In recent months, Parliament has made decisions, which the government has not implemented, because it is in a minority position. The gap between what Liberal members say and what the government decides is often very wide.

Given that the hon. member said work was being done by the Liberals, and with respect to the government's practice, may we expect a change and may we expect the government to finally implement Parliament's decisions?

• (1045)

Hon. Denis Coderre: Mr. Speaker, my colleague is still new to this Parliament and is today slipping into a somewhat facile view of matters. He is trying to give the question a partisan spin.

I would say, quite simply, that we have work to do as members. We do not want to put a spin on things, as such. My colleague from Brome—Missisquoi began the debate. I congratulated the Bloc on having an opposition day on this issue. My colleagues from Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup and Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot worked on it. Today is not the day to get into petty politicking.

We must remain on course. Today, we presented a motion in this regard, because I think we have to work together and send this message. The fact that so many organizations, mayors and associations, even from within the RCMP, agree, tells me that we should all pitch in and not get into petty politicking.

Mr. Yvan Loubier (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise to speak about this subject, which has been very important, I think, for a number of years. As my colleague from Bourassa said, the debate did not begin last year but nearly eight years ago. It was eight years ago that the RCMP's first announcements about rationalization were made. That is why I have been opposed to such closings ever since.

There has been quite a story in my region in connection with my opposition to the closing. Farmers and others have written letters to me and have come to see me and say that they had been warning the government for eight years about the RCMP's intentions. They told me that the RCMP detachments must not be closed because that would make way for organized crime, which would continue to squat on their farmlands and produce illicit cannabis.

This was news eight years ago because no one was talking about the problem. Even I, as the chief economist of the UPA for seven or eight years, had never heard about organized crime squatting on farmland and intimidating farm families.

I might mention in passing that I am going to share my time with the member for Mégantic—L'Érable.

So what came out of the debate about the RCMP's intentions was real news eight years ago. That was when the debate and the discovery of the problem really started. The arguments then were the same as now. When you close a storefront or an RCMP detachment in a problem region, as Saint-Hyacinthe was a few years ago, you deprive yourself of an instrument for fighting organized crime.

Now that instrument has been eliminated and an opportunity has therefore been left for organized crime, because the Saint-Hyacinthe office was quietly closed down. Last January 1, as a matter of fact, when everyone was celebrating the New Year, the RCMP deemed itself above Parliament, above the members, and above the consensus of all the political parties and quietly closed the Saint-Hyacinthe RCMP detachment. This is serious. People were saying at the same time that detachments should not be closed because there were problems with drug trafficking.

Four years ago, to address once again the rumour that the detachment would close, the people of Saint-Hyacinthe-Bagot decided to set up an Infocrime citizens committee. It promoted a simple hotline number, 1-800-711-1800 for people to use to report crimes, threats made by organized crime, and the presence of marijuana plants in the fields and woods. The citizens decided to take charge and boost their preventive activities—especially among children—not only in terms of consumption, but also in terms of the henchmen used by criminal groups for planting and harvesting marijuana, especially in September and October.

This is a recent phenomenon and it is quite serious. In September, when criminals harvest cannabis in fields and woods, there is a very high rate of absenteeism in the region's schools. Why? Police have been monitoring this for a while now. Apparently, children are hired by henchmen of the South chapter, a Hells Angels associate, to harvest cannabis in the fields. Children aged 13 or 14 are being offered exorbitant wages to work for these bastards, to associate with organized crime, and, at such an early age, to establish ties with henchmen of the Hells Angels or any other criminal group. This is serious. Imagine what that feels like, at a time when detachments are being closed.

Not so long ago I heard Commissioner Bourduas say that it was not the role of the RCMP to hunt down luxury gardeners. I do not know if he still feels the same way after the unfortunate events in Alberta where three police officers were killed by a drug trafficker. I do not know if he is still of the same opinion, but I am starting to have a very bad opinion of him, especially for closing the RCMP detachment on January 1, despite the fact that all parties on the Standing Committee on Justice, Human Rights, Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness—remember, committees are an extension of the House of Commons—had agreed that the RCMP offices would not close their doors.

• (1050)

The RCMP feels it is above Parliament. It is making exactly the same mistake as the CIA did. I do not know if you followed the investigations after September 11, 2001, but the CIA was rightly faulted for having concentrated its operations in major capitals and

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not keeping its ear to the ground out in the field, which might have prevented these tragic events.

The RCMP is doing the same. It might be asked at some point what its role is. It no longer deals with drug dealers, borders, luxury gardeners as Commissioner Borduas called them, although these are the worst criminals and connected with well organized rings. What does it deal with? That is what needs to be asked.

I feel this is a bad decision. The four parties cannot agree on reopening the RCMP detachments without providing them with sufficient manpower to carry out investigations. They are talking about a critical mass of eight investigators. We cannot all be wrong.

Commissioners Borduas and Zaccardelli cannot know the truth. There is a kind of malaise somewhere if the Canada-wide police force is making decisions that run counter to the decisions made by Parliament. There is always a limit. The Minister of Public Safety and Civil Preparedness also believes she is above Parliament. She says all of us here are wrong, that we have no reason to be concerned, when a tool against organized crime has just been taken away from rural areas where the nearest neighbour may be 2 or 3 kms away. According to her, all of us are wrong.

What kind of Parliament are we sitting in? What is the government thinking, with such a disaster for our regions about to happen. There was rationalization carried out in Ontario. Now go ask the people in rural areas, particularly in northern Ontario, if they are pleased with that. RCMP operations were centralized in major centres and they are no longer able to respond to calls in outlying regions.

A tremendous effort has been made in my riding, Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot. People took things in hand, as citizens. On the Infocrime committee, there are farmers, municipal representatives and young people working with those who have narcotics problems, for example. Police representatives also volunteer to help the community carry on its own fight against organized crime.

When one has the kind of success that has been seen over the last four years with Infocrime, using all the tools such as Infocrime, the Sûreté du Québec and the RCMP to fight drug traffickers, and one gets a decision like this, it is very frustrating.

A consensus among the political parties on a question as basic as this must necessarily have an effect. We must ensure that the RCMP opens its detachments—or keeps them open in the case of those that have not been closed yet—and gives them enough resources to help the Sûreté du Québec, in particular, fight organized crime.

Having been involved in the drug-trafficking issue for eight years and having experienced intimidation, along with my family, I think that one thing must be kept in mind. If we send a signal to organized crime that we are going to ease up, it will return. We must remain eternally vigilant.

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In my riding, we have succeeded in improving things quite a bit in the last two years, so much that there were hardly any more cannabis patches to be seen by someone flying over the region. Seven years ago, it was unbelievable. There was not a field that had not been squatted on, with 1,000 or 2,000 plants per field. There was not a single farm family that had not been intimidated and seriously threatened by organized crime for daring to contact the police.

Things have improved. But production has moved on—to the Eastern Townships in particular—my colleague from Brome—Missisquoi mentioned that—and also to the Centre-du-Québec region. The citizens have to take things in hand too. They cannot be deprived of tools like the decentralized RCMP detachments with investigators. These detachments make the connection between the local networks and the national or international networks. The surveillance they do complements their work with the Sûreté du Québec and is a major contribution.

I demand that the RCMP reopen the detachments that it has already closed and give them enough resources. I also demand that the minister assume her responsibilities and respond favourably to a consensus of Parliament.

•(1055)

Mr. Marc Boulianne (Mégantic—L'Érable, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am extremely pleased to take part in this debate today. First, I want to congratulate my colleague from Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot for his excellent summary of this problem.

Closing these RCMP detachments, including the one in Lac-Mégantic, is unacceptable. The latter is a strategic border station that is currently open. We need only read the newspapers from about two weeks ago to hear of the arrests in the riding of Mégantic—L'Érable. There was one raid, but how many people have managed to cross since the closure of this detachment was announced?

If there is an emergency in Lac-Mégantic, police from Sherbrooke or Saint-Georges de Beauce are called to the scene. This important presence is gone. Earlier, someone mentioned deterrents, for example, or interventions. This is the government's responsibility. Clearly, the RCMP bears some of the responsibility, but the government has led the way in abandoning the regions. This is evident at every turn. The regions are affected by these problems, be it in terms of economic impact or job creation. At present, the Bloc Québécois is the only party truly defending the regions, including in this instance. We are getting support from other MPs who have realized how serious this situation is.

We are told this is the result of a reorganization. We are told that reorganizing, as is being done to some extent in all areas, is essential. I agree with my colleague from Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot: a serious mistake was made in the aftermath of September 11. In fact, a steady increase in the smuggling of drugs and firearms was seen at that time.

In the name of this reorganization, we continue to forget this event, particularly at a time when, for example, the RCMP needs to conduct preventive patrols—we talked about prevention earlier—along the border and respond to emergencies involving customs or immigration officers. As I said earlier, when we deploy our resources

hundreds of kilometres from the border, 100 km in the case of Lac-Mégantic, it becomes clear that these officers will not be able to do their jobs properly.

The consequences are obvious: the RCMP will lose not only its ability to respond rapidly when needed, but also its familiarity with the terrain, which is essential to fighting crime. Surveillance of this territory and the border area means being able to respond. Problems with drugs and organized crime will not be resolved by calling Sherbrooke or Saint-Georges de Beauce. This would make the criminals' job much easier.

Those happiest at the closure of the Lac-Mégantic detachment, housed in its brand new building, were the members of organized crime. Now they could freely ply their smuggling trade without interference from the RCMP.

Even if the police from Sherbrooke or Saint-Georges are asked to intervene, they have other concerns. That is what they told us. They are concerned with international crime. They cannot just drop things and come. So it is heyday time.

Under this approach, the RCMP will lose its regional presence, so vital in the fight against organized crime and in ensuring public safety. People can sleep in peace and attend to their business when they feel the protection of a police presence. Its dissuasive effect can be felt. We therefore think it is a mistake to take this approach.

The second mistake is the lack of transition. From one day to the next, we learn in the papers that detachments are being closed, that the key is being turned in the lock, just like that. What is the transition period? The criminals have no transition period and operate daily. So something vital is lost.

•(1100)

There were protests in our riding. For example, I received a letter from the mayor of Lac-Mégantic. I will read from it. She was offended to learn of the cavalier closing of the RCMP detachment in the *Tribune* the day before. Imagine. The town council learned from the *Tribune* that its RCMP detachment had closed.

Once again, the consultation process fell by the wayside. It is all very well to say it had become obligatory. I quote the mayor again, because hers is an important role in the municipality. She is its democratic spokesperson. She said:

I am deeply distressed at the way we were treated, at the way our requests were treated. We made many presentations. There were coalitions of MPs. We were practically guaranteed this detachment's future before the election. And here they take our services away. It is appalling.

As an MP, and as part of the coalition, I support the following arguments, which she added and which warrant mention:

We argued for the protection of the nearby U.S. border and of our residents.

The business handled by the RCMP includes the war on terrorism. That is an important activity and it has to be conducted in the field. As far as drugs are concerned, over the past year, while some arrests were made, trafficking continues. Other areas of responsibility include organized crime, customs, immigration, and so on. Our region is poorly considered and poorly protected. It is imperative that this detachment, as well as the others that were closed, be reopened to ensure the protection of society and its citizens.

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I was a member of the coalition of MPs. In October, I wrote the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness a letter outlining these arguments. I told her this was a serious mistake, that we had responsibilities to uphold, and that, as a minister, she was responsible for ensuring the safety and protection of the people of Lac-Mégantic as well as that of people elsewhere. I also told her in my letter that the RCMP presence not only acted as a disincentive but also played a vital role in combating crime. Indeed, we can see organized crime taking root locally.

I have not received any specific answer. The minister's catch-all answer, however, was to maintain that this was how her organization worked and that restructuring would be taking place with respect to safety.

There is therefore a serious problem in this respect, in Lac-Mégantic as elsewhere. I too support the motion, but results have to be achieved. Earlier, my colleague asked what role the minister and the Prime Minister play. Mayors got involved, motions were passed, but we are no further ahead, the reason being that other interests are at stake. The minister, like the Prime Minister, is not making a decision on the matter.

I said earlier and I repeat: what is at stake is the protection of the regions and of citizens. We get the impression that the RCMP is complicit in these political decisions. We must not sit back; we must fight. A victory is absolutely necessary in terms of the reopening of the RCMP detachments that were closed across the regions of Quebec, including the one in Lac-Mégantic.

• (1105)

Hon. Denis Paradis (Brome—Missisquoi, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, first, I want to commend the hon. member for Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot. Earlier he mentioned that his region was making real progress. Although progress is being made, RCMP presence is still needed to maintain the positive results. It is important to see police officers and for them to be located in the area.

I also want to commend the former member for Mégantic—L'Érable, Mr. Binet, as well as the new member, who is picking up where Mr. Binet left off. The hon. member for Mégantic—L'Érable mentioned a few points. In the mayors' report, the proximity of the Canada-U.S. border was mentioned—31 km—and the redeployment of RCMP officers to Sherbrooke—130 km from Lac-Mégantic—and to Saint-Georges de Beauce—110 km from Lac-Mégantic. Police officers will no longer be able to do a regular preventive patrol along the border.

The Canada-U.S. border extends 171 km along Maine and New Hampshire. We are talking about quick intervention. I think the hon. member for Mégantic—L'Érable is right to raise the issue of distance. At any given time, it will be practically impossible for RCMP officers to respond to anything they would normally be able to respond to from a local detachment.

I would like to take this opportunity to join my colleague in congratulating the mayor of Lac-Mégantic. I have met her on several occasions. She is extremely involved in this issue and works very actively with all the mayors from the other towns affected by these detachment closures.

In this debate in committee, we also heard from customs officers. They told us that working in a customs office without this support made the situation pretty much impossible. Customs officers made a suggestion to the committee. If the RCMP is not so present locally, then perhaps it would be appropriate to train mobile border patrol teams that would go from one border point to another to cover all the points between them.

I want to know whether the hon. member has any comments on the possible creation of mobile border patrol units like they have in the United States.

Mr. Marc Boulianne: Mr. Speaker, I think that the first thing that needs doing is to reopen the RCMP detachments and see that they operate efficiently. If there is any reorganization, it can be along the lines the hon. member has set out. Care must be taken, however, to ensure there is efficiency and that a joint operation between Customs and the RCMP is possible.

[*English*]

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Niagara Falls, CPC): Mr. Speaker, ostensibly this is about the fourth report of the Standing Committee on Justice, Human Rights, Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness. The report recommends to the government that the RCMP keep open nine detachments in the province of Quebec. These closings were an issue in hearings before that committee. The report urges the government, presumably, to provide the resources to the RCMP to allow those detachments to remain open.

It is interesting. If we check it out, the sixth report is a reminder to the government that it has done nothing about the fourth report. Members can draw their own conclusions about how serious the government is. It is curious that a government member has brought forward, in the matter of two separate reports, this concurrence motion.

Unless anyone is confused as to why this is taking place, the reason is very simple. The member for Brome—Missisquoi said that he wanted a democratic debate. He only recently has come to this conversion that this is an important item. I can tell members what is really going on here. The Liberals are trying to stall the concurrence motion of the member for Prince George—Peace River, which is a non-confidence motion in the government. According to the rules, we can only have one concurrence motion a day. By moving these concurrence motions each day and by talking more about these things, the longer it will be before they get to the motion of non-confidence in the government. Despite efforts by the government to forestall this and its new partner in marriage, the NDP, the day will come when this chamber will get to decide on these things. It is all about that.

With respect to the report, I am pleased to talk a bit about the whole question of government resources, specifically as it relates to the RCMP. It is a question of money, resources and commitment by the government and its partner in marriage as to what and how government money should be spent.

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I believe it should be spent on things like the RCMP. This is a worthwhile expenditure. I want to see not less effort directed by Parliament but more effort directed toward the RCMP and other security agencies in the country. I would be very upset if there were any plan by the government to close the RCMP detachment in my riding, the region of Niagara. I have said for some time and I have urged the Deputy Prime Minister to spend more time and effort in the area of security, not less. There should be quite a bit more. I would be among those who are concerned with this.

I can understand when hon. members say that it is going in the opposite direction. That is not where the world is going. The world has become a much more dangerous place and we need security more than we needed 10 years ago. It seems to me this is a step in the wrong direction.

I have made the suggestion to the Deputy Prime Minister and I urge her to have a look at the whole question of security. In my case and across the country, it is a question of our borders. We are not doing enough. If we sit down with employees at the borders or if we sit down with police forces across the country, they will tell us the same thing. They would like to see a higher level of commitment at the national level. However, that is not happening and this report draws attention to that.

What makes me feel very bad about this is we still do not see any remedy to this coming from the government or its partner in marriage, the NDP. Indeed, a member of the press asked me this morning about the NDP budget and I said that I had not seen it. In fact, we have had very few details of the whole marriage between the NDP and the Liberals. I suppose we can leave it to our imagination as to what took place between the two of them.

• (1110)

One of my colleagues said that the marriage would have been conducted according to Bill C-38. I guess that goes without saying. I was not there. I have not heard the reports. I suppose Bob Rae was there to give away the bride to make it complete. I have no doubt that there would have been lots of toasts, besides the obligatory toasts to Socialist International. I suppose every toast was about more spending. All the toasts would have been about more spending.

However, in all that spending was there any money or any talk of more money for security or the RCMP? I would bet there was not. My bet is that in all those toasts there would not be any money.

I have no doubt that all the toasts would have been using foreign wine. I know those two parties do not care about the Canadian wine industry. In all the billions of dollars that the government has spent I have not seen one mention that it will go ahead and remove the excise tax for the Canadian wine industry. That would not be a huge amount in terms of the money that gets blown. There would be no mention of that.

I imagine that at the marriage of the two parties all foreign wine would have been used. Obviously they do not care about Canadian wine, as they do not care about a lot of issues. The question of security is just another example.

This is disappointing to me. It seems to me that when the government and its partners do not concentrate on security for this country or worry about where the money is being spent, then if the

money is being blown, wasted or disappears into the black hole of corruption, there is no money for the important things in this country such as security.

I ask the two partners in this alliance to wake up to some of these things and re-evaluate where they are going. They must call to account the kind of corruption that takes place and recognize that billions of dollars were wasted or blown by this government.

The government wasted \$2 billion on the firearms registry alone. When the government and the NDP got together, did anyone say that the gun registry would be a great way to save money? Did they recognize that they had lost money? Imagine what \$2 billion could have done for the RCMP detachments across this country. They could have surely used that money. That \$2 billion would be a tremendous help in my riding of Niagara Falls for security issues. That money is never spent on security.

Mr. Ouellet had \$2 million worth of entertainment expenses with no receipts. What is \$2 million? That could have helped security issues. That would be a better expenditure of the \$2 million.

Day after day in the House of Commons, do we see these issues raised? Certainly not by the NDP. Members can check *Hansard* and they would see that day after day in question period the NDP was not raising issues such as spending money on national security. Did the NDP raise questions about corruption? No. The NDP talked about the United States and it talked about George Bush. That is right, it was not the province of Ontario. The NDP was not talking about problems with cities. It was not talking about issues that I think concern a lot of Canadians as to where and how their money was being spent. The NDP was not talking about corruption. It was talking about the United States.

For a long time I said that I could not figure out where the NDP members were coming from. Even among their own priorities, even if it is not national security, within their own priorities, would they not be better off taking the government to account for this corruption, for the things that they would want to spend money on, even if it is not those recommended in the fourth report?

Then I finally figured it out. The reason why the NDP members were not as upset as those of us in the Conservative Party and Canadians were about that kind of corruption is because if they attack that they were indirectly attacking big government. That is the whole thing. The problem with the Liberal Party is that, as a government, it is involved with everything and every aspect of our lives. It is fixing it, pulling it, subsidizing it, providing kickbacks, commissions, payoffs, phoney contracts, and phony invoices.

• (1115)

That is what it was all about. However, that is just a byproduct of big government. There could be some problems with big government, but I really think that is the reason. I think that is the reason why they never twigged on to it. What is fascinating about their latest marriage is that they voted against the first budget and then when the news about corruption got really bad, that is when they joined. They said, "We had better get together with you guys. This is really looking bad now. We had no idea of this level of corruption".

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Instead of worrying about some of the important issues like border security, the RCMP and some of the other issues, they have signed on with each other in an orgy of spending. It is hundreds of millions of dollars every single day and it will never end of course until we end this coalition. That day will come.

I can tell the member for Brome—Missisquoi that if he is worried about questions like security, a Conservative government will make this a priority. Finally, Canadians will get a government for which this will be a priority, not paying off its friends. This is not going to be a priority for this government. That will come to an end with a Conservative government. We will not be relying, as takes place now, on the local police forces having to pick up the slack, having to pick up the gap between what the Government of Canada thinks is enough for the security of the country and what the country really needs. That day will come to an end when we have a new government in the country and I think it is coming soon.

It is interesting that a government member now is bringing forward this motion. Who knows, we may see the sixth report which is a reminder that the fourth report has not been concurred in.

I urge the hon. member to go home, make sure he lets all his constituents know that the government is not spending money where it is supposed to be spending. It is spending money on the wrong things, as is evidenced by the sworn testimony before the Gomery commission, the sworn testimony that we hear at the public accounts committee, and all the other information outside of these reports that are coming to light. He should tell his constituents that instead of spending money on the right things, he is now part of a group joined by the socialists to spend money and to allow this corruption to continue.

It is a very sad thing, but we will deal with it. I think that day is coming and it is coming very soon when Canadians are going to get their opportunity to pass judgment on the way the government has wasted money.

● (1120)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Denis Paradis (Brome—Missisquoi, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for Niagara Falls for some of his comments. Judging overall, I sense that we can expect support, not only from him, but from his colleagues as well.

Since the hon. member has had a great deal to say about marriage, there is one marriage I always find astounding. Hon. members will recall the marriage of the Alliance, there was the Reform Party and now the Conservatives. It is not so much the marriage as the engagement that disturbs me. The Conservatives are in such a hurry to have an election that they are prepared to propose marriage to just about anybody.

At the present time, the Conservative Party is wooing, and definitely going to get engaged to, the Bloc Québécois. The two of them have joined together to get an election called as soon as possible. The Conservatives say the agreement is not that bad; it will leave Quebec to the Bloc Québécois and try to gain votes elsewhere. I think that such an arrangement is rather sad, whether it is an engagement or a marriage, we do not know yet how far the relationship has progressed.

As for the RCMP, my colleague has raised the money issue. Several times in committee the commissioner told us that it was not a matter of money, that things were fine from the financial point of view, that he had enough money to do everything he wanted. He said that it was more a matter of changing mindsets. That it was a matter of moving people who were in the regions somewhere else. The commissioner said this would be more effective. I have some trouble with that concept of greater effectiveness.

According to them it is not a matter of money but of effectiveness, and I challenge that.

● (1125)

[*English*]

Hon. Rob Nicholson: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member raised a number of points. He thanked me and said he was pleased about some of the things I said. I suggest that he should be happy about everything I said. Everything was correct and everything was according to the truth.

He made a couple of interesting points. I do not know if I quite got it. He talked about some sort of a marriage with the Bloc. I assume he is talking about the Prime Minister and the Minister of Transport. Is that what he is talking about? I remember the Minister of Transport being one of the founders of the Bloc Québécois and now he sits beside the Prime Minister. I was talking about, in the general context, the marriage of the NDP and the Liberals, but if he wants to talk about that marriage, then he is certainly welcome to do that because I see it every day from where I sit in the House of Commons. I think he said something about the next election, that the separatists are in a hurry to have the next election.

The choice is not, in Quebec, between separatism and corruption of the Liberal Party. There is another alternative and, of course, that is the Conservative Party of Canada. He should tell those people in his constituency that if they believe in federalism say, yes, the Liberal Party has screwed up, yes, it is corrupt, but that there is another alternative, a clean alternative that supports federalism in this country, and that is the Conservative Party. He should say that it is not just a question between separatism and corruption, there is another federalist option. I have every confidence that we will be moving in that direction.

He now says it is not a question of money. Good heavens, does he mean the government has the money but does not want to commit to national security? At least I gave him the benefit of the doubt. I said maybe the government is just not giving enough cash and it has overlooked that there is not enough money. Now he says it is not about money. I hate to think that, I really do. It is very wrong. Again, and I have said this a number of times, it is a question of misplaced priorities. Security for this country has to be one of the number one concerns of this country. That is what a Conservative government would do.

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Mr. Richard Harris (Cariboo—Prince George, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want a clarification from the hon. member for Niagara Falls. In the preceding two weeks up to the time the deal with the devil was made between the socialists and minority Liberals, am I not correct in understanding that the socialist NDP voted twice against the budget to bring down the very party that it has now climbed into bed with? Have the NDP members not actually said to the Liberals, "Okay, we know that you are corrupt. We know that you are a bad government. But if you pay us off, we will climb into bed with you?" That is something like political prostitution. Is it correct to say that?

Hon. Roy Cullen: Mr. Speaker, on a point of order, I do not see the relevance of this point. We are dealing with a motion having to do with the RCMP C Division closures. It is totally irrelevant, what the member just said.

The Deputy Speaker: I urge all members to be relevant. There was some discussion in the previous question about coalitions and different things. Perhaps an answer from the member for Niagara falls can pull it all together for us.

Hon. Rob Nicholson: Mr. Speaker, I would love to try. You are quite correct, the hon. member for Brome—Missisquoi did raise this question of coalitions and marriages,

The only point I made was that the NDP members actually opposed the Liberals until the corruption really got bad in the press. When it all became public and the worse it got, the more they started liking the Liberals. Go figure that one out. In any case, I cannot figure it out. When somebody was asking me about the budget, I said that I would call the leader of the NDP's office this afternoon. I might as well have a few copies of it.

Talking about parliamentary procedure, I think the leader of the NDP should have read the budget into the House record. I do not agree with bringing in a federal budget outside the House of Commons. That is not where it should be done. But again, it is a question of priorities. I urge, even at this point, this Liberal-NDP coalition to start putting money into security. That is what this country needs right now.

• (1130)

Hon. Roy Cullen (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I guess the member for Niagara Falls has not been reading the budgets, because if he had been, he would know that this government has invested over \$9 billion in public safety and security initiatives since 9/11. In fact, in budget 2005, if the members opposite would support it, there would be even more money for public security and the RCMP.

I want to raise the point that the members opposite severely miscast what this discussion is about. Those members are calling for the Parliament of Canada and a standing committee of Parliament to run the day to day affairs of the RCMP. This is not how it works. Parliament enacted the RCMP legislation, which gives the commissioner of the RCMP the authority to deal with the operational decisions of the RCMP, and that is what this is: when some detachments are closed to bring in a critical mass of officers so we can fight more effectively against organized crime and terrorism without having scattered little operations that have no impact.

This is what this is about. The commissioner of the RCMP came to the committee and spoke many times about why this was required for operational reasons to make Quebec and Canadians safer. That is exactly what he said, so how can the members opposite now become the instant experts on security and law enforcement? That is my question.

Hon. Rob Nicholson: Mr. Speaker, that is a fascinating and interesting comment from the member. He said that these are "scattered little operations" with "no impact". I reject that categorically. I hope he is not referring to the detachment in the region of Niagara. I am surprised that he would be referring to those detachments as "scattered little operations" with "no impact". That is an insult to all the hard-working RCMP members. This is exactly what we are talking about: this lack of concern and a lack of appreciation for what they are doing. As for the idea that they could have had even more money for security but for the Conservatives and the opposition, as he said, it is absolutely ridiculous.

When is this government going to get out of the habit of blaming everyone else for its problems? The other day the Minister of National Revenue blamed the premier of Ontario for contributing to separatism; not Liberal corruption in Quebec but the premier of Ontario is to blame. For heaven's sake, he is in the member's political party. Okay, I appreciate that all the mess and the Gomery commission were made by members of the Liberal Party, but now they are going to tie in the premier of Ontario? They should get it straight, take responsibility for these things and quit insulting members of the RCMP.

Mrs. Bev Desjarlais (Churchill, NDP): Mr. Speaker, this is obviously a very interesting topic of discussion and it seems to take in a broad spectrum of interest for Canadians.

I will start by talking about the motion before us, which is specific to C division and the detachments in Quebec. There is no question that there is an absolute concern when RCMP detachments are closed. I am sure that in Quebec, as well as throughout Canada and in my riding, people speak very highly of the RCMP. I have met with people in a number of smaller communities who say that the number one thing to help deter crime is an RCMP detachment in the community.

Just having a detachment there is a deterrent to crime. I have had people tell me that when I go door to door. They say that everything else we can do sounds wonderful, but putting in a detachment with some officers is in itself a deterrent. I have communities in my riding where the nearest RCMP detachment can be two hours or three hours away, where one has to get in by air, and that does create problems.

The parliamentary secretary for the minister has indicated that it is up to the RCMP to decide where the detachments go, that it is up to the commissioner. That is fair enough, but there is no question that the funding for the RCMP has a direct impact on whether or not those detachments can be put in place.

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I have met with the RCMP in my area about these issues, and I am sure this is what happened in Quebec with the detachments being closed. They are told that the force has only so many officers to move around and they have to try to cover a larger territory. That is because there is not enough funding. There is no question about it: there needs to be an increase in funding. If we were to put those dollars into the RCMP there probably would be less crime, but certainly if it were to happen the officers would be there to deal with it.

I do not believe for one second that there is any member in the House who does not recognize the importance of the RCMP and who does not recognize the experience, the respectability and credibility of RCMP members. We have a lot of different police forces in the country. They all work very hard to do what they are intended to do, but there is no question that as a national police force the RCMP is a good representative of Canada.

Quite frankly, and I do not mean to ruffle the feathers of my colleagues from the Bloc with this statement, the government would have been far better off to put dollars into the RCMP in Quebec than into the ad scam for unity that it tried. The government would have been far better off to support Canadian entities instead of putting money into ad scams to get money into the pockets of Liberals with the argument that somehow it would be protecting Canada's unity. That was a totally wrong way to look at it.

I will mention another area in which the government could have done the same thing: Canada Post. Small rural post offices are being closed all over Canada and the government is saying that Canada Post is a separate body, it does what it wants and it is out to make a profit. The reality is that the post office is often a central point in the community and it is a representation of Canada, of something that is there for all Canadians. All those rural areas are losing out because this government is not focused on what it should be doing in providing benefits and services to all regions of the country.

The government used the argument of unity in regard to having to put money into the scandals in Quebec, but the reality was that the government wanted the money to get into the pockets of Liberals. That is the reality. I am just saying it could have done things a lot differently. If we were to believe even for one second in the government's argument for unity, the government would have been far better off putting that money into services for all Canadians, into Canada Post, the RCMP and other bodies that are there to provide services for Canadians.

• (1135)

I indicated earlier that the discussion seemed to be going off into a lot of other topics and I cannot help but comment on some that were brought up, specifically, the changes in the budget. In all fairness, I think, it should be reflected that initially the New Democratic Party was not supporting the budget. We were not supporting it and all the Conservatives were. By their silence on the budget, they were supporting it. They were supporting it because it gave huge tax breaks.

However, it did not do anything for the rest of Canada. There were no additional dollars for affordable housing. There were no improvements for student tuition and education. There were no dollars going into foreign aid. Quite frankly, the Conservatives at

one point supported increased dollars going into foreign aid. That was not in the budget, even though they talked a fine line. That it was not in the budget was no big deal. It was not an issue with them.

As well, I do not think they necessarily care that dollars will be going back to the municipalities because then they will not have the argument that tax dollars are not going to municipalities. There was also no reflection in the budget of what we needed on Kyoto and the environment. Also, the Conservatives did not really care about the child care issue, so they were going to support the government's initial budget. We were not.

The New Democratic Party did not sign a deal just for New Democrats. The New Democratic Party did not make an agreement for the New Democratic Party. The New Democratic Party made an agreement for Canadians, all Canadians, not just for corporate tax cuts.

We made an agreement that is going to benefit the lives of students throughout this country, not in one region of the country but in all regions of the country. There will be improvements in tuition rates and training opportunities. We wanted more money for affordable housing for all regions of this country, not one region but all regions of this country. We did not get into a deal that was going to benefit just one sector. We made a deal on the budget and only on the budget.

Of course the corruption within the Liberals and the Liberal government and the stuff in Quebec is obscene. Of course it is obscene. That will be dealt with in good time. In the interim, we have a budget to deal with, a budget that Canadians want passed because tax dollars will go back to the municipalities. Constituents in communities in my riding have written to me saying they want to see it passed because they need those dollars.

There are numerous communities in my riding that need affordable housing. They have some of the worst housing conditions there are. Am I going to let that go if I can ensure there will be dollars for housing? And dollars for student tuition? Not a chance.

If we have to get it by coming to a deal on the budget, by ensuring that these areas are addressed for all Canadians, then we are going to do it. We are not here to play politics on this budget when we know those dollars are needed in Canada. They are needed in all those communities. That is what this is about.

• (1140)

Mr. Gary Goodyear (Cambridge, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask the hon. member for a comment. She spoke at length about why her party defended the Liberals. Of course we would like to remind Parliament that the NDP voted against the Liberal budget not very long ago. The Conservative Party members, I would like to correct the hon. member, did not support the budget by sitting on their hands. We acted responsibly, because we knew that the government could fall at that time.

Routine Proceedings

I will ask the hon. member what exactly was in this budgetary deal the New Democrats speak so highly of. What was in it for workers and the agricultural community? In their effort to get foreign aid, they forgot to ensure that countries like Haiti received foreign aid. I ask the hon. member what exactly the New Democrats were thinking when they shook hands with a party that never fulfills its promises, so to speak. And what was in the agreement for Atlantic Canada?

Mrs. Bev Desjarlais: Mr. Speaker, I cannot help but note that this same member just stated that the Conservatives went along with the budget because they did not want the government to fall at that time. It was but a few minutes ago that the member for Niagara Falls said that the NDP waited until the corruption got worse and then supported the government. Those are two different stories from the same party.

Either you should have gotten rid of the government before because the corruption was so bad, when you supported the budget. At least be—

The Deputy Speaker: If the member would address her remarks to the Chair, it would be appreciated.

Mrs. Bev Desjarlais: Mr. Speaker, I apologize.

Once again we are dealing hypocrisy within a party as to how it is dealing with things.

The New Democrats will support the new budget because the government made changes. That is what Parliament is about. We get together, debate and discuss. We all acknowledge that at times discussions go on behind the scenes. We see changes and then support them. We saw changes directly reflected in the budget that are beneficial for Canadians, so we are going to support it. It is as clear and simple as that. I am not going to hide from that.

We made an agreement. If the budget follows through on what was in the agreement, we will support it. That is what integrity is about. We are trying to show Canadians that there can be integrity and honesty in Parliament. We are not going to try to Mickey Mouse words between two members in one party. Members will hear the same message coming from every New Democrat. That is not what we are hearing from the Conservatives.

Hon. Roy Cullen (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for Churchill for her comments and for the support of the NDP on the budget. It will put more money, beyond the \$9 billion I referred to earlier for public safety and national security issues, into the hands of the RCMP and the Canada Border Services Agency to deal with public safety issues. I want to clarify a couple of points that were made by the member for Churchill.

First, the commissioner of the RCMP appeared before the committee and stated very clearly that in the last five or six years the annual budget allocation for the RCMP has gone from \$2 billion a year to \$3 billion a year. There will be more in budget 2005. I wanted to clarify that point.

Second, when the commissioner of the RCMP appeared before the committee, he said that this was not about funding. He said very clearly that this was not about budget, that this was about

redeploying resources to utilize them more effectively to fight terrorism and organized crime.

He also said very clearly at the committee that this does not result in a reduction in head count with the RCMP in the province of Quebec. He was very clear and categorical on that point. Finally, he was very clear and categorical that this decision was required for the safety and security of Canadians and Quebeckers.

How can we in Parliament become instant experts on law enforcement? We have many opportunities in Parliament to deal with the RCMP through the estimates, through the budget, through the input into the Speech from the Throne, into the very parts of the Criminal Code that we enact and which the RCMP enforces.

There are many, many ways in which parliamentarians can become engaged. In fact, they engaged very clearly when they enacted the RCMP Act. It is an act of Parliament which states that the commissioner deals with the operational decisions of the RCMP. On the closure of detachments in Quebec, notwithstanding that they served a useful purpose, they had to be consolidated. That is what the RCMP commissioner said was necessary.

• (1145)

Mrs. Bev Desjarlais: Mr. Speaker, if the RCMP commissioner was given additional dollars because Parliament and the people of Canada felt there was a need to have additional RCMP officers in smaller detachments, I would be greatly surprised if he would turn that down. I would also be greatly surprised that he would not close those detachments if he saw that there was another risk somewhere else and he had to decide where he had to move those members.

The reality is, if there is a mandate given by Parliament and the government to ensure that there is representation in smaller areas of Canada, the commissioner would follow through, but we cannot give a mandate without putting the funding behind it.

There is no question there has been an increase in dollars. There is no question there has been an increase in need. There is no question there needs to be proper funding for the security services. The parliamentary secretary should think about the reality for a second. If Parliament and the government gave a mandate to maintain offices and detachments in smaller communities, and the commissioner turned that down, I would be shocked.

I am using my own riding as an example. I have gone door to door in communities. I have been told by people, "If we had a detachment, it would be a deterrent for crime. We want the RCMP here".

Mr. Richard Harris (Cariboo—Prince George, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will try to encapsulate the deal with the devil the hon. member made. The fact is that in the two weeks preceding the deal that was made, the NDP socialists voted against the government on two occasions. It was only when the corrupt Liberals promised to pay them off in some way that they agreed to support the government.

Just because the NDP got paid off does not make the government any more honest. That fact has to come out. The NDP socialists have made a deal with a dishonest and corrupt Liberal government. One has to ask the question, does this speak to the integrity of the leader of the NDP and the members of the NDP caucus when they are willing to sell out their integrity, sell out their principles in order to climb into bed with a corrupt Liberal government?

I want to make it clear that the Conservative Party was prepared to work with the government. We supported it on two occasions. It was when the Liberals tried to renege once again on the offshore oil revenue plan with Newfoundland and Labrador and Nova Scotia that we became angry at the them. That would have been the second time they had reneged on the plan and Atlantic Canadians who relied on those resources did not deserve that dishonesty from the government.

● (1150)

Mrs. Bev Desjarlais: Mr. Speaker, there is no question that nobody deserves the dishonesty that has come from the Liberal government.

The member himself said that the New Democratic Party voted against the budget before, and rightfully so, because it did not reflect areas of concern that we wanted addressed.

The member should tell the people of Canada that the NDP brokered a deal to put dollars back into the pockets of Canadians, to provide funding for education and for students' tuition, to provide for affordable housing. He should tell Canadians that the NDP is working on the Kyoto plan. He should tell Canadians that it was the NDP that brokered a deal for child care. He should tell Canadians that it was the NDP that worked out a deal to make sure the gas tax would get to the municipalities. He should be honest with Canadians and tell them that.

Hon. Raymond Simard (Parliamentary Secretary to the Deputy Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Minister responsible for Official Languages and Minister responsible for Democratic Reform, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I move:

That the debate do now adjourn.

The Deputy Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

The Deputy Speaker: All those in favour of the motion will please say yea.

Some hon. members: Yea.

The Deputy Speaker: All those opposed will please say nay.

Some hon. members: Nay.

The Deputy Speaker: In my opinion the nays have it.

And more than five members having risen:

The Deputy Speaker: Call in the members.

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● (1240)

(The House divided on the motion, which was negated on the following division:)

(Division No. 71)

YEAS

Members

Adams	Alcoek
Anderson (Victoria)	Angus
Augustine	Bagnell
Bains	Bakopanos
Barnes	Beaumier
Bélangier	Bell
Bennett	Bevilacqua
Blaikie	Blondin-Andrew
Boivin	Bonin
Boshcoff	Boudria
Bradshaw	Brison
Broadbent	Brown (Oakville)
Bulte	Cannis
Carr	Carroll
Catterall	Chamberlain
Chan	Christopherson
Coderre	Comartin
Comuzzi	Cotler
Crowder	Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley)
Cuzner	D'Amours
Davies	Desjarlais
DeVillers	Dhalla
Dion	Drouin
Dryden	Easter
Efford	Emerson
Eyking	Folco
Fontana	Frulla
Fry	Galloway
Godbout	Godfrey
Godin	Goodale
Graham	Holland
Hubbard	Ianno
Jennings	Julian
Kadis	Karetak-Lindell
Karygiannis	Lapierre (Outremont)
Lastewka	Layton
LeBlanc	Lee
Longfield	MacAulay
Macklin	Malhi
Maloney	Marleau
Martin (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca)	Martin (Winnipeg Centre)
Martin (Sault Ste. Marie)	Masse
Matthews	McCallum
McGuinty	McGuire
McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood)	McTeague
Minna	Mitchell
Murphy	Myers
Neville	O'Brien
Owen	Pacetti
Paradis	Patry
Peterson	Pettigrew
Phinney	Pickard (Chatham-Kent—Essex)
Powers	Ratansi
Redman	Regan
Robillard	Rodriguez
Rota	Saada
Savage	Savoy
Scarpaleggia	Scott
Sgro	Siksay
Silva	Simard (Saint Boniface)
Simms	Smith (Pontiac)
St. Amand	St. Denis
Steckle	Stoffer
Szabo	Telegdi
Temelkovski	Thibault (West Nova)
Tonks	Ur
Valeri	Valley
Volpe	Wappel
Wasylycia-Leis	Wilfert
Wrzesnewskyj	Zed- — 140

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NAYS

Members

Abbott	Ablonczy
Allison	Ambrose
Anders	Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands)
André	Asselin
Bachand	Batters
Bellavance	Benoit
Bergeron	Bezan
Bigras	Blais
Boire	Bonsant
Bouchard	Boulianne
Bourgeois	Breitkreuz
Brown (Leeds—Grenville)	Brunelle
Cardin	Carrie
Carrier	Casey
Casson	Chong
Clavet	Cleary
Côté	Crête
Cummins	Day
Demers	Deschamps
Desrochers	Devolin
Doyle	Duceppe
Duncan	Epp
Faille	Finley
Fitzpatrick	Fletcher
Forseth	Gagnon (Québec)
Gagnon (Saint-Maurice—Champlain)	Gagnon (Jonquière—Alma)
Gallant	Gaudet
Gauthier	Goldring
Goodyear	Gouk
Grewal (Newton—North Delta)	Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells)
Guay	Guergis
Guimond	Hanger
Harper	Harris
Harrison	Hearn
Hiebert	Hill
Hinton	Jaffer
Jean	Johnston
Kamp (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge—Mission)	Keddy (South Shore—St. Margaret's)
Kenney (Calgary Southeast)	Komarnicki
Kotto	Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings)
Laframboise	Lalonde
Lapierre (Lévis—Bellechasse)	Lauzon
Lavallée	Lemay
Lessard	Lévesque
Loubier	Lukiwski
Lunn	Lunney
MacKay (Central Nova)	Marceau
Mark	Ménard (Hochelaga)
Ménard (Marc-Aurèle-Fortin)	Menzies
Merrifield	Mills
Moore (Port Moody—Westwood—Port Coquitlam)	
Moore (Fundy Royal)	
Nicholson	O'Connor
Obhrai	Oda
Pallister	Paquette
Penson	Perron
Picard (Drummond)	Plamondon
Poillievre	Poirier-Rivard
Prentice	Preston
Rajotte	Reid
Reynolds	Richardson
Ritz	Roy
Sauvageau	Scheer
Schellenberger	Schmidt (Kelowna—Lake Country)
Simard (Beauport—Limoilou)	Skelton
Smith (Kildonan—St. Paul)	Solberg
Sorenson	St-Hilaire
Stinson	Stronach
Thibault (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques)	
Thompson (New Brunswick Southwest)	
Thompson (Wild Rose)	Tilson
Toews	Trost
Tweed	Van Loan
Vellacott	Vincent
Warawa	Watson
Williams	Yelich — 148

PAIRED

Nil

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Marcel Proulx): I declare the motion defeated.

Hon. Karen Redman: Mr. Speaker, I believe the member for Calgary Centre-North came into the chamber after the question had been put and did vote.

Mr. Jim Prentice: Mr. Speaker, I was here throughout the vote. I was in my seat in the chamber before the bells had finished.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Marcel Proulx): We accept the member's comments.

Resuming debate, the hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness.

Hon. Roy Cullen (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, for over 130 years the RCMP has been trusted with protecting the people of this country from coast to coast to coast. The hon. member's motion undermines the RCMP's ability to do its job, without changing the government's vital obligation to ensure the safety and security of Canadians. This contradiction is not acceptable.

I should remark and clarify, after the remarks by the hon. member for Brome—Missisquoi, for whom I have every respect, that the government will be voting no to this motion. My remarks today outline the government's position and are addressed to the opposition parties who at every stage have sought to obstruct the commissioner of the RCMP from doing his job.

Since the government must continue to protect Canadians, I urge hon. members to support the right and responsibility of Commissioner Zaccardelli and his senior executives to make policing decisions for the good of our country. They should vote no to this motion.

Let me say at the outset that there is no reduction of RCMP resources in Quebec by even one officer. They were reorganized to improve efficiency. This motion is asking the House to vote, not for improvement, but for a worsening of the position. They are asking us to vote for inefficiency. I urge members on both sides of the House to defeat the motion.

Before going any further let me underscore what is at stake in this motion. The RCMP under the RCMP Act has the authority to manage our national police service and direct resources where they are needed most. Subsection 5(1) of the RCMP Act clearly states that it is the commissioner of the RCMP, under the direction of the minister, who has the control and management of the force and all matters connected therewith.

This motion cuts to the very heart of this responsibility. It undermines the legislative foundation of our national police service.

In addition to challenging the legislated authority of the commissioner of the RCMP, the passage of this motion would have a detrimental impact on Canadians. There would be a serious impact on public safety and the ability of the RCMP to deal with current and emerging priorities in Quebec; namely, organized crime, terrorism and the protection of our shared border with the United States.

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Hon. members who support the motion put at risk the ability of the RCMP to address these priorities and are jeopardizing not only the safety of Quebec and Quebecers, but of all Canadians.

We all know the rule of law. The rule of law dictates that a minister may never direct the RCMP as to the investigation of criminality. Yet this is not the limit of our long convention and practice in this country. It is the first word of a tradition that holds the police apart from the power and politics of the day.

It is true by statute the minister does have the authority to direct the commissioner on certain matters, generally understood to be matters of strategic policy, but never day to day operations. The minister might, for example, instruct the commissioner to prioritize matters of national security affecting our airports. The minister might instruct the commissioner to develop new measures against organized crime. In this, the minister would be within the law and, importantly, within the conventions and propriety that shaped a relationship between the minister and the commissioner.

It is expected that the minister should use this authority sparingly and exercise careful judgment and restraint, recognizing that the commissioner has the statutory responsibility to manage the force and is in the best position to determine how the force can effectively and efficiently conduct its police work and criminal investigations.

The commissioner is a policing professional and his recommendation should be given the highest consideration. If the minister directs the RCMP to focus on organized crime, which is a large part of the force's federal mandate in the province of Quebec, it is the commissioner who knows best how to achieve this mandate in operational terms.

The commissioner's role is that of the expert and more. A commissioner of the RCMP is a distinguished figure. His advice should not be trifled with. He inherits the great traditions of the storied past and his professionalism today is a prized possession, his attempt to live up to that great example. He gives the government his best advice and takes pride in his work.

● (1245)

The commissioner has explained to parliamentarians that these detachments should be closed. He has told us that keeping them open would make Quebec less safe. He has explained that he needs the officers elsewhere. He has explained that even if he had more money, he would still close those detachments to focus on his priorities, including terrorism and organized crime.

I heard some members reject this advice at committee, and it is completely unacceptable. Frankly, I am appalled that members would dismiss the commissioner's advice. It is irresponsible and the worst kind of interference, and it should be stopped right here and right now. The commissioner has a serious job and members should let him do his job.

I have heard hon. colleagues on this matter. "If we can't do this", they say, "why are we here?" This is one of the questions of philosophy, so while I will not settle anyone's existential angst, as members well know there is a broad expanse open to parliamentarians on RCMP matters. Not least of these is the budget process and all the associated financial procedures of Parliament.

Members will recall the substantial increases made of late to the RCMP budget. In fact, the commissioner pointed out that the budget of the RCMP in the last four or five years had gone from \$2 billion a year to \$3 billion a year. Some of these increases include provisions for funding for the integrated border enforcement teams and the provision five years ago of funds to introduce an additional 100 members at the Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver airports. The funds voted by Parliament for the use of the force are diligently used, an important expression of the will of Parliament and parliamentarians. There is also the annual Report on Plans and Priorities, tabled in Parliament for the scrutiny of all members.

Members should also consider the legislative process. It should not be underrated in its impact upon the force. Parliamentarians make the very laws which it is the duty of the police force to enforce. In criminalizing certain behaviours, we make decisions of the utmost importance and of the greatest impact to those who uphold the law. When a law officer carries out his or her duties, he or she is an officer of the law, not of Parliament.

Parliament has a place of first importance in these matters, but not the place imagined by members opposite. We are all privileged to play on the parliamentary field. However, when it comes to the placement of detachments and their operational consequences, we stray from that field and go out of bounds. It is the worst kind of interference, and it should be stopped.

The professional advice of the force should be accepted and it is shocking to see it dismissed so readily out of hand. I will say it time and again until somebody listens. The commissioner said that reopening the detachments would make Quebec less safe. Officers will be taken from duties of greater importance. They will not come out of thin air. It is members opposite who must justify their position, not the government. If the wording of the motion said, "that this House now make Quebec less safe", I wonder if my colleagues opposite would still support it.

That is exactly what any supporter of this motion will be saying. They will be saying, "Let us all join together and make Quebec less safe by ignoring the advice of the RCMP commissioner, by taking officers away from more important duties, stranding them in outposts in ridings X, Y and Z". I expect them to say just that and in large numbers.

● (1250)

[*Translation*]

Since the Royal Canadian Mounted Police was established in Quebec in 1920, this police organization commonly known as "C" Division has always been professional, keeping up with the realities of its time. It has evolved in step with society while at the same time preserving its own culture and traditions.

Today, these police officers are recognized worldwide for their professionalism, integrity and respect for the right of every citizen to be different and equal.

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In Quebec, the RCMP enforces the law in a strictly federal context. Its mandate is to prevent crime and protect Canadians at home and abroad. Its areas of activity include national security, organized crime, tobacco and alcohol smuggling, economic crimes, computer hacking, money laundering, and VIP protection, including for the Prime Minister and for foreign dignitaries.

[English]

Let me assure the House that the requirements of the RCMP in Quebec will continue to be reviewed to ensure that its federal enforcement mandate can be met. Let me underscore that the RCMP will honour all agreements and memoranda of understanding that are entered into with the Sûreté du Québec and its other partners. The RCMP will strategically pursue its efforts in all Quebec regions.

Finally, notwithstanding what is done today, the RCMP will continue to ensure that the people of Quebec and their communities are safe for the good of the province and the good of all Canadians.

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Niagara Falls, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is no surprise to anyone who has followed the history of the Liberal Party to see Liberals on both sides of an issue. We have been treated to the spectacle in the last couple of months of supporters of the former prime minister in the Liberal Party who have made accusations against supporters of the present Prime Minister. There are members of the federal Liberal Party who have picked a fight and have made accusations against the provincial Liberals.

I am absolutely fascinated by the parliamentary secretary's speech. He is now attacking members of his own party. For Heaven's sake, the member for Brome—Missisquoi is a member of the Liberal Party. He had his own cheering section about an hour ago on this.

This is a Liberal motion brought in by a Liberal member and seconded by a Liberal member. Now the parliamentary secretary is saying that the Liberals down at that part of the chamber are against it and the Liberals at the other end are for it. It is one thing to pick a fight with the McGuinty Liberals or to say what one wants about the Chrétien Liberals, but this is within the House of Commons itself. Which half of the Liberal Party are we supposed to be listening to and accepting?

• (1255)

Hon. Roy Cullen: Mr. Speaker, that is the same member who talks about reforming democracy in Ottawa. I want to congratulate the member for Brome—Missisquoi on his work on this file. With respect, on this question, he is somewhat misguided and I said so very clearly.

I am sure that from time to time Conservative members of their caucus have disagreed on one point or the other. I believe it has happened in the history of the House and that is good. It is a healthy situation when members of this caucus can speak up and argue against a position of the government and when members on the government side can speak against the member's motion.

This is about what is best for Canada and for Quebec. The commissioner of the RCMP has stated categorically that this redeployment, which does not result in any diminution of the head count in the province of Quebec, will improve the safety and security of Quebecers. Quebec will be able to develop a critical mass of

officers rather than have small groups that are not so effective. They will be brought in to a coordinated unit.

I know the Conservatives are in bed with the separatists these days, but they do not even understand what goes on in the province of Quebec. They do not understand that the province of Quebec has the Sûreté du Québec. It is not the same as the member's province. I think the member opposite was a member of Mr. Mulroney's cabinet and he would know about a lot of things, some good and some not so good.

He obviously does not understand that the province of Quebec does not have contracted RCMP. The role of the RCMP is to focus on federal policing and the Sûreté du Québec is the police force on the ground. That is the position of the government, that is the position the RCMP commissioner has taken and that is the best position we could take for the safety and security of Quebecers and Canadians.

Mr. Gary Goodyear (Cambridge, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I find it unnerving to hear the member opposite talk about democracy when clearly he just stated that we should not interfere with the commissioner of the RCMP. I feel democracy should never be confused with interference, but I respect the member opposite has that confusion and I am sure it will live long in his heart.

I would like to ask the member opposite two questions. No one in his or her right mind would believe that no security at the border is better than what they have proposed. We see the impact at the border crossings. In fact, in one report it was noted that 1,300 cars crossed the borders unnoticed. I would like to ask the member opposite one question on that. Could he guarantee that those cars were not full of drugs and illegal weapons?

The second thing is this. The member brags about \$9 billion in public safety. The member should be aware that fire departments across the country need \$500,000, a simple half a million dollars, not \$9 billion, but the government has failed to provide firefighters with proper training in chemical, biological, radioactive and nuclear hazardous material strategies.

Maybe the member should stop with the rhetoric and let me know if he can guarantee that the cars were not full of guns and drugs, and what about protecting our firefighters?

Hon. Roy Cullen: Mr. Speaker, I know the member from Cambridge is still somewhat of a rookie, but I am sure the voters of Cambridge will have a chance to reconsider their choice when they send a member here to Ottawa.

The firefighters are in Ottawa making their case. The comment about the fund is not a bad idea. In fact, a couple of years ago the government implemented the pension accrual rate for the firefighters. They always come forward with some very good suggestions and I am sure the government will look at them very seriously.

Routine Proceedings

On the main point, there is a fallacy in his argument. In case the member does not realize it, the border is 8,000 kilometres long. We would not have RCMP officers at every few metres along the border because it is not their role. However, if we had a police officer of some description every few yards, which would be the logic of his argument taken to an extension, we would have police officers about every five or six yards along our border. That is a fallacy. That is the illogical extension of his argument and it makes absolutely no sense. The RCMP does a great job and it will continue to get the support of the government.

• (1300)

Mr. Vic Toews (Provencher, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have this opportunity to speak to the motion to concur in the sixth report of the Standing Committee on Justice, Human, Rights, Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness tabled in the House on April 13, 2005. It is important to draw to the attention of the House that the report reads as follows:

Your Committee draws to the attention of the House the fact that the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness and the Senior Management of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police have not taken into account the opinion expressed by the Committee in its Fourth Report but rather have continued the process of closing nine RCMP detachments in Quebec.

Your Committee recommends that the Minister and the RCMP put a stop to this personnel redeployment plan and reopen the detachments concerned.

I am pleased that the member brought forward this motion, but I was very surprised that the Liberals, aided by the NDP, would shut down this debate in the same way that they are trying to shut down the detachments in Quebec. As the justice critic for the Conservative Party, I found it interesting that the Liberals moved the motion to adjourn the debate just before I stood up. They did not want to give me the opportunity to speak to this motion. I found that very disappointing.

I would have expected it of the Liberal Party which may not understand the significance of the RCMP in rural areas in the prairie provinces especially, but I would have thought the NDP, coming from a rural populace background, would have understood the significance of the RCMP in our areas. It was shameful to see NDP members vote with the government to try to shut down this very important debate. The NDP members should examine the roots from which they came.

First, I would like to state that members of the Conservative Party, and I think all members of the House, are thankful for all of the men and the women of the RCMP who serve our communities across the country. They put their lives at risk in the service of others every day.

The recent tragedy in Mayerthorpe, Alberta was a poignant reminder of our duty as parliamentarians to give our men and women in uniform the very best support and resources. In that context I would like to make some brief remarks about the cuts that have been made over the past decade to the front lines of our law enforcement.

Before I get into those comments, I want to address the parliamentary secretary's comments in respect of section 5 of one of the acts, and about the commissioner being under the direction of the minister. I think that is a very troubling situation. There is not a clearcut distinction in our country between policing services and the political direction of the minister.

It has been recommended on numerous occasions that there be a division between the minister and the RCMP commissioner. The scenario is that the RCMP commissioner is actually a deputy minister of the Liberal government. Let us not talk about him simply as a police officer. We are talking about a deputy minister who carries out the political will of a government. In a free and democratic state like Canada, it is simply unacceptable that there is not an arm's length distance between the commissioner and the minister. That kind of problem in structure relates to all kinds of other problems.

A problem arises when the RCMP commissioner comes to the committee and says what he thinks is the best course of action in a given situation. We, as members of the committee do not know whether he is there as a deputy minister on behalf of the minister and is making a political pitch, or whether he is speaking on behalf of law enforcement officials. That is a significant problem with which we are faced. When the RCMP commissioner comes to us, we want to hear from him not as a political person under the direction of the minister, but as a law enforcement individual. That is a concern.

• (1305)

Quite frankly, I cannot give the commissioner's evidence the weight I would like to give it because of that very close relationship. The government needs to recognize that problem. Why it has not taken the steps to make that simple political disconnection between the minister and the commissioner I simply do not know.

That leads us into this scenario. During the past few months the justice committee has heard testimony about critical shortages of RCMP officers in Quebec and other parts of Canada. This is not just to do with Quebec. We heard exactly the same kind of concerns about Ontario. During my career in the provincial government in the Prairies, we heard the same kind of concerns in the province in which I served.

I have also received information from internal RCMP sources which indicates that staffing levels for the RCMP in a particular province, Manitoba, are falling to a critical level, particularly the highway patrol divisions.

In my own riding of Provencher, virtually most of Highway 1, which is the Trans-Canada Highway, was unpatrolled. It had no highway patrol division virtually from the city of Winnipeg until a few miles before the Ontario border. This is the pipeline of Canada in terms of transport trucks, in terms of drugs, in terms of guns, in terms of tourism and an RCMP highway patrol is not patrolling it. We raised concerns and finally that RCMP highway patrol detachment was reinstated, after the government had shut down that detachment. Other detachments are still shut down in Manitoba. It is quite disgraceful.

I was in British Columbia the other day meeting with the RCMP. They are overworked and underpaid. They are trying to do a very difficult job with very few resources. I do not know if members are aware of the shortage of RCMP officers in British Columbia. The RCMP essentially perform municipal duties in many municipalities, including one of the largest municipalities in Canada, Surrey. In British Columbia the RCMP is short over 400 officers.

Routine Proceedings

How do we rectify this situation? About one-tenth of all RCMP officers are retiring every year. One-half of all RCMP officers are eligible for retirement. Think of those kinds of numbers. How do we close the gap in Surrey and other places in British Columbia, in Manitoba, in Quebec? How do we close that gap when we are only training 1,000 RCMP officers a year? We cannot keep up to the rate of retirement and other officers who are leaving because the government back in 1998 decided to shut down the only training officers' depot in Canada. Since then, all RCMP officers have been under stress.

The RCMP is undermanned and is simply looking for the resources that it is never going to get from the government, in terms of front line police officers. Not just in Quebec, but across the country in areas like mine where we rely on RCMP officers, staffing levels are falling to a critical level.

That sets the background.

A committee motion two months ago summoned the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, the commissioner of the RCMP and the commanding officer of "C" Division to appear before it to explain why they had ignored the committee's previous order to stay the closure of nine RCMP detachments in Quebec.

• (1310)

I may not know everything about the province of Quebec, but I do know the crucial role the RCMP plays in patrolling the border. When the parliamentary secretary says that is not the role of the RCMP, I can tell the House that our border guards and customs officials do not have the jurisdiction because they only have the jurisdiction to arrest people who cross the border within a few hundred feet of their actual booth at the border crossing. They have to rely on the RCMP. If a car goes flying across the border, the border officials cannot stop the offender. They have to call the RCMP.

The news is that there are no RCMP officers in a riding like mine. Volunteer firefighters direct traffic at major traffic accidents on major highways in southern Manitoba because we do not have any RCMP officers. They cannot keep up to the work.

I was speaking to an individual in Richer, Manitoba who had a very big concern about a dangerous driver, very drunk, tearing up the town. They could not get an RCMP officer to the town in under three hours. They called and they called and they called. When the RCMP officer came, he said, "The problem is this weekend in our entire detachment we have two people on duty".

There were two people on duty. One had to execute an arrest warrant for a violent criminal and therefore the other one had to attend with him. We do not want reoccurrences of Mayerthorpe. We want our officers properly protected, but there were two individuals in that entire area to take care of all these problems. After three hours the officer appeared but of course the culprit was long gone.

We have to ask the commissioner, who in effect is a deputy minister of the government, what is happening. I remember in 1998 when the RCMP said to me in my office, "We are going to reconsolidate". They told me that the impact would be that there would be fewer people in administration and more people out on the streets. This is the load of garbage that is being sold to the people of

Quebec today and it is wrong. It is not true. The government should be ashamed of itself.

What happened in Manitoba was that there were fewer police officers on the street. Why did that happen? Interestingly, with all the talk about the Gomery commission these days, some other facts unrelated to the sponsorship scandal itself have come to light during the testimony which actually shed some light on this particular issue.

On December 15, 2004, Mr. Dawson Hovey, who was in charge of the 1996 program review process, stated that he was required to reduce the RCMP budget by 10%. What did that mean? This is testimony that a government official gave to the commission. What did the 10% reduction mean? It involved a budget reduction of about \$173 million and the deletion of 2,200 RCMP positions. What was motivating the RCMP to consolidate? I do not think anyone in the House actually believes it was to create efficiencies to get more police officers out on the street.

• (1315)

We have the testimony of Mr. Hovey, who was in charge of the program review process. He knew exactly what was going on. This minister also knew exactly what was going on when they came to my office back in 1998 and said, "We are going to consolidate to have fewer administrative positions and more police officers on the street". The truth of the matter was that they were cutting 2,200 police positions. That is the truth of the matter.

My colleagues from Quebec are concerned about this issue and well they should be. That is why we asked the commissioner and the minister to come to the committee and explain some of these facts. Why was this happening? Was the experience in Manitoba simply going to be repeated in Quebec, where individuals fly across that border in their cars and the border patrol cannot stop them because they do not have the powers of arrest? Even if the border patrol had these powers of arrest, this government will not provide its members with proper training and sidearms to stop dangerous offenders coming into our country. They have to phone the RCMP. And where are the RCMP officers? They are dozens and dozens if not hundreds of kilometres away from the place of the incident.

Front line officers are telling us that they are seeing their numbers decrease and their resources being stretched, yet when the committee summoned Commissioner Zaccardelli to explain why he ignored the direction of the committee, the commissioner denied—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Marcel Proulx): It is my duty to interrupt the proceedings at this time and put forthwith the question on the motion now before the House, which is that this question be now put.

The question is on the motion. Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Marcel Proulx): All those in favour of the motion will please say yea.

Some hon. members: Yea.

Routine Proceedings

MARRIAGE

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Marcel Proulx): All those opposed will please say nay.

Some hon. members: Nay.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Marcel Proulx): In my opinion the yeas have it.

And more than five members having risen:

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Marcel Proulx): Call in the members.

And the bells having rung:

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Marcel Proulx): It has been requested that the vote be deferred until 5:29 p.m. tomorrow.

* * *

PETITIONS

MARRIAGE

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to present a special petition today on behalf of a special constituent, submitted on the subject matter of marriage. I would like to read that constituent's name into the record: Dr. Agata Chojecka. Dr. Chojecka has submitted a petition on the subject matter of marriage and it contains literally thousands of signatures which she helped orchestrate receiving.

The petitioners would like to draw to the attention of the House that whereas the majority of Canadians believe that fundamental matters of social policy should be decided by elected members of Parliament and not by the unelected judiciary, and that Canadians support the current definition of marriage as the voluntary union of a single male and a single female, the petitioners call upon Parliament to use all possible legislative and administrative measures, including the invocation of section 33 of the charter, known as the notwithstanding clause, to preserve and protect the current definition of marriage as that between one man and one woman.

• (1320)

SIKH COMMUNITY

Mr. Gurmant Grewal (Newton—North Delta, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise to present several petitions signed by thousands of people. The petitioners are asking Parliament to take every administrative and legislative measure necessary to protect the freedom to wear turbans and the five kakkars or five Ks, the symbols of the Sikh religion.

The petitioners state that turbans are not like hats or helmets but are part and parcel of the Sikh religious faith and should be recognized as such. It is contrary to the tenets of the Sikh faith to conceal or cover the turban with any kind of object such as a hard hat. The petitioners call upon Parliament to protect the religious practices and religious freedom of Sikhs in all areas of the Canadian labour force, that Sikh truck operators be exempt from wearing a hard hat, and that Canada Labour Code R.S.C. 1970, c. L-1, adversely affects members of the Canadian Sikh community. They ask the Canadian Parliament to respect religious freedom.

Mrs. Carol Skelton (Saskatoon—Rosetown—Biggar, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it gives me great pleasure today to rise on behalf of my constituents and present two petitions which ask Parliament that marriage be defined in federal law as being the lifelong union of one man and one woman, to the exclusion of all others.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Paule Brunelle (Trois-Rivières, BQ): Mr. Speaker, today, I would like to present two petitions.

The first one is against Bill C-38, on same sex marriage.

NATURAL HEALTH PRODUCTS

Ms. Paule Brunelle (Trois-Rivières, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the second petition is in support of the freedom of choice in making health decisions. These petitioners call on Parliament to provide Canadians with greater access to non-harmful preventive and medicinal options. They therefore urge parliamentarians to enact Bill C-420, an act to amend the Food and Drugs Act.

[*English*]

PORNOGRAPHY

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to deliver a petition from people of London and St. Thomas and the surrounding area who are calling on Parliament to enact legislation against the easy accessibility and display of pornographic material.

DIABETES RESEARCH

Mr. Gary Goodyear (Cambridge, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is my honour today to present two petitions on behalf of constituents in my riding of Cambridge. The first petition calls on the Parliament of Canada to secure funding for juvenile type 1 diabetes to the amount of \$25 million a year for the next five years.

MARRIAGE

Mr. Gary Goodyear (Cambridge, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the second petition calls on Parliament to maintain and uphold the current law which defines marriage as the union of one man and one woman, to the exclusion of all others.

Ms. Helena Guergis (Simcoe—Grey, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour today to present to the House a petition of over 300 names of people in my riding of Simcoe—Grey. They call upon the government to maintain the definition of marriage as the union between one man and one woman, to the exclusion of all others.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I was asked by some constituents in my riding of Timmins—James Bay to present this petition opposing government legislation Bill C-38. As they are my constituents and it is their will that I present this petition, I am bringing it forward today.

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NATURAL HEALTH PRODUCTS

Mr. Dave Batters (Palliser, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 36 I have the honour of presenting a petition on behalf of a number of citizens who reside in my riding of Palliser, most of whom are from the city of Moose Jaw. These petitioners wish to call to the attention of Parliament the following: that Canadians deserve freedom of choice in health care products; that herbs, dietary supplements and other traditional natural health products should be properly classified as food and not arbitrarily restricted as drugs; and that the weight of modern scientific evidence confirms the mitigation and prevention of many diseases and disorders through the judicious use of natural health products.

These petitioners call upon Parliament to provide Canadians with greater access to natural health products and restore freedom of choice in personal health care by enacting Bill C-420, an act to amend the Food and Drugs Act.

* * *

● (1325)

[Translation]

QUESTIONS ON THE ORDER PAPER

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I ask that all questions be allowed to stand.

The Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

* * *

REQUEST FOR EMERGENCY DEBATE

DAIRY INDUSTRY

The Speaker: The Chair has received a request for an emergency debate from the hon. member for Châteauguay—Saint-Constant.

Ms. Denise Poirier-Rivard (Châteauguay—Saint-Constant, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I ask you to consider the request by the Bloc Québécois to hold an emergency debate on the critical situation faced by dairy producers in Quebec and Canada.

Last week, the Quebec federation of dairy producers launched a vast information campaign among Quebec MPs on the import of subsidized artificially modified milk ingredients.

Each MP in turn received a visit from local dairy producers calling for pressure to be exerted on the government to staunch the industry hemorrhage.

Need we recall the urgency of the situation? Imported artificial ingredients are costing Quebec producers \$70 million and Canada's producers altogether \$175 million. If nothing is done, 30% of Canada's dairy production will be replaced by milk substitutes.

The Government of Canada must respond decisively and quickly to this foreign intrusion by invoking article XXVIII of the GATT. It must do so before Quebec's and Canada's dairy industry, already hard hit by the mad cow crisis, disappears completely from our economic landscape in the next few months.

SPEAKER'S RULING

The Speaker: The Chair has considered the request by the hon. member for Châteauguay—Saint-Constant and is of the opinion that it fails to meet the requirements of the Standing Orders. In my opinion, I cannot approve the request at this time.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[English]

CIVIL MARRIAGE ACT

The House resumed from May 2 consideration of the motion that Bill C-38, an act respecting certain aspects of legal capacity for marriage for civil purposes, be read the second time and referred to a committee, and of the motion that this question be now put.

Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am honoured to again join the debate on Bill C-38 on behalf of the residents of Niagara West—Glanbrook. As I have noted previously, the constituents of my riding have made it abundantly clear that they are against this radical change in the definition of marriage, which the Prime Minister wants to leave behind as his legacy.

Briefly I want to remind members of this Parliament, and particularly those who feel forced to support Bill C-38 or lose their cabinet posts, of how strongly Canadians feel about this issue. When was the last time, if ever, that their constituency offices or Ottawa offices received feedback from more than 10,000 people on a single issue? That has been the case in Niagara West—Glanbrook, with 90% of my constituents supporting the position that the definition of marriage must be maintained as being exclusively between one man and one woman.

Some might think that this debate is only for adults and that kids are not engaged. Let me tell the House about one of my young constituents. High school student Nalini Ramaden was so concerned about this issue that she had petitions filled out at her high school and had them delivered to my office here in Ottawa. I want to thank her for that.

I have been accused by some of being biased in favour of protecting the traditional definition of marriage, and yes, I am. I have always been upfront and transparent about my views. During the election I told voters that my intention was to maintain the institution of marriage as we know it. I asked for their support and they gave me their support. They recently reiterated their objections to Bill C-38 by contacting my office in massive numbers. I am listening to my constituents. I am acting on their directions by voting against this legislation.

I will ask members of cabinet again. Are they doing the same for their constituents or are their first loyalties to the Prime Minister's Office?

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It is because of this flip-flopping back and forth on issues that trust and confidence in politicians are reduced. When members of Parliament say one thing between elections and then do another, it confuses constituents. When they write letters in support of marriage and then do not bring it up as an issue in an election, constituents are left to believe that these individuals still support it.

I believe that confidence and trust in politicians are very low these days. I recently received a letter from a constituent who only half-jokingly suggested that we need a police force to protect Canadians from politicians. It is truly sad that all politicians are being painted with the same brush, but the only way to change this is through consistently transparent and responsive decision making.

Monumental changes to fundamental pillars of our society cannot be made lightly. Unfortunately, that is exactly what the government is doing with Bill C-38. I urge members of the government to take a step in the right direction and restore confidence in Parliament by demonstrating accountability to voters. Shelving this legislation until Canadians are truly consulted would show the level of respect that our nation demands.

It is with tremendous respect for the residents of Niagara West—Glanbrook, who I am privileged to represent, that I will be voting against this legislation.

● (1330)

Mr. Pat O'Brien (London—Fanshawe, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak for the second time in this important debate on Bill C-38, the legislation to change the traditional definition of marriage to include same sex relationships.

As we all well know, this is a very difficult and, to some extent, emotional issue that has split the population of Canada more or less fifty-fifty, or perhaps pretty much along those lines, on whether to change the definition of marriage.

Unfortunately, as we know, there has been some disrespect and extreme comments or behaviour from some people, and I would emphasize in a minority of situations, on both sides of this argument.

A number of MPs have stood to defend the traditional definition of marriage. It does not matter what party we are in because this is an issue that transcends party lines. It is much bigger than partisan politics for me. I have spoken to other colleagues on all sides of the House who relate to the fact that they may have had the insult hurled at them from time to time that somehow they are homophobic or against gay and lesbian people if they defend the traditional definition of marriage.

That is a very unfair and unfortunate accusation to make. I have received that only a few times, fortunately, but I have had that accusation made to me. I would like to address that.

In June 1995, I supported Bill C-41, the so-called hate crimes legislation that added sexual orientation to the list of offences or reasons for violent crime. If a person committed a violent crime against someone because of his or her sexual orientation and if that person was found guilty it would be factored into the sentence.

I supported that legislation. I know for a fact, as all members do, that sometimes, unfortunately, in this country people are targeted for violence or intimidation because of their sexual orientation, if they

are gay or lesbian. It is appalling to me as a Canadian and appalling to most Canadians of goodwill. That is why I supported the change in the hate crime legislation which would factor that into a violent criminal assault.

No one at that time called me homophobic. However, now, because some members are defending the traditional definition of marriage, somehow, in some people's minds, we become homophobic.

It is an unfortunate accusation to make. It is simply inaccurate in most cases. I believe most Canadians are not homophobic. They do know that marriage is the union of a man and a woman. It is in no way anti-gay or anti-lesbian to take that position. Unfortunately, people on our side of the argument have made homophobic comments and that is regrettable. However I am happy to say that in most cases we have heard very little of that, which is the way it should be.

If I am not opposed to Bill C-38 because I am somehow homophobic or I am against gay or lesbian people, then why am I vehemently and repeatedly speaking out against the bill and unable in good conscience to support the bill?

I sat on the justice committee from January to June 2003 when there were extensive hearings held on this very topic. I listened to expert witness after expert witness warn against the possible and probable negative consequences to marriage, to the family and to Canadian society if we were to give in to the gay and lesbian lobby that is driving this agenda in the courts.

● (1335)

Some of the most eloquent spokespersons against changing the definition of marriage were themselves gay and lesbian people. In my earlier 20 minute speech I mentioned an expert in this area, a gay Yale professor, William Eskridge, who argues eloquently against changing the definition of marriage.

John McKellar, who was an outstanding witness in committee, is an openly gay man and a founder of an organization called HOPE, Homosexuals Opposed to Pride Extremism. He argued very forcefully and eloquently that we should not change federal and provincial laws just to meet the demands of a small segment of the gay and lesbian population of Canada because not all gay and lesbian people of Canada are demanding that we somehow make marriage into something it is not, never has been and truly never can be, which is a relationship between two people of the same sex.

I would like to share the reactions of my constituents in London—Fanshawe because I have sought their opinions on this issue a number of times. As all members can relate to this, whether I have sought it or not, on a daily basis they give me their opinions in various forms on a constant basis.

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In my riding of London—Fanshawe, 92% of my constituents who have taken the time to express their opinions strongly oppose changing the definition of marriage. I live in London, Ontario, which is an urban centre. People have the misconception that it is only in the rural part of Canada but that is wrong. Canadians from coast to coast, of every political stripe and no particular political stripe, of every major faith and of no particular faith, Canadians in the millions oppose changing the definition of marriage for very sound and solid reasons. The constituents of London—Fanshawe are proof of that as 92% oppose changing the definition of marriage.

Having said that, some 60% of my constituents feel that whether they agree with a same sex relationship or not, it is their personal judgment and not their business that some people choose to live their lives that way. Some 60% of my constituents have made it clear to me that they would support some form of recognition in law of same sex relationships. However they do not support changing the definition of marriage and throwing out all the values to make marriage into something that it was never meant to be.

I think my riding is a pretty good sample of the feeling of Canadians in general. The polls are pretty clear that the majority of Canadians do not support changing the definition of marriage but that they do support some sort of recognition in law that same sex relationships exist in society and that they should have some recognition in law with an appropriate name, if we have to find a label, such as civil union or whatever, but certainly not to somehow threaten the future of marriage by changing the definition and setting into motion a series of very probable negative consequences, not that I say will follow, but that experts after experts in this area have predicted will follow if we take this course of action.

We know that eventually the bill will get to a legislative committee. I was pleased recently to get the assurance of the right hon. Prime Minister that he will do everything he can to encourage some public hearings on Bill C-38. Why is that important? I will tell you, Mr. Speaker, because I understand you will be chairing that particular committee.

The justice committee held extensive hearings from January to June, at which many excellent and expert witnesses on both sides of the argument appeared. What the committee did not do is finish its work. It was totally pre-empted by the Ontario Court of Appeal with its ridiculous ruling that instantly sought to redefine marriage in Ontario. That committee never reported. I think that evidence is too important to be lost. It is still on the record of course. It could be referenced by the legislative committee and the legislative committee ought to hold public hearings that would allow, if not individuals, at least important Canadian organizations the opportunity to have input.

● (1340)

I oppose Bill C-38 as a simple matter of conscience. I cannot support changing the definition of marriage under any circumstances whatsoever. It does not mean that I am homophobic or that I am against gay and lesbian people. My voting record shows that I have supported actions to protect their individual rights, such as Bill C-41 in June 1995.

It is a far cry from doing that and saying that I will be silent as we deconstruct marriage and open up the threat to marriage and the family. I cannot do that and I will never do that.

Mr. Ted Menzies (Macleod, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am privileged to have the opportunity to enter into the debate on Bill C-38 on behalf of the constituents of Macleod. In this time of political uncertainty I am proud to be a member of a political party that respects rights and traditions and encourages honest, public policy debates.

Over the past weeks I have listened to the initial debate on Bill C-38 but, most important, I have listened to my constituents in Claresholm, Okotoks, Vulcan, Granum, Nanton, Turner Valley, Fort Macleod, the Crowsnest Pass and other communities throughout the riding. I am impressed by the honesty, candour and passion which Canadians are approaching the debate. Canadians have been thoughtful on this issue and most have come to believe that Bill C-38 is not the right approach to address the issue of marriage.

Opposing Bill C-38 is not about denying rights. It is not about jeopardizing the Charter of Rights and Freedoms as the Prime Minister would like us to believe. It is a complex public policy issue and one that would have an impact on every Canadian.

I, like most of my colleagues on this side of the House, and many on the other side as well, believe in the traditional definition of marriage as the union of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others.

However, in the course of this debate, those of us who support marriage have been told that to amend the bill to reflect the traditional definition of marriage would be a violation of human rights and an unconstitutional violation of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

I believe that this is an attempt by the Liberals to turn the channel and call those who do not agree with them to be un-Canadian. The Prime Minister does not want to debate the question of traditional marriage versus same sex marriage so he would rather focus on attacking their opponents as opposing human rights and the charter.

The Bill C-38 debate is about rights and recognition and about how to best balance the rights of homosexual couples within our society while at the same time upholding and respecting institutions that have great social importance to Canada, such as the traditional definition of marriage. In short, it is about responding and respecting the competing interests in this debate in a reasonable and compassionate way.

Much of the concern about the legislation comes from the Supreme Court decision released on December 9, 2004. The Supreme Court said that the federal government has the jurisdiction to redefine marriage to include same sex couples. It also said that churches are protected under the Charter of Rights in maintaining the traditional definition of marriage but that legislation would specifically protect religious organizations beyond the constitutional power of the federal government.

What this means is that the federal government determines the definition of marriage but the provinces determine how to marry a couple.

The court did not answer the question of whether the traditional definition of marriage in the common law violates the Charter of Rights. Instead of declaring the traditional definition of marriage unconstitutional, the court has made it clear that it is Parliament that must define the word marriage.

It is Parliament's job to find a consensus that defends rights and, specifically in this debate, offers recognition to homosexual couples and takes into account the views of Canadians.

This is where we are today. We have received direction from the Supreme Court of Canada that if Parliament wants to change the definition of marriage it would be within our purview to do so. We are free to define it as a union between a man and a woman or as between any two persons. Either definition has been deemed constitutional by the Supreme Court.

The rights issues has been settled and the equality provisions continue to be settled. Simply put, the law already sees heterosexual relationships and same sex relationships as equally significant and equally able to access spousal rights and privileges. The Conservative Party supports this view. Same sex marriage, in a nutshell, is a recognition issue.

• (1345)

As stated earlier, the rights component of this debate has largely been resolved and few Canadians are of the mind to reverse those decisions. Their opinion reflects their belief of equality for all Canadians under the law. They merely want the definition of marriage to remain as the union between a man and a woman.

Because of the difficulty of this issue, I am proud to be a member of a party that has allowed a free vote on this issue. It is an issue of accountability to my constituents and it is important that members are granted the ability to vote in as free a manner as possible, without the threat of recrimination by party leaders. Nobody in the Conservative Party finds themselves in an uncomfortable position due to this legislation. Members are accountable, not to their party, but to their own consciences and their constituents. It is the position that I wish all members of this House could share.

Importantly, the majority of people who oppose this legislation favour the insurance and the protection of equal rights for homosexual couples. At some point we have to ask ourselves, why is the government not following the lead of most Canadians and searching for a middle ground that would recognize marriage as the union between a man and a woman while recognizing homosexual unions? The Liberal government, after all, likes to talk about Canada's ability to broker resolutions and likes to talk about Canadians as being the sort of people who search for balance and fairness.

In December the Leader of the Opposition announced three proposals for effectively considering the marriage question. These are as follows: the first proposal would retain the traditional definition of marriage; the second proposal would ensure that same sex couples are afforded equal spousal benefits; and the third proposal would include substantive provisions in the legislation to

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protect not only religious organizations but also to protect public officials who have objections due to reasons of religion or conscience.

With regard to the first proposal, I am proud to be voting the wishes of my constituents, one of which is to support and maintain the traditional definition of marriage.

My constituents reflect the majority of Canadians who believe we do not need to change the definition of marriage and a balanced approach can assure equal benefits and status to same sex couples in a recognized union.

With regard to the third proposal, by protecting the rights of religious institutions, Parliament could support the rights of churches, mosques, synagogues and temples to recognize, perform and solemnize marriages on their own terms.

Parliament must ensure that churches have the right to privately and publicly preach their beliefs related to marriage.

Parliament must ensure that justices of the peace and civil marriage commissioners are not forced to solemnize marriages against their own consciences.

Parliament must also preserve the charitable and economic benefits that churches enjoy as public institutions and recognize the right of public officials to act in accordance with their own beliefs.

During this debate, the Liberals have attempted to hide their politics by invoking the language of rights and accusing our party of not believing in rights. This could not be further from the truth. The Conservative Party has approached this issue as one where a reasonable compromise can be found. We have spoken honestly with Canadians, and it is my hope that the House follows our lead.

I am proud to work with my constituents on such an important issue. I am proud that I can vote freely on their behalf against Bill C-38.

• (1350)

Hon. Gurbax Malhi (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise to support the traditional definition of marriage. Former U.S. President John F. Kennedy once said:

In whatever arena of life one may meet the challenge of courage, whatever may be the sacrifices he faces if he follows his conscience...each man must decide for himself the course he will follow...For this, each man must look into his own soul.

Since first being elected to the House of Commons, I have learned that the work of a member of Parliament is both demanding and inspiring. I have also learned that courage can come in many forms.

Sometimes it is the courage to build consensus, the courage to stand alone as well as the courage to stay the course. At other times, a politician must follow his conscience over the course of time, hoping that ultimately his courage will be recognized when passions have cooled.

It is with a firm commitment to my constituents in mind that I am speaking today on a subject that touches all our communities.

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As hon. members may know, I firmly believe that strong families are the key to any successful society. For more than 6,000 years traditional marriage, defined as the union of a man and a woman, has allowed us to preserve and protect the strength of our families.

As I stated in the House on March 24, I believe that children deserve, where possible, the opportunity to receive the warmth and comfort of a mother as well as the protection of a father. The responsibility falls to each and every one of us to engage in careful debate on the marriage issue.

I have received thousands of letters, emails and phone calls from constituents and, by a wide margin, the majority of them support the traditional definition of marriage.

In the House of Commons I have always voted in support of the traditional definition of marriage. As my voting record will attest, in 2005, 2003, 2002, 1999 and 1995 I have consistently voted to support the traditional definition of marriage as being, and remaining, the union of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others.

On more than 10 occasions over the years, I have stood in the House of Commons and tabled petitions bearing the signatures of thousands of constituents, firm in their conviction that marriage is the union of one man and one woman.

The traditional definition of marriage is part of our inheritance. When a husband and wife are in a committed marriage, they benefit each other in many ways, including better physical, emotional and financial well-being. In addition, the father and mother benefit their children in different yet complementary ways.

Under Canadian law, the legal concept of marriage, as the union of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others, has existed since before Confederation. Marriage has many aspects: social, religious, emotional and financial, among others. It also has legal consequences, including a range of benefits and obligations.

Many people in Canada believe that marriage is fundamental to our society and that its primary function is to create a stable and supportive foundation for procreation and raising children. They believe that the opposite sex requirement of marriage is not only essential but that it is recognized precisely because of its link to procreation.

Marriage is a sociological and religious institution built on the biological fact that children are born to couples of the opposite sex and that the couples who produce most of these children, also raise and nurture them.

• (1355)

Although marriage is not only for procreation, the potential for having and raising children is central to the institution, as illustrated by the fact that the common law provided that a marriage could be invalidated because of impotence.

Given that the majority of Canadian children are both born to and raised by married couples, I believe that we need to promote marriage and reserve it exclusively for partners of the opposite sex to help ensure stability and support for children. This view of marriage is reflected in religious teachings in most major world religions.

In the last few years Parliament has discussed the meaning of marriage at least on three occasions as well as during debate on a series of bills introduced by individual members of Parliament or senators.

In 1999 Parliament passed, by a wide margin, a motion stating that Parliament will take all reasonable steps to maintain the opposite sex meaning of marriage in Canada.

In 2000 section 1.1 was added to the Modernization of Benefits and Obligations Act as an interpretive clause stating that nothing in the act altered the existing meaning of marriage as the “lawful union of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others”.

In 2001 section 5 of the Federal Law—Civil Law Harmonization Act, No. 1 confirmed the opposite sex meaning of marriage in Quebec.

Marriage is a deeply rooted social and legal institution that has become deeply entrenched in our society. It is an institution well worth defending.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

• (1400)

[*English*]

WAR BRIDES

Hon. Andrew Telegdi (Kitchener—Waterloo, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, between 1942 and 1948, 49,000 war brides and their over 21,000 children were brought to Canada in an immigrant wave paid for and sponsored by the Canadian government. By Privy Council Order in Council 7318, September 24, 1944, these war brides and their children were given Canadian citizenship upon landing in Canada.

It has slowly come to light that all across Canada war brides and the children they brought with them on the war bride ships are being told that they are not Canadian citizens when they apply for passports. Consequently, they have had to apply for their citizenship. Some have been refused or have given up due to the red tape associated with the search for supporting documents of their arrival in Canada.

As a symbolic gesture to recognize the sacrifices made by our brave soldiers, I believe that awarding citizenship on VE Day to the war brides and their children would—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Marcel Proulx): The hon. member for Battlefords—Lloydminster.

* * *

LIBERAL PARTY OF CANADA

Mr. Gerry Ritz (Battlefords—Lloydminster, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canadians received a little extra time this weekend to file their taxes. Now that they know how their taxes are being thrown around, I doubt they are in any mood to backstop this government.

The Prime Minister went on television to plead for more time, ignoring the fact he has been at it for 12 years. His record of wasted tax dollars on heating rebates to prisoners, job funds that create bankruptcies and using unemployment insurance premiums to finance his out of control spending are clear to everyone.

He complained it was not time for an election, then promptly hit taxpayers with a photo op campaign featuring billion dollar announcements, which will not be any better managed than his last decade.

It is sad to see the same gang over there who spent years failing forestry, fishing and farmers claim they need more time. They cannot come up with workable deals for provinces or cities. They cannot simplify the tax code, shorten hospital waiting times, keep track of pedophiles or take guns away from criminals. We have to conclude the Liberals have a hidden agenda for dealing with priorities that matter to Canadians, but they have run out of time.

* * *

[Translation]

WORLD WAR II

Mr. Claude Bachand (Saint-Jean, BQ): Mr. Speaker, as we celebrate the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II and the liberation of the Netherlands, I join millions of others throughout the world in paying tribute to the courage of these men and women who risked their lives to free others.

Quebec is grateful to the war veterans still with us and those who have since died, to our fallen heroes and the members of their families.

In choosing to defend democracy, peace and freedom, you have set an example of the most noble sacrifice a human being can make. The Bloc Québécois recognizes your selfless contribution and salutes your bravery.

* * *

[English]

VETERANS

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, this past weekend I participated in events honouring the veterans who fought in the Battle of the Atlantic, the longest battle of World War II. I was with heroes, including at a dinner on the HMCS *Sackville* where I had the honour of sitting with two senior veterans, Earl Wagner, who last year was a Maritimer of the Week, and Murray Knowles. These men and so many others gave so much of themselves at such a young age, young men and women who answered their country's call to protect our freedom and way of life and served in the most difficult of circumstances.

At times words cannot fully express our profound gratitude. Tomorrow though, in the riding of Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, the Royal Canadian Mint will unveil a new circulation coin that will honour VE Day and our veterans. This five cent coin, the replication of the victory nickel, will have special meaning for vets because permission was sought and granted by Her Majesty to replace her effigy with that of King George VI.

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I am honoured to be from a military riding and to represent true Canadian heroes whose sacrifices we will never forget.

* * *

JUSTICE

Mr. Andrew Scheer (Regina—Qu'Appelle, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to express my deep concern with the criminal justice system in our country. Regina has experienced a steady increase in break and enters, car thefts and other violent crimes by habitual, repeat offenders. Because the punishment does not fit the crime, these repeat offenders are given a free pass to reoffend.

My party and I have tried to bring legislation forward to deal with this problem only to be defeated by other parties. NDP-Liberal coalition members have stood up and voted against minimum sentences for repeat offenders. The NDP has even complained that minimum sentences would lead to more trials. I thought that prosecuting criminals was a good thing.

My voters in north central Regina are crying out for the government to give the tools necessary to police officers so they can do their job, keep repeat offenders in jail and clean up drug dealers on our streets. We need more money for front line police officers and less money for a useless gun registry that does nothing to solve crime.

* * *

● (1405)

[Translation]

YOUTH

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, since I was elected in June 2004, I have visited many of the schools in my riding. During the recent parliamentary break, I had the opportunity to meet with grade three students at École Régionale de Saint-Basile.

Despite their tender years, these students impressed me a great deal with the quality and relevance of their questions. I am certain that some of these young people are our future leaders and that is why I take advantage of these opportunities to meet with students in our schools.

If the future is being shaped today then it is important to provide our young people with every opportunity to learn more about the workings of our government system and to give them a chance to speak up and ask the questions on their minds.

In closing, I want to thank Anick Grandmaison and her class for their warm welcome.

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BAGOTVILLE MILITARY BASE

Mr. Robert Bouchard (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, this morning, the chief of the air staff, Lieutenant-General Pennie, received an important document on the future of the Bagotville military base, which the Minister of National Defence will receive a little later today.

This document makes important recommendations which, if implemented, will “For a promising Future”, not only maintain personnel but also assure a promising future for the Bagotville base.

I want to congratulate and thank all the members of the retired armed forces personnel committee who helped write this report: Christian Couture, Daniel-René Verreault, Pierre Bettez, René Marion et Michel Aubin.

I congratulate these individuals who have the development of my region at heart. I hope that military and political leaders will recognize the importance of their report and respond in a positive manner.

* * *

[*English*]

TORONTO POLICE SERVICE

Hon. Jean Augustine (Etobicoke—Lakeshore, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate Mr. William Blair on his appointment as Toronto's 20th chief of police.

With almost three decades of service with the Toronto Police Service, Chief Blair is a man of high calibre who will no doubt carry out his duties in a stalwart manner. He is a professional dedicated to bettering our community.

In his maiden speech, Chief Blair addressed some of the pressing issues that faced Toronto's diverse community. I was particularly pleased to hear Chief Blair's emphasis on policing with a community based approach to fight the perception that police treated some individuals differently based on their race. He stated, “There is no greater challenge to our relationship with diverse communities than the corrosive issues of racism and racial bias”.

Solving this overarching disconnect is one of our greatest challenges. I hope through increased community policing that we, as members of the Toronto community, will make our streets and neighbourhoods a safer place to live.

I congratulate and welcome the chief.

* * *

RURAL POST OFFICES

Mr. Dave MacKenzie (Oxford, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in the early years of the 20th century, Oxford farmer George Wilcox led a tireless letter writing campaign in favour of free rural mail delivery. In 1908 his efforts were crowned with success when the first free mail delivery started in Springford, Ontario.

Rural post offices have played an important role since then. They provide a link to the federal government and they also connect residents to the rest of the country.

These rural post offices are now under risk of closure. Many communities will be devastated by the loss of their post office. They do not have the luxury of choosing alternatives.

I urge the government to protect rural post offices. Show some commitment to rural Canadians.

* * *

MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS

Hon. Paddy Torsney (Burlington, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, multiple sclerosis is an unpredictable and at times debilitating disease of the central nervous system which affects Canadians from coast to coast to coast.

Canada has one of the highest rates of MS in the world. Usually diagnosed between the ages of 15 and 40, for unknown reasons women develop the disease more than twice as often as men.

May is Multiple Sclerosis Awareness Month. Tomorrow I will be pleased to be kicking off the 29th annual MS carnation campaign. Tomorrow volunteers from the MS Society and I will pin carnations on all MPs as they enter this place to raise awareness of the MS campaign.

This weekend volunteers in over 280 communities across Canada will be selling carnations to raise money for MS research and for services for people with MS. Last year we raised over \$1.4 million.

I encourage all hon. members of the House and all Canadians to join me in supporting the MS Society to help make a difference for individuals living with this disease and their families. Tomorrow everyone in the House will be wearing a carnation and raising awareness.

* * *

● (1410)

VETERANS

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in the eight years that I have been a member of Parliament, I have never in my entire life been so ashamed to be in the same House as the Conservative Party.

The reality is this is a time when we put politics aside and remember our greatest heroes of the country, those people who fought and died for our country. This is the liberation of Holland. As a Dutch-born parliamentarian, I cannot say how ashamed I am of that party over there, playing cheap politics with Canada's greatest heroes. I ask them to put their swords away for a short while so we can honour our veterans in the manner that is dignified to them.

Everything we have in this country we owe to our veterans. The last thing we need to be doing is playing politics. I remind them that this is the year of the veteran, not the year of the politician.

LIBERAL PARTY OF CANADA

Mr. Jeremy Harrison (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the shocking testimony we have heard so far at the Gomery inquiry is only the tip of the iceberg of what the Liberals across the way have been up to in recent years. The RCMP has launched investigations into allegations of wrongdoing in many of the government's departments. The sheer number of cases would make a detective's head spin.

Let us take, for example, the Department of Citizenship and Immigration. Last year we heard allegations that a Romanian diplomat pulled strings with a Canadian immigration officer at Pearson airport so his exotic dancer daughter could get a rush work visa. What about the former director of Measurement Canada who is facing 11 charges for the fraudulent use of government credit cards to buy hockey memorabilia? We all miss the NHL but this is ridiculous. There have been investigations of the CCRA into confidential personal information on thousands of Canadians which has disappeared into thin air, and the records were not written in invisible ink.

What can we conclude from the likes of these investigations, one might ask? It is elementary, my dear Speaker. The members of this corrupt Liberal government are the last individuals we should trust to get to the bottom of the sponsorship scandal that they themselves created.

* * *

[Translation]

THE LIBERAL GOVERNMENT

Ms. Monique Guay (Rivière-du-Nord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, midnight last night was the fateful hour, the deadline for filing our income tax returns.

No doubt, Quebecers and Canadians took a few moments to wonder what the Liberal government, awash in scandals, will do with our tax dollars. There is the human resources scandal, in which the government wasted nearly \$1 billion; the firearms scandal, in which the government ran through nearly \$2 billion; and the sponsorship scandal, in which this government used public funds to try to buy the conscience of Quebecers, while filling the pockets of its cronies who paid it back in spades.

Paying taxes is already hard enough. It is discouraging for taxpayers to see how this government is wasting their money.

Without a doubt, at the stroke of midnight last night, these disturbing facts must have left more than one person angry.

* * *

[English]

SPONSORSHIP PROGRAM

Mr. Jeff Watson (Essex, CPC): Mr. Speaker,

When Mr. Small Town Cheap, tall and wiry,
Took on the big city Gomery inquiry,
The former prime minister refused to take the fall,
Scorned the taxpayers and showed us his golf balls.

No human pyramid in the Liberal caucus room next day,
But this Prime Minister's cheers and raucous applause, to say,

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Be true to the fool, 'cause what he did was real cool,
He never thought it crass, the former prime minister's "can of whoop-ass".

But now the Prime Minister says "no way",
He was not the cheerleader that day,
This Prime Minister clapped for the vaudeville act,
And put his former boss on a pedestal in fact.
So said the Liberal caucus chair,
Tell us the truth, Mr. Prime Minister, it is only fair.

The Liberal member for Beaches—East York gave,
The credit to the Prime Minister for the applause tidal wave.
And a Liberal member of that other place said,
Surely the Prime Minister led the clapping disgrace.

I think it is only fair to say,
Does the Prime Minister have a different story today?

* * *

LIBERATION OF THE NETHERLANDS

Ms. Ruby Dhalla (Brampton—Springdale, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, this week as we commemorate the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the Netherlands, we are reminded of the courage and the valour of those who fought the evil forces of tyranny and occupation. In the nine dreadful months that it took to liberate the Netherlands, over 7,600 Canadians made a supreme sacrifice.

Earlier today, Her Majesty Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands joined the Right Honourable Adrienne Clarkson, Canadian veterans, representatives of our veterans organizations and Canadian youth in a solemn commemorative ceremony at the Groesbeek Canadian War Cemetery, the final resting place of more than 2,300 Canadians. The Groesbeek Memorial at the entrance to the cemetery contains the names of another 103 Canadians who have no known graves. An inscription on this memorial reads, "We live in the hearts of friends for whom we died".

It is these words that perhaps best describe the very special friendship and very special bond between the Dutch people, Canada's veterans and Canadians from coast to coast.

* * *

●(1415)

[Translation]

THE ARMENIAN PEOPLE

Ms. Nicole Demers (Laval, BQ): Mr. Speaker, April 24 marked the commemoration of the 90th anniversary of the Armenian genocide. This crime against humanity took place in 1915 and its victims numbered 1.5 million.

Last year, the former Bloc Québécois member for Laval Centre, Madeleine Dalphond-Guiral, presented a motion to have Canada recognize the Armenian genocide. The motion was adopted.

We must remember these atrocities against the Armenian people in order to prevent such a thing ever happening again.

There are some 19,000 Armenians in Quebec, including a large community in Laval. I wish to recognize the outstanding involvement of this community and, more specifically, Laval's Centre communautaire arménien and the Armenian church, Sourp Kevork.

*Oral Questions***ORAL QUESTION PERIOD***[English]***THE BUDGET**

Hon. Stephen Harper (Leader of the Opposition, CPC): Mr. Speaker, last week the Prime Minister did the unprecedented. He ripped up his own budget. He has a new NDP budget, a budget which Parliament has never approved or voted on. Yet in the past 10 days the Prime Minister has spent over \$7 billion promoting this budget.

When will the Prime Minister face the House and have a vote here in the House on his new budget?

Right Hon. Paul Martin (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the government is very desirous of bringing the budget before the House. It is very desirous of seeking the support of the opposition for a budget that has absolutely responded to the needs of Canadians.

I would like to say that it is very unfortunate that the Leader of the Opposition, having initially supported the budget, then reneged on his word.

I must say I am delighted that we have been able to work together with the NDP to basically deal with the issues that face Canadians.

Hon. Stephen Harper (Leader of the Opposition, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister himself knew this was not the right budget when he tabled it less than two months ago.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order. I am sure the Leader of the Opposition appreciates the encouragement, but the Prime Minister has to be able to hear the question so he can provide a response.

The Leader of the Opposition has the floor. We will hear the question.

Hon. Stephen Harper: Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister has announced \$8 billion worth of new budgetary measures sponsored by the NDP. There is \$4.5 billion in spending and \$3.5 billion in tax cuts removed.

When will the Prime Minister bring his new budget to Parliament for a vote?

Right Hon. Paul Martin (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I simply remind the Leader of the Opposition that the budget that he is now decrying, with the additions this is the budget that the hon. member less than a month ago supported.

We have seen the Leader of the Opposition flip-flop on every single issue, but I have to say in this particular instance, he set his own personal record.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order. I sense there is a lot of enthusiasm in the House today, but we do have to have a little order so we can hear the questions and the responses. It is almost impossible for the Chair to hear; I do not know how other hon. members can.

We will have a little order please, while the Leader of the Opposition asks his next question.

• (1420)

Hon. Stephen Harper (Leader of the Opposition, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I do not know what planet the Prime Minister is on as his career spirals down the toilet.

This party was not part of that budget deal and it would never be so fiscally irresponsible.

[Translation]

Will the Prime Minister continue to play hide and seek with his budget? When will he hold a vote here in the House on his new NDP budget?

Right Hon. Paul Martin (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would ask the Leader of the Opposition what he did on Friday, April 22.

[English]

The hon. member forgets the fact that the budget implementation bill was up for debate on Friday, April 22. Instead of engaging in that debate what did the Leader of the Opposition do? He engaged once more in petty politics, putting his own partisan interests ahead of the interests of Canadians.

He cannot stand up in the House now and speak. He has already blown it.

Mr. Monte Solberg (Medicine Hat, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that is pretty rich coming from a guy who would sell his own soul to save his political skin. That is exactly what he did.

Here is what Nancy Hughes Anthony recently said about the budget:

The government's decision to rescind its commitment to tax relief for all businesses will threaten Canada's credibility—

A few weeks ago the finance minister told us that reducing the tax burden for business was essential for creating jobs and that the budget could not be changed. He had barely finished saying that when the Prime Minister came from behind, knocked him over the head and the NDP later came and stole his budget and ripped out the tax cuts. What is the Prime Minister—

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Minister of Finance, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the budget on February 23 included a number of very important tax measures—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order. The hon. member for Medicine Hat has asked a question and he is sitting there aching for an answer. We will have a little calm and quiet please, so that members can hear the Minister of Finance give his response to the member for Medicine Hat.

Hon. Ralph Goodale: Mr. Speaker, the budget on February 23 included a number of very important tax measures. Those are embodied to the large part in Bill C-43. The vast majority of those remain fully engaged in Bill C-43. There are two measures that will be put into a separate piece of legislation and voted upon separately.

The fact of the matter is we intend to proceed with the tax relief as and when this House is prepared to support it. That was moving on quite well until 10 days ago, until the Leader of the Opposition—

Oral Questions

The Speaker: The hon. member for Medicine Hat.

Mr. Monte Solberg (Medicine Hat, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I guess I should have asked that of the leader of the NDP.

Tom d'Aquino recently said that the deal would sacrifice Canada's ability to foster more high paying jobs. We know the NDP does not like high paying jobs.

The Prime Minister sold out fiscal responsibility, job creation, and the finance minister himself just to form a coalition with the socialists. Those are the actions of a desperate man.

Why does the finance minister allow himself to get used, abused, and then thrown aside by his own boss, the Prime Minister?

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Minister of Finance, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to say since we balanced the budget in 1997, after 27 years of deficits largely created by the party opposite, after we balanced the budget, we have the best debt to GDP ratio in the G-7, the best job creation record in the G-7, the fastest growth in living standards in the G-7, the only balanced budgets in the G-7, and the best fiscal performance since 1867, and that will not be jeopardized.

* * *

[Translation]

GOVERNMENT CONTRACTS

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, in the Earnscliffe matter, Warren Kinsella's notes are quite specific.

In October 1994, David Dingwall informed the Prime Minister's Office of what he referred to as the finance minister's "problem". In November of that same year, David Dingwall spoke directly to the Minister of Finance to tell him that he knew about the contracts illegally awarded to Earnscliffe. In the end, following intervention by the current Prime Minister, Earnscliffe still got the contract.

Warren Kinsella's description is highly detailed. Will the Prime Minister finally admit that Earnscliffe is his own personal sponsorship scandal?

• (1425)

[English]

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Minister of Finance, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, a simple repetition of the same old allegations does not make those allegations true. The fact of the matter is there is nothing new in what the hon. gentleman has referred to.

All the evidence on the public record would indicate that the appropriate procedures at the time were followed and the arguments made then by the then minister of finance were to increase competition, not reduce it.

[Translation]

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the response from the Minister of Finance reminds me of the answers Alfonso Gagliano used to defend Jean Chrétien.

The Prime Minister is the one who defined the terms of reference of the Gomery commission. He is the one who voluntarily restricted the scope of the inquiry solely to the sponsorship and advertising

program, excluding public opinion research contracts, which just happens to be Earnscliffe's specialty.

Will the Prime Minister admit that he himself ensured that the Gomery commission would not review the contracts awarded to Earnscliffe, in short, that he was careful to prevent the public inquiry from considering his own personal sponsorship scandal?

[English]

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Minister of Finance, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, once again I would refer the hon. gentleman to the external audit conducted by Ernst & Young in 1996, and the internal audit conducted by the Auditor General of Canada reported in the year 2003, both of which indicate that the polling activities of the government were handled properly and that the appropriate procedures were followed.

[Translation]

Mr. Benoît Sauvageau (Repentigny, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Finance has referred to two incomplete reports, but according to Warren Kinsella, the former finance minister and his office had a major role in the awarding of contracts to Earnscliffe, and they intervened numerous times to force other ministers to favour Earnscliffe too.

How does the Prime Minister explain the fact that Mr. Kinsella confirmed in a memo that Earnscliffe, which was partially owned by Michael Robinson, who co-directed the current Prime Minister's first leadership campaign, received \$615,000 in irregular contracts in 1995 alone?

[English]

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Minister of Finance, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, again I would challenge the hon. gentleman on the facts. There is nothing in the information that he has referred to and nothing on the public record that would indicate anything but the fact that the appropriate rules were followed. Where the office of the former minister of finance made representations, they were made to increase competition, not to decrease it.

[Translation]

Mr. Benoît Sauvageau (Repentigny, BQ): Mr. Speaker, many of the former finance minister's friends and collaborators have ties to Earnscliffe, a company which received favours from the finance minister and the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, and which was headed at the time by the current Minister of Finance.

Does the Prime Minister deny that his numerous ties to Earnscliffe and his heavy involvement in the awarding of contracts led to his being nicknamed the octopus by David Dingwall, former minister of Public Works?

[English]

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Minister of Finance, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, again I would make the point to the hon. gentleman that simply passing along personal insults and repeating allegations does not in fact make those insults or allegations true. There is nothing on the public record referred to today or previously in the House that would indicate that any rules were violated.

*Oral Questions***HOUSE OF COMMONS**

Hon. Jack Layton (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Prime Minister and I would appreciate it if he would answer it.

If Parliament is supposed to work, it really requires the Prime Minister to respect Parliament. On four separate occasions the majority of members in the House have made themselves very clear and yet the government has ignored the decision of the majority in the House. This is not what was promised.

Would the Prime Minister stand in his place and explain why he has refused to make Parliament work by ignoring the majority of members of Parliament and ignoring the House?

• (1430)

Hon. Mauril Bélanger (Deputy Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Minister responsible for Official Languages, Minister responsible for Democratic Reform and Associate Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as per the Constitution, various branches of government have various responsibilities. The legislative branch has certain responsibilities, as does the executive branch. In the capacity of their relationship, one of them has an advisory role. In some cases the advice is followed and in others it is not. Nevertheless, both the executive and the legislative can carry on as we do in the House.

* * *

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Hon. Jack Layton (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am not sure what the Prime Minister's point is in ignoring the one party in the House that is trying to get something done to make Parliament work. Let us try again.

It is important that veterans be honoured and that ceremonies be attended so that veterans can be honoured. It is also important that a veterans charter be adopted so that the quality of life of veterans can be enhanced.

Will the Prime Minister introduce the veterans charter legislation so we can then seek the unanimous consent of the House and get something done, instead of playing politics?

Right Hon. Paul Martin (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the question just posed by the leader of the NDP is a very important question.

I want to congratulate my colleague, the Minister of Veterans Affairs, for the initiative, commitment, respect and loyalty she has shown to our veterans.

It is the government's intention to proceed as quickly as possible with legislation here in the House.

* * *

SPONSORSHIP PROGRAM

Mr. Peter MacKay (Central Nova, CPC): I sense a lover's spat, Mr. Speaker.

[*Translation*]

On April 11, the Prime Minister told a reporter that all those involved in such dealings would be punished. We do know, however,

that under the Gomery inquiry's terms of reference, the judge cannot name the responsible parties.

How does the Prime Minister intend to punish the guilty parties when he has not given Justice Gomery the mandate to identify them?

[*English*]

Hon. Scott Brison (Minister of Public Works and Government Services, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Judge Gomery's mandate is very clear: he is fact finding. His report will be a fact-finding one that will tell Canadians what in fact happened and give the truth about it. Second, he will report back to us with prescriptives to prevent it from happening again.

That has been his mandate from the beginning and his mandate is clear. Our mandate as members of Parliament in a minority Parliament is clear as well. Canadians want us to work to make this Parliament work, which is exactly what we ought to be doing. When we make Parliament work we should be letting Justice Gomery do his work.

Mr. Peter MacKay (Central Nova, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the terms of reference for the Gomery commission specifically prevent recommendations on criminal culpability or civil responsibility for the millions of taxpayer dollars lost or stolen in ad scam.

In fact, Justice Gomery has said himself on this limitation that "there will be no legal consequences arising from the commission's findings". The Prime Minister himself said there was political direction in the scandal and yet he does not allow Justice Gomery to make that determination.

Why is he and his dupe now trying to dupe Canadians into thinking that this report will provide answers when he knows it will not? Will he just admit that it is Canadians who will judge who is morally and politically responsible—

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Public Works and Government Services.

Hon. Scott Brison (Minister of Public Works and Government Services, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is aware that there are in fact criminal investigations and there are charges against some of the individuals, like Jean Brault, who they present as being sacrosanct in terms of his testimony. In fact, Mr. Brault is facing fraud charges.

Further to that, the government has launched civil charges against 19 firms and individuals to recover \$41 million worth of funds. So there are several processes. One is on the recovery side, one is on the criminal side where charges are being pursued vigorously by the RCMP through the courts, and Justice Gomery is doing his work, which is exactly what Canadians want him to do.

Mrs. Diane Ablonczy (Calgary—Nose Hill, CPC): Mr. Speaker, there are misconceptions about the Gomery inquiry, so here are the facts. Gomery can hear evidence even during an election. Gomery can only make recommendations aimed at preventing mismanagement of future advertising activities. Gomery cannot say who is guilty.

Canadians already have more than enough evidence of Liberal corruption. The government no longer has moral authority. Is that not why the Liberals are afraid to face the voters?

• (1435)

Hon. Scott Brison (Minister of Public Works and Government Services, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we are not afraid of the truth. We want to have Justice Gomery's report so that Canadians have the truth. The people who are really afraid of the truth are in that party over there and the separatists because they do not want Canadians to have the truth and to have Justice Gomery's report before an election. They would rather Canadians make a rash decision based on allegations.

What is good for the separatists is not good for Canada, and that party ought to remember it.

Mrs. Diane Ablonczy (Calgary—Nose Hill, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the truth is that clause k of Gomery's mandate is Liberal no-fault insurance. Clause k prohibits Gomery naming anyone as the guilty party. Gomery can watch the surveillance camera and he can confirm the bank was robbed but he cannot disclose who grabbed the cash or who drove the getaway car.

Kickbacks, money laundering, bribes, extortion, all involving Liberals. The Prime Minister does not even try to deny Liberal corruption. Why are the Liberals still clinging to power?

Hon. Scott Brison (Minister of Public Works and Government Services, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the RCMP were called in to investigate and to pursue legal action.

It is important to recognize that the member for Newmarket—Aurora said in today's *Globe and Mail* that “Voting against the entire budget will impact negatively. We cannot jeopardize the funding for infrastructure programs which include transportation, roads and public transit”.

She is right. Let us invest in Canadian communities. Let us invest in child care. Let us invest in education. Let us invest in the Canadian Forces. Let us pass the budget, and let Justice Gomery do his work.

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, when asked about the shenanigans that enabled BCP to obtain the promotional contract for the referendum clarity bill via Communication Coffin, the Prime Minister said that everything had been done properly.

How can he use his position as Prime Minister to claim everything was done properly when it has been clearly proven that Communication Coffin was used as a front for this contract? Is that what the PM means by properly?

Hon. Scott Brison (Minister of Public Works and Government Services, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, these are allegations, not facts. To know the facts, we need to wait for Justice Gomery's report.

Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, as it happens, Canadians now know enough about the sponsorship scandal. I am merely repeating what the Prime Minister himself said when he decided last year to call an election.

Oral Questions

Now, to get back to BCP, which was not eligible for the clarity bill contract, but managed to get it by going through Communication Coffin, a company which, according to Paul Coffin himself, had been used as a front—

The Speaker: The Minister of Public Works and Government Services.

Hon. Scott Brison (Minister of Public Works and Government Services, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Canadians want to see Parliament work. It is obvious why the separatists do not want it to work: they do not want Canada to work. It is dangerous for the Conservatives to support the separatists. What is good for the separatists is not good for Canada.

* * *

JUSTICE

Mr. Richard Marceau (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the more we look, the more we see a hint of Liberal red peaking out from the robes of the chief justice of the Quebec Court of Appeal, Michel Robert.

On November 19, 2004, when asked whether he would have been appointed to the Court of Appeal if he had been a sovereignist, he told journalists, “No, I would not be on the Court of Appeal because I believe the Government of Canada appoints people with federalist sentiments when there are openings in the hierarchy.”

How can the Minister of Justice claim that such comments are not prejudicial to the independence of the judiciary in Canada?

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I understand that the hon. member has filed a complaint with the Canadian Judicial Council. We should let the council do its work.

Mr. Richard Marceau (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, BQ): Mr. Speaker, what a sorry spectacle. The hon. member for Mount Royal, that known champion, here and abroad, of human rights, is now condoning the words of Chief Justice Robert, which are an assault on judicial independence and freedom of conscience.

When will he stop this Liberal partisan behaviour and start acting like a Minister of Justice by denouncing, in no uncertain terms, these unacceptable comments by Michel Robert?

• (1440)

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, what is unacceptable is to tarnish the reputation of excellence of the judiciary. I will have no part of it.

Oral Questions

[English]

GOVERNMENT CONTRACTS

Mr. James Moore (Port Moody—Westwood—Port Coquitlam, CPC): Mr. Speaker, long-time Liberal Warren Kinsella sent a memo in 1995 to the public works minister stating that \$615,000 in government contracts were given to the Prime Minister's friends at Earncliffe in violation of cabinet guidelines.

David Herle, who was the Prime Minister's campaign manager, worked at Earncliffe and received this money after the Prime Minister as finance minister insisted that David Herle and Earncliffe receive the contracts.

The Prime Minister has two choices: rise in his place and admit that he directed cash to his friends, or rise and call Warren Kinsella a liar. Which is it?

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Minister of Finance, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, there is nothing new in the allegations that the hon. gentleman has made. Just repeating them does not make them true. The fact is that all of the evidence on the public record indicates that the appropriate procedures at the time were indeed followed and that any intervention by the office of the former minister of finance was intended to increase competition and not decrease it.

Mr. James Moore (Port Moody—Westwood—Port Coquitlam, CPC): Mr. Speaker, with answers like that it is no wonder Bono has quit the Liberal Party.

[Translation]

According to Mr. Kinsella, this Prime Minister granted contracts to his friends, his friends at Earncliffe, in particular, in the 1990s, people like Scott Reid, who today is his director of communications, and David Herle, who ran his leadership campaign.

How can the Prime Minister continue to manipulate the truth on the granting of contracts?

[English]

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Minister of Finance, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, when it comes to assessing the veracity of the Prime Minister compared to the other witness to whom the hon. gentleman refers, I will put my money on the Prime Minister every day of the week.

* * *

[Translation]

JUSTICE

Mr. Peter Van Loan (York—Simcoe, CPC): Mr. Speaker, serious allegations have been made with respect to the appointment of judges. The former director general of the Liberal Party has said he regularly received calls from a member of the judicial selection committee to find out whether candidates had done enough work for the party. When the answer was yes, the candidates were appointed judges.

Can the Minister of Justice tell Canadians whether he has called for an inquiry into these serious allegations?

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, if there are allegations of corruption, the police can be contacted. The Gomery commission is proceeding.

Another process can be launched. However, I do not want to start interrogating people solely on the basis of allegations.

[English]

Mr. Peter Van Loan (York—Simcoe, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would hope the Minister of Justice would take more seriously his obligation to defend the independence of the judiciary.

We now know that a step in the process of appointing judges is for a member of the supposedly non-partisan appointments committee to confirm with Liberal headquarters how much work nominees have done for the Liberal Party. This is a very serious matter, calling into question the independence of the judiciary. At a time when Canadians are looking to the courts to deliver justice to sponsorship players facing criminal charges, this news corrodes public confidence in the courts.

In light of these additional revelations, does the Prime Minister still deny that there was partisan involvement in the judicial appointment—

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice.

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, what erodes public confidence in the administration of justice in the judiciary is any kind of guilt by unfounded association, any kind of trafficking in innuendo, and drive-by smears. We will not indulge in those things before the House.

* * *

HOUSING

Hon. Maria Minna (Beaches—East York, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Labour and Housing.

There is a significant need for affordable housing in the province of Ontario, particularly for people with mental illness, victims of domestic violence, and lower income families.

Can the minister tell the House what he has done to help the people in Ontario who have faced such a critical housing need for so long?

● (1445)

Hon. Joe Fontana (Minister of Labour and Housing, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the hon. member for her tremendous support. This caucus and cabinet have made it possible to sign a historic \$602 million agreement with the province of Ontario, a Liberal government that believes in people and housing unlike a previous Conservative government that did not care diddly-squat about people and housing in Ontario.

Our partnerships with municipalities, not for profit housing, cooperative housing and the private sector will deliver 20,000 units to the people of Ontario. This party stands for housing. That party stands for nothing.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Speaker: Order, please. Some new words are coming into the vocabulary. I would urge the Minister of Labour and Housing to have a discussion with the Deputy Prime Minister about the propriety of the language used. Perhaps we can tone it down a little.

*Oral Questions***MAHER ARAR INQUIRY**

Ms. Alexa McDonough (Halifax, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the public inquiry into Canada's role in the deportation of Maher Arar has finally resumed public hearings and it is about time. Canadians can now learn who played what role in Arar's deportation and his horrific ordeal in Syria. Canada's previous foreign affairs minister tried to cook up a deal with the Bush administration to avoid this public inquiry.

Will this government finally end the stonewalling, table all documents, and allow an open and transparent inquiry to get to the bottom of this horrendous injustice?

Hon. Geoff Regan (Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the government is committed to a full and complete inquiry. In camera hearings balance the need to make the inquiry as transparent as possible while at the same time legitimately protecting massive security concerns, as we must.

Ms. Alexa McDonough (Halifax, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the journalist whose home was raided by the RCMP because she was reporting on the government's role in the Arar deportation has received the World Press Freedom Award, a telling commentary on how journalistic freedom is not always guaranteed in today's Canada. Yet, we still do not get clear assurances that this government is prepared to end the obstruction and let the public inquiry do its work in public.

Will the government assure Canadians it will begin to cooperate with the Maher Arar inquiry, or is that just too much to ask?

Hon. Geoff Regan (Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the government is cooperating with the Maher Arar inquiry. The government agreed recently with the judge on the case on what should be permitted to be disclosed. My hon. colleague should know that.

Is she really saying that the government should disclose how CSIS and the RCMP operate? Should the government really disclose information it has that may endanger the lives of informants?

* * *

[Translation]

GOVERNMENT CONTRACTS

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Nepean—Carleton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Liberal Senator Massicotte would have us believe that he broke no rule in signing a \$100 million contract with the federal government. But subsection 14(1) of the Parliament of Canada Act states, “No person who is a member of the Senate shall...be a party to...any contract under which the public money of Canada is to be paid.”

What is the Prime Minister waiting for to punish this Liberal senator who has broken the law?

[English]

Hon. Scott Brison (Minister of Public Works and Government Services, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the contract was signed well before the individual was a senator.

Further to that, yesterday, prior to question period, a letter was delivered to the hon. member fully explaining the situation. The fact is that the lease was awarded through a fair and open tendering process that was overseen by KPMG, and the winner of the

competitive contract, on the basis of least cost, was Alexis Nihon, a large, publicly traded company.

The occupation of the building took time because of the amalgamation of two units into one entity within government and the set up requirements. The hon. member knows the truth because he received the truth. He is just plain—

• (1450)

The Speaker: The hon. member for Nepean—Carleton.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Nepean—Carleton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the fact remains that section 14 of the Parliament of Canada Act bans senators from participating in government business, whether they were appointed before or after that government business started. That means the Liberals broke the law and paid millions to a Liberal senator's company for an empty building.

What will it take for this Prime Minister to stand in the House and announce what he will do to punish this Liberal senator who has broken the law?

Hon. Scott Brison (Minister of Public Works and Government Services, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would urge the hon. member to go outside and make that exact allegation. I think he would require some legal representation from members of his own caucus, perhaps, and God forbid for his sake, because I do not think he would get very far in that sense.

This contract was tendered fairly and openly. It was overseen by KPMG and the company that won the contract is a large, publicly traded, commercial real estate company that owns over 50 commercial properties in Canada.

Members opposite are engaged in another drive-by smear campaign because they are not interested in the truth. They are only interested in attacking reputations under parliamentary privilege.

* * *

CANADIAN BROADCASTING CORPORATION

Ms. Bev Oda (Durham, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Liberal patronage and cronyism has hit a new low. The Prime Minister has named Mr. Sahi to the CBC board.

Who is that? A close personal friend of the Prime Minister, a former business associate of Canada Steamship Lines, and a donor to the Liberal Party who owns the building the CBC leases as its head office in Ottawa. One would think it was enough that he gets the rent cheque from the CBC every month.

Can the Prime Minister justify to Canadians his decision to put his pal and supporter on the CBC board?

Oral Questions

[Translation]

Hon. Liza Frulla (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Minister responsible for Status of Women, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we are proud of the appointments we have made to the CBC and Radio-Canada. I am referring to Peter Herrndorf, Trina McQueen, Guy Fournier, Johanne Brunet, Yasmin Jivraj and Mr. Sahi. Why? Because Mr. Sahi was named entrepreneur of the year. We need a businessman who is also able to grasp the administrative complexity of the CBC and Radio-Canada. He has been chosen for his competence.

[English]

Ms. Bev Oda (Durham, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the minister just does not get it. Mr. Sahi was appointed to the CBC board. A close personal friend of the Prime Minister, he owns the building the CBC leases. A landlord cannot be trusted to make the best decisions for the CBC on matters of leases and capital assets.

The Prime Minister claimed he would condemn to history the practice of cronyism. How can he justify to Canadians this appointment, a blatant conflict of interest?

[Translation]

Hon. Liza Frulla (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Minister responsible for Status of Women, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is appalling to put on trial a man who, in 1994, was named turnaround entrepreneur of the year, who joined the Bank of Montreal in 1977 and, in 1982, while working for the bank, purchased businesses which he developed.

He was appointed simply because he is an entrepreneur and because the CBC needs people like him. He is a member of an exceptional community, yet people are trying to put him on trial here, in this place. That is beyond me.

* * *

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Ms. Christiane Gagnon (Québec, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Social Development has signed agreements on child care with two provinces already, but is delaying doing so with Quebec, the source of Canada's low cost child care model.

Can the minister guarantee he is prepared to negotiate an agreement with Quebec that will not impose a Canada-wide standard or conditions? Can he confirm that in this House today?

[English]

Hon. Ken Dryden (Minister of Social Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased that the Government of Canada has signed agreements in principle with the governments of Manitoba and Saskatchewan that will support the development of early learning and child care in those provinces.

I am hopeful that Quebec will participate in a new initiative on early learning and child care. A new initiative should be flexible enough to accommodate each jurisdiction's particular priorities and circumstances. We all know that Quebec is a leader when it comes to child care in this country. We are respectful of Quebec and its leadership on early learning and child care, and at this moment our officials have had preliminary negotiations on how we might move forward in—

● (1455)

The Speaker: The hon. member for Québec.

[Translation]

Ms. Christiane Gagnon (Québec, BQ): Mr. Speaker, preliminary negotiations with Quebec should be a given, because the Prime Minister has already said that Quebec would receive its cheque unconditionally.

Can the Minister of Social Development renew this commitment and confirm his readiness to negotiate an agreement on child care with Quebec that provides the right to opt out unconditionally and with full compensation?

[English]

Hon. Ken Dryden (Minister of Social Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as I said a moment ago, we are in preliminary discussions with the province of Quebec. Those conversations have gone well. I expect them to go well. They are discussions that are conducted with the understanding of all that has been done in the area of early learning and child care in the province of Quebec. We would hope to come to an agreement that would respect all of that.

* * *

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Mr. Stockwell Day (Okanagan—Coquihalla, CPC): Mr. Speaker, billions of dollars have been stolen from the Iraqi people in the UN oil for food program. If Canada really cares about the United Nations, it will insist that all of its officials participate fully in any investigation.

Maurice Strong, the close friend and long-time business associate of the Prime Minister, has recently stepped aside from his UN duties because of a million dollar cash infusion into his company Cordex.

We want to know, will the Prime Minister confirm or deny reports that the third investor in Cordex is in fact his family business CSL?

The Speaker: Order, please. I am afraid that question is out of order. The hon. member knows it does not concern the administrative responsibility of the government. The hon. member for Okanagan—Coquihalla may have a second question.

[Translation]

Mr. Stockwell Day (Okanagan—Coquihalla, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canada's reputation at the UN is very important. Each time I ask the Prime Minister a question about Maurice Strong, he refuses to answer. My question is quite simple, however.

Has the Prime Minister already discussed with Mr. Strong the involvement of his company, CSL, or any other Canadian company in the oil for food scandal?

The Speaker: Order, please. Would someone like to answer this question? The Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Speaker's Ruling

[English]

Hon. Pierre Pettigrew (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, this is a question that we believe was out of order. It is not that there is no member of the government ready to respond. I am ready to respond.

Mr. Maurice Strong is not a Canadian government employee. Mr. Maurice Strong works for the United Nations. He has denied all of the allegations and this government believes that as long as there are allegations, we need inquiries which the United Nations is conducting right now.

This government is ready to respond, but this is not the kind of question we should have on the floor of this House. This is not government business.

* * *

[Translation]

INFRASTRUCTURE

Ms. Françoise Boivin (Gatineau, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as the member of Parliament for Gatineau who believes in the economic development of the Outaouais region, I am proud of the announcement made by the Government of Canada on Friday to invest \$38 million toward the completion of highway 50.

Could the Minister of State for Infrastructure and Communities tell the House what other measures were taken for the rest of Quebec?

Hon. John Godfrey (Minister of State (Infrastructure and Communities), Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I had the pleasure of announcing, with my hon. colleague, the Minister of Transport, a total of \$1.2 billion in transfers for infrastructure in Quebec.

I am pleased that Canada and Quebec have announced priorities with respect to the enhancement of highways, including the Dorval interchange, as well as clean drinking water initiatives.

This announcement also included the details of an agreement in principle with Quebec on the municipal rural infrastructure program.

* * *

● (1500)

[English]

SPONSORSHIP PROGRAM

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Regina—Lumsden—Lake Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in this week's *Hill Times*, the Liberal member for Lambton—Kent—Middlesex called the Gomery commission "stupid". We all know that the daily confessions of corruption have not made the Liberals across Canada very fearful of Gomery, so here is my question for the Prime Minister. Does he agree with his Liberal colleague that the Gomery commission is in fact stupid or is this not in fact merely a smear campaign to try to besmirch Mr. Gomery's reputation before he has a chance to table his final report?

Hon. Scott Brison (Minister of Public Works and Government Services, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the fact is that our government has remained absolutely committed to supporting Justice Gomery's work. We stand shoulder to shoulder with Canadians who want the truth from Justice Gomery, who want the report from Justice Gomery.

The fact is that within this House the only people who really want to see Justice Gomery kneecapped and not given an opportunity to report to Canadians before an election are the separatists and their bedfellows, the Conservatives, who want Canadians to make a decision based on allegations, not on the truth.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Regina—Lumsden—Lake Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the minister opposite speaks the talk but he does not walk the walk, particularly with respect to his other colleagues. Here is what one of the other colleagues he is talking about says in today's *Globe and Mail* in reference to Gomery. The member for Victoria said that this is rather small potatoes. He said, "Other countries have serious problems...and we worry about a seven-year-old ripoff of government money".

Will the Prime Minister finally admit that he has an orchestrated campaign to besmirch the reputation of Justice Gomery and divert Canadians' attention from the real issue, the issue that this is a corrupt government desperately trying to cling to power?

Hon. Scott Brison (Minister of Public Works and Government Services, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in the same direction, let me quote some of the hon. member's colleagues, and in fact the member for Newmarket—Aurora, who said that "voting against the entire budget will impact negatively". She said, "We can't jeopardize the funding for the infrastructure programs, which include transportation, roads and public transit". Or perhaps I will quote the member for Cumberland—Colchester—Musquodoboit Valley, who said that "people want to wait until we hear all the evidence from the Gomery commission".

He ought to listen to his colleagues over there who are saying to let Justice Gomery do his work. That was before they were muzzled by their leader when they returned to Ottawa and were told to forget about what their constituents told them last week.

* * *

PRESENCE IN GALLERY

The Speaker: I would like to draw to the attention of hon. members the presence in the gallery of the Honourable Peter Lougheed, former premier of Alberta and Chancellor Emeritus of Queen's University at Kingston.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

* * *

● (1505)

POINTS OF ORDER

ORAL QUESTION PERIOD—SPEAKER'S RULING

The Speaker: I am now prepared to rule on the point of order raised on Tuesday, April 12 by the hon. member for Newton—North Delta concerning an accusation made by the hon. Minister of Citizenship and Immigration during that day's question period that the hon. member was having constituents post bonds payable to him in exchange for his aid in seeking temporary visitor visas for family members.

Privilege

I would like to thank the hon. member for raising this matter as well as providing additional information in the form of a letter dated April 20. I would also like to thank the hon. Minister of Citizenship and Immigration and the hon. leader of the official opposition for their interventions.

In presenting his case, the hon. member for Newton—North Delta stated that the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration had accused him of having constituents post bonds payable to him for his intervention on their behalf to acquire visitor visas. This, the hon. member claimed, was absolutely false, and neither he nor his staff had ever done so. The hon. member pointed out that the issue had been erroneously reported in the media and had been corrected. He then asked the hon. minister for an apology.

The remarks referred to had been made by the minister in reply to a question posed by the hon. member for Ajax—Pickering during question period. The hon. member had referred to allegations that \$50,000 cheques for bonds were being taken by a member of the House. He asked if the minister was looking into the matter and what he intended to do about it.

[*Translation*]

In his answer, the minister stated that those were not allegations, but admissions by the member for Newton-North Delta, that it was a very serious misrepresentation of the immigration system, and that he had asked the ethics commissioner to look into the matter.

[*English*]

During his intervention on the point of order, the hon. minister stated that he had simply read from the transcript of the meeting of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration of March 24, wherein the hon. member for Newton—North Delta had admitted to the actions.

As I promised, I have reviewed the transcript of the committee meeting referred to. In his remarks in the committee during consideration of Bill C-283, an act to amend the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act and the Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations, of which he is the sponsor, the hon. member for Newton—North Delta stated categorically that he took no money from anyone, and that in asking constituents to sign a guarantee bond document he was testing the genuineness of their promise to ensure that the visitor for whom they were seeking a visa would leave Canada as required.

Further to this, on April 21 the hon. minister rose in the House to speak to the matter. Noting the importance of conducting its affairs with civility, the minister said he wished to take the opportunity to respond to the point of order. He advised the House that while he felt his initial intervention was worthwhile and stood by his decision to refer the matter to the Ethics Commissioner, he was withdrawing remarks he had made during question period on April 13 in reply to a question from the hon. member for Edmonton—Strathcona suggesting that the hon. member had profited personally from this type of action. I would like to thank the minister for doing so.

In raising this matter, the hon. member has had the opportunity to set the record straight. It seems to the Chair that this is not a point of order but a dispute as to facts. It is not for your Speaker to judge the accuracy of statements that are under dispute. Indeed, it would be

inappropriate for me to do so even if I were to want to pronounce further on this case, since I am now in receipt of a communication from the Ethics Commissioner informing me that an inquiry into the matter has been requested.

May I remind the House of section 27(5) of the Conflict of Interest Code, which forms part of our Standing Orders as Appendix 1. It reads as follows:

(5) Once a request for an inquiry has been made to the Ethics Commissioner, Members should respect the process established by this Code and permit it to take place without commenting further on the matter.

Accordingly, further consideration of this matter will be put aside until such time as the process established by our Conflict of Interest Code has run its course.

Once again, I wish to thank the hon. member for bringing this matter to the attention of the House.

The Chair has notice of another question of privilege from the hon. member for West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country.

* * *

● (1510)

PRIVILEGE

FRANKING PRIVILEGES

Mr. John Reynolds (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened with interest this morning to the member for Ajax—Pickering with regard to a concern he had about 10 percenters going to his riding. As we all know in the House, all parties have the privilege of distributing 10 percenters. Parties send them into the ridings of other members. That has been a long-standing practice and I know this is under review by the Board of Internal Economy as to whether it is a proper method of using taxpayer money.

When I arrived home last week for the break, a few of my neighbours saw me in the garden. As there is nice weather in British Columbia, one can do that there. My neighbours came to visit me and asked why they were receiving mail from a Liberal member in North Vancouver in a franked envelope. Inside the envelope was a note from the Prime Minister displaying his name and the B.C. team, talking about the great job they had done across Canada. On the back of this piece of paper it talks about all the grants this Liberal team has given out in my riding.

I do not have a problem with the Liberals doing anything in my riding. However, I have heard the rumour that they think they have a chance next time so they are inundating the riding with mail. It is not just from the member for North Vancouver. I received a fax yesterday from a concerned citizen in another part of my constituency. I sent him back the letter saying that, yes, he got a piece of material from the member for Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca. It had the same material in it.

I heard from another part of my riding today that some other Liberal member has it going to another part. I can only assume the Liberals are sending these franked envelopes to every home in my riding.

Government Orders

As we all know, a 10 percenter goes out in bulk. Bulk mail is very inexpensive or a minimal cost, and we all have the same rules to follow.

I emailed the House of Commons this morning asking what the rules were. David, the person who works in the House leader's office, sent me the following answer:

This is not an attempt not to answer your question.

House of Commons resources can only be used for carrying out of parliamentary functions. Franking privileges are pursuant to the Canada Post Act and therefore the House of Commons have no jurisdiction.

The Member is accountable and he/she would have to defend the use in court of public opinion. I always advise Members to be careful.

It seems to me that we do not have any real rules when it comes to the frank. It is an absolute affront to the Canadian taxpayer for the Liberal Party to be franking envelopes to every home in my constituency.

I hear some mumbling and groaning, but my party does not send things in envelopes on a mass basis to other ridings. We all do 10 percenters. I do not have a problem with that, but I have a problem with using the frank in a mass mailing basis to the ridings of opposition members or for us to do it in their ridings.

Other matters have been referred to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs and I believe this matter should go to that committee. I believe my privileges have been affected. I will not be here a lot longer, but if I can help change the rules so we do not waste taxpayer money in this fashion, I would love to be before the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs to discuss this issue with the other issues it is discussing.

If you find that I have a prima facie case, Mr. Speaker, I would be prepared to move the proper motion.

Mr. Derek Lee (Scarborough—Rouge River, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, this is certainly a matter of privilege, although I do not know whether it is a question that you are in a position to resolve today. I have a couple of comments.

The hon. member attempts to make a distinction between communications that are in a franked envelope and communications that go out as part of what we call 10 percenters. We also have householders and perhaps other methods of communication. It has been my perception over the last while that the Board of Internal Economy, and I know the member opposite is very familiar with how that operates, has allowed our system of communications to evolve in a way that fully allows for full exchange of partisan and non-partisan information and communications, and in my view it is getting a little out of hand.

I would like my remarks to be taken here today as an effort to urge the Board of Internal Economy to rein this in. At my residence in Ottawa, I received some very interesting things from the New Democratic Party, which were quite partisan. It is a matter at which I think colleagues in the House will have to look.

There is no sense throwing stones back and forth. It is an area that I believe needs some attention because we are spending a ton of taxpayer money on very partisan communications all over the country, well outside the ridings where these privileges are intended to apply to facilitate communications with our constituents.

● (1515)

The Speaker: The hon. member for West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country was absolutely correct in the reading of the memorandum that he had from the member of the office of the House leader indicating the confusion surrounding the use of the frank. While hon. members are free to use franking privileges in ways that it is not perhaps for the Speaker or the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs to investigate, the material in it is something that the committee in my view can have a look at, especially since it appears it might have been printed here and printed as one of the 10 percenters or some other kind of other publication that members can have printed in the House.

Since there may be confusion on the point, since the matter is currently before the committee because of a reference I made two weeks ago on this very issue and since there might be another one tomorrow, depending on the outcome of a vote on the motion put by the hon. member for Ajax—Pickering, I am prepared to allow the hon. member for West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country to move a motion to refer the matter to committee. I believe there probably is a question of privilege here.

REFERENCE TO STANDING COMMITTEE ON PROCEDURE AND HOUSE AFFAIRS

Mr. John Reynolds (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I move:

That the matter of the question of privilege raised by the member for West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country on Tuesday, May 3, 2005, be referred to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

The Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to)

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[*English*]

CIVIL MARRIAGE ACT

The House resumed consideration of the motion that Bill C-38, an act respecting certain aspects of legal capacity for marriage for civil purposes, be read the second time and referred to a committee, and of the motion that this question be now put.

Mr. Leon Benoit (Vegreville—Wainwright, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to speak against the Liberal government's same sex marriage bill, Bill C-38.

Renowned expert Eugene Meehan, a former national president of the Canadian Bar Association and former executive legal officer of the Supreme Court of Canada, has ruled in a legal opinion: first, that Canada's highest court has not required Parliament to amend the traditional definition of marriage, as many Liberal MPs have indicated; second, that gay marriage has not receive protection under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms; and third, that the federal government has no power to protect from human rights complaints religious officials who do not want to perform gay marriages, as such powers rest with the provinces.

Government Orders

In my speech today, I will give a brief summary of what was determined by this esteemed expert, Mr. Eugene Meehan, and what the Leader of the Opposition as prime minister with a Conservative government would do with this important issue.

The first question Mr. Meehan answered was this. Would the Parliament of Canada be acting consistently with the same sex marriage reference opinion of the Supreme Court of Canada if it were to enact the statutory definition of marriage as the union of one man and one woman for life to the exclusion of all others?

To answer this, he broke the question down into three separate questions, A, B and C.

Question A is: Does the reference require Parliament to amend the common law traditional definition of marriage, as many of the Liberal MPs have in fact claimed? His answer is, no. The answers provided in a federal reference are an advisory opinion only to the governor in council, or in other words, to the government. In addition, in the reference, the Supreme Court did not address the question of whether an opposite sex definition of marriage would fail to meet charter requirements.

He said that the same sex marriage reference did not require Parliament to amend the common law definition of marriage for the following reasons. First, the Supreme Court has recognized that answers provided in a federal reference are by nature advisory only. Second, the federal government took the position before the Supreme Court of Canada in the same sex marriage reference that it was not bound by the court's answers. Third, the Supreme Court did not address the question of whether an opposite sex definition of marriage would fail to meet the charter requirements. Fourth, ultimately the decision of whether to follow or not a reference opinion is political, not legal.

Question B is: Should it be the case that the purpose of the common law definition of marriage arose out of Christendom, is it consistent with the constitutional precedent for the Parliament of Canada to nevertheless define marriage as the union of one man and one woman for life, to the exclusion of all others, so long as the purpose is secular and consistent with section 1 of the charter?

Mr. Meehan's answer is, yes. Legislation pertaining to the legal capacity for civil marriage falls within the subject matter of section 91.26 of the Constitution Act, 1867, which pertains to the exclusive legislative competence of Parliament.

As we know, traditional marriage is supported by all of the world's main religions and by non-religious people as well.

Question C is: Would Parliament be acting consistent with jurisprudence if it determined that for the test under section 1 of the charter, the purpose of the restriction of the statutory definition of marriage to one man and one woman is exclusively to serve the best interests of children and to create a public institution that makes it more likely that a child will be raised by the child's own mother and father?

The answer to question C is, yes. The Supreme Court has previously recognized the importance of protecting the best interests of children in a variety of contexts.

It is therefore constitutionally possible that a law defining marriage as the union of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others, specifically promulgated with the secular objective of the best interests of the children, could be perceived by the courts as a pressing and substantial objective.

• (1520)

In light of the fact that under section 1 charter analysis it is the government that has the evidential burden, proof would need to be tendered as to why and how a restrictive marriage definition is required to protect children in Canadian society and how it advances the well-being of the interests of children generally.

If the new federal act included assurances that despite a restrictive statutory definition of marriage for purposes of federal law, all rights, benefits and privileges accruing to the opposite sex couples in marriage would apply equally and without discrimination to those in same sex relationships, this could augment the constitutional chances of new legislation withstanding a charter challenge.

I wish to note that this is exactly what the Conservative Party of Canada and what a Conservative government will do, but I will discuss that later.

The second question that the Lang Michener letter reviews is Meehan's opinion on the religious freedom concerns that will likely flow from the enactment of Bill C-38 should it pass. The main question was: What religious freedom issues would Canadians face should Bill C-38 be enacted as proposed?

Mr. Meehan broke the question into three parts, which were A, B and C.

Question A: Does the Parliament of Canada have the constitutional jurisdiction to protect by statute the freedom of religious groups or officials to refuse to perform marriages that are not in accordance with the group's religious beliefs? His answer, in his legal opinion, was no. He said that provincial governments, pursuant to section 92(12) of the Constitution Act, 1867, had exclusive jurisdiction with respect to the solemnization of marriage.

Question B: If Bill C-38 is enacted could religious groups or officials who refuse to solemnize a marriage become the subject of actions by others? His answer was yes. He said that a punitive same sex spouse who is refused a marriage licence or a place to hold a wedding would have a variety of options to assert his or her rights. I would like to note that this has already happened, so it is not at all a hypothetical question.

Question C: Does the Parliament of Canada have the power, through Bill C-38 or otherwise, to protect religious groups or officials from the actions referred to above? His answer was no. He said that the Parliament of Canada cannot protect religious groups or officials from the actions referred to above because the solemnization of marriage lies within the exclusive competence of the provinces.

Therefore the claims made by the government in that regard simply are not true.

Government Orders

This legal opinion, which was delivered by Mr. Meehan, an esteemed expert, is supported by 35 legal counsels who maintain active practices or academic interest in litigation, human rights, religious, charity or constitutional law.

It is clear, therefore, that only the federal government can legislate a definition of marriage for the entire country. The Leader of the Opposition has indicated that as Prime Minister he will do so. That definition will be the union of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others. Our legislation would also maintain and protect in law the rights, benefits, obligations and responsibilities of other types of unions.

The Leader of the Opposition intends to protect the traditional definition of marriage while equally recognizing other types of unions. This is a reasonable compromise position that most Canadians support. Why do the Liberals refuse to support our actions and our proposals in this regard when they know that a majority of Canadians support this position?

The fact is the Prime Minister and the Liberal Party want to change the definition of marriage and they are out of step with Canadians on this issue. They want to shift the discussion to the debate about rights and the courts because they know their position on the definition of marriage itself is not consistent with the views of Canadians.

Like the bill before the House today, our legislation will be subject to a free vote by all members of the Conservative caucus. I sincerely hope that the other parties in the House will recognize that each member of Parliament should represent their constituents on this important issue. No party, except the Conservatives, is allowing a free vote on this issue in the House.

● (1525)

I will continue to stand and fight for marriage, for the family, and for a strong and healthy society. I will help defeat the government and the same sex marriage bill.

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I, like most of my colleagues on this side of the House and many on the other side of the House as well, believe in the traditional definition of marriage as the union of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others. Many or most Canadians feel the same way. The number of petitions presented in the House and the number of letters and e-mails we have all received show this to be true.

There is no doubt that there are sincere and deeply held feelings on both sides of this issue. There is also no doubt that the majority of Canadians are looking for a middle ground compromise that would recognize the valid concerns of the partisans on either side. This is the type of country Canada is and the type of goodwill the people of Canada do usually show.

In the course of this debate those of us who support marriage have been told that to amend this legislation to reflect the traditional definition of marriage would be a violation of human rights and an unconstitutional violation of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

I believe that this is an attempt by the government to shift the grounds of this debate. It does not want to debate the question of the traditional definition of marriage versus same sex marriage so it would rather focus on attacking its opponents as opposing human rights and the charter. This is not the middle ground. This is partisan divisive politics.

However this debate is not about human rights. It is a political, social policy decision and should be treated in that light.

The citizens of Elgin—Middlesex—London during the last election chose me to come to this place and help make the laws of the land. Many during the election talked openly about not allowing unelected court judges to become the lawmakers. That duty is ours and we should endeavour to do it to the best of our ability.

Let me present several reasons why the issue of same sex marriage is not a human rights issue and why defining the traditional definition of marriage would not violate the charter or require the use of the notwithstanding clause.

First, as has been said in the House, no internationally recognized human rights document has ever suggested that there is a right to same sex marriage. For example, almost all the rights listed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the foundation of the United Nations human rights charter, are worded as purely individual rights, rights which everyone shall have or no one shall be denied. However, when it comes to marriage, the declaration says:

Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family.

The use of the term “men and women” rather than “everyone” suggests that only traditional opposite sex marriage is contemplated. The subsequent international covenant on civil and political rights contains similar language.

Many attempts to pursue same sex marriage as an international human rights issue have failed. In fact, to this date no international human rights body nor national supreme court has ever found that there is a human right to same sex marriage.

Therefore, if same sex marriage is not a basic human right in the sense of internationally recognized human rights law, is it a violation of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms?

We still have not heard from the highest court in this land. In the same sex reference case, the Supreme Court declined to rule on the constitutionality of the traditional definition of marriage despite a clear request from the government to answer this question.

This leads me back to our purpose here. It is with us, 308 free thinking and free voting members of the House, that the definition of marriage awaits defining. Even the Supreme Court sent it back here to be done. There is good reason to believe that the Supreme Court, if it were eventually asked to rule on a new statutory definition of marriage combined with a full and equal recognition of legal rights and benefits for same sex couples, might well accept it.

Government Orders

The Conservative position that the use of the notwithstanding clause is not required to legislate a traditional definition of marriage is supported by law professor Alan Brudner of the University of Toronto, who recently wrote in the *Globe and Mail* that:

—the judicially declared unconstitutionality of the common law definition of marriage does not entail the unconstitutionality of parliamentary legislation affirming the same definition.

● (1530)

The professor also argues against those who have argued that a pre-emptive use of the notwithstanding clause is the only way to uphold the traditional definition of marriage. He stated:

These arguments misconceive the role of a notwithstanding clause in a constitutional democracy. Certainly, that role cannot be to protect laws suspected of being unconstitutional against judicial scrutiny...Rather, the legitimate role of a notwithstanding clause...is to provide a democratic veto over a judicial declaration of invalidity, where the court's reasoning discloses a failure to defer to the parliamentary body on a question of political discretion....

In other words, let this body make the decision and the court will deal with it.

The notwithstanding clause should be invoked by Parliament only after the Supreme Court has ruled on the constitutionality of a law. As yet there has been no such law for the Supreme Court to consider, so there is no need to use the notwithstanding clause.

There is every reason to believe that if this House moved to bring in a reasonable, democratic compromise solution, one which defined in statute that marriage remains the union of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others, while extending equal rights and benefits to couples living in other forms of unions, and which fully protected the freedom of religion to the extent possible under federal law, that the Supreme Court of Canada would honour such a decision by Parliament.

This leads us back to where most Canadians want us: at a compromise solution to this question, to a place we can all arrive at in agreement, not in an uncompromising, uncompassionate line in the sand that has no room for discussion.

This House, including the current Prime Minister, voted to uphold the definition of marriage in 1999 and in the amendments to Bill C-23 in 2000, with the Deputy Prime Minister, who was then the justice minister, leading the defence of marriage from the government side.

In 1999 the Deputy Prime Minister said:

We on this side agree that the institution of marriage is a central and important institution in the lives of many Canadians. It plays an important part in all societies worldwide, second only to the fundamental importance of family to all of us.

She also said:

The definition of marriage, which has been consistently applied in Canada, comes from an 1866 British case which holds that marriage is "the union of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others". That case and that definition are considered clear law by ordinary Canadians, by academics and by the courts. The courts have upheld the constitutionality of that definition.

She also said:

Let me state again for the record that the government has no intention of changing the definition of marriage or of legislating same sex marriages.

Marriage has fundamental value and importance to Canadians and we do not believe on this side of the House that importance and value is in any way threatened or undermined by others seeking to have their long term relationships recognized. I

support the motion for maintaining the clear legal definition of marriage in Canada as the union of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others.

That was the Deputy Prime Minister, speaking as justice minister, less than six years ago. Nothing that she said then is out of date today.

The Supreme Court itself has still not addressed this issue despite a clear request to do so by the government.

We do not believe on the basis of provincial court decisions, which the government refused to appeal to the Supreme Court of Canada, that a fundamental, centuries' old institution should be abolished or radically changed.

We believe that marriage should continue to be what it has always been, what the courts and the government accepted it to be until a very few years ago: an institution which, by its nature, is heterosexual and has as one of its main purposes the procreation and nurturing of children in the care of a mother and a father.

In conclusion, I will not be supporting Bill C-38.

● (1535)

Mr. Greg Thompson (New Brunswick Southwest, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is an honour to take part in the debate. I want to thank my colleague from Okanagan, British Columbia for allowing me to speak now and he will speak a little later.

From the outset I simply want to put on the record that I support the traditional definition of marriage as a union between one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others.

The debate is about the Government of Canada changing the definition of marriage; it is as simple as that. The federal justice minister suggested that we change the traditional definition of marriage from the union of one man and one woman to the union of two persons, which is the change that we are actually debating in the House today. I am fundamentally opposed to that and a number of my constituents are as well.

I want to mention at the outset that our party is the only party in the House of Commons that is actually having a free vote on this issue. We can talk about a democratic deficit in the House, as the Prime Minister used to do a long time ago and that he would do something about it, but the fact is we are the only party that will have a free vote in the House of Commons on this issue.

The NDP will not have a free vote. In fact, Mr. Speaker, if you have been observing, which you often do from the chair during votes, some of the members of the NDP have had to leave the chamber during the vote. They are not allowed the intellectual freedom to cast a vote according to the wishes of their constituents and their own conscience, which is a good word and a fair word to use. Of course it is the same for the Liberals. As for the Bloc members, we know how they are voting on the issue.

Government Orders

The Liberals do not have a free vote. It is disturbing to a lot of Canadians that if there were a free vote in the House of Commons, the bill simply would not pass. The Prime Minister has the largest cabinet in the history of Canadian government. All of those people will be forced to vote. They are whipped by the Prime Minister. They hold their positions only because of the wishes of the Prime Minister. In addition, there are the parliamentary secretaries. Three-quarters of the Liberal Party will be forced to vote according to the Prime Minister. There is no free vote in the House of Commons. So much for the democratic deficit and so much for the words of the Prime Minister. They mean just about as much in this issue as any of the other issues we have dealt with in the House.

The sad part of the whole debate is that the Prime Minister is attempting to pit Canadian against Canadian. The Liberals do not want a debate. I want to quote from some comments made yesterday by my colleague from Dufferin—Caledon because they focus on the level of debate the government wants to take us down to.

The government does not want to debate the question of traditional marriage versus same sex marriage. It would rather focus on attacking its opponents as opposing human rights and the charter. This debate is not about human rights. It is a political, social policy decision and should be treated in that light.

That fits in with what we have heard from so many speakers in the House. The previous speaker mentioned the same thing in terms of human rights. He quoted the United Nations charter as it relates to human rights and the whole marriage issue.

We are the only party that will have a free vote. We are the only party that introduced amendments to the legislation which, by the way, were voted down by the government. Again, the government members were whipped by the House leader and the Prime Minister.

• (1540)

We said that we would propose amendments, which we did and which were voted down by the House—Mr. Speaker, you were here for that vote—which amendments would provide clear recognition of the traditional definition of marriage. It is something that the courts were saying that Parliament should do, that Parliament should lead on this issue.

The Supreme Court is acting in a legislative vacuum. The leadership on this issue should have been exercised by the Government of Canada. The Supreme Court would take its message from the Parliament of Canada.

In addition to the recognition of the traditional definition of marriage, we were also proposing to provide full recognition of same sex relationships as possessing equivalent rights and privileges. In addition to that, we would provide substantive protections for religious institutions in the context of federal law, none of which exists under the present legislation.

The churches are afraid of prosecution under the act because the government has not taken the time to provide them with adequate protection. That is an argument that we are hearing from all religions and all denominations. We have seen those cards, letters and presentations from Catholic bishops, Baptist ministers, and the list goes on. Basically every religious group and every denomination in the country has concerns about the direction in which the federal Liberal government is pushing us.

There is an article written by Barbara Kay in the *National Post*. I want to read it because children are the one group of people missing in this debate. Other members have mentioned this as well. The title of Barbara Kay's article is "It's time to think about the children". This is the point that Ms. Kay made:

Canadian researchers have made no effort to harvest the views of those who have the most invested in the gay marriage debate—children. Nobody has asked the children if they "strongly prefer, strongly reject or don't care" whether they have a single mom, single dad, mother and father, or two moms or two dads.

She said that "children are by nature social conservatives and will, by nature, respond that they prefer a mom and a dad". She concludes by saying, "Canada is one of only three places on earth poised to endorse the use of children as social guinea pigs without their consent. And all because our intellectual and political elites haven't ever really thought about it". They have not thought about the children.

That pretty well lays it on the line. That journalist is speaking for a lot of moms and dads and a lot of individual Canadians.

This is not about voting the wishes of our constituents. It is all about voting our conscience. There are members in our own party with whom we disagree on this issue. We respectfully disagree with each other on this issue.

This is an issue that does not have to come before Parliament. It does not have to be dividing Canadians. The track record of the government is always about dividing. It is never about uniting and bringing us together. This is a debate that should not happen.

The Conservative Party is asking the government to reconsider this legislation. It should reconsider this legislation in light of the impact it will have on our families and our institutions. We ask the government to simply stand back for a minute and listen to individual Canadians.

• (1545)

Mr. Stockwell Day (Okanagan—Coquihalla, CPC): Mr. Speaker, when I previously made remarks relating to this legislation on changing the definition of marriage, I reflected on the philosophical, theological and sociological implications. Today I would like to reflect on the legal implications pretty well exclusively, not to bore any listeners, but the legal assessment of this legislation is very important and it is not getting active consideration through the media nor through admission by government members.

I will reflect on legal documents and legal opinions. There is one particular very comprehensive legal assessment of this legislation by about three dozen legal experts and academic advisers whose whole careers are invested in academic interests related to human rights, religious rights, and charity and constitutional law. This particular document reviewed two constitutional opinions that were provided by the law firm of Lang Michener on the subject of Bill C-38. A number of very specific questions were posed, many of which came from our constituents, people who, either for religious or social reasons, have concerns about this dramatic social change. In fact it is the most dramatic social change definitely in Canada's history, modern and past. This is a very significant sweeping legal and social change. Canadians should be fully apprised of all the implications before they decide if this is a good thing to support or not.

Government Orders

The Liberal government did not want Parliament to decide this, which is where it should be decided. The government slid it over to the Supreme Court, hoping the Supreme Court would absolve it of responsibility in terms of changing the definition. The Supreme Court quite rightly sent it back to Parliament and that is why it is here today.

Let us look at the very specific questions that were submitted for constitutional legal assessment. One question was, did the recent same sex marriage reference opinion of the Supreme Court require Parliament to amend the common law definition of marriage? The answer was no. The Supreme Court did not require it. This is a very important point. The Liberals are going ahead with this, but they cannot hide behind an imperative from the Supreme Court. There was no requirement from the court to make this change.

The next question was, should it be the case that the purpose of the common law definition of marriage rose out of “Christendom”, in fact religious history, as discussed in paragraphs 21 and 22 of the reference? Is it consistent with constitutional precedent for Parliament to nevertheless define marriage as the union of one man and one woman for life to the exclusion of all others, so long as the purpose is secular and consistent with the charter? The answer to that is yes, it is consistent. Legislation pertaining to the legal capacity for civil marriage falls within the subject matter of section 91(26) of the Constitution Act. That addressed the exclusive legislative competence of Parliament.

The next question was, would Parliament be acting consistent with jurisprudence if it justified a statutory definition of marriage of one man and one woman on the basis that it would serve the best interests of children? Was that an actual constitutional matter of jurisprudence? Could it be justified to look at this from the point of view of the best interests of children, and to create a public institution that makes it more likely that a child will be raised by the child's mother and father? That is the specific question referenced. The answer to that is also yes. The Supreme Court has previously recognized the importance of protecting the best interests of children in a variety of contexts, so it is a justifiable consideration.

The next question was, should Bill C-38 be enacted as proposed? Does Parliament have the constitutional jurisdiction to protect by statute the freedom of religious groups or officials to refuse to perform marriages that are not in accordance with the groups' religious beliefs? There is the constitutional question on the religious question.

● (1550)

If Bill C-38 passes, can Parliament protect the religious freedoms of those who, for religious reasons, do not want to perform ceremonies or things like that? In fact, the answer to that is no. This Parliament does not have the jurisdiction under section 92(12) of the Constitution to have exclusive jurisdiction to protect religious freedoms should this legislation pass. That answer is no. Members opposite need to know that.

Another question was this one. If Bill C-38 is enacted, could religious groups or officials who refuse to solemnize a marriage become the subject of action by others? If, for religious reasons or just reasons of conviction, justices of the peace or marriage commissioners say no, they do not want to do a marriage, could

they wind up getting sued? The answer to that is yes: “A putative same-sex spouse who is refused a marriage licence or a place to hold a wedding would have a variety of options to assert his/her rights”.

The next question was, does Parliament have the power through Bill C-38 to protect religious groups or officials from the actions referred to above? Could churches be protected by Parliament? Does Parliament have the power to protect them should Bill C-38 pass? The answer is no. We need to be honest about that. The Liberals need to be honest about that. If we are moving into this brave new world, we need to understand what it is going to look like. The answer is: “Parliament cannot protect religious groups or officials from the actions referred to above”.

The three dozen or so constitutional lawyers and other experts in this field then gave legal advice. They stated:

—if passed, Bill C-38 will be used by provincial governments and others to override the rights of conscience and religion of ordinary Canadians. Public officials will in all likelihood lose their employment simply because of their conscientious convictions. It is our view that your constituents, including religious groups and the members of religious groups, will face expensive and ruinous lawsuits if Bill C-38 becomes law.

I wish the government and the Minister of Justice would address these legal and constitutional arguments, but they refuse to. They want Canadians to go blindly into their brave new world, but it is not wise for a society to move blindly in any direction.

Some will say that these are scare tactics, that this type of thing will never happen in Canada, but in fact, even before the law has been enacted—we hope it will not be and that is why we are speaking against it—these things are already happening. Provincial governments in Canada have terminated the positions of marriage commissioners who have, for personal religious convictions, not performed same sex marriages. It has happened in Saskatchewan.

I believe in freedom of speech, but I believe we should also have the right to comment on freedom of speech. A chilling editorial in the *Globe and Mail*, which is supposed to be one of the bastions of freedom of expression, on January 7, 2005, urged provinces to fire any marriage commissioners who refused to perform same sex marriages. That is incredible coming from something that purports to be a national newspaper. It has the right to say that, and I am not saying it does not, but we certainly have the right to respond.

Bishop Frederick Henry of Calgary is facing at least two official objections to his public statements along with expensive hearings before the Alberta Human Rights Commission for expressing his biblical views on same sex marriage.

I have engaged in debates where people who do not believe in marriage have said they think marriage is a terrible thing. They think it is awful. I have participated in debates where people have said they think marriage is one of the most fearsome and loathsome institutions there is. I disagree with that, but they have a right to say it, and Bishop Henry and others also have the right to say that marriage should be maintained.

Government Orders

On April 4, 2005, the Quesnel School District suspended school counsellor Dr. Chris Kempling. He had been employed as a counsellor in the school system. He had, under the name of his political party, written a letter to the editor of a local newspaper criticizing the Liberal government's position on same sex marriage. He was suspended and has faced many expensive legal proceedings since then.

These things will happen, but they are happening even now, before this legislation has passed.

• (1555)

I am curious when I hear people say that we should not have this discussion because it is “divisive”. There is a reaction among some people in the academic, media and political communities who say that if anything is divisive we should not talk about it. They say that Canadians cannot handle division or divisive items, that we are just quiet little people who do not want to be upset by someone's different point of view.

That is not our history. Our history is that we can very aggressively, if necessary, and openly and democratically discuss our differences. We have a democratic history in which we come together and vote on these things.

I have maintained some legal positions today. My previous speech, for those who would like to consult it, deals with the philosophical, religious and sociological effects of the change in this definition. It is a brave new world, one that I do not think most Canadians, when they fully understand its implications, will want.

* * *

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Hon. Karen Redman (Kitchener Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, discussions have taken place among all parties and I believe that you would find consent for the following motion:

That during today's debate on Government Business No. 11, pursuant to Standing Order 53.1, no quorum calls, dilatory motions or requests for unanimous consent shall be entertained by the Speaker.

• (1600)

The Deputy Speaker: The House has heard the terms of the motion. Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to)

* * *

CIVIL MARRIAGE ACT

The House resumed consideration of the motion that Bill C-38, an act respecting certain aspects of legal capacity for marriage for civil purposes, be read the second time and referred to a committee, and of the motion that this question be now put.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, if the flood of petitions and letters to my office over the past six months is any indication, Bill C-38, the same sex marriage bill, is by far the most important bill that will be dealt with by the 38th Parliament.

I have received about five times as much mail on this subject as on any other that I have dealt with in my four years as a member of Parliament. I have received many thousands of signatures on petitions in the constituency. For example, last week I presented nine such petitions to the House, and this week I have a further eight petitions that I am ready to submit. As members can see from the size of this pile, there are many hundreds of signatures on these petitions. As well, of course, I listen to many of my colleagues on all sides of the House presenting one petition after another, which is a very strong indication of the depth of interest expressed by Canadians on this issue.

Another sign of the depth of interest and commitment is the number of letters that are received and that are individual handwritten letters, letters from people who, although they are constituents, are not regular correspondents. People have been moved to write to me on this issue when they have written on no other issue. That is a signal to me of the depth of their interest in and commitment on this issue.

It was my practice in the 37th Parliament, that is, the one that sat from 2000 to 2004, to seek instruction from the electorate in my riding as to how to vote on key legislation via a mechanism that we refer to in the constituency as a constituency referendum.

I have conducted constituency referenda in which I asked constituents, by means of a mail-out ballot to all households in the riding, how to vote at final reading on, among other things, the species at risk act, which was Bill C-5 in the 37th Parliament, and the anti-terrorism act, Bill C-36 in the 37th Parliament. I have asked about whether to opt in or out of the MPs' annual \$20,000 pay increase and also about how the riding boundaries of my then riding of Lanark—Carleton ought to be redrawn so that I could submit to the Electoral Boundaries Commission a submission that accurately reflected the community of interest as expressed by my constituents.

My party leader, the Leader of the Opposition, is a democrat, which means a lot to me because I am of course the shadow cabinet critic for democratic reform. He is a democrat. He strongly supports the right of MPs, including members of the shadow cabinet, to vote their consciences or to vote the collective consciences of the people they represent. That is why three members of our shadow cabinet are able to vote for this bill without fear of sanction, reprisal or losing their posts.

This contrasts dramatically with the Liberal benches, where no such freedom is available to members of the cabinet. I am also the critic for FedNor, the federal agency for regional economic development in northern Ontario. My opposite number in the Liberal cabinet, the minister for FedNor, has indicated very strongly that he personally is opposed to same sex marriage and is opposed to this legislation. He has been faced with a choice between resigning his post or abdicating his conscience. Unfortunately, he seems to have chosen to abdicate his responsibility to his conscience in choosing to fall in line with the government.

Government Orders

How many others have done so without at least speaking openly as he has done I do not know, but certainly there is very little in the way of democracy on that side of the House and on something that is the most important issue in the minds of many of the constituents of many of the members opposite, and of course also in the minds of many of the members opposite themselves, as it is in the minds of so many opposition members of Parliament.

The same lack of freedom to follow one's conscience or the conscience of one's constituents is even more evident in the New Democratic Party, where one member, the member for Churchill, in northern Manitoba, has essentially been knuckled under, read the riot act and told she must vote the way her party leader tells her to, without regard for her personal conscience or for the will of her constituents.

As our party's critic on democracy, I am proud of the courageous and democratic position adopted by our leader, but also of the democratic position adopted by our party, the Conservative Party, at its March policy convention in Montreal. I want to read from our policy platform a policy that was adopted in Montreal at our March convention. It states:

● (1605)

On issues of moral conscience, such as abortion, the definition of marriage, and euthanasia, the Conservative Party acknowledges the diversity of deeply held personal convictions among individual Party members and the right of Members of Parliament to adopt positions in consultations with their constituents and to vote freely.

My intention personally has been to vote against this bill at second reading and to conduct a constituency referendum to determine how I should vote at third reading.

At second reading a bill is being approved or rejected in principle. As such, it is the stage of the bill's life where it is most appropriate for a member of Parliament to vote his or her conscience. My conscience dictates that I cannot support a bill that fails to provide adequate protection for religious freedom when such protection could easily have been included in the text of the bill.

I have largely based my political career on the defence of religious freedom. My very first statement in the House of Commons, as a new member of Parliament, was the defence of the freedom of religion of Falun Gong practitioners in mainland China. When I turned to my constituents to ask how to vote on the Anti-terrorism Act and ultimately when I broke ranks with most members of my party, and with the government of course, in order to vote against the bill, I was primarily motivated by the unwarranted restrictions that the bill was placing on freedom of religion which I believe set a very dangerous precedent in this country.

Freedom of religion that is nominally protected in clause 3 of the same sex bill is quite frankly a fictitious protection of freedom of religion. It is a section that Liberal members will cite constantly. Let me read what it says because it is revealing when the text is read. We realize how hollow this protection of freedom of religion really is. Clause 3 of the bill says:

It is recognized that officials of religious groups are free to refuse to perform marriages that are not in accordance with their religious beliefs.

There are two things to note about this. First, which my hon. colleague from Okanagan—Coquihalla so clearly identified, this

does not take care of all of the other impositions on freedom of religion, of many other actors in society that are not contained within the wording of this section, such as people who serve as commissioners of marriage who find their personal conscience violated.

It would be no great effort to find someone who finds it in accordance with his or her personal conscience to perform a same sex marriage as opposed to leaving it, requiring that all people who are commissioners of marriage must be willing to do so should the condition present itself. That is just unreasonable. It provides no extra rights to a same sex couple, but it takes away a fundamental and profound right to those who find that it is not in accordance with their personal religious or philosophical beliefs.

That provision could be taken care of by provincial law. It cannot be taken care of by federal law, but the federal government could have engaged in negotiation with the provinces to ensure those kinds of protections are built into provincial law. It has made no such effort and in fact is standing by while the opposite starts to happen. There are many other instances that my colleague cited, but I will not go through them all now.

The other thing to note about this clause is that in the draft of the bill, the earlier version that was submitted to the Supreme Court of Canada, an almost identical provision was written into clause 2 of that draft law except that it did not have the wording "it is recognized" at the beginning. Clause 3 states that "It is recognized that officials of religious groups are free to refuse to perform marriages—".

The inclusion of those words makes this a purely declaratory provision. It has no weight whatsoever. It should be up in the very long preamble to the bill because it has no weight in court. The reason it has no weight in court, even written as the original clause 2 of the prior bill was, is because the court said it can have no weight. It is *ultra vires*; it is outside of federal jurisdiction.

The solemnization of marriage under section 92 of the Constitution is a provincial responsibility. So putting this in the bill is disingenuous. It should not be given any weight. In fact, it should not even be in the text of the bill.

At third reading my intention is to go to my constituents and ask them how I ought to vote. Some people feel there is a contradiction between voting one's conscience and vote consulting one's constituents.

● (1610)

I want to indicate here that I heartily disagree with this bill. People know where I personally stand, particularly on the issue of freedom of religion. However, it would be arrogant of me to suggest to my voters, to my constituents, that on an issue of such great importance my conscience is somehow superior to the consciences of each of the 113,000 people I represent in the House of Commons. That is not the case. I am proud of them. I am proud of the good sense and conscientious, thoughtful and general sentiments that have been expressed over and over again in the hundreds of letters and many petitions that I have received on this subject, and that I have taken many hours to read and review personally.

Government Orders

If all members of Parliament of all parties showed the same good sense, goodwill, openness and respect that my constituents, and the constituents of all members, have shown, this debate would be a much more civilized debate than it has turned out to be so far.

Ms. Helena Guergis (Simcoe—Grey, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is with great honour that I rise in the House today to speak on this very important subject. I rise at this point in time not just as a politician but as a representative of the people in my riding of Simcoe—Grey. Those people have chosen me to be their voice in Ottawa and that is a job I take very seriously.

As such, I would like to say straight away that I have already voted, and will continue to vote, in this House to preserve the traditional definition of marriage as being the union of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others. That is as it stands today and as it has stood for decades in this great country.

In my short time here in Ottawa, I have risen in this House on many occasions, much of the time asking the government to explain itself on the numerous scandals that I am sure the public is getting just as furious about as I am.

Today, however, I would like to bring some important comments to the attention of all hon. members in this House.

There is no doubt that this subject brings up strong feelings in most who talk about it. Indeed, it divides the members opposite. I believe that the majority of Canadians are looking for a middle ground, a compromise which would recognize the valid concerns of the partisans on both sides. I believe that the proposed amendments suggested by the Leader of the Opposition provided the best ground to find a constructive compromise that the vast majority of Canadians would feel comfortable with.

There are differences of opinion within the Canadian public on this issue. At one end of the spectrum, there is a group which believes that the equality rights of gays and lesbians trump all other considerations and that any restriction on the right to same sex marriage is unjustifiable discrimination and a denial of human rights.

At the other end, there is another large body that thinks that marriage is a fundamental social institution not only recognized by law but sanctified by religious faith, that any compromise in terms of allowing same sex couples equal rights and benefits is unacceptable.

However, the vast majority of Canadians are somewhere in the middle. They believe that marriage is a basically heterosexual institution, but that same sex couples also have rights to equality within society that should be recognized and protected. We believe the Conservative amendments speak to the majority of Canadians who are in the middle on this issue.

Our proposal was that the law should continue to recognize the traditional definition of marriage as the union of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others, but at the same time, we would propose that other forms of union, whether heterosexual or homosexual, whether called common law status, civil unions or registered domestic partnerships, should be entitled to the same legal rights, privileges and benefits as marriage.

Many of these types of unions are subject to provincial jurisdiction under civil law. However, there are also federal issues

related to rights and benefits. Our party moved amendments to ensure that all couples in provincially recognized unions are recognized as having equal rights and benefits to married couples under federal law.

We would ensure that same sex couples have the same rights and benefits as married couples when it comes to matters like pensions, tax obligations or immigration matters.

We would ensure that there is no federal law that treats same sex couples any differently from married couples.

We believe that this approach would meet the needs of both those Canadians who believe that marriage is and should remain as an institution which, as Justice La Forest said, in the Egan decision, “is by nature heterosexual” and also those who are concerned to recognize the equal status of gays and lesbians under the law.

Around the world, there are only two countries which have legislated same sex marriage at the national level: Belgium and the Netherlands. In both of these countries, there are some areas related to adoption or marriage of non-nationals of those countries which still make them slightly different from opposite sex marriages.

By far, the vast majority of jurisdictions have gone the route of recognizing civil unions, domestic partnerships or reciprocal beneficiaries rather than abolishing the opposite sex nature of marriage. Among the countries which have brought in these laws are France, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Iceland, Finland, Germany, Portugal and New Zealand. I do not think that any of these countries, considered among the most progressive in the world, could be considered violators of human rights.

● (1615)

It strikes me as a perfectly reasonable compromise for Canadian society to accept exactly the same position as these countries and states. The Conservative compromise option may not satisfy those who believe that equality rights for same sex couples are an absolute, which cannot be compromised by accepting anything less than full marriage, or that the heterosexual status of marriage is an absolute, which cannot be compromised by recognizing equal rights for other kinds of unions. However, it will satisfy the vast majority of Canadians who are seeking common ground on this issue.

This may not make Canada the most radical country in the world, but it will keep Canada in the same relatively liberal company as the governments of Tony Blair's Britain, Lionel Jospin's France and Howard Dean's Vermont. I do not believe that most Canadians are looking to be more radical than the British Labour Party, the French Socialist Party or the most liberal democrats in the United States. They are looking for a reasonable, moderate compromise that respects the rights of same sex couples while preserving the time honoured institution of marriage.

Government Orders

This compromise is the Canadian way and it is the option that only the Conservative Party is prepared to offer. Conservatives believe that if the government squarely and honestly put this option of preserving marriage while recognizing equal rights of same sex couples for civil unions or other means, this is the option that Canadians would choose.

Mr. Eugene Meehan, a former national president of the Canadian Bar Association and former executive legal officer for the highest court in Canada, stated:

Canada's highest court has not required Parliament to amend the traditional definition, nor has gay marriage received protection under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Mr. Meehan goes on to state that the federal government does not have the power to protect religious officials from human rights complaints if they do not want to perform services that go against their views. This does not fall under federal jurisdiction. It is the jurisdiction of the provinces. The justice minister has misled Canadians and this Liberal government has misled Canadians yet again.

The Conservative Party is not proposing a reactionary solution that would violate human rights, as the government alleges. We are proposing a moderate compromise position that would put Canada in the company of some of the most Liberal and progressive countries in the western world. That is why I am proud to be a member of this moderate, mainstream Conservative government in waiting.

Mr. Jim Gouk (British Columbia Southern Interior, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have spoken at times with some of the Liberals across the way and they have asked me what exactly my problem was with this, why it would make a difference and what it would do to marriage.

One of my constituents recently published an article that very adequately summarizes the issue being discussed here today. I am grateful to Phil Johnson of the Osoyoos Baptist Church for his gracious agreement to allow me to read his submission which I now read in its entirety. The article is entitled, "Marriage is not a 'Living-together-thingy'":

Recently, my wife and I were looking for some new furniture for the living room. Fortunately, the English language is rich enough to have more than one word to describe the different pieces we can sit on. They are not collectively referred to as 'The sitting-on-thingsies'.

If our language was not so rich, to become more specific in our speech we would have to refer to the 'single-sitting-on-thingy', the 'double-sitting-on-thingy' and the 'three-or-more-sitting-on-thingy'. Wonderfully, the English language has provided us with single words that accurately describe a chair, a loveseat and a sofa.

Marriage is the same way. It is not a 'living-together-thingy' where any two or more people living together is called 'Marriage'. God has defined marriage as a man and a woman committed to each other for life. Any other relationship outside this is not marriage. This is not a matter of cultural preference. This is a definition that has been around 1000's of years.

Surely, the English language is rich enough to furnish another word or term to describe a same sex or other union. Why must the term marriage be used? The word we use to describe the union between one man and one woman is Marriage.

If you are going to come up with a new type of union, come up with a new term to describe it.

Just like we have a 'single-sitting-on-thingy' as a 'Chair' and 'three-or-more-sitting-on-thingy' as a 'Sofa', so we need to have a whole new word to describe this new type of union.

We could even run a nationwide competition to create a new word, that years from now could invoke warm and sentimental feelings, just as they do now about marriage. The chair does not feel discriminated against because it is not called a sofa.

Why is the term 'Civil Union' unacceptable? Perhaps, it has nothing to do with the recognition of a lifetime commitment between two people, and everything to do with the destruction of the idea of what marriage truly is? Why did the lesbian couple that took their cause to the Supreme Court apply for a divorce only five days after they were married? Hmmm.

New definitions will not destroy the institution of marriage, but it will drastically dilute its meaning and we will all lose in the end. A chair is a chair and a sofa is a sofa. For thousands of years, the English word to describe one man and one woman in a committed relationship to the exclusion of all others has been marriage. It does not mean, a 'living-together-thingy', however you want to define it this week.

I think the article Mr. Johnson sent in sums up very well the concerns that a lot of people have. I would like to tell members about my riding and the concerns people have in my riding.

As members might well imagine, coming from rural British Columbia, the government's Bill C-68 firearms registry bill was a huge issue. As the costs went from an estimated \$2 million to almost \$2 billion and still rising, their outrage became even more pronounced. However, as big as that is, it is dwarfed by the way people feel in my riding about this particular bill.

I have had over 4,000 letters and e-mails from constituents. I have even taken the trouble to stir the pot a bit to suggest that not many people are writing in supporting this and, if they are out there, I am not hearing from them. Out of those 4,000 letters that generated a total of 15 people who support this. There might be some support for this somewhere but it certainly is not in British Columbia Southern Interior.

As far as how this is being handled in the House, it is very interesting. It is a free vote, say the Liberals who introduced this bill. Well it is not quite a free vote. It is a free vote for the people on the backbenches but the members of the cabinet were told that it was not a free vote for them. They must vote the way they are told or they will be kicked out of cabinet and have their shiny new cars taken away.

● (1620)

It is a free vote for the people on the backbenches, except that I happen to know some of them quite well and quite a number of them do not support the bill. The pressure on them to comply with the way the government tells them to vote, even though it is a free vote, or, alternatively, to make sure they are absent when the vote is taken, has been intensified.

Members of another party, the NDP, the kissing cousins who live down the street and who dream of grandeur they will never realize on their own, do not have a free vote. They have been told that they must vote in support of their Liberal cousins. Even though the Liberals themselves have said that it is a free vote, the NDP have said that its members must support the Liberals in this because it dare not ever allow this to be a free vote.

When the Prime Minister was asked about having a referendum on this he said no, that he would never allow a referendum on an issue like this because he had little doubt that the majority of Canadians did not support the bill and he would not allow the majority to dictate to a minority. Is that not a wonderful process we have in the House of Commons where the majority does not rule?

Government Orders

I hear the Liberals yipping and yapping across the way wondering why we would expect in a democracy that the majority would ever rule or even have a say that they would listen to.

This is a very unfortunate bill. I had a lesbian couple come into my office to verify something I had said. I said that I had no quantitative evidence for this but that I believed that a lot of gay and lesbian people did not want or ask for this legislation. They did not want the notoriety. They are just people like everyone else. They have their jobs, their friends and their recreation. They want to go about their lives like the rest of us do. However along came the Liberals saying no, that they had to elevate them to something they had not asked for because they have very strange ideals. The couple who came in said exactly that. They said that they had never asked for this. They said that their lives were just fine until the Liberals came along and that now all of a sudden they were under a spotlight. Maybe that is what the Liberals intended but who knows.

In closing, I would like to say a heartfelt thank you to the Liberal Party of Canada because this is the kind of issue that will help me in the next election. It will help me to be one of the Conservatives who come back to replace the government. We will not play around with bills that very few people ask for. We will not arbitrarily rule on things where the majority is not allowed a say. We will bring in the kind of good legislation this country has waited for. It will be interesting to hear what kind of yipping and yapping the Liberals do once they are sitting over on this side of the House.

• (1625)

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I did in my first speech, I first want to acknowledge the folks who have spent a lot of time trying to get support for this bill and encouraging us and standing behind us. Some folks have spent quite a bit of time in Ottawa, in particular I think of the Christian Brethren organization which has been very supportive of us and has stood strongly for the definition of traditional marriage, along with many of the other religious organizations that have been true to what they believe in.

The last time I talked a little bit about the inconsistency of this cabinet and the problems within it in terms of knowing where it is going to stand and having it change its position regularly. I talked a little bit about the Prime Minister and how he has changed his position. It did not bother him to move from one position to the other. At one time he was defending the traditional definition of marriage and now he has gone beyond simply opposing it, seeing it as a charter right, to overturn it.

I talked a little bit about the present Minister of Citizenship and Immigration who, in front of churches, made a tearful plea to them to support him because he would stand up for their beliefs and for the traditional definition of marriage, only to find out that as soon as he left that church he changed his position.

We have the present Deputy Prime Minister who in 1999 voted against changing the traditional definition of marriage. She voted to support the traditional definition of marriage. She said that the Liberals would definitely never move to change the definition of marriage. From her conversation we find out how really good, accurate and true the word of a Liberal is. She has since changed her position on that as well.

My own minister from Saskatchewan, the finance minister, also has flip-flopped on this position, as he has on so many other issues. He favoured the traditional definition of marriage at one point in 1999 but he now opposes it. Although we know the people of Saskatchewan overwhelmingly support the traditional definition of marriage, he chooses to run contrary to that. Once again he has failed to represent the people of his province, as he has on so many other issues.

The last time I spoke about agricultural issues where farmers did not get the Crow payment that had been promised to them. The finance minister was responsible for changes to the Canadian Wheat Board which ended up with farmers being put in jail. It has only been in the last few days that we find out that what he did the courts have thrown out.

The issue of equalization has been talked about in the House and about how the finance minister betrayed his own province and refused to stand up for Saskatchewan. Instead, he sent ministers out last week to promise \$22 million for day care. In the meantime, the minister is taking something like \$8 billion out of our economy that he refuses to put back into his province. This is the kind of consistency that we get not only on the marriage issue, but on a host of other issues as well.

We have listened to the Prime Minister dither on many issues. I mentioned earlier that the Prime Minister has once again changed his position on the definition of marriage. He now thinks that this is an issue of human rights. We think the issue of marriage is a social policy issue and not one of human rights.

If it is an issue of human rights it is interesting that the Prime Minister has chosen not to force his caucus to vote for it. How can this be a charter right when the Prime Minister has told half the caucus they can vote how they want and the other half to vote the way he wants them to vote?

We heard quite eloquently how many of the backbenchers on the other side are actually being whipped and forced to vote against their conscience. The Prime Minister does not come forward and is not straight on the issue. On the one hand he says that it is an issue of rights but on the other hand he is allowing some people to vote freely while others must vote with him.

It is interesting that he uses this issue of rights to cover the bad position in which he finds himself. Once again, he is completely out of touch with Canadians and the positions that they hold.

What is even worse than inconsistency is intolerance and deception. This spring another minister came very close to running into that position of really showing just how intolerant the Liberal side is when he declared that churches should actually stay out of this discussion. I think the words were that they should "butt out". His quote was that "the separation of church and state is a beautiful thing". What he meant by that was that the churches have no say in matters of social policy and social conscience.

Government Orders

I think almost all Canadians would understand that the reason churches exist is to have a say in social policy, social issues and to put their positions forward.

We live in a democracy that up until now has guaranteed both freedom of speech and freedom of religion. We expect that would continue. I am not so sure that the other side even thinks that is important at all.

• (1630)

The intolerant attitude that was shown by the Minister of Foreign Affairs is unacceptable, especially coming from a person in a position of power and who could do something to effect those freedoms. I think that is why people were concerned and worried about his comments.

Cabinet ministers do have the power to carry out what they choose. In this case the minister chose to say that it was okay to be intolerant and to force churches and people who held personal beliefs not to participate in the public realm in this country. We fundamentally disagree with that because the Conservative Party believes in the freedom of religion and speech.

The minister totally misunderstood the principle of separation of church and state. That does not mean that people involved with churches and have religious faith do not have the ability to speak out. They do. The separation of church and state is a concept whereby the church is protected from the power of the state. Once again, we insist that the government back off on its pressure on the voices of those who have faith in our country and want to express that faith.

The second issue involves deception again. I am speaking about the misinformation being spread by the government regarding the protection of religious rights in the legislation. The government has tried to leave the impression with Canadians that religious rights would be protected, but that is not so. If people look at the legislation, and look at it in light of the Supreme Court ruling, they would see the protection of religious rights is not guaranteed. The Supreme Court said that it could not do that.

The Supreme Court clearly said that although religious rights should be protected, there were areas in which it could not involve itself. It insisted that defining marriage was a federal responsibility, but that the administration, the solemnization of marriage, was provincial jurisdiction. The government has been pretending that is not the case. It has been schizophrenic on this position, saying that it will protect religious rights, yet it does not have the power.

I believe the deputy government House leader said that commissioners who did not perform same sex marriages should lose their jobs. Once again a senior member of government has taken the position that if this is against people's personal beliefs and conscience, they should be forced to step aside. They should be forced to perform these marriages. We are beginning to see the kind of coercion the government expects to exert on this issue and by extension, on other issues of social policy as well.

In my province the idea of interference in people's religious and personal beliefs has already begun. The provincial government has insisted that commissioners who do not want to perform these ceremonies have to step down. Several have been forced to do that. Other provinces are doing the same thing.

For the government to leave the impression that somehow it is protecting religious rights, is misleading Canadians at best and completely deceiving them at worst. The court ruled that the clause dealing with the protection of religious rights was basically unconstitutional. It could not ensure those rights would be protected because for a large part they were provincial jurisdiction.

The federal government has not protected the power of Parliament as it should have. It cannot be trusted to protect religious freedoms. The government has no credibility in that area at all.

The Conservative Party is proposing something different. We are proposing a middle ground. We want to make amendments to the legislation to protect the definition of marriage. We want to legally recognize other relationships such as same sex marriage. This is a major change for our society. This issue should be freely debated because it is a social policy issue rather than a right. We believe all members in the House should have a free vote on this issue.

I want to state the obvious, which is I will continue to support the traditional definition of marriage. I would like to reiterate the words of Justice La Forest who, in the last major words of the Supreme Court, recognized the importance and uniqueness of traditional marriage. He said:

Marriage has from time immemorial been firmly grounded in our legal tradition, one that is itself a reflection of long-standing philosophical and religious traditions. But its ultimate *raison d'être* transcends all of these and is firmly anchored in the biological and social realities that heterosexual couples have the unique ability to procreate, that most children are the product of these relationships, and that they are generally cared for and nurtured by those who live in that relationship.

We pray and ask the government to hear these words and apply them to its legislation.

• (1635)

Mr. Rob Anders (Calgary West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, like the member before me, I would like to thank those who have travelled far and who have sat in this chamber for the last several weeks watching over its debates, its deliberations. Their encouragement is appreciated.

I, like many on this side of the House, believe in the traditional common law definition of marriage as the union of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others. It is a central, social institution. It is a stable environment for the procreation and raising of children. It provides for the nurturing of children in the care of a mother and a father. To quote the legal ethicist, Margaret Somerville, "The crucial question is: should marriage be primarily a child-centred institution or an adult centred one?" If we believe it is a child centred institution then it should be left as is.

There is a large body that thinks marriage is such a fundamental social institution that not only should it be recognized by law but also sanctified by religious faith, and that leaves it as basically a heterosexual institution.

Justice La Forest in the Egan decision as well said, "it is by nature heterosexual", when referring to marriage. I also believe that is something that is consistent with the belief of the vast majority of Canadians.

Government Orders

Around the world there are only two countries that have legislated same sex marriage at the national level, Belgium and the Netherlands. In both these countries there are some areas related to adoption or marriage of non-nationals of those countries, which still make them slightly different from opposite sex marriages.

At this point I would like to ad lib and talk a bit about a radio show that I listened to not that long ago. The former leader of the Reform Party, Preston Manning was on the show and I thought there were some words of wisdom to be offered on this matter in this debate. He said that the term he would prefer for those who wished to see a middle ground institution, a compromise, was one that he described as being that of a dependent relationship. Some people like to call it a civil union or a domestic partnership et cetera.

I want to make very clear that I believe marriage should maintain as its definition, being of one man and one woman. For example, if this place could consider dependent relationships, dependent relationships do not have a sexual nature to them. They are in a sense neutral. If we were to enact a dependent relationship and recognize it in this place and if members here or any people in society at large had members in their families who were incapacitated, dependants, whether it be infants, or people over the age of 18 or maybe even seniors who could not look after themselves, something like a dependent relationship would be there to look after these people for tax purposes. It would ensure that they would have the means to do so. It would be the state in a sense stepping in. Like the idea in a book, we sometimes quote in this place about widows and orphans being protected and looked after. If people want a compromise position, I think the description of a dependent relationship is the best I have heard, given the scenario.

There is one state in the United States, Massachusetts, the state of Ted Kennedy, that has recognized these types of unions the Liberals are trying to pass. It is noteworthy that a majority in the Massachusetts legislature opposed it. Even the governor of the state of Massachusetts opposed what the Liberals in this country are trying to do. I guess that means the Liberals in Canada would be to the left of the Democrats of Massachusetts.

I do not believe most Canadians are looking to be more radical than the British Labour Party, or the French socialist party or the most liberal Democrats in the United States. I think most people believe in preserving the time honoured institution of marriage. We believe that if the government squarely and honestly put this option forward, that of preserving marriage with the possibility of maybe dependent relationships and it was a fair question, this option is the one that most Canadians would choose.

•(1640)

I for one believe this is a question worthy of a referendum. I remember when the Constitution was first patriated back in 1982. I was 10 years old, in grade five and I watched it in the classroom. I remember thinking that people like my father should have had the opportunity to vote on the Constitution. I am sure there are many in Quebec who share that sentiment and wish they would have had a chance to vote on the Constitution as well.

There is a fine Liberal tradition, going back and looking at Mackenzie King. The reason he was able to have as many consecutive governments as he did was he was a person who

deferred to the people on controversial questions and put it to a vote. The conscription crisis in particular comes to mind. The Prime Minister in this case would have been well advised to take a page out of Mackenzie King's book and in a sense not go ahead and impose his hidden agenda on Canada.

It is worthy of note that not long ago in this place the Liberals across the way voted to preserve and protect the traditional definition of marriage. They have gone against the earlier votes and promises they made in this place. It does not surprise me that they went back on their word, but it probably surprises a lot of the people who gave them their votes in the last election.

When the Liberal Party talks about hidden agendas, it is very appropriate for people to remember which party said that it would not make any significant changes to marriage. Yet it is now in power. The Liberals never raised it during the election campaign. As a matter of fact, they promised the opposite. They never allowed it to go to a national vote, yet they are going ahead and imposing their will.

The government is insisting upon an absolutist approach and that puts it on the extreme. It is not a reasonable approach. It is certainly something that we on this side of the House do not believe is reflective of Canadian values. The Liberals are not respecting the will of the majority and they are not preserving one of our deepest held positions. That is why it is very important that they must accept and consider the amendments the Conservative Party has moved on the bill.

I would like as well to address the issue that one of my colleagues brought up previously, the idea of the separation of church and state. I like reading some of the founding documents of the American constitution. I believe that Thomas Jefferson, when he first advanced these principles, was in a sense avant-garde in breaking ground.

It is important to note that Thomas Jefferson was chosen as the writer of the Declaration of Independence because he was the author of the constitution of the Commonwealth of Virginia. He created Virginia as an ecumenical state.

The issue that the United States was running into, and I want to ensure this is clearly laid out, was that Maryland, for example, was a Catholic state. Pennsylvania was a Protestant state. What Thomas Jefferson sought to do in a very ecumenical and multi-faith based place like Virginia was implement a state constitution that would allow for all these religious differences.

It is important to note that at the time Thomas Jefferson never would have considered the twisting of his words, as has taken place today. All people were Christians. Some of them may have been Baptist, some Catholic, et cetera, but nonetheless all shared a common book in the sense of right and wrong.

When he talked about the separation of church and state, he was merely doing so for the idea of an ecumenical Christianity in the United States. He was not advocating that church leaders abdicate the public square. That is what Liberals across the way are intending when they twist the words of Thomas Jefferson. They intend that church leaders and moral leaders abdicate the public square. This is the reason why they are probably advocating for the legalization of prostitution as well.

Government Orders

If they want to be true to the words of Thomas Jefferson and some of the great minds that formed those liberty documents, it had nothing to do with the abdication of moral and religious leaders from the public square, none whatsoever. I want to ensure that is clear and put on the record.

I realize I am tight on time. I thank the Christian Brethren for its presence, and I hope the bill fails.

• (1645)

Mr. Andrew Scheer (Regina—Qu'Appelle, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I also would like to recognize the great work done by many grassroots organizations across this country, groups such as the Christian Brethren and the many groups that are very active in my riding and throughout Saskatchewan and all of Canada. Several of these grassroots organizations are really trying to let the Canadian people themselves decide this issue. Some have been very active in contacting my office and the offices of other MPs, encouraging them to listen to the majority of Canadians on this issue.

I would like to continue in that vein, because I am confident in the knowledge that I am speaking on behalf of the majority of the members of my riding. My job, first and foremost, is to make sure that I am an effective representative for the views and wishes of my constituents.

I would like to read for members an argument that was put forward in 1998. It states:

—the definition of marriage is already clear in law in Canada as the union of two persons of the opposite sex. Counsel from my department have successfully defended and will continue to defend this concept of marriage in the court...I continue to believe that it is not necessary to change well understood concepts of spouse and marriage to deal with any fairness considerations the courts and tribunals may find.

That is not my argument. That is the argument of the current Deputy Prime Minister in a letter she wrote to a concerned constituent. Note this phrase: "Counsel from my department have successfully defended and will continue to defend this concept of marriage in the court".

We know that she is not continuing to defend this concept of marriage, nor is anyone from any government department. Despite a promise to her constituents and to all Canadians, the Deputy Prime Minister and many of the NDP-Liberal alliance are forging ahead with plans to change the definition of marriage.

There is another section I would like to read for the House:

[There is] a universal pattern of marriage that has existed historically and across cultures. This universal pattern demonstrates that the *raison d'être* of marriage has been to complement nature with culture for the sake of the intergenerational cycle. Across world religions and throughout small-scale societies, the universal norm of marriage has been a culturally approved opposite-sex relationship intended to encourage the birth and rearing of children...Preserving the definition of marriage as the descriptor of this opposite sex institution is not discriminatory....

Same-sex marriage is an oxymoron, because it lacks the universal or defining feature of marriage according to religious, historical, and anthropological evidence. Apart from everything else, marriage expresses one fundamental and universal need: a setting for reproduction that recognizes the reciprocity between nature...and culture....

The legal definition of the word cannot be changed without creating "an unacceptable cleavage between ordinary usage and the legal meaning; moreover, such redefinition is in conflict with the normal use and development of language"....

In sum, the definition of marriage does not infringe s.15(1) of the Charter... because the distinction it draws does not amount to "discrimination." While the definition distinguishes on the basis of sexual orientation, the distinction is not the product of stereotypical categorizations or assessments of the relative worth of individuals. Instead, marriage differentiates only on the basis of capacity or need, and thus it does not come within the range of invidious distinctions which s.15(1) was designed to eliminate.

Again, those words come from the Deputy Prime Minister of this country. They come not from someone on this side of the House but from a Liberal cabinet minister when she was the attorney general. This is quite a flip-flop. This is a far cry from her current position, which is to demean and degrade those who argue in favour of maintaining the traditional definition of marriage.

Today, the Liberal-NDP coalition calls people who advocate this view, who advocate the views the Deputy Prime Minister herself once had, bigots and un-Canadian, insensitive, hateful people. The rhetoric coming from that side is very shameful as we try to conduct an honest debate about an issue that is so important to many Canadians.

What has prompted such a reversal of opinion? Many Liberals point to the idea that the courts have forced them to change their position since the Supreme Court has ruled that traditional marriage is against the charter, but we know that the Supreme Court of Canada did not declare the current definition of marriage unconstitutional. I have read the reference questions. I have read what the Supreme Court submitted. If government members would only take the time to read this, they would see that section 4 was not answered. This means that the current definition of marriage was never rendered unconstitutional.

The United Nations Human Rights Commission has never recognized that extending marriage to include homosexual couples is to be considered a human rights issue. No governmental human rights body has ever claimed that marriage is a human rights issue.

• (1650)

Those arguments about traditional marriage being unconstitutional should end right away since it is clearly no such thing, but unfortunately these people still hold on to that idea and still perpetuate this myth to Canadians that traditional marriage, something that society has recognized for generations, for thousands of years, is unconstitutional and discriminatory.

It is an idea that many current cabinet ministers once rejected and once went to their constituents about. They looked their constituents in the eye and told them they would never allow the traditional definition of marriage to be changed. They told them that they would continue to uphold the traditional definition of marriage and continue to fight this in the courts. They looked their voters in the eye and then came back to this place and reversed their position. It is shameful.

There is also a huge problem in this bill regarding the protection of religious institutions. I had to point out to those members that question number four was never answered, and I think I also have to point out to them that the one area that was ruled *ultra vires* of this House was the issue of protecting religious institutions, since that fell under provincial jurisdiction.

Government Orders

It is unbelievable that on the one hand those members tell us they have to do what the courts tell them to do, while on the other hand they do the one thing that the courts told them they could not do. They look at us and bash us for our position on it, yet it is their position; it is their members who do not understand what the court reference decision actually means.

We in Saskatchewan have seen the NDP allow marriage commissioners to be fired for their religious views and their views of conscience. These are civil servants. These are people who are being forced to go against their own personal convictions. We already know that the religious protection is not there. Marriage commissioners in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, under NDP governments, are being fired for their views on this. We know that this Liberal fig leaf of protecting religious institutions will not hold up because the courts have already told us that they are not able to uphold it.

I am proud to be able to be here in this House today as a representative for Regina—Qu'Appelle to vote against this bill. I know that I am doing so on behalf of the vast majority of constituents in my riding. I know that my party is taking the position that the vast majority of Canadians want to see taken on this. They want a respectful debate with the Government of Canada upholding the traditional definition.

I think it is important to note that the Prime Minister is not acting on behalf of the majority of Canadians. He is not doing what is in the best interests of Canada. He is going to have to answer to Canadians and explain his actions on this matter.

The Deputy Speaker: Is the House ready for the question?

Some hon. members: Question.

The Deputy Speaker: The question is on the motion. Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

The Deputy Speaker: All those in favour of the motion will please say yea.

Some hon. members: Yea.

The Deputy Speaker: All those opposed will please say nay.

Some hon. members: Nay.

The Deputy Speaker: In my opinion the nays have it.

And more than five members having risen:

The Deputy Speaker: Call in the members.

And the bells having rung:

The Deputy Speaker: The chief government whip has asked that this vote be delayed until 5:29 p.m. tomorrow.

●(1655)

PATENT ACT

Hon. Lucienne Robillard (for the Minister of Industry) moved the second reading of, and concurrence in, amendments made by the Senate to Bill C-29, an act to amend the Patent Act.

Hon. Jerry Pickard (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Industry, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as hon. colleagues will recall, Bill C-29 proposes remedial technical amendments to both the Patent Act and the Jean Chrétien Pledge to Africa.

The Jean Chrétien Pledge to Africa, which received royal assent on May 14, 2004, implements an August 30, 2003, decision of the World Trade Organization allowing developed countries such as Canada to adopt legislation authorizing the production of low cost generic versions of patent medicines for export to least developed and developing countries unable to produce their own.

Those who are familiar with the Jean Chrétien Pledge to Africa may recall that the legislation contained four schedules, which are to be annexed into the Patent Act. Schedule 1 sets out various pharmaceutical products which are eligible for the export licences under the regime and schedules 2, 3 and 4 set out various classes of the least developed and developing countries which would be eligible for these products.

However, because of an oversight in the drafting of these various schedules, they became divorced from the enacting clause, with the result that there is no legal authority by which to annex them to the Patent Act. If this oversight were not fixed, the Jean Chrétien Pledge to Africa could still come into force but there would be no products eligible for export and no countries to send them to.

In other words, unless the schedules are properly annexed, the Patent Act and the Jean Chrétien Pledge to Africa cannot be made operational. This oversight, although fundamental from a policy perspective, is a simple technical one from the legal perspective and it lends itself to the simple technical, albeit legislative, solution. The amendment setting forth that solution was introduced and adopted during the examination of Bill C-29 by the committee at the other place.

As a result, the text of the bill now before us differs from the one that appeared before the House in two very minor but critically important ways. First, new section 2.1 provides that the Patent Act shall be amended by adding schedules 1 to 4 of the Jean Chrétien Pledge to Africa to the end of the legislation, that is, after section 103. Second, new subsection 3(1) provides that both of the provisions in Bill C-29 that deal with the Jean Chrétien Pledge to Africa would come into force on the same day as the latter instrument.

I should add that the oversight that gave rise to the need for these changes was discovered only very recently and not in sufficient time to bring forward the necessary amendments while Bill C-29 was initially under examination in this House.

Government Orders

In fairness to the government on this point, it will be recalled that the Jean Chrétien Pledge to Africa received royal assent only three months after it was introduced in the House in the last Parliament. That was a very busy period during which there were a number of amendments made to the bill by all parties.

Quite simply, no one involved with this legislation, from the legislative drafters and the stakeholders who were intimately involved to the members of Parliament examining the bill in committee, caught the technical oversight. Even Carswell's 2005 edition of the Patent Act overlooked it.

While the version of Bill C-29 which we are considering today differs marginally from the one seen and approved in this House earlier, the underlying technical remedial objectives remain the same. I encourage my colleagues to join me in supporting Bill C-29 as amended by the other place so that it may enjoy the swift passage that characterized the progress of the Jean Chrétien Pledge to Africa through both Houses during the last Parliament.

• (1700)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Paul Crête (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I listened with great interest to what my colleague had to say .

I would like to remind the people listening to us that last year, at about this same time, the bill was very urgent. It absolutely had to be passed and all the parties worked together on passing it.

Last fall we made technical amendments that should have been made earlier. Now we have another delay, thanks to what a Senate committee has done, with recommendations that may be justified in the end.

However, the government and even all the parties have been criticized somewhat in the papers this week about the fact that a law that was leading edge a year ago is still not in effect. This is not something frivolous. This is about major health problems in very poor countries, developing countries. We are speaking about people with an urgent need for the medicines to be made available.

I would like to ask my colleague how he can explain why it has taken such a long time before—finally I hope—passing the bill, making no more amendments and allowing it to come into effect.

In the comments made by the newspapers this week, people from the generic drug industry said, among other things, that there were some aspects that discouraged putting the law into effect.

There were also some amendments proposed in the Senate. Public servants explained a bit of the reasons for this delay to us.

In the end, however, we are in a situation where we wonder, if the same tragic situation had arisen here in Canada, would we have taken so long to deal with it?

It is important for the government to tell us why it took so long to add to what already existed last year and what had already been introduced as a bill. It will be remembered that we were on the eve of an election call. We went through several stages very quickly, thinking we were doing the right thing. What we have before us now

is the same bill, or the same bill slightly modified, as we know. Can anyone explain why it took so long?

[*English*]

Hon. Jerry Pickard: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague and all colleagues in the House for trying to move this forward as expeditiously as possible.

There is no question that sometimes fundamental mistakes can be made. In this case, a drafting error was made. In order to ensure that there was no loss of time, we put those amendments forward in the Senate, had them adopted, and then brought them back to the House at the first opportunity.

We have tried to move the bill forward as quickly as possible without delay. That is why we are back in the House today, looking for the kind of support and the goodwill that we have had from Parliament over this issue.

My colleague from the Bloc asked a very good question. We have attempted to move this as quickly as we can, without delay, by reaching out to the Senate to get the approval of that amendment. We have brought it back to get the approval of the House of Commons, rather than delaying the issue from moving forward.

I believe we are now in a position where we can enact the bill quickly with the amendments before the House. We can look at a technical drafting problem where the schedules were not put into the bill. In a perfect world, that would have been done. In this case, our drafters missed it and everyone who examined the bill missed it. I believe that even all opposition parties that had an opportunity to examine the bill missed it.

However, the goodwill and good spirit of all of my colleagues in the House and all of my colleagues in committee has been very much appreciated. Everyone has worked to ensure the bill goes forward and I do appreciate that.

• (1705)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Réal Ménard (Hochelaga, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I add my voice to that of other members to congratulate all the parliamentarians in this House who have worked on making this bill the best and the most perfect bill possible.

Admittedly, this is a highly humanitarian bill. In the past, our examination of drug costs and issues related to research and development has tended to cause division between the parties.

I believe that the current Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development was the Minister of Industry at the time when this bill was referred to the committee. The committee achieved a perfect consensus, which should also be reflected in the allocation for the Summer Career Placements Program this year. But that is for another debate. Without digressing, I would like to plead in favour of the status quo, if the minister gets my drift.

Government Orders

That having been said, I have three short questions for my hon. colleague. First, could he remind the House of the degree of cooperation that was anticipated in connection with this GMO issue? I know that there were expectations concerning the bill in that respect. Second, could he remind us of the difference between compulsory licensing and the current system? Third, could he remind us of the importance of schedule I, which lists the countries which will be allowed to bid and to which the shipping of medicine will be allowed? I think it would be helpful, for the benefit of our fellow citizens, if he could read this list.

[English]

Hon. Jerry Pickard: Mr. Speaker, I would say that your comments are well appreciated. I believe there has been cooperation among all parties in the House. You in particular along with the—

The Deputy Speaker: Order. The parliamentary secretary should address his comments through the Chair rather than specifying a specific member of Parliament.

Hon. Jerry Pickard: Mr. Speaker, I thought that “you” could be considered as plural or singular. It is not a specific member of Parliament. “You” could well be the whole Bloc Québécois. I think your English is good enough to understand that, but just to correct you, so you will remember in the future.

Everyone has cooperated extremely well and I am pleased with that. The question about the annex lists, we have four schedules as I mentioned. One schedule points out the drugs that could be included under the bill. All drugs that could be included are in one of the schedules in that annex. The other list includes different countries. There are three lists of different levels of countries to which those drugs can be sent. Those are specifically laid out as well. I understand that those would be available to everyone in the House and all Canadians who wish to get those annexes.

We have a system in place where drug companies and others can go forward, produce those generic drugs, and ensure that they go to the required countries, so countries could receive those at much less cost if we look at the general cost of patent medicines.

Mr. James Rajotte (Edmonton—Leduc, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to ask the parliamentary secretary how the progress is going in terms of actually preparing and how many medicines we can expect perhaps in the years ahead to be used for least developed nations for HIV-AIDS, TB and malaria? What is the government's plan with respect to helping with the medical infrastructure and everything else that is needed in order to ensure that these medicines are used effectively? I would appreciate if he could bring the House up to date on that.

• (1710)

Hon. Jerry Pickard: Mr. Speaker, it is my understanding that those drugs that are primarily used for certain outbreaks or certain problems that come about, and it could be malaria, HIV-AIDS or whatever, would be added to schedules and those schedules would then be able to move forward.

At this point in time there is a schedule set forth for certain drugs. This is not a broad spectrum of every drug being put on the scale. It is for those that are dealing with specific problems that we see abroad and richer countries like Canada can help. They cannot manufacture those drugs on their own.

In order to forecast what would be added to those schedules in the future, we would have to look at a broader picture of where those problems would come from and what drugs would be applicable. Then there would have to be amendments to those annexes in order to implement any of that. Again, it would have to come back to an amendment to the schedules in order to change any further drugs that would go on those lists.

Mr. James Rajotte (Edmonton—Leduc, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to rise today to again discuss this bill. As members of the House know, we have seen this bill many times and in many forms. It is a bill which members of all parties can take some pride. We worked together on an issue as serious as this in terms of trying to get cheaper medicines into least developed nations by amending the Patent Act.

For the parliamentary secretary's information, I was asking more about the infrastructure that is helping to ensure that these medicines get to the people who need them and that they do the most good when they get there.

A lot of the people from the non-governmental organizations, like Médecins Sans Frontières, the global AIDS fund, Oxfam and others, came before us and said it is one thing to allow for cheaper medicines, but it is another thing to ensure that the system is in place. We have the physicians and nurses, but we should also ensure that people are taking these medicines with an adequate diet, a clean water supply, and know how to take the medicines properly. If they do not take them properly, it can act in the exact opposite way and make them immune to treatment. I encourage the government to ensure that through CIDA and other departments, agencies and organizations it continues to work with the NGOs to ensure that the medicines actually arrive and do some good.

When this bill was introduced in the past Parliament, every opposition party was willing to pass this legislation in one day. Unfortunately, it has taken the government four times to get this legislation right. That reveals a lot about this Parliament and the last Parliament. In fact, there were people in all parties who through goodwill have tried to move forward on this issue. It says something about the government. It brought the bill forward and reintroduced amendments in committee. Now it has reintroduced amendments again to its own piece of legislation which had unanimous opposition support from the first day it was introduced.

It should be pointed out to the Canadian people that there are parties like the Conservative Party that are very willing to work with all other parties on issues of concern to Canadians. I certainly commend my colleagues from the Bloc Québécois and the NDP who worked on this issue. I know they put a lot of effort into this as well. To be fair, the current Minister of Labour and Housing was quite instrumental in committee in trying to shepherd some of these amendments.

Government Orders

I want to give a brief overview of this issue. It is about trying to enable generic manufacturers to manufacture medicines, which are still under the 20 year patent protection, at lower cost, so a lot of the individuals in the least developed nations will be able to reduce the cost in terms of what they actually pay for these medicines. It is important because it allows generic manufacturers to step in not only from Canada but from other nations.

We should also recognize the efforts that a lot of the brand name manufacturers have made. I had the opportunity to visit the headquarters of GSK, GlaxoSmithKline, in the United Kingdom. One of the things it talked about was river disease in Africa. I believe it has dealt with about 20 million people and has been able to combat that disease. Its goal is to eradicate it within about 20 years. We should recognize its efforts, as well as Merck Frosst's efforts in Botswana. This is an issue which people and companies of goodwill can certainly have an impact on.

We supported Bill C-29 and the Jean Chrétien pledge to Africa act in the last Parliament and we support these amendments. We hope that this bill will finally be passed and become law. The Conservative Party is showing an awful lot of goodwill by putting up one speaker and ensuring the bill goes through in an hour to an hour and a half of debate.

• (1715)

I encourage the government to work with the NGOs to ensure that the infrastructure is in place. I encourage it to keep an accounting and then report to Canadians on what progress has been made.

I was trying to make another point to the parliamentary secretary. The government should keep track of how much medicine actually goes to these nations under this legislation so that we can be accountable to Canadians. We should be able to tell them in 2006, 2007, and in subsequent years that under legislation which was enacted in 2005, how many people were helped, how much medicine was produced, and how much money went globally to fight the horrific challenging diseases of tuberculosis, malaria and HIV-AIDS.

We in the Conservative Party support these amendments. We support the goal of this legislation. We would like to see it succeed.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Paul Crête (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, BQ): Mr. Speaker, that was an interesting speech, which reminds us of the work accomplished in this regard to date. However, I agree with my colleague. To some extent, it is somewhat disgraceful for it to have taken another year for the bill to pass.

In my colleague's opinion, is this the result of administrative delays or something else? Sometimes, we can slow down the process or see that a bill is not rushed through, because people are constantly telling us that rushing legislation through is not necessary.

Were there not such representations? In his opinion, is this not simply evidence of how slow the legislative process—the stages involved in passing bills—is and is this not also partially the result of having rushed this bill through last year, before the election call? Are these two realities not lessons for the future? First, there was an additional delay because things were done too quickly and therefore not properly. Second, things slowed down significantly over the past

year for amendments which, ultimately, have proved to be insignificant or, in any case, which could have taken less time.

I want to know what my colleague thinks about this.

[*English*]

Mr. James Rajotte: Mr. Speaker, my friend in the Bloc Québécois is absolutely correct. This legislation was introduced in the final period of Jean Chrétien's administration. He professed a great deal of interest in trying to help nations in Africa and other least developed nations.

When this legislation was introduced our House leader, the current member for West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, approached the Bloc Québécois and the NDP and there was agreement among all opposition parties to pass it in one day. Interestingly, the government said no. This was government legislation and the opposition was willing to pass it in one day, yet the government would not agree. It said there were problems with the legislation.

The member asked me if it was an administrative problem or a question of other issues or just normal delay in the House. I am trying to be fair and diplomatic, but it was a question of government incompetence. The government could not put together a piece of legislation right from the beginning. I believe other parties would agree that it was a question of government incompetence. It is ironic because the government is fond of saying the opposition does not want to make Parliament work. Bill C-29 has shown the exact opposite. Members of the opposition were willing to work with the government to make this work.

My colleague from Windsor and the Bloc member who asked the question worked hard at committee to get Bill C-29 through committee as soon as possible. It came back to the House with amendments. The government forgot to include a schedule so it has to be amended again.

I have spoken to this legislation about five times in the House and have said essentially the same thing. We support it and we want it to go through as quickly as possible.

The government should be ashamed at how long it has taken to get this legislation through. It should do its job henceforward. However, there may be a new government sooner rather than later that would ensure that people in the least developed nations would get the medicine they need. There would be no incompetence that would hold up a good piece of legislation such as this bill.

• (1720)

Mr. Brian Masse (Windsor West, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the member has worked very efficiently on this file.

It is important to reinforce his comments that at committee there was a great difference between where his party was and where mine was when this bill was first introduced to us. We spent a lot of time bridging that gap.

Government Orders

I had over 100 amendments to this piece of legislation. Members of the opposition worked very hard to condense the legislation to be accommodating and to at least be open to significant changes that had to come. The original draft of the legislation was significantly different. We had to go through a very difficult time in committee to change the legislation to make it work.

The government members claimed the other day that if we worked with them and made sure that we were diligent, they would get this bill passed. We are not doing our jobs. People across the world are suffering from tuberculosis, HIV and other diseases and we are not providing medications because of the incompetence in handling this file.

I would ask the hon. member to revisit that period when as opposition members we heard promises from the government that it would move the legislation expeditiously through the whole system, through committee and into what we have done today. Does he think this is a black mark on Canada? I think it is.

In 2003 when the legislation was originally conceptualized, we were to fast-track it to make sure we could do our part for others. We have not seen that. Not a single pill has gone to anyone who needs it because of the incompetence of the government. There is suffering that could be ended today. I would like the member to reiterate what we did on our side.

Mr. James Rajotte: Mr. Speaker, in fairness, I should say that my colleague in the NDP worked very hard at committee. He is correct in the sense that often the Conservatives and the NDP do not agree, probably 90% of the time. However, on this issue he listened to what I said and I listened to what he said. A lot of the amendments he brought forward, I supported. Members from the Bloc brought forward amendments.

It is interesting, and the member will recall, that at committee the Bloc members had their amendments ready. The NDP members had their amendments ready. We had our amendments ready. Even some Liberal members had their amendments ready, but the government did not. We were told that the Prime Minister had taken an interest in the file and he was changing some of the amendments, so we had to put off committee meetings. We had to agree unanimously that we would not meet on a given day but that we would meet the following week. We had to cancel the meeting again because we had to wait for the amendments from the government to its own legislation. It was astounding.

We should compliment the staff of the committee and all members, who really worked hard. We worked day and night to get our amendments ready. Then we waited for two weeks for the government to prepare its amendments.

It shows how ironic the charge is that somehow Parliament does not work because of the opposition when the work on this bill shows the exact opposite.

The hon. member talked about Canada's lead role on this issue. The point of the bill was to take the lead on the issue. It is embarrassing that it has taken so long to get this piece of legislation through the House.

When the two ministers presented the bill at committee for the first time, I asked the simple question of how much the outlay of

money was through CIDA and other organizations to shepherd the movement of medicines to these nations. The answer we got was that they did not know, that they were not dealing with that now. That should have been part and parcel of it from the very beginning.

I have very dear friends who have moved to Canada from that area of the world. They have said to me that the tsunami was tragic. It was the worst and the best: the worst in terms of how nature dealt a devastating blow to millions of people, but it showed the best of the human spirit in terms of the response.

That is what this should be about. This tragedy is 10 times the size of the tsunami and we should have 10 times the human response to the tragedy. The government should have taken the lead on this issue and shown the rest of the world how generous Canadians are in that endeavour. Unfortunately, it has not done so, but we certainly hope it will in the future.

● (1725)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Paul Crête (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to be able to speak today about this bill.

As I was saying previously, this bill was under consideration several times last year. There was a desire at first to ensure that the entire issue of intellectual property rights over drugs did not limit their availability in the poorest countries in the world, those that need them. We wanted these countries to have access to drugs without having to pay exorbitant prices like those we often see in our society. Imagine what this would mean for the poorest countries in the world.

The Government of Canada was congratulated on having taken the initiative to pass a bill of this kind. Since that time, unfortunately, the bill has been lost in a huge administrative and legislative maze. It will be remembered that the bill was passed about this time last year. Then, when the House resumed after the election, technical amendments had to be made to fix certain errors or add certain provisions that had not been foreseen. The bill was then sent to the Senate, which has now proposed two new amendments to correct it.

During this time, certain justified remarks have been made in the newspapers. I will simply quote Mr. Tony Parmar of Doctors Without Borders in an article seen this week, on May 2 to be exact:

"We're still in a waiting game", said Tony Parmar of Doctors Without Borders, who was hoping that the countries hit by AIDS, malaria and other treatable diseases would benefit from the passage of this bill.

These illnesses can and need to be treated as quickly as possible.

We obviously welcome the fact that we will finally have a bill that helps to cover this kind of situation. We hope that the process will be quicker for medical infrastructure assistance, so that the bill will be efficient.

The witnesses at committee, especially the NGOs, including Doctors Without Borders and other stakeholders of this kind, told us clearly that we should not confine ourselves to making the drugs available—something we have not yet succeeded in doing. We have thought for nearly a year that the bill would finally be passed in its definitive form. Now there is an opportunity to do so.

Private Members' Business

At the same time, the necessary assistance must be available. If the drugs are not taken properly, if the proper dose is not taken, if the instructions are not followed, if there is no appropriate medical support, the desired result will not be achieved. It is equally important that medical resources be among those made available to international aid. This is why we must support the bill before us.

The two proposed amendments to the bill are technical in nature. One of them will allow a representative of the Senate to sit on the committee in question, and the other is similar. Neither changes the substance of the bill but they remind us of the unacceptable international situation. Thousands of people are dying because they lack access to affordable drugs of acceptable quality. This may be one of the points on which we ought to be coming down hardest on the international community.

Initially, we realized that the general rules concerning intellectual property would never allow an adequate supply. This is what gave rise to the desire to create an exception so that the WTO rules could be applied differently to give the poorest countries access to these drugs. No satisfactory response has yet been forthcoming. Very few countries in the world have followed up on the matter or have proposed legislation or regulations in the appropriate way to meet this urgent need.

Right here in Canada, a year after introducing such a bill, and having patted ourselves on the back for being the first in the world to do so, we are still dragging our feet as far as the necessary administrative amendments are concerned.

• (1730)

Let us hope that this will be the last time, and that once this bill is passed we will have the opportunity to put the appropriate mechanisms in place in the short term.

Mr. Speaker, I see that the time allotted to me will be limited by the end of business. I would like to have some indication from you as to whether I should continue at some later time.

The Speaker: The hon. member for Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup will indeed have 15 minutes to complete his remarks next time this bill comes before the House.

[English]

It being 5:30 p.m. the House will now proceed to the consideration of private members' business as listed on today's Order Paper.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

[English]

PATENT ACT

The House resumed from February 9 consideration of the motion that Bill C-274, an act to amend the Patent Act, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

Mr. Derek Lee (Scarborough—Rouge River, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to engage in debate on this private member's initiative. We always congratulate each other for our private members' initiatives and I applaud the member on this one. In the

end, I find that I am not able to support it and I will try to explain why in the few minutes that are available to me.

As has been stated a number of times, Canada's drug patent policy seeks to benefit effective patent enforcement for new and innovative drugs on the one hand, with the timely market entry of their lower priced generic alternatives on the other.

The current manner in which that balance was realized was established in 1993 with the enactment of Bill C-91. That bill introduced into the Patent Act what is commonly called the early working exception as well as the enabling authority for the NOC regulations, which sounds a little technical but that is what they are called, and which Bill C-274, which we are looking at here today, proposes to repeal.

I should confirm as well for the record that I conspicuously voted against Bill C-91 when it was proposed at the time. Since then there has been a massage of the provisions in the regulations and the balance, which I referred to earlier, has been created, although in my view that balance is still not effective. However to remove the whole regulations without putting something else back into place would not achieve the public interest purposes that I seek.

In the pharmaceutical industry the early working exception does allow generic companies to work or develop a patented product while in the process of applying for Health Canada approval to sell that product on the market. Generic drug companies are therefore able to complete the regulatory approval process during the lifetime of the patent and be in a position to enter the market as soon as the patent expires.

The NOC regulations were conceived in order to prevent generic copies of patented drugs from going to market in breach of the patent. They do so by linking Health Canada's ability to approve generic drugs to the patent status of the brand name drug that the generic is seeking to copy. If passed, as I said, Bill C-274 would undermine our attempt to provide balance and would strip the patent holder from what they argue is the most effective means of protecting their patent.

There has been a significant debate over the last while in intellectual property circles about how we regulate pharmaceuticals in this way. Rising concern has been expressed about the balance between fostering innovation and the availability of generic drugs. Many countries have made adjustments to their laws in order to optimize that balance between innovation and access to affordable medicines. For instance, in 2003 the United States introduced reforms to its so-called Hatch-Waxman rules which are similar in many respects to the NOC regulations we maintain here.

Here in Canada, recent court decisions have enabled patent holder drug companies to list new patents on Health Canada's patent register on the basis of just inconsequential changes to the original drug product. The listing of these additional patents, which in the industry is sometimes called evergreening, has resulted in repeat litigation between innovative and generic companies and, in some instances, the unwarranted delay of generic market entry, and I regret that evergreening.

Private Members' Business

The process appears costly and not in the public interest. Some observers have suggested that we put in place a once only procedure whereby the patent holder could not evergreen after a NOC application began. There would only be one 24 month stay triggered by the generic company's NOC application.

To address these problems, the government recently proposed some regulatory amendments designed to readjust that balance between the enforcement of the intellectual property rights of the patent holder and encouraging the generic entry. The amendments are directed to both the NOC regulations and other intellectual property instruments, including what is called data protection under the food and drug regulations.

These amendments were pre-published in part I of the *Canada Gazette* on December 11 last and pre-publication was followed by a 75 day consultation period, during which the pharmaceutical industry and other interested parties could submit their comments. The government is currently reviewing those comments.

• (1735)

In my view, the government should include in the new regulation package, however it wishes to put it in, the new "once only" 24 month stay so generic companies will know where they stand and they will not have to face this repeated evergreening, this artificial device now apparently relied on by the patent holding companies.

By restoring the balance to the NOC regulations and shoring up the data provisions in the food and drug regulations, the government's proposed regulatory amendments, and the one I have just proposed here and which other members may propose, would provide greater overall stability and predictability to our intellectual property environment for pharmaceuticals.

These new changes would attract new medical therapies to Canada, encourage real improvements to existing drugs and ensure more timely competition in the marketplace.

While I salute the hon. member's interest in this issue, I am confident that the amendments that have been described in my remarks will better address the concerns that motivated the tabling of the bill in the first place and avoid the wild west scenario that might evolve in the event there were a complete revocation of these regulations as the bill proposes.

Mr. Rob Merrifield (Yellowhead, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to add my voice to the debate on this important legislation. I commend my hon. colleague for bringing Bill C-274 forward.

I believe he has good intentions with regard to why this legislation is important and why he is bringing it forward to this House. I believe he is looking at the cost of pharmaceuticals in this country. We know pharmaceuticals are the number one driver of costs in our health care system. If we look out into the 21st century as far as we can determine it will continue to be that way. Perhaps it will even expand as we move forward.

Pharmaceuticals do a tremendous job for Canadians. They are well received and well used. In fact, we actually have to change the paradigm around pharmaceuticals in this country. Instead of understanding or thinking that there is a pill for every problem, we have to start understanding that every pill does have a problem

because of what we are seeing with the adverse events with some of the pharmaceuticals on our marketplace today.

How do the pharmaceuticals get on to the market and are the proper rules in place to allow them there? This is part of the debate that has to go on in Canada. However the legislation actually talks about the evergreening or the battle between the generics and the brand name pharmaceuticals.

I think it is fair to have this debate and to actually raise the awareness of the people of Canada about this issue and what is happening. Bill C-274 would repeal the patent medicine notice of compliance regulations and reduce the patent protection of 20 years down some. As my colleague mentioned, the regulation was enacted in 1993. It was called Bill C-91 and it was introduced by the Conservative government.

I would like to read into the record the Conservative Party policy as it was adopted in March in Montreal.

The Conservative Party believes that Canada's pharmaceuticals legislation must strike a balance between encouraging the development of new drugs, and ensuring that those drugs are available to Canadians at affordable prices. We believe that part of this balance is achieved through adhering to the international standard of 20 years patent protection for pharmaceuticals.

To reduce that would not strike the balance. I believe it would disrupt the balance. It would actually drive investment out of Canada and not be in the best interest of the Canadian population, the pharmaceutical industrial or Canadian health care as a whole.

We support the laws and regulations that respect property rights. We encourage research and development into new drugs by brand name companies. We also support regulations that would allow generic manufacturers to offer similar medications through lower prices in a reasonable time.

What I think we are talking about is the balance between what the brand name pharmaceuticals are doing with regard to research and development, and then the generics that come along after the 20 year patent has expired capitalizing on the drug by duplicating it at a cheaper price and selling it to Canadians at a lower price. The generic manufacturers can realize their profits at that time.

It is a balance between encouraging development and investment into new technologies, as well as at the lowest price possible. We want to strike that balance and hold that balance.

Therefore we support the regulation of drug prices through the Patented Medicines Prices Review Board. This is unique to Canada. It is much different than in the United States. The prices review board sets our prices for brand name pharmaceuticals at a balance between seven other international countries so that we are not high or low but we make sure that the top price does not go above the median of those seven countries.

Private Members' Business

Because of that we have actually quite reasonable prices for pharmaceuticals in Canada. It has caused some problems because those prices are quite a bit lower than our nearest trading partner which is the United States. Consequently, Internet pharmacies are popping up which is causing considerable concern on both sides of the border.

• (1740)

Our prices are artificially set low, going into a marketplace that does not have a regulated pricing regime and therefore the brand name pharmaceuticals are being pumped in. It is not really comparing apples to apples from that perspective. It is a long complex issue, but it is an issue that I do not have time to address here. However, I want to bring it forward because it has implications with regard to the pricing of pharmaceuticals in Canada.

The bill does not seek to strike a balance. It seeks to tip the balance on to the generic side. Generic companies also are doing a very good job in Canada. They do great work, and some wonderful companies are adding to the prosperity of Canadians with jobs. We want to appreciate what they do at the same time.

This is a complex issue. I had an opportunity to sit in the industry committee when it was debating this issue last year. The debate becomes very complex. As one goes through the debate, one has to appreciate both sides, understand them and get a handle on it. The debate was would evergreening happen, or would the generics take advantage of laws of the land and try to capitalize on what happened in patent law or would the brand names try to capitalize and hold off generics unjustifiably to try to steal an extra two, three or four years under patent law.

My question to the industry officials who were there at the time was this. Did generic firms ever try to compromise the 20 years and bring their products on to the marketplace ahead of the 20 year window of patent protection? The response I received astounded me. In fact, it was not did they ever. It was they could not remember one product ever developed in Canada that was not attempted by the generic firms.

When we see this happening, we have to ask ourselves, in light of what the mover of this bill is trying to do in getting rid of evergreening, if this is legitimate. If a product is allowed on the market ahead of the 20 year period, if it is challenged in litigation and law to recoup of the costs and if the brand names win in court, they would never be able to recoup the costs of what they lost because of market share from the court case.

Therefore, we have a serious situation if the bill goes through the way it is. I believe it would drive the brand name pharmaceuticals out of the country. What do they do for the country? It is roughly \$1 billion per year in research and development in Canada. They hire well educated Canadians and they provide well paying, stimulating employment for those Canadians. They produce some amazing drugs. That is probably the best benefit we can get from the pharmaceutical industry in Canada. I believe they will continue to do that.

The Conservative Party wants more than that from them. We want more investment because I believe they are falling behind on some of their investment. We want more well paying jobs. We want more

knowledge based jobs. We want more new drugs developed in Canada. Therefore, we have to set up an environment that ensures they have assurance from governments that they will respect their 20 year patent law.

Therefore, I would like to read again another piece of our policy from the March convention which talks about research and development and innovation. It states:

The Conservative Party recognizes the importance of health sciences research in enhancing the health of Canadians and as a dynamic economic sector in its own right.

Research and development in Canada has done that. It is important for us to continue to protect that and to ensure a stable situation for our pharmaceuticals so we not only have very good products, but we have them at a very cheap rate as well, and Canadians can be proud.

Incidentally, our brand name pharmaceuticals in Canada are 50% to 80% cheaper than they are in the United States. On the generic side, that is not true. The generics are cheaper in the United States than they are in Canada.

I am please to have contributed to the debate on this issue, but I cannot support the bill.

• (1745)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Réal Ménard (Hochelaga, BQ) Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise to speak to a bill that proposes to totally eliminate linkage regulations. My neo-Bolshevik friends introduced this bill.

It has a certain merit. However, with all due respect, it lacks subtlety. It is reasonable to question the balance that must always be sought between innovative and generic industries.

It would be difficult, however, to say that linkage regulations have to abolished completely. We must not lose sight of the historical context. Until the Conservatives under Brian Mulroney changed the Patent Act, Canada had a system of compulsory licenses. In other words, a company manufacturing and marketing a drug obtained an exclusive license. With the payment of a royalty to the company, the drug could be copied.

For years, because this system of compulsory licensing in return for a royalty—royalty was the word at the time—was in effect, it was felt that Canada performed poorly in the area of research and development.

Obviously, if it is possible and relatively easy to copy a drug, that does not provide not much of an incentive for the biomedical industry to make investments.

These investments grew over the years. I saw the figures last year. Between the marketing phase and the research phase, from the moment the molecule is isolated to the moment the drug is available for consumption, it can easily take 10 to 12 years. We are talking about an investment cycle involving several million dollars.

Following a royal commission, Canada decided it wanted to change its system, at least in terms of drugs. When the Conservatives under Brian Mulroney came into power in 1984, they changed the law a few years later.

Now, it is no longer a compulsory licensing system, but an exclusivity system. In other words, to be a patent holder you have to submit an application to Health Canada and Industry Canada through the Canadian Intellectual Property Office. Then you get exclusivity, not from the date the patent is obtained—which was the case with the former legislation—but when the Conservatives passed their Bill C-91, exclusivity was granted for 20 years from the date the application is submitted to Health Canada and the Canadian Intellectual Property Office. Note that this is not market exclusivity for 20 years, since two or three years can go by before a patent is granted.

The Bloc Québécois cannot support the bill as it now stands. We have a large caucus in the Bloc Québécois, this great force of national liberation, this leading political force in Quebec that is here to stay, as everyone knows, if that is the wish of our fellow citizens. The Bloc Québécois cannot support the bill as it now stands. Why? Because we cannot agree to put all these innovative industries on an equal footing. We cannot say that marketing a patent, for example, for a washing machine or a dryer is the same as marketing a drug patent. There need to be guarantees for infringement protection. That is what the linkage regulations are for.

• (1750)

The linkage regulations are not perfect. I am even prepared to acknowledge that the innovative industries have engaged in delinquent behaviour, by extending patents that had expired. I believe what our colleague from the NDP was trying to say was that the industry used provisions in the linkage regulations, themselves established under the Patent Act. These provisions provided an opportunity, when there was an allegation of infringement, to automatically get an injunction for up to 24 months.

This mechanism is indeed questionable. I have statistics showing that between 1998 and 2003, there were almost 80 cases brought before the courts concerning notices of allegation. In two cases out of three, the generic companies won, which means the notices of allegation were not founded. It is true that in the past innovative companies used the linkage regulations not to protect themselves from infringement, but to extend their patents. This is unacceptable, as this was not the intention of the legislator.

We acknowledge that there are major investments that need protecting. The bulk of pharmaceutical research facilities are located in Montreal, not necessarily in Hochelaga—Maisonnette, but more in West Island. These investments must be protected. Yet at the same time it is not acceptable to tolerate patents being perpetuated by claim mechanisms.

It must be acknowledged that the government has recently modified the regulations in order to protect us somewhat against that, in order to make use of the linkage regulations less easy, less automatic, less immediate, not to protect against infringement but rather against evergreening.

Private Members' Business

The Bloc Québécois, believing that this balance must exist between the generic and innovative drug industries, cannot support questionable practices which lead to evergreening.

That said, we do not feel that the solution proposed by the NDP, that is total abolition of regulations, is reasonable. Unfortunately, my neo-socialist friends sometimes let themselves get carried away with solutions that are a touch excessive. Fortunately, the Bloc Québécois, in all circumstances, provides that balance between what is desirable and what is feasible. I believe the Bloc Québécois worked very hard in committee to ensure that the linkage regulations are maintained, but used wisely.

Still, we must recognize that it may take 10 years from the time a molecule is isolated to the time a drug is available to consumers, and this can represent investments of up to \$800 or \$900 million. This money is not coming from the unions or workers or governments, but rather from the private sector. I do not want to shock my socialist friends but, in our system, it is normal to expect a return on an investment.

We do not tolerate abuses. We want a balanced policy and I believe that repealing the regulations in their entirety is unreasonable.

In closing, I want to say that, in the future, we will need to monitor drugs without any real therapeutic benefits. The Patented Medicine Prices Review Board refers to three classes of drugs: classes 1, 2 and 3. I believe that we must work with the pharmaceutical industry to ensure that new drugs coming onto the market and for which Health Canada issues an advisory have real therapeutic benefits. I agree with the NDP that, in the past, things have been somewhat lax and drugs with no new therapeutic benefits were marketed.

• (1755)

According to our estimates, this has contributed to a 50% increase in the cost of drugs.

Mr. Speaker, I sense your impatience. There is no medicine for that. The only cure is for me to sit down and give the floor to someone else.

[*English*]

Mr. Pat Martin (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am thankful for the opportunity to enter into the debate on Bill C-274. I would like to begin by paying tribute to my colleague from Windsor West, who is the sponsor of this important piece of legislation, and to recognize the contribution he has made to this debate. It is safe to say that among those of us here he has become known as somewhat of a champion on this issue of providing accessible, affordable, necessary pharmaceutical products to the Canadian public within the confines and parameters of a fair system, but one that provides access to necessary drugs without bankrupting the system.

Private Members' Business

I should point out that Bill C-274 relates to access to less costly pharmaceutical products. What could be more poignant, timely or topical as we all wrestle with the problem of our health care system and the difficulty in providing these basic needs to Canadians. We know that the quickest growing aspect of our health care system is the exorbitant prices that we are paying for necessary life-saving drugs.

I begin by simply recognizing how important the job is that my colleague from Windsor West has done in bringing this important issue to the House of Commons today.

This bill has been stripped down to its most lean form. One could sum it up by simply saying that the bill seeks to repeal the patented medicines notice of compliance regulations. We argue that Canada's notice of compliance regulations regime fosters an anti-competitive behaviour among drug manufacturers. It is antithetical to what needs to be done in our pharmaceutical industry, in that it does not encourage research and development and innovation. It means that Canadians, governments, hospitals and benefit providers are paying more for drugs than would be necessary if a fair system were in place.

After careful consideration of this issue, my colleague from Windsor West has arrived at the conclusion that the single most effective thing he could do to enable more Canadians to get the drugs they need at affordable prices is to repeal the regime known now as the patented medicines notice of compliance regulations.

It would be helpful to look at a bit of the history. From the 1920s to the 1980s our government played a key role in limiting market monopolies on pharmaceutical products. In the interests of access and competition, our government played an interventionist role to limit and restrict the possibility of monopolies. The regulations that we talk about took their first form relatively recently, in 1993, in a bill which I think we can all remember, the infamous Bill C-91, billed as the biggest corporate giveaway. The biggest corporate sellout in Canadian history was Bill C-91. We remember it with great regret as a turning point in the health of our health care system.

Compulsory licensing, I should explain, allowed a non-patent holder to compete with lower priced versions. The compulsory licence issue was done away with in Bill C-91. This is one of the most dangerous elements. People sounded the alarm. I remember the NDP passionately fighting against Bill C-91 at the time. The debates were very public and high profile.

It seemed that pressure from the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement in 1988 and then subsequently NAFTA in 1994 exerted enormous pressures that radically altered the way Canada dealt with pharmaceutical patents.

• (1800)

The compulsory licensing aspect was one of the changes. In fact a federal commission of inquiry in 1985 concluded that the use of compulsory licensing had saved hundreds of millions of dollars in the health care system at the time, had no adverse impact on the research and development of pharmaceutical products, or on the multinational drug companies regarding investment in research and development. It was found and held to be true in 1985 that

government intervention in the form of compulsory licensing of real competition was saving money.

That reason and logic was thrown out the window in those days in the rush to implement the free trade agreement. Whoever negotiated these things on behalf of Canada I have always maintained should be dragged into the streets and shot because they really did sell us down the road. The names of the chief negotiators of the free trade agreement and NAFTA should live in infamy in Canadian history for what they did to us. We remember now the impact of NAFTA and the free trade agreement radically altering the way Canada deals with pharmaceutical patents.

If another federal commission of inquiry were held today, it would likely find the exact inverse of the 1985 findings. This radical shift in government policy that my colleague from Windsor West is trying to address has undermined the possibility of government to retain some element of control over pharmaceutical pricing to ensure that Canadians have access to affordable pharmaceuticals at the pharmacy counter and in our public health care system.

There is a contradiction in that there is a gap we cannot even span between the stated purpose of these notice of compliance regulations and the actual results of them. In actual fact the purpose of the NOC regulations was to protect patent rights, et cetera. Rather than protecting legitimate patent rights, these NOC regulations have actually incorporated and caused an abuse of litigation options and in fact of people extending, artificially some would add, the patent protection for a period longer than the 20 years, which we argue is already very generous.

I see I am running out time, so I will simply cite some of the key issues that others may not have touched on. One is evergreening, which implies the perpetual renewal of patents with small or insignificant changes or modifications to an existing drug. This is a bastardization of the patent protection that was agreed to under international guidelines and in our bilateral trade agreement with the United States. It is being abused widely. I will give an example.

In 2003, 103 patents were added to the patent registry by brand name companies but there were only 16 actual new substances approved. In other words, these patents were being listed based on a change in the colour of the pill, based on a change in the recommended dosage. The tiniest, most insignificant excuses are being used to provide a monopoly on these drugs, where companies can charge the highest possible amount without worrying about generic competition. This is what is killing us, figuratively and literally in some cases, because Canadians cannot afford the drugs they need because we are shackled by these monopolistic biases built into the system.

Private Members' Business

My colleague has tried to address this by eliminating the notice of compliance regulations within the drug patent review mechanism. I commend my colleague from Windsor West for being bold enough to bring this initiative before the House of Commons on behalf of Canadians who deserve access to life-saving drugs. If that means standing up to big pharma now and then, we are not afraid to do it. We are not going to sit and listen to apologists for big pharma justify the rip-off of the system in the form of billions of dollars. We are being fleeced by big pharma. My colleague from Windsor West and the NDP caucus are trying to address that. We should all stand up and support my colleague's bill today.

• (1805)

Hon. Dan McTeague (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, let me begin by suggesting that I will be supporting in principle Bill C-274 in the name of the member of Parliament for Windsor West. I have worked tirelessly with the member over the years, as I have with the member for Scarborough—Rouge River and a number of other members on what has been obviously one of the most neglected areas of our health care policy.

We have heard some very interesting speeches by members of Parliament from all sides of the House on this issue. Most will not support, apparently, the initiative that is being taken here. We certainly need to update our thinking about drug patents in this country and of course, since 1993, what has been the ultimate benefit for Canadians.

We can talk about innovative drugs and how important it is to keep the price of our health care system down. We can look at a number of other initiatives and PR perspectives that have been given. It is important for us to understand that when it comes to the so-called balance that has been discussed, we need to give to the House a reality check that Canadians spent almost \$22 billion in drugs last year, up substantially from the year before. Much of that balance, quite apart from the cost to consumers and the cost to various drug plans and other drug insurers, has also meant investments in research and development.

We know that when a drug is qualifying for its approval it must go through a very rigorous test. The test is a requirement that the companies must engage in as part of their research and development. What we have seen recently, and I think this has been made very clear by the Patented Medicine Prices Review Board and others, is that in fact the research and development is often advertising. In fact research and development is what they are required to do to conduct clinical trials, not the vaunted, wonderful R and D that would happen, that we thought would take place many years ago, but instead, what they have to do, the bare bones. Even at that we saw last year that the 11% requirement was not met. It is now down near 9%.

Let us put this into perspective. Several members have talked about the regulations as they relate to new drug submissions, as they relate to the requirement to fulfill certain obligations. We heard from other members concerning certain drugs that were abused. In fact, almost every drug that was nearing or ending its patent was subject to automatic injunctions which allowed the patent holder to basically make a claim of infringement without even having to prove it, because of a bizarre, arcane, draconian system. It basically forced the

generic which was lawfully attempting to reproduce the drug at the end of expiry into a legal morass which went on for years.

In the case of Losec, it should have come off in 1999. Losec is an ulcer drug which costs Canadian consumers over \$425 million a year. Those are real figures that cannot be simply dismissed. Of course the overall costs to our health care system came in the form of private corporations, provinces and other corporations which had to pay for this ultimately.

I suggested at the time that it was important for us, and we know we had a pitch battle in the industry committee of which I was vice-chair, where members suddenly walked in out of nowhere, knowing it all. Of course we never had the full study that we thought we should have had, but it did click with the industry department. I know that what they proposed here in terms of its recent regulatory package to deal with the retroactive claims or what they call evergreening took place sometime in November or December. To date we have no definitive answer as to where that is going.

My guess is that while it may take out the most egregious forms of automatic injunctions or this draconian system of being able to claim retroactively one's submission for a new drug, it seems to me that it will not do what has been done in the only other jurisdiction which had this system, the United States. There, the President of the United States proactively said, "I will not allow you to frivolously cause another stay or to go and get another patent extension or bring these matters before the courts and tie them up while making tons and tons of money". Instead, the United States went with one stay .

• (1810)

The United States, of course, receives not only the benefit of having the infrastructure of the drug industry, it also has some of the greatest lobbyists to Congress. If Congress could accept that as a limitation, why is it so difficult for this House of Commons and our industry department to get it right?

I am exasperated as any member of Parliament here. I am glad that members of Parliament raise the issue of cross-border drugs, and that we have this terrible thing that is happening, but that, in many respects, beguiles and, of course in my view, denies the real game that has been played here with prescription drugs to the detriment of Canadians.

I know the position of the Liberal Party in 1993. I campaigned on that position. I defeated a member of Parliament who cheerfully brought this thing through. It hurt seniors and Canadians and today I am true to what I said in 1992 and 1993 when that bill was wrong. It needs a rewrite.

Private Members' Business

There is no doubt in my mind that section 511 prevents, for example, paclitaxel, which is a very important drug for women as it relates to cancer. It was a drug created by the United States department of health. Officials found it through a little coniferous tree known as a yew. They found the product and were able to extract the serum but could not patent it because they were a government agency. They gave it at the time to Bristol-Myers Squibb. BMS then took the product, patented it, and then released it several years later because it thought it was not effective. A little tiny company in St. Catharines, Ontario, which is saving millions of dollars and a lot of lives, decided to pick this product up only to find that BMS out of nowhere showed up and reclaimed the patent.

There is something terribly wrong with a company being able to not invest a penny in that kind of patent product, to get rid of it, to abandon it only to get it back when some other small innovative company, which happens to also be a very important company, loses the opportunity. In my view, our regulations do not provide any balance. They in fact destroy the balance and unevenly put the burden on consumers against those who want to innovate and those who want to create new products.

I am very pleased to see the Bloc Québécois finally recognizing this issue. I am very pleased to see that there is certainly a change in terms of the approach that people are taking, that people count, and that there has to be a restoration of balance.

However, I want to make it very clear that if we want to make this legislation successful, meaningful, and build on what we are doing in other initiatives, including the Chrétien relief package for Africa which I initiated through my caucus in 2001 working with Médecins Sans Frontières and Oxfam, the last thing we should be doing is giving ourselves, with respect to the drug patents regime, a bum rap.

It is very important that we understand that the fragility of the system, as it relates to the overall cost for drugs and being able to increase innovation while not completely dumping on our generic industry, is the position to which we have to continue to look forward.

As the rest of the world is busying its way to find new opportunities for its generic industries, Canada has had a policy which in my view has been very detrimental to generics. I can only conclude that if it is so important for us to have a drug patents regime, where a company can come in and create all sorts of innovation in another country and not even have the courtesy of packaging those new drugs in this country, we have been sold a bill of goods.

It is extremely important that members of Parliament get their minds around this and speak to the department and industry officials because it is also not true to suggest that there is some kind of a balance between innovation and generics. We should also consider the balance between health care and industrial outcomes. In my view, health care has not been properly treated. If anything, it has been seen only from a commercial end and I do not think Canadians would generally agree with that.

It is important for us to understand the intentions of the bill. If we cannot change forcefully these regulations, then there is no other option but to rewrite them. I believe that is the right approach and it

is an approach whose time unfortunately has come. I would ask that all parties who are involved with this, who may be lobbied on this question, take into consideration the overall impacts on our economy and on the bottom line for Canadians, particularly Canadians between the ages of 18 and 64 who often have no drug plans.

I am not asking the drug industry to not be given something that it clearly deserves, but it is important for us to understand that when it comes to sustaining economic outcomes for Canadians, it is important that Canadians have an opportunity to understand that these regulations must also serve the general and common interests of this country. I believe that they do not. I believe they need to be reformulated and if they cannot be reformulated, this member's bill must be allowed to pass.

• (1815)

Mr. Alan Tonks (York South—Weston, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to take part in this debate on Bill C-274. I would like to congratulate the member for Windsor West who, in putting forward the bill, seeks to exclude certain medicines from the scope of the regulation-making power set out in subsection 55.2(4) of the Patent Act and to repeal the patent medicines notice of compliance regulations.

Members on both sides have spoken with great eloquence and a huge amount of insight into the manner in which the whole pharmaceutical industry operates. Many people have criticized the regulations because they are special rules that only exist in the pharmaceutical industry.

I would put forward the opinion that when one considers the amount of risk associated with pharmaceutical research and development, and society's vital need for the best available medicines at a reasonable price there is a compelling rationale to have special rules in place with respect to this industry.

In no other industry are the stakes as high. The quality of life of people not only in this country but throughout the world is dependent on investment in this particular site. This can only be achieved by an architecture of legal and enforceable rules that would ensure a certain degree of predictability in this particular industry. This is precisely why these regulations are in place. They provide an enforcement mechanism that is time limited, effective, and tailored to the particular features of the industry.

It has been pointed out very eloquently and in a very informed manner that there are problems and shortcomings with respect to the present regulations. However, they are predictable and they are what we have in place at this time. Under these regulations, patent disputes are addressed concurrently with the health and safety review process, and the majority of cases are resolved within a reasonable timeframe.

The enforcement mechanism of the 24 month stay is clear, predictable, and minimizes market disruption. It gives patentees the certainty that the generic competitor will not be able to market its product until infringement issues have been addressed.

Private Members' Business

The stay also serves as a convenient clock for judges to render a timely decision. The process under the regulations is less expensive and faster than traditional patent infringement litigation, which I am sure my learned colleague would agree is extremely expensive.

Repealing these regulations could be expected to have a number of detrimental consequences. It would necessitate much more costly and protracted patent enforcement litigation. It would also seriously undermine the ability of these companies to compete with their counterparts in other jurisdictions for research and development capital.

While there have been problems with excessive litigation between innovative and generic companies on certain drugs protected by multiple patents, I do not believe the bill provides an appropriately measured solution.

Industry Canada, with the assistance of Health Canada, has completed an exhaustive review of patent listing behaviour and litigation outcomes, and concluded that while the fundamentals of the regime are sound, a number of recent court decisions have enabled more aggressive patent enforcement practices on the part of generic drug companies.

• (1820)

The amendments in the regulations will reaffirm the strict rules for listing patents on Health Canada's patent register and will clarify when generic companies must address listed patents. This will ease Health Canada's administrative burden, cut down on litigation, and accelerate the market entry of generic versions of patented innovative drugs. As a whole, these amendments will bring greater stability and predictability to the intellectual property environment for pharmaceuticals by introducing firmer lower and upper boundaries to the market exclusivity of innovative drugs.

In contrast, the radical measures that have been proposed in this bill would forsake any semblance of balance, undermine R and D investment, and lead to instability and unpredictability in the marketplace. As I said, while the hon. member for Windsor West may have the best and most well intentioned desire in tabling the bill, its objectives will be counterproductive and would be better served by the government's current regulatory initiative.

• (1825)

Mr. Brian Masse (Windsor West, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to rise today to speak to Bill C-274. I would like to thank all members of the House for participating in a good debate about an issue that affects the pocketbooks of many Canadians. It also affects generic companies, pharmaceutical companies and insurance programs because of the cost of drugs which continue to rise. At times it has even threatened labour disputes. Often negotiated benefits and plans revolve around drugs as part of the whole package for financial compensation to workers. That is what is so important about the situation.

In due respect to all members, there is a duty and an obligation to pass the bill and get it to committee. If we do not, we are saying that it is okay for the government bureaucracy and the regulators to continue to do what they right now, which is to ignore this issue and leave it in the dark. Unless there is some type of political pressure to

revisit the issue, which has happened by tabling this legislation, nothing will be done.

If we pass this opportunity by, we are saying that members of Parliament have no role in the regulations of our drug and pharmaceutical industry. That is the bottom line. It is cause for much concern. We know there is no parliamentary oversight for the regulations.

I would like to pay tribute to the member for Pickering—Scarborough East. When I first came here in 2002, he was very much a champion of this issue and he still is today. It is a pocketbook issue and he has done a lot of work on it.

We were on the industry committee that studied this issue. We heard delegations from the pharmaceutical industry. We heard delegations from the generic industry. We heard from a lot of lawyers. Evergreening and the improprieties related to patent protection have cost billions of dollars and have been centred around litigation that could have been avoided.

We also heard from activists representing labour, small business and insurance agencies, like Green Shield, about the cost to the system from drugs having their patent extended beyond the 20 year period because of a legal loophole that allowed pharmaceutical companies to extend it for years and years. It was litigation versus innovation.

When we had an opportunity to get some movement on the issue, the government suddenly changed certain members. Members I had not seen on the committee would show up and vote a certain way to ensure the issue did not move forward. It was a shocking and deplorable behaviour from the government of the day. After all the work we did, which cost thousands of dollars to bring in witnesses and hear testimony and the time it took to do that, we had no final recommendation.

We talk about the democratic deficit. Why on earth would the industry committee study such an important issue for so long and still not have a final report? That is the type of subject we are dealing with today.

We want to see the pharmaceutical industry do well in Canada. There is nothing wrong with that. The problem is, it has not lived up to its end of the bargain. The pharmaceutical industry was supposed to put 10% R and D back into the country for getting the 20 year patent protection. Some pharmaceutical companies have been abusing it. Not all pharmaceutical innovators, just certain ones have used these legal loopholes at the expense of Canadian consumers, the Canadian public, and our industry.

I will wrap up by giving a specific example. In the case of Paxo, the notice of compliance originally was supposed to be available on the market in a generic form in 1999. It was extended to 2003. It is estimated it cost \$114 million for one drug alone, fleecing the Canadian public.

Private Members' Business

Members of Parliament have a duty and an obligation to participate in the regulations, because they affect not only the pharmaceutical industry, but other groups and organizations, taxpayers and other industries. Benefit plans have come under greater intensity because of the explosion of the cost of pharmaceuticals, which keeps money in the hands of big pharmaceuticals with little investment back into Canada. It keeps doctors, nurses and capital investment out of our health care system which we need to improve wait times and to ensure Canadians have the proper treatment they deserve.

• (1830)

The Deputy Speaker: The time provided for debate has expired. Accordingly the question is on the motion. Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

The Deputy Speaker: All those in favour of the motion will please say yea.

Some hon. members: Yea.

The Deputy Speaker: All those opposed will please say nay.

Some hon. members: Nay.

The Deputy Speaker: In my opinion the nays have it.

And more than five members having risen:

The Deputy Speaker: Pursuant to Standing Order 93, the division stands deferred until Wednesday, May 4 immediately before the time provided for private members' business.

Pursuant to order made Friday, April 22, the House shall now resolve itself into committee of the whole to consider Government Business No. 11. I do now leave the chair for the House to go into committee of the whole.

[For continuation of proceedings see Part B]

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OFFICIAL REPORT
(HANSARD)

Tuesday, May 3, 2005
Part B

—

Speaker: The Honourable Peter Milliken

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Tuesday, May 3, 2005

[Continuation of proceedings from part A]

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[Translation]

CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

(House in committee of the whole on Government Business No. 11, Mr. Chuck Strahl in the chair.)

Hon. Mauril Bélanger (Deputy Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Minister responsible for Official Languages, Minister responsible for Democratic Reform and Associate Minister of National Defence, Lib.) moved:

That the committee take note of citizen engagement.

He said: Mr. Chair, I am pleased to participate in this take note debate on citizen engagement in the democratic process.

Take note debates provide an important opportunity for the government to listen and, of course, to take note of the views of members of Parliament.

As Minister responsible for Democratic Reform, I and my officials have been working to better comprehend the root causes of the democratic deficit in Canada. The government believes that, rather than jump to solutions, it is critical first to gain a better understanding of the nature of the problem.

And my view is that it is essential to involve parliamentarians in this process of renewal. Indeed, it would be foolish to fail to engage them in an examination of Canadian democratic institutions and practices. This take-note debate is an important part of that process.

Why citizen engagement? With the support of opposition House leaders and opposition critics, I have chosen citizen engagement as the theme of this take-note debate because I believe it is at the very heart of democratic renewal. I would like to thank the critics of the other parties, the members for Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, Roberval—Lac-Saint-Jean and Ottawa Centre for their contribution and their suggestions.

In recent years, it has become clear that Canadians wish to play a greater role in public policy-making. Gone are the days when citizens were content to participate politically only at election time. Studies have shown that Canadians wish to have more opportunities to involve themselves in policy-making processes. They want their elected representatives to make decisions. But they do want their voices to be heard before those decisions are made.

Citizen engagement is important not only because it improves the quality of government policies, but also, and perhaps more fundamentally, because it encourages active citizenship.

A healthy and vibrant democracy requires citizens who are informed and who participate actively in promoting their own conception of the public interest.

Beyond taking an interest in their communities and their country between elections, active citizens also exercise their right to vote—and do so in a more informed manner.

The question arises, then, as to how we can improve citizen engagement by the government and also by members of Parliament.

[English]

The first area I would like to deal with is how to improve citizen engagement by ministers and their officials.

In the development of public policy it is important for departments to involve citizens. Canadians expect to be involved by the government of the day and in some instances the Government of Canada is legally obliged to consult the public.

The executive branch of government in the country currently does a significant amount of public consultation. However, while it may often seem from our perspective that departments have vast resources at their disposal to consult and engage citizens, often there are time and financial pressures against involving citizens. Moreover, in many instances there is still a lack of expertise in many departments concerning public involvement techniques.

• (1835)

The New Brunswick commission on legislative democracy has recently recommended the creation of a public dialogue office. This government agency would have permanent staff and resources to put on public engagement exercises for departments as required.

The advantage of having a single office responsible for public engagement is that it would be a repository of knowledge and experience for engaging citizens on a wide range of issues. It may be worthwhile to consider a similar structure federally.

Government Orders

However, citizen engagement by the executive raises serious questions about the role of members of Parliament in representing Canadians. Specifically, can investments by the executive branch of government in consultation and engagement processes undermine the role of parliamentarians? Are parliamentarians not expected to be the primary conduit for the views of citizens into the policy-making process?

My view is that we must be careful not to undermine the representative roles of members of Parliament. This is not to say that the executive branch should not be involving citizens in policy development. It should and we should improve its capacity to do so. It is just that we have to be very careful not to sideline parliamentarians.

Ultimately the question is one of legitimacy. If ministers and their departments have significant resources to be able to engage citizens and members of Parliament only have the means to be able to reach out to Canadians in a fairly limited manner, then their legitimacy with citizens will decline over time.

Therefore, the next issue I would like to raise is how well members of Parliament perform in connecting with the citizens we represent. I suspect that most of us are quite proud of the work we do in helping our constituents to navigate their way through what can be a maze of government services. What about actively engaging citizens on policy issues?

If we are speaking on behalf of our constituents, how well do we really understand their views in a variety of areas? Today all members of Parliament have constituency offices. These offices play an important role in assisting our constituents with immigration processes, helping with passports and dealing with the difficulties of employment insurance claims, for instance. These services are important for the citizens and we reach them this way.

However, what about the majority of citizens who do not use constituency offices? Are we effective enough at reaching out to talk about the concerns of Canadians? Should constituency offices have additional staff with a knowledge of citizen engagement techniques to be able to reach out on policy issues? Are constituency offices set up in the right places so they can be our hubs of community oriented activity? Are they meeting places for people looking to solve local challenges? Finally, should constituency offices have greater resources in order to be more effective?

The expertise on this matter lies first and foremost among members of Parliament. I would be interested in the views of the members of Parliament on this important question. It seems to me that we can do a great deal more with constituency offices to connect with the citizens we serve.

Another key area where I would like to seek the views of other members is in citizen involvement in the work of parliamentary committees. Here I have a number of questions about the nature of the committee hearing processes.

First, while committees sometimes hold hearings in various parts of Canada, my question is should they be doing more to reach out to citizens to provide Canadians with more opportunities to engage with the policy-making process?

Second, are committee hearings as welcoming to citizens as they should be or could be? Many citizens see committee hearings as overly formal, distant, uninviting forums where they would feel reluctant to put forward their views. How do young people feel about committee hearings, for example?

Third, do we need a parliamentary public dialogue centre which would be a repository of resources and expertise to be used by parliamentarians when engaging citizens? This centre could be used both by parliamentary committees as well as by individual members of Parliament wishing to engage citizens.

Overall I put the question to the members. How can we improve and open up the committee process to better serve Canadians?

• (1840)

[*Translation*]

The last issue related to public engagement that I would like to discuss today is civic literacy. All forms of political participation—from voting to advocacy work—require a certain level of civic literacy.

Civic literacy, at a basic level, involves an understanding of political structures and processes, along with knowledge concerning the issues facing one's community, one's country and the world.

Beyond this, civic literacy is also the knowledge and experience concerning how to make a difference, whether that is through creating a group of citizens to address a local issue, writing to the media, meeting with one's member of Parliament, or lobbying a minister.

The data that we have on civic literacy is limited. However, what we do know about the issue is not especially comforting. In 2000, for example, 46 % of Canadians could identify no more than one of the Prime Minister, the Minister of Finance and the Leader of the Official Opposition

I would be interested in the views of my fellow parliamentarians on a number of questions:

First, do we all agree that rates of civic literacy are low? Second, if we do agree on this, what steps should the Government of Canada be taking to address this issue?

Moreover, given that education is a provincial responsibility, what is the role for the federal government in this area? Finally, what programs are needed, if any, to provide young people with the knowledge and experience necessary to be active citizens?

Mr. Chair, in conclusion I would like to quote from Judith Maxwell, President of the Canadian Policy Research Networks, who has noted that:

Government Orders

Dialogue is an essential ingredient for representative government in 21st century Canada ... It is about governments listening to a sustained conversation among citizens themselves on the issues that matter most to them as citizens.

Of course, representative democracy is also about the dialogue that takes place in this House. This is why I look forward to hearing from other members on this important matter.

[*English*]

Mr. Pat Martin (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Mr. Chair, without kowtowing to the government, I do want to express appreciation for being able to speak to this issue tonight. It is a worthwhile activity and I think there is an appetite and a thirst to explore some of these very topics.

There are two items that I would like to comment on or at least ask for further expansion on from my colleague.

My colleague asked for input regarding constituency offices and how members of Parliament manage to expand the role of Parliament into the constituency, or the services at least offered by the House of Commons. I would simply inform him that my constituency office should be more properly called an immigration office. I will try to express the frustration I think members of Parliament feel with trying to deal with the enormous backlog of immigration issues.

As a government member I would ask him to take into consideration that this is a reflection of an immigration system that is not working very well, if so many people have to ask their members of Parliament to intervene for them for simple things, such as a visitor's visa, things that were otherwise a normal course of action which they applied for through the normal channels and received within a reasonable period of time. People now talk about months of delays for a simple visitor's visa.

I will not go on and on but I would ask him perhaps to take note, seeing as this is a take note debate, that we are frustrated as members of Parliament. It is a misnomer to call our offices constituency offices. They are immigration offices, plain and simple, in the inner city.

The other thing I would like to express an interest in is that I too am concerned about the rates of civic literacy and civic participation or engagement, the lack of engagement of ordinary Canadian citizens in this most important privilege that we have, and that is the democracy that we enjoy. It irritates me to no end but I do not see any specific action plan on behalf of the government. I understand the member wants input from us to give some direction to the government, I suppose, but I would encourage him strongly to have an active program to educate and invite the increased participation and engagement of citizens, whether that is at the high school level or whatever.

If he could take note of and comment on either of those two things I would appreciate it.

•(1845)

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Mr. Chair, I share the member's concern about constituency offices becoming immigration offices. I represent a riding here in Ottawa and an overwhelming percentage of our time and resources are dedicated to meeting people and trying to help them with their immigration difficulties. We must recognize that because I have heard the same from members on all sides of the

House. We somehow have to come to grips with that. One could easily argue that was not the purpose for which we set up our constituency offices.

I am quite prepared to acknowledge that is a difficulty for urban constituency offices. There may be similar difficulties in rural constituency offices. Colleagues in rural communities have told me that their constituency offices sometimes become passport offices. There may have to be a rethink of the relationship between the member of Parliament, the constituency office and the expectation that citizens have vis-à-vis the government and the constituency office.

I do not have a great deal of difficulty taking note of that point. I will pass it on to my colleague, the Minister of Immigration, and to the cabinet at large because it is a situation that all members are facing.

On the matter of civic literacy, it is, I suspect, one of the first times we may be debating this in the House, in this forum. I will take a step back for the member and perhaps others who may be listening.

As members know, an amendment was made to the Speech from the Throne calling on the government to look at democratic reform and electoral reform. The Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs was appointed to suggest a process whereby Canadians could be consulted.

In the meantime, knowing that a recommendation would be coming from the committee any time now, the government engaged in what we call a multifaceted diagnostic exercise involving, for example, the debate tonight, but also involving focus groups. Four discussions have occurred in Calgary, Montreal, Halifax and Toronto. One will be held in Vancouver after the May 17 election and referendum. Studies have been conducted.

A whole exercise is going on and one of them will involve civics. A colloquial is scheduled on civic literacy to which we have invited participation from the provinces. We are waiting for confirmation on that.

As the hon. member will recognize, there is an element of uncertainty in the air so that may throw a monkey wrench into those plans, but nonetheless we recognize that we have to become much more engaged in civic literacy while still respecting jurisdictions and acknowledging that education is a provincial responsibility.

However a number of instruments and tools can be developed to encourage that without, in any way, shape or form, threatening a jurisdiction battle.

In terms of how far we have progressed in our diagnostic exercise, the government recognizes that civic literacy may be one of the things we should engage in first and rather aggressively.

Mr. Gary Goodyear (Cambridge, CPC): Mr. Chair, I would like to acknowledge that I do appreciate that the member is here trying to open dialogue with the citizens of Canada.

Government Orders

One of the issues that we have, and it has been mentioned before, is the issue of passports and how it seems that the immigration department is downloading its services to MPs' offices, which is clearly not their function. Not only does it render a huge burden on our budgets but it takes up valuable time when we could be helping constituents with other issues.

I have two issues I would ask the hon. member to address and ask him if there is a solution, or perhaps he could even carry it forward. One issue has to do with the crack between a provincial disability situation, and as I am the member for the Cambridge riding it would be the Ontario disability, and the Canada pension plan. It would seem that a number of constituents are falling through the cracks. They do not qualify for the Ontario disability pension under the provincial framework and they do not qualify for Canada pension.

The second issue of great concern in just about every riding in Canada is, for lack of a better word, the stealing of physicians from other ridings. Frankly, millions of dollars are being spent in recruiting physicians into, in my case, my riding. It is not millions of dollars in my riding of course but overall.

I would like the hon. member to comment on the fact that the government has failed to put in place an accreditation process. Despite its promises to do so, these have been delayed. We need to fill in the cracks for people who fall through them with pension issues and increase the number of doctors by putting in place an accreditation process immediately.

• (1850)

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Mr. Chair, on the matter of immigration caseloads in constituency offices, I have already commented on that so I would be repeating what I have said. However, on my part in any event, I have acknowledged that the situation needs to be looked at because in many constituency offices, the urban ones in particular, immigration matters have become a preponderance in the caseload that members try to help constituents with. There is a recognition that constituency offices were not designed or created for that purpose, so there has to be an attempt to rectify that situation.

On the matter of the Ontario disability legislation and CPP, I cannot comment on that. That is not my area of responsibility. However I would use the opportunity to comment that we have seen in the previous Parliament one of the better examples of citizen engagement being done through one of the subcommittees that was dealing with disability questions. It was a subcommittee of the Human Resources and Skills Development department, which was not called that at that time. It really did engage through the Internet and it was one of the very first attempts. I am hoping that one of our colleagues tonight will give us a sense of how that went, but there are occasions where citizens themselves, if we engage them, can provide answers to the questions the member poses.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC): Mr. Chair, I am delighted to rise tonight to speak on the subject of citizen engagement. I will start my comments by making the simple premise that the more democratic the system is, the more citizens will participate.

As the critic for democratic reform for the official opposition, I will focus my remarks on the subject of democratic reform and I think it will be evident how this will improve rates of citizen

participation. Democracy, which is my portfolio, is also my passion. It is the reason I am in politics. I developed this passion while I was living in Washington State in 1990-91 and saw referendums in action. I saw what an effective and intelligent decision making tool they were.

This was added to when I lived in Australia in 1997 to 1999. There, I sat in on the country's constitutional convention in which Australians were debating whether or not to abolish the monarchy and replace it with a republic. Again, the level of intelligence of the debate impressed me deeply, as did the level of citizen participation. The number of people who came to sit in the viewers' galleries in their old Parliament House and listen in on these debates was very impressive.

Since that time I have gone to Switzerland to attend a *landsgemeinde*, the traditional citizens' assembly in the town square, and to Vermont to participate in a New England town meeting.

This is something I do very much believe in very passionately. I do believe that the more transparency and directness we have in our democracy, the increase in democracy, the more likely we are to see citizen engagement.

Other Conservative members speaking tonight will speak on other issues relating to democratic reform and the democratic deficit, but my particular topic tonight is Senate reform.

There are many democratic reforms that our party proposes. The Conservative policy document, amended in March of this year in Montreal at our convention, calls for changes to the answerability of officers of Parliament. They would be answerable to Parliament directly. That is one policy.

We believe in a substantial improvement in the nature of free votes. We have committed ourselves to free votes, including free votes of members of the shadow cabinet, or of our cabinet should we find ourselves in government, on issues of moral conscience such as abortion, the definition of marriage and euthanasia.

We would ensure that nominees to the Supreme Court of Canada would be ratified by a free vote in Parliament after receiving the approval of the justice committee of the House of Commons. This sort of ratification process would substantially increase citizen interest and participation, I think, just as the genuinely free debates that have occurred in the 38th Parliament, as opposed to the elected dictatorship that was the 37th Parliament, have increased citizen interest and citizen participation.

We would also work on Senate reform. I will read for members what our policy says on Senate reform before getting into more detail. It states:

i) A Conservative government will support the election of senators. The Conservative Party believes in an equal Senate to address the uneven distribution of Canada's population and provide a balance to safeguard regional interests.

We also state, and this is the democratic part, that:

ii) Where the people of a province or territory by democratic election choose persons qualified to be appointed to the Senate, a Conservative government will fill any vacancy in the Senate for that province or territory among those elected persons.

Government Orders

The House may rest assured that citizens will participate in Senate elections. We know this because there have been Senate elections in the province of Alberta and we know that more votes were cast for Bert Brown and Stan Waters when they were voted for the Senate than have ever been cast for any member elected to the House; a larger number of votes were cast for those individuals. That, I think, is a testament to the effectiveness of the system.

We know as well that individuals can be appointed to the Senate after having been elected, because this was done in the case of Stan Waters. Admittedly, the Prime Minister of the day, Brian Mulroney, was reluctant to make that appointment, but he finally conceded the point and did appoint Mr. Waters to the Senate, where he served as Canada's only elected senator so far. Hopefully he will be the first in a series that will become permanent.

With regard to the Senate, our party's policy and the Alberta elections to the Senate, I want to contrast what I have just said with the current Prime Minister's record on the subject of Senate reform.

• (1855)

The current Prime Minister came to office on December 12, 2003. On December 19, one week later, he said something to the effect that "I am going further than any Prime Minister has gone before to make the Senate of Canada a democratic place. What I am going to do is ensure that all senators must be approved by the House of Commons". I do not have the exact words. This statement sounded very dramatic and on its face was a very Conservative proposal, or rather, a very democratic proposal.

When I heard this statement being made, I was absolutely astounded. I issued a press release under the title "Martin Kills Senate Reform". I will read from it. I will substitute the words "Prime Minister" for the Prime Minister's name, although that is what was used in the original. I said:

Placing one house of Parliament in charge of appointments to the other is a dangerous and unprecedented departure from the traditional practice of federal, bicameral systems.

I noted that "no other federal system" in the world "allows the lower house any role in the selection of members to its upper chamber". I said:

The Senate was intended to be a chamber of sober second thought, reviewing rash decisions taken in the Commons. [The Prime Minister] would rob it of its independence from the Commons. This reflects a surprising ignorance about how the separation of powers is supposed to operate under our Constitution.

I then pointed out that this would have certain other perverse impacts. I said:

Under [the Prime Minister's] proposal, Quebec's 75 MPs would get three times as many votes as Alberta's 26 MPs, as to who becomes a senator from Alberta. Ontario's 103 MPs would have a greater say than Quebec's MPs, as to who becomes a senator from Quebec. Only a prime minister who is completely deaf to the regional nature of Canadian federalism could dream up such an ill-conceived proposal.

I pointed out that the Prime Minister could have taken decisive steps. I said, "He could have called for Senate elections". He could have appointed Bert Brown and Ted Morton, the two senators in waiting, as had been done with Stan Waters earlier.

The last thing I said was this:

So, in [the Prime Minister's] world, nationwide Senate elections are impossible, and so are local initiatives to introduce elections. This is [the Prime Minister's] way

of simultaneously killing any prospect of a democratically elected Senate, and transferring the blame to others.

That is because he said, "I will not allow for piecemeal reform to the Senate. We can't do it unless the whole thing is done". Of course, making all the changes required for an elected and perhaps somewhat regionally different but equal Senate would require not merely the consent of the provinces but the consent of all of the provinces. If it is piecemeal we cannot have it, he said, for reasons that he has never actually articulated. I am not sure that he knows why himself, except that it assures no change to the Senate.

Incidentally, what happened when I released that press release was that the very next day the Prime Minister called up one of the newspapers and said he was badly advised and was withdrawing his proposal. He said he did not actually want to do that after all, but of course piecemeal reforms cannot happen. That has been the state since then. Since then there has been nothing on the Senate except for the same old kinds of appointments, the same old undemocratic appointments that existed back in the bad old days. We see no prospect of that changing.

I want to spend a moment dwelling upon this theme of "I will not engage in piecemeal reform. I will never do it. There's something wrong with it". If the Prime Minister really believes that, then there is a question we have to ask. Why did he support the proposal for Senate reform in the Charlottetown accord?

The Charlottetown accord of 1992, when of course he was a member of Parliament in the opposition, had in section 4 surely the most piecemeal proposals ever imagined for a national Senate. There was a proposal for two senators per province and one per territory, but if the territories became provinces they still would get only one. That was one piecemeal element: half-representation for these new provinces when and if they became provinces. There was going to be provision for the indirect election of senators in some provinces but not others. That was under section 23(a) of the Charlottetown accord.

There was going to be provision for some provinces, but not others, to have special measures to provide for equal representation of males and females. That was Ontario's proposal. That would exist in Ontario but nowhere else. There is something that is piecemeal.

The determination of electoral boundaries and districts in relation to the election of senators would be set up by the provinces. At least on paper this is not incompatible with multiple member districts in some provinces and not in others. Perhaps it is some system of proportional representation. In other words, it is one more element of piecemeal reform.

Finally, I will read from the Charlottetown accord: "Where a law of Parliament and a law of a province or territory under the paragraphs above conflict, the law of the province or territory will prevail to the extent of the conflict". This is thereby ensuring more "piecemeal".

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•(1900)

So he was willing to consider piecemeal reform. We should be willing to consider piecemeal reform. The United States went from an unelected to an elected Senate through the use of piecemeal reform. Oregon started it in the first decade of the 20th century. Within another decade it became the law of the land through a constitutional amendment.

I think this makes a lot of sense. I think it would greatly increase citizen engagement. I very much would encourage all members to consider the possibility of piecemeal reform, starting with elected senators. Then we will work around to the other question of making our Senate more equal than it is today.

Mr. Pat Martin (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Madam Chair, my colleague made some really interesting observations about the possibility of Senate reform, an interest I share with my colleague. I know it is the official position of my party to abolish the Senate, but that is not my position. I hope that some day my party might see fit to pass a resolution that we would in fact support a Senate but an elected and equal Senate.

The member and I do share that interest. We also share an interest in the Charlottetown accord. I took part in the five “ordinary Canadian” meetings that took place across the country. I simply answered a letter in the *Globe and Mail* and said I was an interested Canadian. I was a carpenter by trade at that time. That was a fascinating introduction and education along these lines.

I am interested in one thing, which I wonder if my colleague could expand on, and that is the way the United States came to have an elected Senate. This is news to me. It is something I am learning about tonight; that in fact it began as a reform movement in one state and then spread throughout the whole country. Could my colleague expand on the importance of an elected Senate for progress as he sees it and how it came about in the United States so that we might be able to use it as a model for Canada?

•(1905)

Mr. Scott Reid: Madam Chair, I would like to talk a bit about the abolition of the Senate first before directly answering the member's question.

Polls show that the abolition of the Senate is a popular option. It is not necessarily the majority option, but it has strong support in Canada. That has been the policy of the New Democrats and others in Canada for many years. It is a respectable position. Other countries have done it. New Zealand, for example, abolished its upper house in the early 1950s. All of the maritime provinces and Quebec had upper houses and got rid of them. The idea of going from a bicameral to a unicameral system is certainly respectable.

We would be very well advised not to take that course for a very specific reason and we should look at what happened in New Zealand as a model. New Zealand adopted a unicameral system, so there was no check from the upper house on the lower house. It retained a first past the post system. My colleague who went to New Zealand with me a month ago will recall this.

It entered into a period of unbridled power. In fact, the definitive textbook of New Zealand politics at the time was called unbridled power because there was nothing to stop the dictatorship of whoever

controlled the lower house under the first past the post system, even when that person got a fairly small percentage of the vote. Therefore, the country was whipsawed back and forth between parties that would get elected on a mandate, abandon the mandate, and adopt policies that were dramatically at variance with where the people wanted to be. Typically in New Zealand's case, these were hard right policies and they campaigned on the left, and one party would replace the other. In the end, there was a tremendous frustration and so a new system of representation was adopted in the lower house.

I think the system has stabilized a bit, but that is the danger. One cannot get rid of the upper house without adopting electoral reform in the lower house. In particular, if one did that, I think one would have to have the kind of electoral reform that ensures some kind of perpetual minority government in order to keep things stable.

I would go further and say one would want to design a system of electoral reform for the lower house that ensures that the parties that hold the balance of power tend to be centrist parties as opposed to parties at the margin in order to ensure that one does not then get whipsawed between left wing coalitions and right wing coalitions but instead tend to get centrist coalitions, which unfortunately I do not think has been achieved in New Zealand. That is a long way of not dealing with the question the member actually asked me.

With regard to the senate in the United States, the American senate actually served quite effectively for over a century as a house of the states. The senators were appointed by the legislatures of the various states.

An hon. member: Two each.

Mr. Scott Reid: Two senators for each state. There was no change in that respect.

We will remember the talk about the triple E senate being equally effective. While it was a double E senate, it was equal and effective. There were very high level debates in the senate. The office of senator was highly respected, although it was not an elected office. The famous Lincoln-Douglas debates, for example, were debates of two candidates for the senate in the late 1850s.

There were a number of things that were problematic about this. It was not democratic for one thing. In addition, and the Lincoln-Douglas debates point this out, they went to these debates in front of vast audiences and argued the democratic and republican positions on the issue of slavery, western expansion and so on, and then people voted for their members of the state legislature largely based on who those people would then vote for in the state house to send to Washington as their senator, which means that to some degree the legislature was being turned into an electoral college for senators.

I do not want to exaggerate the importance of this transformation into an electoral college of the state houses but it was a problem. Of course, having discharged that one responsibility, a person then had to get on for the next two or four years, depending on the state one was in, with actually governing the state and other issues under state jurisdiction might not have been discussed in the fullness with which they should have been discussed. That was a problem.

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What happened was the progressive movement of the 1890s and particularly the first decade of the 20th century arose and there was a movement for a variety of improvements, many of them democratic, including the introduction of the primary system to control the party bosses. There were some temperance movements that were tied in with it as well.

• (1910)

It was very much a populace movement. There was a lot of citizen engagement, some of it unfortunately tinged with racism and so on. None the less it was a genuine populace movement.

The state of Oregon decided that state elections would be held to select senators with the first election being held in, I think, 1906. This movement was already taking place in other states, but the election happened first in Oregon with the senator being accepted. The senate had the capability to reject a member of its body, but that was not done and the senator from Oregon was elected.

Senate elections occurred on a two year cycle. In 1908 there was a larger number. This number also increased with the 1910 elections. In 1913 an amendment was proposed which required acceptance by three-fourths of all the states making senate elections mandatory.

I do not think, as a result of that, the quality of the United States senate has gone down. It was always regarded as the chamber in which a more thoughtful level of debate occurred than that which occurred in the House of Representatives. Tocqueville points out that comparison.

Although the House of Representatives has become better, the senate has still retained a kind of *gravitas* that comes from the length of service. For example, Ted Kennedy has been around for years and so have many other senators. Unlike the lower house, it also has the advantage of not being subject to gerrymandering which is a severe problem unfortunately in the United States.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bernard Bigras (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, BQ): Madam Chair, I congratulate you for saying my riding name. The fact that I am in my seat today, and not closer, does not mean I have no interest in participating in this debate which might be described as important. It is, however, a bit of a delusion to think that a take-note debate this evening on a supposed democratic reform or democratic deficit is going to settle everything.

The debate the government has begun this evening is nothing more than smoke and mirrors. In the few minutes I have, I am going to try to show that by addressing five different points.

A few years ago, during the watch of the previous Prime Minister, Parliament was already aware of the existence of the democratic deficit. The government and the present Prime Minister were committed to solving the problems of centralization of power and favouritism.

I will, moreover, quote the present PM when he was a simple member of Parliament and a minister. In October 2002 he said that the absolute powers of appointment enjoyed by a Prime Minister were too extensive. So what the government wanted was to see a greater delegation of powers, to ensure that the power was less and less centralized at the PMO.

Can we conclude today that the arrival of a new prime minister and the commitments made in 2002 resolved the problem? Of course not. The new Prime Minister could have resolved the situation by officially responding to the consensus expressed repeatedly by the Quebec National Assembly—which, in passing, is a democratic institution—and the people of Quebec.

If the federal government had wanted to engage in a real democratic, transparent and open process, and answer the call to resolve the democratic deficit, he would have recognized, for example, the existence of a fiscal imbalance, which the National Assembly ratified in a parliamentary motion. But no, the government and the Prime Minister have refused, both in the throne speech and the budget, to recognize the existence of this fiscal imbalance.

Is the government's and the Prime Minister's refusal to recognize the decisions of and the messages from the Quebec National Assembly about the existence of the Quebec nation and the fiscal imbalance not proof of a democratic deficit? No, the government calls this fiscal pressure instead.

Second, if the government had wanted to resolve the democratic deficit, it would have respected, first, the will of this Parliament. Many times since 2004, Parliament has expressed its opinion on serious issues by adopting parliamentary resolutions and motions calling for measures in numerous areas. Why is this government not responding to the members of this House, by proposing concrete measures?

The first measure involved cull cows. We have demanded aid for cattle producers as a result of the mad cow crisis. Why has the government not responded to the calls of parliamentarians?

• (1915)

The same situation occurred in the case of the textile industry. Members will recall that in February 2005, when six textile mills in Huntingdon were hit with closure, we called in this House for action. Why did the government not heed this call from members?

The same thing occurred again concerning the return of the Mirabel land. The same was true regarding reversal of the burden of truth. We demanded a bill in the House to amend the Criminal Code to reverse the burden of proof. Why did the government not respond to the call of a majority of parliamentarians, if it really wanted to resolve the democratic deficit once and for all? The case was similar in connection with supply management. As regards the setting up a trust for tainted money, why did the government or the Prime Minister not respond to the call of parliamentarians in establishing this trust?

Had the government really wanted to settle the matter of the democratic deficit, it would have responded immediately to the wishes of Canada's Parliament by establishing the measures provided in the motions adopted in this House. That is one way to resolve the democratic deficit once and for all.

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However, the government literally ignores the decisions made by this Parliament. It continues to do what it likes. We on this side of the House might have thought that a minority government situation would lead to democratic openness and the discovery of solutions to the democratic deficit. No, the context is unchanged.

The situation is the same regarding the role parliamentary committees play in appointments. I will remind you of only one of these appointments with respect to the Standing Committee on the Environment and Sustainable Development. At issue was the appointment of Glen Murray, a former mayor of Winnipeg. The committee had indicated it did not want this candidate and rejected the appointment. What did the federal government do? Nothing. Mr. Murray continues to sit at the national round table on the environment and the economy, despite the committee report on this appointment. Why is the government sitting on its hands?

I remind you of another element, which is the government commitment made in October, 2002. The current Prime Minister said he wanted candidates' qualifications examined by the competent standing committee before appointments were confirmed.

When we considered the case of Mr. Murray at the parliamentary committee, the appointment was in effect. We had not considered the candidates' qualifications before the appointment. On the contrary, the appointment was confirmed and we had considered seven possible appointees at the parliamentary committee. In appointing the chair of the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy, the government decided to ignore the committee's decision and that of the House of Commons.

I have a question for the government. Where is the democratic deficit in the role of committees? The government, or the current Prime Minister, refused to keep the October 2002 promise on appointing various people, including Mr. Murray.

Since I have only one minute remaining, I will conclude by adding that the same thing happens when it comes to appointing judges. The former president of the Quebec wing of the Liberal Party summed up quite nicely how judges are appointed in Canada. He is convinced that anyone wanting to be appointed judge, or to be given an important mandate, has to have close ties to people who can influence the political machinery.

● (1920)

Has the government resolved the democratic deficit problem? The fact the question can still be asked gives us the answer.

Decisions are still as centralized and partisan as ever. The role of parliamentarians, in adopting reports in committee or passing motions in the House, has no impact on the decision the government must make. So, the democratic deficit has not been resolved, despite the Prime Minister's promises.

Mr. Joe Comartin (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Madam Chair, I thank my Bloc colleague. One of the suggestions I heard was to have more democracy and more engaged people, as well as to enhance the powers and rights of the political parties. I would like to know whether my colleague has any comments on this. Does he think this is a way to encourage the people of Canada and Quebec to become more engaged with the political system?

Mr. Bernard Bigras: Madam Chair, naturally, the political parties must be given a greater role in this Parliament. Naturally, the political weight of the parties in this House, a forum in which representatives are elected to voice the public's ideas, must be greater. It is also important, among other things, for Quebec to be able to retain this significant representation in the House of Commons.

I think it is possible to ensure that the diversity of opinions and the ideas represented by each political party can be expressed both in committees and in the House. However, we must never forget that each political party has this important duty. When a party makes decisions, it must do so in accordance with the true opinions of the voting public. In my view, this is fundamental.

The last few days and weeks have been quite unprecedented. We cannot deny that. The NDP was asked to form an alliance with the Liberal Party of Canada. Is this really what voters wanted? I cannot answer that question. However, by electing us, voters have given us an awesome duty and responsibility. So we must do our duty, in keeping with the convictions of the public, who have agreed to delegate some of their responsibilities to their elected representatives.

So, yes, greater transparency is essential. The political parties must play a greater role. Naturally, the electoral system plays an important role in how these political parties are represented. We must ensure, too, that this balance is maintained, respecting the ability of each province, and ensure a healthy and equitable representation in this institution.

● (1925)

[English]

Mr. Joe Comartin (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Madam Chair, I rise with some appreciation for the process that we are using but I want to say to my colleague from the Bloc that I share a great deal of his concern over the historical role that the present Prime Minister has played and the previous prime minister and the one before that in concentrating so much power in the Prime Minister's Office, oftentimes to the exclusion of the departments, the ministers, this House and the electorate generally in Canada.

In preparation for this evening I spent some time reviewing material of other authors and researchers who have done work on the whole issue of the term that is becoming popular, which is civic literacy. In the course of doing that, I have to acknowledge the work of our colleague from Ottawa Centre who provided me with a good deal of this background and pointed me in a certain direction.

One of the authors he pointed me to was Henry Milner who has done a great deal of analysis on civic literacy and how it is achieved. A good deal of his work was done in countries in the northern part of Europe and then some comparison work with other democracies in the world. He came up with a list of ways of achieving a greater civic participation by all citizenry. One of the points that we should make is that he spent a good deal of time looking at Denmark specifically, as well as a number of the other northern European countries.

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While in Denmark he did quite extensive research in terms of trying to ascertain why the rate of participation in Denmark was substantially higher than it was in Canada, oftentimes exceeding 80% or 85% of eligible voters. One of the conclusions he came to was that voter participation was higher in countries where people read newspapers. In Denmark the average citizen reads three to five newspapers a day from a broad spectrum of newspapers across the ideological parameters and they do that on a regular basis. There was an exact correspondence to the people who read multiple newspapers to the percentage of the population that voted. It was almost an exact number.

He said that there were five things a government really had to do to make sure civic literacy was achieved to its epitome. The first one on his list was encouraging newspaper reading. He pointed out that a number of northern European countries provide public subsidies to newspapers to ensure they are widely available. It is an interesting concept given the way our newspapers function in this country.

The next one was to make sure that there was not an overreliance on commercial TV and that public broadcasting was readily available, well funded and, in effect, useful in developing that civic literacy. He talked a great deal about the need for society to ensure that the maximum amount of intellectual awareness is guaranteed and provided for by that particular society, and public television was one of the ways of doing that.

The next one is interesting given the current experience we are undergoing, at least at the federal level. He says that we should limit the authority and power of money in politics. Of course the last election in this country was run under legislation that substantially reduced the ability of large monied interests to have influence in politics.

• (1930)

Looking again at the experiences in both the province of Quebec and the province of Manitoba, which have been ahead of us in working on that, it has changed the way politics function in those provinces. More important, from the analysis that I have made of those provinces, it has engaged the average citizen more extensively than I see in other provinces where money is still a major factor in elections.

The next point he made was that society and governments had to enact transparent laws and regulations. Coming out of a legal background myself, I can identify with the difficulty that the average citizen has in understanding our laws, being able to read them and understand them, even with post-secondary university degrees. If one does not have a law degree, a good deal of our legislation is quite frankly not very comprehensible. That is something I would suggest that we need to work on, and it was the same findings he made.

The final point he made is what I think we will deal with to a more extensive degree in one of the subsequent take note debates on trying to expand democracy in the country. That is the issue of governance and the use of a consensual model, that the first past the post, which is the present system we have, does not lead to this and that we go to a consensual model of proportional representation where both during and after the election and during the whole period of governance after an election the interests and policies of a wide range of parties

and interests are reflected in the House, first is the natural representation. However, in terms of the nature of not having majority governments, where one party dominates the House exclusively, we always will have a Parliament, the law-making body, forced to deal with the interests of other parties and other sectors of society. Therefore, we never have a very narrow scope. It always will be a broad one. We have seen some really good examples of how that does not work well at the provincial level in particular, but also at the federal level.

He comes back to the importance of this repeatedly in his analysis by arguing that if we do not have that model just about anything else we do to try to develop civic literacy is doomed to fail. If the average citizen does not feel Parliament, the House or houses if it is bicameral, are making decisions on a consensus basis, by building consensus in the country, they are going to be much less interested in participating on an ongoing basis in their governance.

I was interested to listen to the comments by the minister. We heard about a number of things we could do. I agree with him on the point he made about the need for most of us to have greater resources as members of Parliament. For instance, I have tried to hold public debates and forums in my riding and I have felt inadequate in my ability to do them as often as I like. If I had the resources, I could conduct public debates in my riding, and perhaps the city as a whole, where people from different perspectives could come to and take part in, or run seminars and forums that would encourage that kind of debate.

I just spent the weekend in Windsor speaking to one of our city councillors. She said that she needed to do more of that but she did not have the resources.

The minister spoke about the need to try to democratize our committees in the House. I agree that we should be doing that. We could look at the English experience and how they do much more work in advance before the laws are put to the House. Committees and representatives deal with them at that level.

I would like to conclude by saying we will be unable to do that unless we have a government forum that builds this consensus. If it does not come with that attitude, with that as an essential theme, we will not get any of those other democratic reforms in place.

• (1935)

Hon. Raymond Simard (Parliamentary Secretary to the Deputy Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Minister responsible for Official Languages and Minister responsible for Democratic Reform, Lib.): Madam Chair, I would like to pose a question to my hon. colleague. His comments were very valuable. I believe we on this side have offered a legitimate debate on citizen engagement. I think one reason Canadians are skeptical is because when we make this kind of an offer and people do not take us up on it and treat it seriously, it is an issue. I appreciate the comments. Some of these things are very valuable.

In the member's studies has he been able to identify some of the options when we work with different demographic groups? For instance, we know there is a huge issue with young people not voting. I thought the member's comments about people reading newspapers was very interesting. Are there any comments on how we can engage younger people in this process?

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Mr. Joe Comartin: Madam Chair, I have been a strong proponent of lowering the voting age. It was interesting that in a number of the meetings I attended across the country on electoral reform the issue always came up about how to engage young people. It did not come up in most cases by young people, but by other members of society who felt very strongly about the loss we suffered and the fact that it was becoming worse.

I think lowering the voting age would help. I say that because of my experience when I go into schools. I go into high schools in particular. These are students who because of the civic course, or the history course or sometimes the political science course they take are very knowledgeable. They are engaged in the course they are following. I would not say that it is universal but it is quite extensive. They ask probing, knowledgeable questions.

Two years or three years later when I have run into those people, oftentimes when canvassing during an election or at other times in their work places or at university, a great deal of that enthusiasm has been lost. I am not sure what happens in that process. However, I cannot help but think that if we get them voting at a somewhat earlier age, before they leave secondary schools, would they fall into a pattern that would follow on through their adult life, during the crucial period of time from 18 to 24. In the last two federal elections turnouts in that age category was 25% or under.

I will make another point with regard to this. When we travelled in Australia to look at its system, we discovered that it was compulsory to vote. However, its system is very complicated. People vote, and young people vote obviously as much as older members of the population, because they have had the experience of voting. They learn about the electoral system in high school and they continue to vote on through their adult lives. There does not seem to be any differentiation, even though they have to pay a small fine if they do not vote. The proportion of votes among the youth, the 18 to 24 age group, is roughly the same as in the rest of the population.

● (1940)

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC): Madam Chair, one of the concerns we are talking about is participation. I bring this up because of the fact that the committee on which both the hon. member for Windsor—Tecumseh and I sit in plans to report to the House. I am sure the minister would take notice that what we would be reporting deals with electoral reform.

One of the problems that can occur with electoral reform, which was mentioned to us in our travels, is that if the system is too complicated, that is if there is a difficulty in determining what the effect of one's vote is and how one is making a difference, then that seems to lower citizen engagement. I think it is a real problem.

On the other hand, the arguments in favour of electoral reform on the basis that we ought to have election results which in some way resemble the voting patterns of the population as opposed to reflecting the random results of the first past the post system also has the effect of lowering people's rates of participation. I suspect that when one talks about young people, and I increasingly find it harder to relate instinctively as some of my younger colleagues can, to the feelings of young people, I think part of what is driving them not to vote is the sense that it is not going to make a difference.

Does my colleague have any thoughts on how we reconcile the prospect of changing with the need for some kind of transparency to allow an electoral system that will hopefully have some effect in raising citizen participation not only among young people, but among others who do not participate. One could look at other groups that have low participation rates if that seems appropriate.

Mr. Joe Comartin: Madam Chair, if we are going to make a change to our electoral system, it is going to have to be done very carefully.

We were there primarily for active engagement. We were looking at some of the processes that both New Zealand and Australia had gone through in terms of engaging their people in various attempts to change their electoral system and/or their government system. It is absolutely crucial we get it right.

On one hand, we have to be careful not to look at it as a panacea. I do not believe that just by making a change in our electoral voting system will increase participation. We have to change a good deal of our system. We can look at other groups. Those who are less economically advantaged vote at a much lower rate because they have no vote.

On the other hand, some of the evolving democracies in South America are engaging individual communities that are oftentimes very poor. They are involving them in the process not only at election time, but during the whole period of governance on an annual basis, for instance, taking the budgetary process to them.

That has worked up to this point in time in Porto Alegre in Brazil. It is still novel, but it has been doing it for over a dozen years now. On an annual basis, it engages citizens from the barrios and the very poor parts of cities on how to spend the amount of money which has been allocated. That is what we have to do.

I do not think electoral reform by itself, even though how we do it is very important, will not increase participation in elections. We have to do other things.

● (1945)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (Minister of State (Public Health), Lib.): Madam Chair, I thank the Minister responsible for Democratic Reform, since the debate this evening is very important.

[*English*]

Citizens are engaging in record numbers, but they are simply not engaging with politicians. They have written us off. Some are not even voting. Many believe it does not matter.

As an antidote we must ensure that the template or structure for citizen engagement at all levels is intelligent and genuine. Citizens are right to be cynical. Countless exercises in public consultation have been pro forma, a sort of occupational therapy for citizens. Governments have simply treated consultations as a box to check off, having already decided what to do anyway.

Government Orders

Citizens can tell the difference, particularly the savvy young ones who can sniff out manipulation and people wasting their time. We need at all times to keep our cynicism thermometer in full view and ensure that everything we do is driving the red mercury down. The legitimacy of a genuine process should be palpable. The process must utilize all the modern technology that all generations will use.

The case history is clear. Polling conducted by Earncliffe years ago rated listening to Canadians as the third most important issue facing this country.

The signs and symptoms are clear. There is decreasing voter turnout, particularly among younger voters. Only 11% of Canadians have contacted their elected representatives, written a letter to the editor or anything like that. It is the decline of deference among Canadians as has been described by University of Toronto political scientist Neil Nevitte. The diagnosis has been the democratic deficit, but there is a treatment. The treatment is democratic reform.

Stephen Coleman, a professor of e-democracy at Oxford, talks about a two way accountability between citizens and their elected representatives. I see democratic reform in four ways: one, electoral reform; two, the necessity of party reform if electoral reform is entertained; three, parliamentary reform; and four, citizen engagement.

I will leave numbers one and two alone for now, but numbers three and four together are what *Toronto Star* columnist Carol Goar calls "democracy between elections". Stephen Coleman has made it clear that it is this two way accountability and civic efficacy. "People don't want to govern", he says, "they want to be heard".

Being heard, however, means that those listening, the elected representatives, are themselves heard when they present their ideas to government. There is no point in citizens wasting their time talking to members of Parliament or parliamentary committees if the centre of government ignores them. If the view of the centre is that MPs are nobodies, the point of the exercise is defeated. When a deputy minister in this country was once called in Parliament "a minor process obstacle", one has to say that we need some attitudinal change in this place.

Citizen engagement means absolutely nothing without the attitudinal shift that is at the heart of parliamentary reform. As former House of Commons Clerk Robert Marleau observed, "the problem is not the rules, it is the culture". The culture is determined by attitude.

If Parliament matters, better people will run for office. Parliamentary reform is critical to improving the quality of those who run for public office, in that good people will not waste their time as rubber stamps for decisions predetermined by unelected officials. I thank the minister responsible for democratic reform for all of the changes and all of his proposals in making this a reality so that the new generation of parliamentarians will welcome the role of mediator between citizens and their government and be able to demonstrate their ability to truly make a difference.

Empowering MPs will strengthen democracy using all of the tools available in six ways. I see that we as parliamentarians operate in six ways.

One, we operate in our riding. Two, we operate in our non-geographic constituencies, for example, women, persons with disabilities, business, whoever sees the MP as their person on the Hill. Three, we operate in committees. Four, we operate sometimes in collaboration with government. I very much enjoyed the online consultation that was conducted years ago between MPs and the Department of Canadian Heritage on whether there is a Canadian way and what is the role of government in online chats. Five, we also operate as party members. Party policy development is also very much part of our role as members of Parliament. Six, we operate internationally sharing best practices with colleagues around the globe.

The collaboration between MPs and citizens can ultimately lead to better public policy, as unusual coalitions work together in presenting real solutions with real buy-in of those affected. It results in better legislation and better implementation.

● (1950)

Citizens help parliamentarians keep government accountable. Their input results in better questions, in better analysis of budgetary estimates, priorities and planning exercises. There is no question that the ongoing dialogue will result in better relationships between citizens and their elected representatives. Our ultimate goal is a democracy between elections that will not only persuade citizens that their voice really does matter and that they should vote, but that they may even decide to get involved in the political process and consider running for office or getting behind someone who will.

Parliamentary reform means taking up Dr. Coleman's challenge and asserting the emerging role of Parliament as a mediator between the public and government. It is about redefining representative democracy using the new tools and acknowledging that citizens have a lot more to offer than their voice every four years.

As a family physician it was clear to me that the patient had to be a partner in his or her care. Taking this patient as partner approach to the work in my riding has been one of the most rewarding aspects of being the member of Parliament for St. Paul's. From town hall meetings to neighbourhood checkups, to the grade five classroom, to the interactive website in my blog, to my Sunday night MSN chat with my young voters, I learn a great deal from the engaged citizens of St. Paul's.

We, as parliamentarians, must believe that we will indeed get better policy by consulting Canadians. The Prime Minister raised the bar as finance minister with the prebudget consultations. It was clear he respected that the expertise was in the trenches. The ideas would come from those who worked in those areas, unlike those who would dismiss engaged citizens as special interest groups.

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As chair of the subcommittee on persons with disabilities, it was clear to me that the parents of children with disabilities were indeed experts. They could better delineate the gaps and duplication in supports and services than any policy analyst or academic. The Prime Minister demonstrated that respect and his ability to harvest the best ideas and solutions through these consultations.

The OECD wrote a document in 2001 called "Citizens as Partners" which identified three levels of citizen engagement. It is really important that whenever we engage citizens we let citizens know what level we are asking for. One, are the citizens simply being informed, a sort of transparency, the typical dad approach of government, decide, announce, defend? Or, are they being consulted? Do participants understand that the parameters include timing, budget constraints, federal-provincial realities? Or is it indeed a deliberative democracy exercise and is the government prepared to live with the results? Citizens, the OECD argues, must always be clear about the level in which they have been asked to participate.

Many of us realize that the third level of government may be a little bit more relevant, the municipal level. Carolyn Lukensmeyer demonstrated this in the replacement of the twin towers after 9/11. She used a fabulous process in which citizens actually rejected the first three architectural designs and sent them back to the drawing board in order to find a more therapeutic design which was the Libeskind model.

It was clear in the Romanow commission that the input of Canadians was essential. At no time did Canadians in that process feel like a process necessity. It was genuine. The title of the report "Building on Values" represented the might of thousands of Canadians. Canadians note that they are citizens of a community, a province and a country. It is only through putting citizens back at the centre of the debate that we will avoid the ridiculous jurisdictional squabbles that are so tiresome and counterproductive.

The 2003 success of the e-consultation on the future of CPP disability by the subcommittee on persons with disabilities set a benchmark for all parliamentary committees. The subcommittee's report recommended that all committees have an expanded information based website and consider e-consultation in much the same way as they consider travel, videoconferencing and other tools.

As a minister, I find that we are able to engage in this same wonderful process on the public health agency at www.healthycanadians.ca. I am very aware that the resources that I have as a minister of the crown in the government are way too big compared to that available to individual members of Parliament.

• (1955)

After tonight's debate I hope the minister will understand that there is huge support for basic websites and online chats as basic tools for a member of Parliament. The ability to host town hall meetings is imperative. The webcasting of committees is important, as is increased resources to the Library of Parliament so that we can have personnel to do the estimates on an annual basis, to create the content that is necessary in terms of citizen engagement in civic literacy, such that we can always know that the committees will get better and newer information than what is there as a government.

If I may, I just want to tell one tiny story about a constituent of mine, Lembi Buchanan, whose work as a truly engaged citizen was reflected in this year's budget. Lembi arrived in my office to tell me about the disability tax credit and how it was not fair to people with mental illness. We took that problem to the committee on status of persons with disabilities. We ended up with a unanimous report. When the government of the day did not do what the report said, we ended up with a unanimous vote in the House of Commons. We ended up with a technical advisory committee on which Lembi B sat.

All the recommendations of that technical advisory committee are now in the 2005 budget. It is huge to say that from riding to committee to the House to an advisory committee of government that this citizen and everything that she was working on worked.

[*Translation*]

The change consists not only in admitting the democratic deficit exists and in describing it, but also in showing how Canadians can work together with the members of Parliament to eliminate it by using all the tools available for this purpose.

[*English*]

I thank the minister for the opportunity to bring Parliament and citizen engagement into this century.

Hon. Raymond Simard (Parliamentary Secretary to the Deputy Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Minister responsible for Official Languages and Minister responsible for Democratic Reform, Lib.): Madam Chair, I would like to ask my colleague a question based on one of my experiences as a new member of Parliament.

It will be three years that I have been a member of Parliament within the next couple of weeks. In my first year I am not sure if I was naive, but I said that I would do community consultations. I figured I would go right into the community centres and meet the people in their areas. I was extremely disappointed with the turnout. I literally invited thousands of people and dozens showed up. I think I was doing it for the right reasons. I wanted to engage people. I wanted their feedback on issues.

The hon. member spoke about cynicism and how citizens are cynical about things. Maybe she could tell us how we get beyond that. It is easy to get a full house at a town hall in times of crisis, but how do we engage people between the crises, when we want their feedback on day to day things and we want serious engagement from them?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Madam Chair, there is a number of different things.

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I have divided my riding into natural geographic neighbourhoods. We do a neighbourhood checkup on any topic that people want.

When we do the town halls we tend to have a very topical issue that has come out. I have to admit that the best meetings we have had have been the ones with real partners in the community who help get the people out as. The meetings we had on Sharon Carstairs, on end of life care and palliative care, the Hospice Association helped and cohosted them. Those seemed to work. I think it is about those sorts of partnerships.

Even with the ones where the turnout was small, I would begin them with the attitude that it was my briefing and that I had invited the three people whom I really adored and wanted to know what they thought of things or to debate issues. It was like a briefing for me. Even if nobody came, I still got the briefing from the panel in the same way.

Once in my office I ended up in this fabulous discussion. I thought that everybody else should be able to hear it. I would also love it if at some point we were able to webcast the town hall meetings. People who did not want to attend could quietly watch at home, in much the same way as my MSN chat on Sunday nights operates. There are what the kids call lurkers who are there listening to the chat, but do not feel quite comfortable participating in the chat.

It is a matter of our changing our ideas on how many it takes to have a good conversation. I think I have had over a hundred since I have been elected and I do not think there has been one in which I have not learned something.

• (2000)

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC): Madam Chair, early in the minister's comments she made reference to something just in passing, but I hope I will be able to encourage her to expand upon it.

She said that there is need for party reform if electoral reform occurs, which interests me. I think there is always a benefit to reforming and democratizing one's party even if there is no electoral reform. I got myself embroiled in a bit of a controversy over attempting to do some of this in my own party last month, although I still think that the policies I proposed are substantial improvements on the status quo. Some of them did actually get put through and I think they are a benefit to the democracy of our party.

However, leaving self-promotion aside, what I wanted to do was inquire about that, and because I am only going to get one shot at asking the minister of state a question, I am also going to ask her about her experience with her blog. I hear people starting to say that a blog is a useful tool. I would be interested in hearing from another person who has experienced it and might be able to add comments that would be of use to all of us.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Madam Chair, on the first piece, I guess it is a sort of a chicken and egg thing. My feeling on going to electoral reform, and I think I probably got it backwards, is that we cannot really go to electoral reform until the parties are truly democratic. In order to put people on the list, it has to be done in a fair and transparent way. We need to know how that list would be arrived at. It would have to be something that one would feel comfortable with as a party. In France on the parity issue, they

passed a bill saying that for every other person on the list it should run woman-man-woman-man or the parties would have to pay a fine. All of the parties paid the fine.

I think one needs to feel that there is a buy-in in terms of what one is trying to achieve, whether it is a parity law or whether it is proportional representation. I guess it is an interesting challenge now. I think the *Globe and Mail* editorial this morning was fabulous in terms of understanding the risk of some of the methods of proportional representation, which will not achieve the advent of more women and more of the under-represented people but will tend mainly to diminish the effect of political parties.

Second, the blog has been fabulous. What they talked about in the Congress Online project was a sort of anticipatory approach. For example, on same sex marriage, two summers ago at the Ontario Superior Court ruling, as soon as I had five letters on it I was able to put up what I thought, which people feel can deter other letters or can encourage letters from the people who disagree.

I found in the last election that the content I created for the website over those years of just writing what I think about things became a sort of documentation, which I actually then used in election brochures or certainly on the issues part of the site. It is not a formal blog, but I have been doing this now for three or four years, I think, and it is interesting.

In terms of the text messaging and cellphone piece as well, it is interesting in terms of how we have to be like Gretzky and skate to where the puck is going to be. I was at a blogging conference at Westminster a couple of summers ago when they changed the date, the time and the place of the meeting and everybody was there at the right place at the right time just because of text messaging. It is interesting. I have not figured out how to blog from my BlackBerry yet, but we are working on it. I find it very satisfying.

Also, even when I am being introduced as a speaker, quite often the introducer will remark on what I have blogged. I remember that when I got back from Israel Don Newman on *NewsWorld* commented on comments about what I felt in Israel, comments that came straight from my blog, which beats the two year old biography that is on most of our websites.

There is no question about it, though, that when I became a minister the department and my staff were quite worried about me just blogging away. But I feel that one puts up what one believes in, along with comments linked to articles one has liked and all of that sort of thing. I do not have the formal blogging software that automatically makes the links. I have to make the links myself in an HTML format. By doing it myself, though, I have found out that no one on my staff can say they cannot do it.

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● (2005)

Mr. Stockwell Day (Okanagan—Coquihalla, CPC): Madam Chair, the debate tonight is about engaging citizens and how we in fact engage citizens more effectively in the democratic process. It should be a compelling discussion. We do not reflect on the absence of members, but it is interesting to see how engaging it is in that in fact there are four of us in the House of Commons tonight in this engaging discussion.

Citizens will be engaged if they have a sense of something; I want to get to that in a minute. It is very positive that we are hearing about the techniques that various MPs use to engage citizens and to get information out to them. That is good and it is helpful. We can learn from each other in non-partisan ways.

Around my constituency, I use many of the techniques that I have heard about here tonight, such as holding small group meetings and town hall meetings. I go door-knocking in between election times, which shocks people. When we are at the door, their feeling is to wonder what we are selling. I send out surveys regularly to get feedback. I regularly set up a booth in local farmers' markets or malls and I advertise in the paper that I am going to be there. People can walk by. There are people who do not normally have the time to make an appointment or set something up, or maybe they are intimidated by going into an office. They can just walk right up and say whatever it is they want to say. We use the Internet and various techniques.

Techniques are important, but citizens will engage only if they feel they can actually influence the world around them. That may be just their neighbourhood or their own home, but if they do not feel they can influence those who purport to represent them, they are going to disengage no matter how many wonderful techniques we put in place to give the appearance of engagement and the appearance that they could make a difference. If they do not sense through their elected persons that they can make a difference, they are increasingly going to disengage. I would suggest that this is largely where we are today.

Some people point accusingly at people who are not engaged, as we call it, in the political process. Maybe they accuse them of being selfish or apathetic. Largely, I believe, many citizens have a sense that what they think and what they say really does not make that big a difference. Until it is something of a huge and major proportions, they are not going to rise up.

Was it not interesting to see one of the greatest movements of citizen involvement in terms of a spontaneous picking up of the telephone and citizens calling not their politicians but a government funded agency? I say this with all respect. It was the night that people thought Don Cherry's contract was not going to be renewed. Personally, I like Don Cherry. We were told that the CBC was flooded with thousands upon thousands of phone calls. Why? Because people at that moment felt that something they liked was being threatened. It was not orchestrated, but they felt that if enough of them got onto it they could make a difference. Apparently they did, yet other areas of social concern do not seem to get the same reaction.

I would like to read for the House a statement by a social commentator. Some of you would be familiar with H.L. Mencken. He said this 70 years ago, so he is not politically correct on the

gender issue; the word "man" means man or woman. It is gender neutral. He said:

The average man...sees clearly that government is something lying outside him... that it is a separate, independent and often hostile power...capable of doing him great harm. [Government] is apprehended, not as a committee of citizens chosen to carry out the communal business of the whole population, but as a separate and autonomous corporation, mainly devoted to exploiting the population for the benefit of its own members.

● (2010)

That is a harsh critique, but I think it largely spells out how many of our citizens feel: that the government across the way and we as the opposition are an entity unto ourselves. And life goes on. We become engaged here in question period and the great debates. We get all fired up and call home and ask, "Did you hear me say this?" or "Did you hear my friend say that?" They are saying, "Huh?" No, our citizens are trying to make a living or taking their kids to soccer games. We are becoming increasingly irrelevant in the minds of our citizens.

If one does not feel that one can have an influence one is not going to engage. In a tyranny or a dictatorship, obviously, we see the greatest lack of citizen involvement, because there is a great cost to engagement. It could be death or imprisonment. There is virtually no engagement.

Or there is the fear of losing something. Nathan Sharansky talks about two types of societies. We like to think in terms of communist or capitalist or socialism or fascism. He breaks it all down to two societies: fear societies and free societies. In a free society people can speak up freely because they do not think they will be punished for it. They may run into vigorous debate, but they do not think there will be some sort of loss.

We say almost cynically at times that there is nothing wrong with a benevolent tyranny, a benevolent dictatorship. People have written about the present form of our government as a benevolent or a friendly dictatorship. In fact, the problem with a dictatorship is that power is concentrated in the hands of a very few people, or one of a few people. When that happens, Lord Acton's corollary kicks in: power tends to corrupt. It tends to corrupt, and of course ultimate power, supreme power, corrupts supremely.

It is for that reason that our society has to be broken down and we have to acknowledge the division of power. We have to keep power away from ourselves as individuals and as small groups, because the more power we have centralized within our own power, we will be corrupted.

We are hammering on the federal Liberals with the scandal situation and let us face it: in Conservative politics there has been scandal also. We can go right back to the start of our history with Sir John A. Macdonald and the famous scandal that brought his government down. This is not a partisan issue.

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How can we break down that division of power and make people feel that they can make a difference? First of all, we must recognize that individuals are sovereign and that the very purpose of government is to recognize the fact that each one of us as individuals has God-given rights and the only purpose of government is to protect those rights and secure those rights for us. If I am representing my constituents, I am there to protect their rights and to make sure those rights are secure.

I am talking about federal politics now—but some of these would have similar relations to municipal or provincial politics—when I say that there is no greater sense of discouragement for one of my constituents than for him or her to think that I as their representative have absolutely no influence, that I cannot make a difference for my constituents. That would be ultimately discouraging for them. No matter what techniques I put in place they would not engage in the process, because they would say, “He can't do anything. He has no influence at all”.

Thus, I believe that this is one of the most important things that could happen to engage citizens. This government could do this. Members can determine how they want to qualify this person, but here is a great quote:

Unfortunately, the authority of the individual Member of Parliament has been allowed to erode, while the power of the executive has grown steadily.

I agree with that. Concentrating power in a small group of people will discourage citizens from being involved.

The quote goes on:

We must loosen the hold of party discipline over Members of Parliament—

I agree with that. It continues:

—so that they can more freely and more frequently employ their own judgment on individual matters...we must give new means to individual Members of Parliament to represent their consciences and their constituents.

The author of that quote is none other than our present Prime Minister.

● (2015)

Across the land today, whichever side people are on the issue of the same sex marriage legislation, there is one thing that all citizens in Canada understand. On this matter of conscience, many members of Parliament are not allowed to vote freely. That has more of a discouraging effect across the country because it spreads out from that particular issue. Let us leave that issue. It reinforces the sense that members of Parliament cannot vote freely.

It is not just all of the Liberal members to whom the Prime Minister has said “You will not vote your conscience”. He promised it here. He wants to see changes so that members can represent their consciences and their constituents, and yet he said, “No, you are not going to”.

I am just using examples and I am trying to keep this from being partisan. The leader of the NDP has said to his entire caucus, not just a big portion of the caucus, “You will not vote freely on this issue”. It reinforces the notion that across the country members of Parliament do not have the freedom to speak for their constituents.

Until we reverse that notion, all the techniques, all the blogs, all the Internets, and all the townhall meetings will have the same

struggle of getting people engaged, so that they feel they have an influence. When there is a sense in the land that individuals do not have a say, that they will not be able to in any way get their way, then this characterization of government will ring true, that we are a separate autonomous group, largely removed from everyday life and becoming increasingly irrelevant.

That is a dangerous situation that any society should steer away. Restoring the freedom of vote to all members of Parliament will start to engage citizens again.

Mr. Ken Epp (Edmonton—Sherwood Park, CPC): Madam Chair, I enjoyed the presentation that my colleague just gave on this topic. I would like to ask him whether he has any comments with respect to the engagement of our citizens when it comes to petitions. He mentioned the marriage question which is now before the House and has been for some time. We have had literally thousands of petitions presented. I do not know how many names. I asked the clerk of petitions office for that information. It said that it has so many of them and it is so far behind in counting them that it could not provide me with a number. Yet all of those petitions are not presumably being listened to or being heeded by Parliament.

I would like to have my colleague comment on whether or not we should encourage our citizens to present petitions when they are so routinely ignored here.

● (2020)

Mr. Stockwell Day: Madam Chair, I cannot emphasize the importance of that question.

There is a hierarchy of effectiveness of processes by which to influence government. Petitions are important, but let us be honest here. They are probably one of the least effective ways of affecting government. We all read petitions. When our citizens give us those petitions, we do not have the right to say we are not going to present them. As long as they are in order according to law, we present them in the House.

We do not have to agree with the premise of the petition. We send the petitioners a copy of what we did and that makes it look like we are onside with their issue. Let us face it. Petitions are somewhat useful. I am being very honest and we all have to agree that they are not that effective in turning government, otherwise government would move the way citizens want it to move far more often.

The next most effective way would be individual letters or emails from a constituent to his or her MP. Going up the ladder, the next step would be individual phone calls not in terms of mass organization because we can tell when that is going on but individual phone calls.

The one thing that will influence the heart of an MP is what may happen to his seat. I will use the marriage question as an example. When constituents phone their MPs and tell them that they will support them in the next election as long as that MP supports their side of the issue, whichever side that may be, that will have a compelling effect on an MP. A few of those phone calls will probably have more impact on a member of Parliament than petitions.

Government Orders

However, petitions should not be stopped; they are important. People need to understand that when someone signs a petition, they may feel absolved of the responsibility to do anything else. They feel they have taken great action on the part of their country. That is going to have a minimal effect.

Petitions should keep on coming, but people must realize the best thing they could do would be to appeal to the self-interest of an MP. James Buchanan won a Nobel prize for economics. He spent a lifetime researching economic freedoms. He said that one of the fundamental pillars for which his economic theory was awarded a Nobel prize was that public servants and politicians are just as self-interested as the rest of society, but most scholars and textbooks tell us otherwise. We sometimes walk around thinking we are far more altruistic than the rest of the population. We are not. Some of us are more altruistic than others. Some business people are more altruistic. Some teachers are more altruistic than others. As human beings we are all self-interested.

If constituents want any influence, they must appeal to the self-interest of their members of Parliament. They should tell them about the issue that means a lot to them and that they will work for them and support them if they support that issue. If they do not, they will support the candidate who will.

Mr. Mario Silva (Davenport, Lib.): Madam Chair, it is often said, and I wholeheartedly agree, that we live in the greatest country in the world. One of the most profound treasures we as a nation cherish is a democratic system of government. It is a sacred trust bestowed upon us in which the people of our country choose those who will govern them. At face value it seems simple and perhaps we take it for granted, but in reality it is part of the soul of this country and it is most certainly a right that is woven into the fabric of our nation.

Pierre Trudeau, one of this country's greatest prime ministers, once said:

Democracy is superior to other political systems because it solicits the express agreement of the people and thus avoids the necessity of violent changes. At each election, in fact, the people assert their liberty by deciding what government they will consent to obey.

There are many who say that our democracy is in need of renewal. I agree it is important that we look at new approaches to governance. The steady decline in the number of eligible voters actually casting their ballots is perhaps a call to review our political system. While electoral reform may indeed encourage greater voter participation, there is no guarantee of this result. However, I believe it is incumbent upon us to seek renewal and welcome the changes this will bring to our system of government.

Indeed, if one were to question the belief that all across this country and around the world there is a desire for electoral reform, a brief survey of this issue at the provincial level would put the argument to rest. For example, British Columbia will soon have the opportunity to vote on a single transferable vote system chosen by the Citizens' Assembly. This vote comes on May 17, 2005. New Brunswick will review a report released in January 2005 recommending a mixed member proportional system. Ontario has created the democratic renewal secretariat to modernize Ontario's democratic institutions. Prince Edward Island has appointed an eight person commission to look at the province's electoral future. Quebec

has a draft bill before it to be studied by a parliamentary committee through public consultations.

Indeed, it should be noted that this is only what is occurring in Canada. We see similar trends in democratic jurisdictions across the world.

Clearly, no matter where one lives, there is a prevailing mindset that states not so much that democracy is dysfunctional as much as there is need for renewal. We need to look at engaging citizens more directly in the political process and to do so we must look at changing the way governments are elected. Voters must clearly see that their system of electing representatives truly reflects their desired choice.

We should briefly review the statistics on how governments are elected and how this might support the case for change.

One of the main criticisms we often hear is that a party's political share of the national vote is rarely reflected in an accurate way in terms of results. For example, in only 134 of the 308 ridings in the 2004 general election were candidates elected with a majority of 50% of the vote or more. The actual voter turnout for those between the ages of 21 and 24 years was a mere 35.4%.

In four of the last five general elections between 1988 and 2004, the governing party received less than 50% of the popular vote, yet the leading party formed majority governments. Perhaps more blatantly, in the 1993 general election the Progress Conservative Party received 16% of the national vote but only two seats or .7% of the total seats. Clearly, not a representative reflection of voter support.

There are also significant discussions that continue to take place in relation to the role of members of Parliament. I am sure that any member of the House will readily attest to the fact that their offices are busy centres of activity dealing with the most diverse challenges from immigration files to pension issues.

The electorate clearly looks to their representatives for assistance, as they most certainly should. Do members have the resources to deal with these large caseloads and do we as members possess the influence over public policy that flows from the frontline experience we receive through our offices? These are legitimate questions worthy of consideration. Indeed, on the issue of members of Parliament we could have a debate lasting days just on this subject alone.

We may also ask if the roles of ministers within the government structure also require renewal. Is it practical to put into place a mechanism to ensure that there is a greater public input into the process by which public policy is developed and implemented? I believe the answer is in the affirmative. There is perhaps a greater role for members of Parliament in this regard.

● (2025)

I believe it is also essential that we work diligently to ensure that we teach our children from a very young age the most basic mechanism of government. It is incumbent upon us to make certain that our children, when they graduate from secondary school, have at least an understanding of our democratic system and the need for their participation and interest.

Government Orders

It should be noted that there is no shortage of studies making recommendations on how to change system, including the Pepin-Robarts task force in 1979 or the Macdonald commission in 1985.

What is clear to all who look objectively at our political system is that change is required. If we fail to act we risk further alienating the electorate from the people they choose to represent them in Ottawa or any other provincial capital or indeed in city halls across the country.

The example of British Columbia is one that deserves close scrutiny from those who support change at the federal level. Citizens must feel that they are part of the system that develops reform proposals in terms of the political system.

This month British Columbia will decide whether to accept or reject recommendations of its citizens' assembly. Regardless of the outcome, at least the matter has been discussed and at least they have been engaged in meaningful dialogue.

There is little doubt that voter apathy may indeed be a phenomenon more deeply rooted than simply changing the electoral system. The examples of Scotland and Wales come to mind where, despite changes in the manner in which representatives were elected, voter turnout remained less than enthusiastic.

However it is incumbent upon us as parliamentarians and citizens that we at least make the effort to consider alternatives to the political system we currently have in place. These can range from the preferential ballot system, proportional representation, the single transferable vote system or the mixed member proportional system. All possibilities should be considered.

Democratic reform may not solve all the pressing issues facing our political system or those around the world but it is clearly an opportunity to engage voters in a positive and constructive manner. It is imperative that time not be lost in making progress in this area for what is at stake may well be the democratic process that is one of the greatest gifts handed down to us by our ancestors.

• (2030)

Mr. Ken Epp (Edmonton—Sherwood Park, CPC): Madam Chair, the member opposite was just talking about the fact that so many members are elected here without having a majority in their riding. I am one who happens to enjoy and have enjoyed every time in the last four elections a fairly healthy majority in my riding.

I must admit that it gives me a great deal more confidence to know that the policies I put forward during the election campaign, the things that I promoted, were supported by over half of the people. Therefore when I stand in the House to speak or to vote I know I am representing the majority of the people.

However if one assumes that the overall guiding principle of democracy is that the majority should rule, then we should have some way of recognizing that in those ridings where the member was elected with less than a majority that somehow the wishes of the constituents in that riding should be represented.

I wonder whether the member who brought this forward has any specific ideas on how that should be done. To me it seems like a bit of a problem because of the fact that a person who was elected because he had the most votes could end up having to represent most

of the time ideas that are opposite to what he actually ran on. I think that would probably cause the greatest amount of consternation in his riding because he is displeasing the greatest number of people, namely those who voted for him.

It is a dilemma and I wonder whether the member has any specifics on it.

Mr. Mario Silva: Madam Chair, I have also wrestled with that issue but it is important to keep things in check, and that is in our democratic system of government and the Canadian system of government.

We recognize that some members are elected with more than 50% of the vote and some are elected with less than 50%. We know governments sometime form minority governments with less than 50%. However all those members and those governments are legitimate because the people and the Constitution states that they are legitimate. I would not want in any way to question the validity or undermine the legitimacy of those individuals and those governments. They are valid, they are legitimate and they have every right to represent, not the 30%, 40%, 50% or 60% of the people they were elected to represent in the House, but all the people of their ridings. We were elected to represent those who voted for us and also those who voted against us. That is the nature of our democracy and our representative system.

The point I was trying to make is that many forms across the world are being studied. A system I tend to like is the preferential ballot system that is advocated in some countries. Australia has that system where in fact the people can elect their first, second and third choices. If a candidate does not get 50% of the vote, then the other groups drop out and the people cast their votes for their first and second choices until the candidate gets 50%.

France has a similar system but operates differently. Where a candidate does not get 50% there is a second round of voting until those two individuals get 50%. That to me is much more in keeping with our system of allowing members to keep their existing constituency.

The big problem I find with the proportional representation system is that members have to be elected at large and therefore people do not know who their members of Parliament are. They also do not have constituencies that they have to answer to, and that is a system I think that is a little bit foreign to most people. I think the vast majority of Canadians like the system we have where we have one elected member of Parliament for a riding and that individual member of Parliament is answerable to the constituents and has constituency days. That system has worked very effectively and I do not think anyone wants to throw it out.

However I state once again that I am prepared to look at all systems across the world and at different examples provincially to see what is the best model for this country. I must state once again the we as members of Parliament who were elected with 30% or 60% or 70% are there to represent the people and are legitimately there constitutionally and with every right under the law.

Government Orders

• (2035)

Mr. Ken Epp: Madam Chair, I feel absolutely guilty dominating the debate here but I am going to do it anyway because I have another follow up question.

Not many issues come across our desks or across the parliamentary agenda that engage many people but when those issues happen, even with the scheme that he suggests that there be a runoff ballot, it could still happen that a member of Parliament is elected where in the end he or she may have more than 50% of the votes on the last ballot, but still there would be a whole bunch of people who then voted for that member of Parliament and who given a choice would rather have sent their first choice there. Therefore it is still not a full representation.

When these issues come forward that engage the interest of Canadians to such a large degree, would it not be better to actually have some mechanism that would permit ballot questions to appear on a referendum? I am asking for his approach to it. I think it is something we should seriously explore in this country and come up with some kind of a mechanism that works and that would accurately engage the wishes of people on different issues.

Mr. Mario Silva: Madam Chair, the member is engaging in a complex question on the issue of electoral reform and what exactly is the best model. I do not think we will ever find the best model. Every country has a model that works best for its country. Some models work very effectively while others work less effectively.

In terms of having questions on the ballot, California in the U.S. has a similar system but it tends to have a lot of flaws. I would caution us from going in that direction where every question, every debate and every budget issue is up for a vote. What tends to happen is that the most organized groups, the ones that are more radically opposed or in favour as opposed to the middle, tend to be the ones who have the upper hand in putting forward their agenda.

I believe that people elect their representative. Their representative means that they are there to represent and advocate for the people and to bring forward the agenda of the party and of their constituency. If we are to subject everything to a referendum or to a question it would tie the hands of Parliament and, in many ways, it would probably lessen the democratic system that we have in place.

It may be the case that constituents have a given view on certain subjects today and a totally different view a year from now. However a member of Parliament may be here for three or four years depending on the length of that Parliament session. I would question and also be very cautious about that type of system. I would rather that we reform the system of how we get members elected.

I agree that many issues are at play. Our institutions need to be questioned. It is healthy to question our institutions. It is quite important and profound that we do that because our institutions need to be checked once in a while to see if this is the direction that we as a country need to see the institutions from the public's perspective and whether we are on the right course or not.

It is quite legitimate but I do not think we need to throw our institutions out. We have an incredible institution that has served Canada really well. We need to be cautious and diligent in our

approach but it is important that we engage parliamentarians and of course the public in whatever role and whatever outcome there might be for this country.

• (2040)

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Regina—Lumsden—Lake Centre, CPC): Madam Chair, it is a pleasure to stand in the assembly tonight to speak to the issue of citizen engagement. To me it is another euphemism for either voter connect or voter disconnect.

I would like to speak for the next few minutes on that, because it is, quite frankly, a serious problem with all political parties. It is a shame that we have a situation now in Canada where politicians are looked upon with such cynicism and such disrespect by the electorate that sometimes we are almost ashamed to go to public meetings. Certain folks figure that if one is a politician, one cannot be respected or trusted, and that is a pox on all of our houses. I will particularly focus on a pox on one house in my presentation tonight, and that is the house opposite.

I want to go back to 1993, the start of the government's regime. One of the main reasons, in my view, that the government was elected back in 1993 was the unpopularity of the incumbent government at the time, which was a Conservative government. There are two issues in particular that I believe really turned the election in favour of the Liberals. One was the free trade agreement, which the Liberals, the opposition of the day, campaigned against, and the other one in particular was the GST.

I recall the famous Liberal red book of the 1993 election where the opposition leader of the day, Jean Chrétien, was standing up with the red book in all of his television ads saying, "If elected, we will get rid of the GST, axe the GST". We still have it. That was the first indication that the government was losing the connection with the voters. That was a fundamental and very key issue, because no one liked that tax. That was one of the most unpopular taxes this country had ever seen and the Liberal Party of Canada campaigned strongly on the fact that if elected, it would eliminate the GST. That was 1993. Today is 2005 and we have not even seen one effort by the government to get rid of it. That is not to say that the GST is an unfair tax. It is not to say that we should get rid of the GST. The fact of the matter is, however, that party, which is now the government of this country, campaigned that it would eliminate the GST and it has done nothing to do just that. Broken promises. That is the type of thing that makes all Canadians so suspicious, so cynical and so distrustful of politicians.

Beyond that, there are some other things we could be doing to try to regain some of that trust. At least our party on this side of the House is doing a few things which resonate well with the voters of this country. I want to highlight some of those things and perhaps illustrate why our party has a little different stance and a little different approach when it comes to dealing with the voters and how we plan to connect more with the general public and the voters.

Government Orders

The first thing of course is free votes. I am a firm believer in free votes because I honestly believe that members of Parliament are elected to represent those who vote for them, those who represent their constituency, the riding population. Whether or not, I should add, the people vote for me or against me, if I represent them in my riding, I think they are my bosses. I have to take my direction from them. Normally, that seems like an easy thing to do, but in this environment, it is a little different.

The members opposite have a different view of that. Of course, they are government and they might advance the argument that they cannot always represent the total view of their constituents, because if the party line is for the greater good of Canada, they have to follow that party line.

Perhaps my idealism is shining through and I have not been elected long enough to be a complete cynic about the political process, but honestly, the opposite is true. I believe that we have to represent our constituents first and foremost. I am pleased to say that a Conservative Party would honour that commitment.

We have seen this party and individual members within the House speak freely and frankly in opposition to the majority view of other members. However, on the opposite side of the House, I have seen members whom I know personally vote against the direct wishes of their constituents. I know that to be a fact. I want to give a couple of illustrations.

• (2045)

Obviously I am most familiar with Saskatchewan. In March of this year in the federal riding of Wascana there was a fairly comprehensive poll taken on the issue of same sex marriage. The overwhelming view of the respondents to that poll suggested that the majority of all the voters, of all the residents in that riding were opposed to the government's position on civil marriage. In other words, they were opposed to same sex marriage. However, the member representing those constituents, the Minister of Finance, has consistently voted in favour of the civil marriage act and in favour of same sex marriage.

My point is I know that is the government view, but it is one of the most controversial and divisive pieces of legislation that this country has seen. People are divided. They are divided to the point where some individuals are leaving their church. They are divided to the point where some people are fighting among themselves in community groups and religious organizations because they want their voice to be heard. They want their voice to be heard and through their voice, they want their elected representative, their member of Parliament to represent their views in this assembly. It is not being done. The case in point with the Minister of Finance, is he has consistently voted in favour of same sex marriage against the express wishes of his constituents.

Another example is what is probably one of the key election issues in Saskatchewan, the national gun registry. Again, without exception the vast majority of individuals, of all voters, of all residents in Saskatchewan, whether they be urban or rural, whether they be male or female, whether they be professional or blue collar, are adamantly opposed to the national firearms registry. Yet again, a Liberal member, the Minister of Finance, knowing the views of the majority wishes, has consistently voted in favour of the national gun registry.

I can absolutely assure the House that if a poll were taken in the finance minister's riding or any other riding in the province of Saskatchewan, we would find that at least 70% to 80% of the people would be against the national gun registry. What do they get from their elected representative? Someone comes to Ottawa and votes in favour of the national gun registry, something that is diametrically opposed to the majority wishes of the people of not only the minister's riding, but the entire province.

What we need to do here is allow all members to vote freely on issues such as that. I can certainly understand that if the government of the day wants to instruct its members of Parliament to vote in favour of major money bills or the budget, that has to be adhered to. Members must vote in favour of those key pieces of legislation. However, on almost every other issue, is it not the democratic way to allow members to represent their constituents so we have a full and complete knowledge of the feelings of all Canadians in this assembly? Should we not be here to represent the views of all of our constituents? I think we must. To do otherwise is not only unconscionable, it is undemocratic.

The party across the aisle does not see that as a priority. I think that is shameful. We have to start changing the way we do business in this assembly before any Canadian will start to view us as reputable and trustworthy.

Unless we do that, we will continue to be looked upon by the majority of people in this country as dishonest, disreputable politicians. The term politician will be looked upon as a dirty word and a slang word. That is something I cannot stand. I did not stand for election to be viewed in that light. We have to clean up our own house and it starts in this assembly.

In conclusion, in order for voters to become more connected to MPs, we have to start representing the views of our constituents on a regular and consistent basis with integrity and with honesty.

• (2050)

Hon. Raymond Simard (Parliamentary Secretary to the Deputy Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Minister responsible for Official Languages and Minister responsible for Democratic Reform, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I cannot help but feel that I am at a Conservative convention right now. It is a very interesting evening.

The hon. member mentioned free votes in the House of Commons. On this side of the House we have brought in the three line vote. It has worked extremely well. In fact, there is a lot more flexibility for members to vote the way they want to vote. I have not necessarily seen that on the other side of the House.

I would appreciate the member telling me how he figures that a Conservative government would bring that forward. Why would they not bring it forward immediately when they are in opposition?

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Chair, I am not exactly sure where the member is coming from. Our party does have a policy that we are allowed to vote freely. We have stated, our leader has stated, that if in government, when we form government, even cabinet ministers would be allowed to vote freely, with the exceptions that I gave, such as the budget and major money bills.

Government Orders

Consistently we have seen on this side of the House our members stand and vote according to the wishes of their constituents, sometimes frankly to the majority opposition. We have seen on the same sex marriage bill, as the member well knows, four or five of our members have opposed. I applaud the members opposite. The member is right in that many members of his caucus have stood and voted their free will, but beyond that, on critical bills I have seen nothing but whipped votes on that side of the House.

We need to encourage members to vote the wishes of their constituents, not discourage them. That is the only way we can truly represent our constituents in this assembly. What we are trying to do here is to be totally representative of all Canadians. How can we do that if we are voting against their wishes?

Again I will go back to the example where the Minister of Finance absolutely fundamentally knows that the majority of people in his riding are opposed to same sex marriage. They are opposed to the gun registry. Yet he has consistently voted against their wishes. What kind of democracy do we have here?

Perhaps this is just my sheer idealism but I have told my constituents very clearly, and I will continue to do so in the next campaign, that if I know the majority wishes of my constituents on a certain issue are to the left, and my personal views are to the right, I have basically two choices. I can either try and convince the majority of people in my riding that my viewpoint is correct and have them agree with me so that I can vote the way I wish to vote. If I cannot, and I know that they are fundamentally opposed to my personal conscience, my personal wishes, if I do not vote in favour of the majority wishes of my constituents, I should resign and I will resign, bottom line, pure and simple.

Perhaps that is not the most effective way of governing, but I will say one thing. I can sleep at night and I can look at myself in the mirror the next morning, because I know that I am being honest to the wishes of the people who elected me. That is the bottom line. That is what we need to do fundamentally in this House to ensure that there is true engagement and true connection between members of Parliament and their constituents.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC): Mr. Chair, I have a comment to make rather than a question, but it backs up what my hon. colleague has just said.

I have tried as a member of Parliament to vote with the wishes of my constituents and to do so in a way that to some degree would replicate the kind of citizen engagement there would be if there was a formal referendum process in this country. We do have the Referendum Act, but it is used very selectively. Over the course of the last 100 years it has been used three times. There have only been three referendums from 1896 to 1992.

We do have what we call constituent referendums where a postal ballot is mailed to all households. I have done this with respect to a number of laws. I explain in the mailing why I am consulting my constituents and why I regard an issue as important. I provide a non-partisan description of the bill as well.

I did this in the prior Parliament with respect to Bill C-5, the Species at Risk Act. I included the review that was done for members by the Library of Parliament and included it in the mailout.

I included it so people would understand the general purpose of the bill in a non-partisan kind of way and also included arguments for and against the legislation.

In order to ensure that I provide fair and reasonable arguments, I took arguments from individuals who actually advocated for or against the legislation in debates in committee, in debates in the House or from newspaper editorials and so on. I tried to give a representative sample of the arguments for and against the legislation. Thanks to the magic of the Internet further documents and links could be put in to allow people to look at it and consult. This is particularly easy on something like same sex marriage where there are numerous websites that promote either side of the argument.

Having done this, I can say this produces a lot of citizen engagement as well as a lot of respect for an MP. I did it on two pieces of legislation in the last Parliament where I actually voted against my party based on the recommendations of my constituents. One was the most important piece of legislation that faced the 37th Parliament and that was the Anti-terrorism Act. When I asked my constituents whether I should vote in favour of the bill at third reading if no sunset clause was included in it, the majority told me not to vote in favour of it. I voted against it. Only four members of my party broke ranks and voted against that legislation. I was one of those four.

On another occasion I was the only member of the entire opposition to vote in favour of a law. It was a lonely experience, but it was what my constituents had instructed me to do.

The number of people who respond to these constituent referendums can be substantial. In one constituent referendum I asked whether I should opt in or out of the MP pay raise. I had over 3,000 responses.

This kind of mechanism, if used by MPs, can produce a lot of citizen engagement and involvement. It seems to me that it is a healthy antidote to the danger that worries many MPs on the government side. They think that we are just going to get anarchy and people going off in different directions. If we have to go through the process and the discipline of explaining in an objective way to our constituents what the nature of an argument is, we are unlikely to be led astray unless the government itself has wandered astray from where public opinion actually happens to be.

• (2055)

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Chair, I am a little torn on the issue of citizen referendums. In certain cases that is an excellent way to gauge the pulse of the nation. It certainly has its place. I cannot say that we should engage in citizen referendums on every issue. Parliament would be relatively ungovernable if we were to have a referendum on every single issue that came before this assembly.

However, this assembly should take an initiative and make a concerted effort to examine the whole concept of citizen referendums to see how it could be incorporated into some of the business that we do here. Let us all be honest, there are certain pieces of legislation that, while important, need not be whipped by any party.

Government Orders

What we are trying to accomplish as a Parliament is to ensure that the majority wishes of Canadians are heard. Some will argue and we have heard it before, particularly in the civil marriage debate, that the majority wishes cannot dictate the minority rights situation. Leaving that aside for a moment, I am suggesting there are many issues that have come before us as parliamentarians that are not perhaps that controversial and do not impact the personal religious views or morality issues.

We deserve to examine the possibility of how we can incorporate citizen referendums into the voting patterns of the House because in many cases we absolutely want to know what Canadians feel on issues. I am doing as much as my hon. colleague is doing in his riding in terms of surveys. I am doing it by Internet, by phone calls, by 10 percenters, and all of the various communication avenues that we have.

On almost every piece of legislation that comes down, I am trying to get that information out to my constituents and ask them a very simple question, "What do you think of this piece of legislation? Here are the pros, here are the cons. How do you wish me to proceed?" I cannot do it in every single case, but on the majority of pieces of legislation that this government has brought down, my constituents are aware of the legislation and are aware of my views. I encourage them to contact me if they want to express their thoughts. I do that. We should all be encouraged to do that and this assembly should be taking some very serious steps in making that a preferred method of voting.

● (2100)

Mr. Ken Boshcoff (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): Madam Chair, I was really looking forward to this debate. I am so pleased that it has come forward as a take note debate because one of the major reasons that I ran was to involve more people in the democratic process, and citizens' engagement is truly a worthy endeavour for all parties in this House.

I believe that as parliamentarians we have the ultimate role to play in bringing people back into the parliamentary and democratic process. The best way we can do that is to set the highest possible standards for ourselves as members of Parliament. This implies respect, honesty, integrity, trust, accessibility and accountability. I will focus my time on the impressions that we convey to Canadians, especially young people and visitors to this House.

Reforms must start right here in the heart of it all. I find as a first term MP that the lack of decorum, civility and just good manners is generally very appalling. When I see the high school groups come here, and these are award-winning students in many cases representing a forum of young Canadians, Rotaries, youth scholars, Student Connections, and they watch the debates, they just leave shaking their heads. I watch them and they are very disappointed. If any one of them had ever behaved such as we might in this House, they would be booted right out of class and suspended.

That in itself should give each and every one of us in the House pause for concern because several hundred young people a week come to see the speeches here in the House, at question period in particular. For those of us who come from a municipal background, and I have spoken to members from all parties, they are generally astounded at the lack of civility and the type of antics that go on

here, especially disruptions. When we talk about respect, this would never happen in any municipal forum anywhere in the country. That it goes on is really quite shocking, particularly to people who have already served in some sort of democratic process.

When we think about people who are involved, who are engaged, people who are close to local government, who appear as deputations and delegations, they see firsthand the mayor, the head of council, the reeve rule anyone with the least provocation starting to speak out of order or out of turn and immediately order is restored. Why we cannot do that here in this very impressive chamber is something that I have not yet come to understand.

Indeed, immunity applies somewhat in municipal spheres, but here it seems to have been stretched to its ultimate limits of abuse. The ultimate test should be that if someone truly had something to say that was honest and truthful, they would be able to say it outside in the hall. The fact that they never dare to do that, even when challenged, should give each and every one of us pause to think of what is really happening in this House.

Are people taking advantage of a process that protects them and impugns others? Once it is out, once the media in the gallery hears the statement, once it goes into *Hansard*, then it is there and it can be used, no, it can be abused far more greatly than anyone would ever want their own name to be impugned.

As I have been watching this for the past number of months, it occurred to me that perhaps something in the order of a private member's motion would be appropriate because when we talk about the engagement of citizens, they are not going to come back if they do not respect what we are doing. They are not going to participate in something that they cannot relate to, and if they are appalled and disgusted, then they are not going to project that to the young people or to other voters.

● (2105)

What I am proposing in my private member's bill is to restore civility and decorum to the House, particularly under Standing Orders 16 and 18. Standing Order 16 is that there will be no interruptions while someone is giving an answer or asking a question. Standing Order 18 is that people will act respectfully toward each other.

It will take all parties to agree to this. I know some people are smiling and saying "mission impossible", but we have to agree that if it can be done in other orders of government, it certainly should be here in this Parliament.

As a student of this exercise, I undertook some light reading, *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*. I came across many interesting things. I have read it cover to cover. I am not going to say I just read it during opposition speeches. I read it while I was in the House doing my House duty. We know attempts have been made in the past by other parties to try to restore decorum and civility. In at least one case, historically, it came to third reading and someone was almost getting there.

As I enjoy my first term, I have met people from all parties who I feel share these values, who are cordial and respectful. Therefore, there is no one monopoly and there is no one guilty party in this exercise.

Government Orders

I guess we can use the adage of the mother asking the two children when did they start fighting and one says, "It started when he hit me back". We know this is the kind of thing where there is no sense trying to say "You guys are the bad guys" or "You are the bad people". We might as well just ask if there is a way that we can do this better for the people of our country. I believe very strongly that we have to do it.

We also get visitors from other countries. Some may think our rules or our procedures may be lax. I do not know. I have not seen many other houses. I am only concerned about this one.

I believe that if we are absolutely serious about citizen engagement, citizens will become engaged when they see us behave with respect, decorum, civility and when a question is asked, the person is allowed to ask it without being heckled and someone is allowed to answer without being chastised or commented upon.

This book of course has several interesting things. It does prohibit singing, except for the national anthem. When one reads some of the anecdotal history of some of the infractions, it is possible that perhaps there is a requirement for more enforcement by the Speaker, I do not know.

However, I know that among ourselves, as good parliamentarians who care about the country first and foremost, we are only here by the good graces of the people who elected us. The least we can do for them is to show them how much they mean to us. For me, it means that I can go back and say to them, "I asked your question. I got your answer", and they can say to me, "I actually could hear you ask the question and get the answer".

If we want to be closer to the people, it must start here. I look forward to presenting that. I thank the hon. members for allowing me to speak tonight. I am glad I stayed to hear the arguments put forth on all sides.

• (2110)

Mr. Ken Epp (Edmonton—Sherwood Park, CPC): Mr. Chair, after that speech, I feel like heckling. I really do not. I am trying to put a little levity into the debate tonight so we can stay alert and awake. The member talked about an intriguing concept, that we should be able to debate, engage in dialogue, ask questions and get answers without being heckled. I sit near the back and I always have. I have chosen a back seat and fortunately the whip in my party has always given it to me. I used to need it so I had a little more room to push my seat back. Now I do not really need the room, but I still like the bird's eye view. I can see everything. When question period takes place, frankly, even when I wear the earpiece, I cannot hear. It is despicable.

I was a high school teacher for 4 years and I taught at the college level for 27 years. I would never have tolerated that kind of behaviour in any of my classes. There were several occasions, when I was teaching at the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology, that I invited my students to go outside, as the Speaker does from time to time. He says that if we have something to talk about, we should go behind the curtain or into the lobby. I did that when I was an instructor at NAIT and some of my students took me up on it. I said that it was not right for them to interfere with other people's ability to concentrate.

When I was first elected in 1993 with a number of my colleagues in the then Reform Party, one of the things we tried to do was restore some dignity to Parliament. The member was not here then but some of the others were. They may recall that we sat here as respectfully as we possibly could and the media started putting out statements saying that we were a totally ineffective, unanimated, disengaged opposition.

I kept hearing the phrase "ineffective opposition", and some people still believe it. I remember talking to someone, and I cannot divulge the name because the person is an apolitical House of Commons staffer. That person said that he thought it was the first time in many decades that Parliament had a real opposition because we had come here with some new, challenging ideas on how to do things differently. He said that this had not happened until then. It was a matter of the parties changing sides from time to time in terms of who was the government and who was the opposition.

There we were with that dilemma. We were getting the public persona that we were ineffective because we were not yelling and screaming like everybody else. Now I do not know. Maybe now we are being too effective. By that definition, perhaps we are. I personally do not like it.

I was telling some people in my riding the other day about the one thing I resisted, and I have several witnesses here. In all my years in Parliament, which is now a little over 11, with very few exceptions, I have not engaged in the heckling, yelling and so forth. I have to say with very few exceptions because sometimes I just could not help it. Now it is very commonplace. I wish we could do something about it. I appreciate what the member is saying.

Sometimes I have thought we should be running this place like the boardroom of a major corporation. It would never be tolerated there. We should be able to put out ideas. We have a dilemma. If a member puts out an idea, all of a sudden that member is accused of it being party policy. One has to be very careful what one thinks and says. It is very constricting.

I would like the member's comments on how we could achieve that and somehow sell to the public that we are now doing our jobs better than we did before.

• (2115)

Mr. Ken Boshcoff: Mr. Chair, I have talked to several of the member's colleagues from the 1993 class of several parties. I am aware of that exercise in an attempt to set a new standard to try and bring decorum and civility to the House. Members can see I am already crossing boundaries here in terms of understanding the historical nature of that.

The interesting thing in this "not for your daily reading journal" is there are several instances in which the Speaker of the day, when they asked for decorum and order, ruled in favour of the hecklers, saying that heckling was part of the bit here. From what I have seen in my short time, I believe the bit is now controlling the entire show. For us to have an intelligent discussion on this, and I wish everyone was as intelligent as the member sitting in the House tonight, we have to believe we have to start somewhere.

Government Orders

I am absolutely unmitigatedly convinced that the Canadian public wants us to behave differently in this House. No matter how good the show is between 2 p.m. and 3 p.m., I know they would rather something different.

Some of the councils I have served on have also been known as boring types of council, but they rolled up their sleeves and they got the job done. In a democracy, people would much rather see their elected representatives with their sleeves rolled up, producing good work, than someone rehearsing their lines and then coming in and acting indignant.

I would be willing to work with any member of any party who shares those ideas. I know several of the member's colleagues opposite have expressed that idea to me already.

Mr. Joe Comartin (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Mr. Chair, I want to share with my colleague from across the way my experiences of observing and in fact studying some of the history and the reforms that have occurred in England, Australia and New Zealand. I have been in all of their parliaments now in my almost five years in the House. In those cases, they had a practice that was not dissimilar to the practice that goes on in this House, oftentimes a house that is basically out of control. It required a change in the corporate culture, but they did it.

Interestingly, England did it at the time when television was introduced. We did just the opposite. Our situation degenerated after we introduced television to this chamber. We know people play to the cameras. It is in fact worse I am told by parliamentarians who were here before cameras were.

I learned an example when I was observing the New Zealand house when I was there a few weeks ago. It has empowered its speaker to do greater things than we have empowered our Speaker to do. The example I will give, because it is a practice which it follows, almost was used the day I was there. One speaker pressed very close to the line and was almost disciplined by the speaker, and that is done. Our Speaker has very little authority to discipline.

It has adopted a rule from soccer. Its speaker cards, as a way of disciplinary action, an individual. That means a person has to leave the chamber for the question period. If they misbehave during question period, they are in effect required to leave for the whole question period. They cannot take part. It has proven a great authority on the part of the speaker and has been used regularly. I share that with members, and any comments the member may have in response.

Mr. Ken Boshcoff: Mr. Chair, the member for Scarborough—Rouge River, who has written a history of many of these changes that have gone through the parliamentary process, is the author of this riveting book on the changes that have occurred. If the member has seen it in action, then we must know that it can be done. I really think it can only enhance each and every party member and each and every representative here in terms of the way our constituents view us and other nations view us.

I cannot believe it could get any worse. As a first term MP I share some of the disillusionment of coming into a place where I really expected that I would be able to hear someone speaking without having to plug into a machine.

I like the idea from soccer but in here it might be more of a checkered flag. However just that suggestion tells me that many of us are thinking the same thing, and that is that it has to be better than this. I truly think that if we were to put our minds to it, it could work. I cannot see any Canadian citizen disagreeing with us.

• (2120)

Mr. Ken Epp (Edmonton—Sherwood Park, CPC): Mr. Chair, I wish we had the opportunity tonight to move a motion but I know we do not. However if I could I would move that tomorrow we have an experimental day with absolutely no heckling and that every member, on coming into the chamber tomorrow for question period, would post a \$1,000 bond to be forfeited if he or she broke the agreement. I would just love to do that.

I imagine that right now there is not a single person in the media watching this and I would just love to watch the press gallery tomorrow. Their jaws would drop. They would wonder what was going on. We would hit the news for the new decorum in the House of Commons.

I know I cannot move the motion and I am not even sure I could get agreement if I were able to move the motion because I am not sure others would want to go along with it, but I think it would be worthwhile. I would like to see that happen.

I have a few things I want to talk about with respect to the relevance of the democratic process. The topic tonight is citizen engagement. A number of things that have been mentioned in the debate this evening really strike at the heart of the matter.

The first thing I picked up was that citizens are less involved because they are increasingly convinced that it does not really make any difference. They think they are not heard and therefore why would they waste their time. I have even spoken to some members of Parliament who have that attitude. They want to know why they should be here at 9:23 in the evening to make a speech when it really will not make a difference.

The scenario we have now for votes in the House, and one we have had for a while, is that votes taken in the House are taken by the government as advisory. I always thought that Parliament was supposed to be the final authority in the country, that it was more authoritative than even the Supreme Court of Canada. This is where the laws are made. I always was of the impression, until I became an MP, that when we had a vote here that it meant it had to be dealt with, that it had to be followed by the government and that it was binding on the government unless specifically stated that it was an advisory vote, maybe something like the debate tonight where we are here batting ideas around. There is no vote at the end of this motion. It is just a matter of debating the issues and I suppose coming up with some ideas. Will they be implemented? I do not know. I would hope so but it is not necessarily going to be so.

I have been here since 1993. One of the things that really woke me up when I was first an MP was that too often I got the impression on frequent occasions from the prime minister at that time that Parliament was nothing more than an annoyance. He had his agenda and he wanted to do things but he had to go through the hoops here and it was an annoyance. Even in question period today in answer to a question we heard a statement that the vote in the House was advisory to the government and not binding.

Government Orders

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Some are.

Mr. Ken Epp: The member opposite just said that some are. I find this incredible because we have had supply day motions that have passed but which the government has chosen to ignore.

I think for example of the vote that we held after debate and after due consideration on dividing foreign affairs and international trade into two separate departments. We talked with a number of different individuals on that issue and there were a number of them, including people within the department, who said that it was not a good idea because foreign affairs and international trade were intricately intertwined.

• (2125)

As a result, after listening to those debates, the majority of the members in this House came to the reasoned conclusion that it was not a good idea to separate those departments and the motion was defeated. The government members said that they did not care because they were going to do it anyway.

Why should we ask our citizens to become involved? Why should they go to the work of being involved in elections, in campaigns, in raising funds to buy signs, in doing the literature, in helping on the phone banks and in making literature drops when after the candidate they are working for gets elected, comes here, debates and thinks through the issues, votes in accordance with the conclusions logically reached, and the government says “nyah-nyah, nyah-nyah, we are not going to do it anyway”. I do not know how they are going to put that into *Hansard*. I guess they could show that the member spoke with some sarcasm.

However it is really very disconcerting to the people who are watching this and it is disconcerting to me as an MP. If we have a debate and a vote and we lose it, so be it, as long as it is a free and open debate. Too often in this place and in committees I have been involved in debates and have put forward a solid argument. I taught for 31 years and I know body language. I knew when students understood what I was teaching and I knew when they were confused without having to ask them. If they were confused I would try a different approach and explain it in a different way.

It happened on more than one occasion in committees when we had the majority Liberal government where I know that I persuaded other members of the committee to my point of view because I had a logical and defensible position. However when it came to vote they voted against my amendment to the bill. I asked one member why he had voted against my amendment and he shrugged his shoulders and said that he really did not have a choice. That is despicable. It is a great deterioration of democracy and we ought not to tolerate it. Why not have a free vote? If the majority came to the conclusion that this was better, we would end up with better laws in this country on behalf of the citizens who sent us here.

I find it very troubling that people who make these decisions on how they are going to vote are very often making those decisions in isolation and often were not present to hear the debate. I cannot imagine that they have time to read all the blues from all the committees, let alone the *Hansard* from this House. They did not even hear the arguments and they stand their ground and we end up with laws that are less than the best on behalf of our citizens.

I think of other examples where we voted in the House contrariwise, for example, on the appointment of Mr. Murray from Winnipeg to the environment position. We voted to set up a trust fund to receive in trust, as lawyers receive money in trust, tainted money that was inadvertently received by the Liberal Party. There is a lot of evidence for that. I do not think the government will set up such a trust fund. We have basically been told that.

There has to be a mechanism also in Parliament for us to defeat bills and motions without it being a confidence vote.

I was the founding chairman of a school board of a private school. The board members were thoughtful, hardworking people. We all worked long hours for no pay. When we were setting up the school, there were more meetings that lasted from seven or eight at night until midnight to the point where some of us had to be reintroduced to our families because they did not recognize us.

• (2130)

Many motions were put forward. Often the motion sounded good, but then one person would say, “Ah, but think about this”, and another one would say, “Yes, and what if we pass this motion and this happens?” After a while the chair would say “Okay, all those in favour should raise their hands”. It happened on several occasions where even the person moving the motion did not vote for it in the end because he was enlightened by the input from other people present who were thinking about these issues. Then we defeated the motion. We did not say, “Oh, no, now we are in such trouble. We will have to have an election now to see whether we can be re-elected because we defeated a motion”.

One of the huge flaws in this place is that we do not have the right as members of Parliament to defeat in a free vote a bad bill, a bad motion, a bad amendment. We would actually be doing the citizens of this country a service by not putting into law a bad idea. We would then have many good ideas. That is what I would like to see happen.

There should be a rule in the House that says no minority government or whatever would be defeated, except by a specific motion of non-confidence, which could be made at any time by any member of the House. It would not be used frivolously. When would we say that we have lost confidence in the government? Only when the majority of the members of the House would agree.

I could really go on for another hour or two but I know that the rules will not permit it and I do want to be cognizant of the rules and obey them. I hope that someone has some good questions for me.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC): Mr. Chair, I want to ask a question of the member who is famous for his mathematical moments.

Government Orders

I am sort of switching gears between his great passion for how the House works to my great passion for electoral reform. I want to mention one of the problems that seems to occur in systems other than our current system. Our system has the great virtue of extreme simplicity. We vote for a bunch of people and whoever gets the most votes wins, whether or not he or she has 50% of the votes. Just or unjust, it is certainly comprehensible. Other systems almost always wind up involving some level of complexity. Frequently they require vote allocations based on formulas, usually named after the person who came up with it. The Sainte-Laguë formula is used in New Zealand and the Droop formula, named after Mr. Droop who invented it, is used in Australia.

For those who are not as passionate about the peculiarities of mathematics, does this kind of thing lead to a problem? If voters do not know, if voters cannot see easily the results of what they are doing, is there a danger that they will lose the kind of interest and passion that the member has? Perhaps not all of us or perhaps not all of the citizens share the same enthusiasm. Is there a danger that we could not win? Are there other suggestions he has as to how to boost the interest and engagement of voters in the whole system?

• (2135)

Mr. Ken Epp: Mr. Chair, the first past the post system is simple. The Deputy Prime Minister won by two votes. On the night of October 25, 1993 the official announcement indicated that she had received two votes more than her nearest competitor who happened to be running for my party. After the recount I believe she had won by 11 or 12 votes. It was a very narrow race. She is one perfect example of having won with less than 50% of the vote by a fair amount and very close to the others.

There is a danger that those who voted for one of the other candidates, and particularly the people who voted for my friend who ran for our party, had some disillusionment. They had worked so hard. They tried so hard. They came so close, but received nothing.

I do not know if you, Mr. Chair, have ever run in a physical race. I was in a 50 mile bicycle race. Just by looking at me people can tell I am rather athletic. There were gold, silver and bronze medals so at least the top three received something for their efforts. There should be some way of recognizing the votes of the other people who did not vote for the candidate who won.

The model which I like the best in terms of a proportional system is, believe it or not, the first past the post system. The person representing the riding should be the individual who received more votes than anybody else, even if it is a squeaker. If that person wins the race then he should receive the gold because he came in first. The other votes should then be allocated to, say, a provincial number and used for members at large to represent that point of view. That is the model I am leaning toward.

The other model is the preferential ballot where a single ballot is used to indicate a person's first, second and third choice and so on. Nowadays with computers it would be relatively easy to run those things off. The individual with the lowest number of votes would be knocked off and all of those ballots would be applied to the second choice. This would continue until somebody received a clear majority. That would be my second choice.

There are definitely ways of doing this. We would certainly engage more citizens in a meaningful way if, when they cast their ballots and expressed their ideas, they knew they would have a greater influence in the House of Commons.

Hon. Mauril Bélanger (Deputy Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Minister responsible for Official Languages, Minister responsible for Democratic Reform and Associate Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I must respond to some of the comments made by the member for Edmonton—Sherwood Park, especially his reference to the department of external affairs and international trade being split. I am not debating the merit or the lack of merit of that proposition.

The member said he hoped that the House could defeat bills without causing a general election. We have already had two examples of that. There were two government bills in front of the House causing that department to be split in two. Both bills were defeated in the House. It did not cause an election. That is an example of the two line voting system that we have instituted for ourselves.

He indicated that the government did not pay heed to the will of the House. I would have to disagree in the sense that the government received mixed signals. The House had authorized expenditures for the two departments as being split. It was only subsequent to that when the two bills were defeated. Since then the government has been taking stock of the situation and looking at the options, and it is to come back to the House. That is an example of the House speaking not in an advisory way but telling the government to take note, and it did.

There are different ways and levels for the House to speak and when it speaks through legislation the government must adhere to that. With our system being a bicameral system, legislation needs to be passed by both Houses. When it is a motion it may very well be an advisory matter, and in some cases the government takes advice and in other cases it does not. That is not to say there is a lack of respect. Whenever the House uses its legislative will and expresses it through law, there is no government that would not listen to that.

• (2140)

Mr. Ken Epp: Mr. Chair, I should begin with an apology. I believe I called the member a parliamentary secretary. I got his title wrong. He is a minister and I should acknowledge that. My apologies for that.

I would like to respond to what he is saying. I think that the point I was making was that in question period when a question was asked today, and I do not even remember the issue but it was from the NDP, the answer was given that it was just advisory, yet there was a motion. It was passed by this House. It was a majority. It is supposed to be a democracy and that is what I was referring to. I find it somewhat frustrating that the government does not bind itself to the decisions in the House.

Government Orders

The one which strikes me as particularly important right now is the one from some years ago when this House, by an overwhelming majority, voted to retain the definition of marriage as the union of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others. The end of that motion said “and that Parliament will take all steps necessary to preserve that definition”. That motion passed here resoundingly, yet when various lower courts ruled opposite to the wishes of the House on that particular matter, the government failed to challenge that at a higher level of the courts, which I think it should have been obliged to do as a result of having passed that motion. That is one that has been brought up to me many times, because there are very many people in this country who believe very passionately about this definition of marriage. It has really grabbed the attention of the people.

While I am up on that issue, I want to very quickly bring up the number of representations we have had and the petitions that have been presented in this House on that issue as well. That is another example where people can rightly ask whether they should bother doing these things. They do not seem to make a difference. If we ever had a place where Parliament would react positively to something like that and back off from an agenda if it is going in the wrong direction, I think that would certainly enhance people's trust in Parliament and people's involvement because they would know that what they are doing and saying is making a difference.

Not being heard eventually makes one become very quiet. I could tell a joke here about a man who got that from his wife but that would be inappropriate. If people are never heard, never listened to, they soon stop talking. That is what I think has happened to many of our electorate.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Raymond Simard (Parliamentary Secretary to the Deputy Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Minister responsible for Official Languages and Minister responsible for Democratic Reform, Lib.): Mr. Chair, as the parliamentary secretary responsible for democratic reform, I am very pleased to rise in this take-note debate on citizen engagement. It is certainly not a new issue, but it is becoming more relevant to Canadians. It is an area where there is room for a lot of improvement, too.

I would like to take this opportunity to examine three key aspects of public participation, three aspects we must bear in mind in our discussions of the issue. I would first like to speak about the importance of public participation in democratic governance and public accountability.

Second, I would like to speak about the effect real public participation has on the relationship between government and the people. Engagement presupposes a different relationship, one in which people are not considered passive users of services, but one in which elected officials still play a key role in decision making.

Finally, I would like to look briefly at certain challenges and reservations sometimes expressed when discussing increased citizen participation in policy development.

The importance of citizen participation in keeping democracy healthy and strong is the first reason for valuing it. In Canada, as elsewhere, the significant decrease in voter turnout in elections in

recent years, especially among young people, is forcing us to look at what appears to be a more general lack of public interest in public affairs. Many western democracies, in fact, are increasingly concerned over the drop in public participation in volunteer work and political activities, and not just in the election process.

Although it is hard to separate cause and effect, it is easy to conclude that a lack of interest in the election process is the product of a more general decline in community participation. In the absence of active Canadians knowledgeable about political processes and issues, we will probably see a weakening of our democratic institutions. The more informed Canadians committed to the political debate we have, the more vigorous our democracy will be. In this sense, public participation is important, because it allows Canadians to fulfil their duty as citizens.

In the past, it was often a question of our rights. We do not take interest in our responsibilities often enough. In Canada, although people are increasingly aware of their rights—since the adoption of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in particular—we should become more interested in the issue of citizen responsibility.

Citizen engagement contributes to improving the quality of government policies and it ensures that public interest policies take into account the needs and aspirations of Canadians. By providing citizens opportunities to take part in policy development, we are ensuring that these government decisions are based on the acknowledged preference of citizens. For the most part, that is what it means to have a democratic government.

The participation of citizens in policy development is important because it encourages individuals to think about public interest in a broader sense. Rather than restricting the focus to a particular group, the citizen engagement process, especially the deliberative type, encourages individuals to take common interests into account.

This dialogue allows the public to understand the challenges from different perspectives, including those of people from different regions and of different ethnicities, genders and religions. In fact, when the public raises concerns in a public forum, they often feel obliged to speak, not in their own interests, but in the interests of their community or their country.

In terms of the process, public participation can make it easier to determine common interests, which may serve as a basis for negotiations and which may increase the feeling of belonging and responsibility for results. This increases the legitimacy and acceptance of the process.

Additionally, the proceedings may complement the activities of the major advocacy groups or lobbyists. By promoting direct public participation, governments can better understand the needs and hopes of the general public.

Government Orders

• (2145)

[*English*]

This brings me to another issue, which I raised at the outset, namely, the fact that citizens are increasingly seeking a different type of relationship between themselves and government.

As University of Toronto professor Neil Neville pointed out some time ago, there has been a decline of deference among Canadians. Citizens are no longer willing to be passive figures in relation to authority figures. Increasingly, Canadians wish to play a much more active role in relation to their elected representatives.

The government-citizen relationship has grown more complex, with citizens demanding a greater voice in policy development, either individually or through advocacy organizations in civil society. Ministers and elected officials need to be actively in touch with citizens rather than simply seeing them as passive clients demanding services.

This demand for a new government-citizen relationship not only means more citizen consultation, but also a different way of engaging citizens that goes beyond the traditional narrow consultation exercise. While public opinion polls tell us consistently that citizens overwhelmingly indicate a great desire to be involved, they also demonstrate that Canadians have a low level of confidence that what they have to say matters much in the end. There is a sense that the involvement of citizens in policy development is done in a superficial manner, where a policy direction has already been taken in advance.

While studies clearly tell us that citizens wish to have a greater and more meaningful say in policy making, it is important to point out that ultimately citizens want their elected representatives to make final decisions. In other words, greater citizen participation transforms and, in my view, reinforces representative democracy. It does not negate it.

The demand for greater and improved means of citizen engagement is not without challenges. Beyond the benefits of citizen engagement, a number of concerns have been raised about involving citizens that I would like to address.

First, it has been argued that citizen engagement processes are just too expensive. The argument is that the money would be better spent on programs that directly affect the well-being of Canadians.

My response is that, yes, it is true that citizen engagement processes require significant funding. Real engagement exercises do require considerable time and resources. However, my understanding is that the overall cost of all citizen consultation and engagement is a tiny fraction of total government expenditures. Moreover, this fraction of government expenditures is more than justified if it enables MPs and the Government of Canada to reach out to citizens, to determine their needs and aspirations and to craft appropriate policy responses.

Another argument against citizen engagement is that it can tie the hands of the government, reducing its flexibility, particularly in the context of negotiations, and make it difficult to achieve policy reforms.

Concerns are sometimes raised, moreover, that citizens are unable to think through the difficult trade-offs that must often be made and increase the pressure on governments to take decisions that simply appeal to the lowest possible denominator.

While it is true that engaging citizens in policy development can reduce flexibility if a clear consensus emerges for a given approach to a problem, this is not necessarily a problem. If there is a clear consensus as to a solution to a problem, the government has an obligation to listen. If it chooses an alternative approach, it has an obligation to offer a publicly justifiable rationale.

Regarding the difficulty of trade-offs, one of the benefits of some new citizen engagement techniques is that they allow for citizens to discuss among themselves the choices they would make in a situation of competing priorities.

A final concern that is often raised is that it can be time consuming and could, in the extreme, paralyze governments. My response to this concern is that engaging citizens can be done in a variety of ways.

For some issues it will be important to have an extended citizen engagement process. The Romanow Commission on the Future of Health Care engagement process lasted for a number of months. However, not all engagement processes need to be large. In some cases, smaller, targeted processes can be extremely effective.

• (2150)

[*Translation*]

I will close by saying that, clearly, there are numerous excellent reasons to encourage public participation in policy development. Although significant progress in this area has been made over the past few years, we must multiply our efforts to reach Canadians.

Ministers and departments clearly have the obligation to improve their efforts to encourage public participation. In addition to what the ministers are doing, parliamentarians have a fundamental responsibility to speak with their constituents on government policy issues.

I am eager to hear what other parliamentarians have to say about this.

[*English*]

Mr. Ken Epp (Edmonton—Sherwood Park, CPC): Mr. Chair, the member talked about the fact that people are frustrated, according to the polls, because they have not been convinced that their input is actually listened to and heard. I think the only way to correct that is to actually respond to people.

I can see no reason in the world why, for example, when thousands and thousands of people sign petitions, we simply present them in the House and ship them off to a warehouse. We should do much better than that. We need to actually respond to them, especially when they are overwhelming on certain issues.

I would like to know how the member can justify making a statement that citizens are not heard and not also say that we need to do something to actually hear them.

Government Orders

• (2155)

Hon. Raymond Simard: Mr. Chair, I would like to respond by saying that petitions in fact are responded to by the government. It is up to every member of Parliament to then do what they want with them.

In my own case, I have had petitions responded to and I have forwarded the responses to the interest groups that forwarded them to me. I would think that it is basically the responsibility of the MP. The member, if not satisfied with the answer, should try to get more information from the government. That is the member's responsibility. The government does have a responsibility to react within three months, I believe. We do this all the time. As a member of the House leader's team, I have the opportunity to respond to petitions on almost a daily basis.

I would say it is the responsibility of every MP to ensure that the responses from the government are forwarded to their constituents. If they are not happy with the answer, I believe they have an opportunity to come back to the government for further responses.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Nepean—Carleton, CPC): Mr. Chair, the hon. member spoke eloquently about the issue of democratic reform. One of the questions that always occurs to me when we discuss the issue of democratic input into governance is how it affects our policies with respect to internationalists.

When the tsunami crisis occurred, there was a massive outpouring of support for and assistance to the people who had been devastated by that natural disaster. It was forced upon the government to respond to that outpouring. Reluctantly, the government did respond after some period of time.

I visited one of the tsunami affected regions. I visited both southwestern Sri Lanka and northern Sri Lanka and of course the capital, Colombo. When we told people about the enormous sum of money that had been expended on reconstruction aid by the Canadian government and other governments, a lot of them wondered where all of that money had actually gone. That strikes me as an absence of democratic accountability.

Canadians know that hundreds of millions of their dollars from charitable and government levels were spent on this project of reconstruction in tsunami affected regions, and we still do not know how all of those dollars have been expended. Many people in my riding who are of Sri Lankan origin are demanding to know where those dollars went and how they have been expended. This is something that I do not believe this government has accounted for effectively enough, particularly with the allegations that have been revealed in east Asia of international aid dollars, not just Canadian dollars, having gone missing, dollars having been misspent and results not having been achieved for the people who are suffering most.

I wonder if the hon. member could rise in the House of Commons and explain how when it comes to international aid, for example, we can be more democratically accountable to the Canadian people in explaining where their tax dollars are spent and how those results are actually achieved. Perhaps he can elaborate in particular on the Sri Lankan tsunami disaster.

Hon. Raymond Simard: Mr. Chair, actually I find it very unfortunate that probably the last question in the House tonight is a very partisan one. We have had extremely good discussions this evening on these issues. We put forward the debate this evening to try to get input from parliamentarians of all parties to see how we can improve democratic reform and how we can advance with this issue.

I am trying to tie the member's question into citizen engagement and I think maybe there is a possibility that we can do it. As a matter of fact, I feel that the government actually responded very aggressively in the days immediately following the tsunami event. The Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs reacted within a day or two.

I think Canadians were engaged in the sense that they asked us to invest more money in tsunami aid. I believe that in this case Canadians had a huge impact on the government investing more funds and I believe that we did react to it. I think that in a sense it was an excellent way, where Canadians did get involved and government reacted to it. I think it is totally normal for us to do that.

• (2200)

Mr. Joe Comartin (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Mr. Chair, so that we do not finish on a completely partisan note, I have a concern and a reform that I would like to see. It has been proposed by our party and comes from the experience of the member for Ottawa Centre who has had many years in the House. It concerns appointments. A great deal of government policy is both developed and deployed by appointments.

Our party has proposed a methodology for appointments that would take into account the criteria of merit, that a person knows what they are doing for the appointment that they are being considered for. There would be some kind of meaningful review at the parliamentary committee level.

I am wondering if the parliamentary secretary would care to comment on whether he would think that would be a good way of introducing more democracy.

Hon. Raymond Simard: Mr. Chair, I believe that we are open to a better system. We feel that there are issues. As a matter of fact, since the last government a lot of substantial changes have been made to that effect and crown corporations are a typical example of that.

The President of the Treasury Board has instituted many recommendations. Changes have been made for the better. We feel that for people who are being nominated the whole process is much more transparent.

I believe we are moving in the right direction when it comes to appointments. Obviously, there is more work to be done. Hopefully, we are going to continue to move in that direction.

Mr. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC): Mr. Chair, it is appropriate that we are having this take note debate. I read recently in yesterday's *Globe and Mail* that it will be doing a two or three part series on proportional representation. It is very apt timing on our part to have a debate here in the House on this issue.

Government Orders

I will begin by talking about the problem that spurred us to this debate on the democratic deficit, or democratic reform. It has to do with two issues: cynicism in the voting public and what is perceived to be low voter turnout. These two issues must be put into a better perspective.

Voter turnout has not been a linear thing since 1867. We did not start 130 years ago or so with a 100% turnout in those elections and now we find ourselves today at roughly 60% turnout and that it has been a sort of straight line linear decline in voter turnout since then. That has not been the case. Voter turnout has fluctuated over the last 100 years, sometimes reaching lows of 60% to 65%, sometimes spiking up to 70% or 80% in those elections where there was a very key ballot question, such as the 1988 free trade issue.

Another reason for the way things are the way they are today is because we have a relatively good economic situation and our culture in North America, in the west, is becoming increasingly fractured. Modern life has many competing interests and the body politic is, as a result, becoming fractured. In marketing terms, we would say that the market is being segmented.

I do not deny that there is a lot of cynicism out there and that there are problems with voter turnout and that we should not make efforts to increase voter participation and civic participation.

However, that said, what I worry most about this debate is that, to use a colloquialism, we are going to throw the baby out with the bath water.

One of the solutions being talked about more recently is proportional representation. It is a system that I do not agree with and one that I would quite strongly oppose. I believe in our first past the post system. The reason I do not agree with proportional representation is that on either the full proportional representation system or the mixed one, we would weaken our system of government and would actually remove people from their democratic institutions.

With full PR we would not have constituencies, we would not have ridings, and therefore people would not know who their individual member of Parliament was and, more important I think, individual deputies or members of Parliament would not take ownership of the ridings that they do have or that they have been assigned to because they would have been assigned to them as opposed to ridings that they fought for and won.

I also think that in full PR, as in mixed PR, the party list component of proportional representation gives undue influence and greater power and authority to parties. That is to the detriment of our system as well because by allowing parties to nominate people or to control the lists of people who they would put forward in a proportional representation system we are creating a system where the voters are one step further removed from their democratic institutions.

Some people propose a mixed solution, where half the people in this House, or a quarter of the people, or a third of the people, would be elected through party lists and through proportional representation and the other portion of the House, whether that be one half of it, or a third of it, or three-quarters of it, would be elected through our current system, the first past the post system.

The problem with that is that I have a riding right now which is largely rural. It has about 100,000 people in it. I can, with difficulty, make it to all parts of my riding. It is very difficult. It is many long hours and many weekends going to different parts of the riding, but I am accessible.

•(2205)

If we go to a system of mixed PR where instead of having 308 members of Parliament representing the country we have 100 people on the party list and 200 as riding MPs, suddenly I may find myself in a riding with 200,000 people. In that case it would be virtually impossible for me to be accessible in the way that I am today. It would be virtually impossible for me to cover that kind of geographic territory, to try to cover that number of people and the number of towns. I simply could not possibly do that. That is why I think even mixed PR has its flaws.

The other problem with ridings that get too large is that one of the fundamental principles in our current system is communities of interest. When we get to ridings, especially rural ridings, where we have 200,000 or 300,000 people, we are talking about very different communities of interest. It would be more difficult for an MP to represent two or three very different communities of interest and try to represent them as a single voice in this chamber.

Another reason why I think PR probably would lead to possibly even lower voter turnout is that it would create voter confusion. Right now we have one of the best voting systems in the world in terms of the way we set up our polls and the way we have our ballots laid out. It is very clear. It is paper-based. We go to our polling station and walk up to our ballot box. We have ballots that are consistent across the country. It is very clear who the candidates are and what the parties are. We make our selections. It is very simple, and we walk away.

With mixed PR we would be making two selections. We would vote for a candidate and for a party. I think it could cause mass confusion. At the very least it would cause some voter confusion as to what exactly they were doing and for whom they were voting. That added confusion is also another impediment between the people and their democratic institutions.

However, more important, the reason why I adamantly oppose proportional representation is that we live in a country that is very regionalized. We have very different regions in the country. We have two official languages. We have many different groups. We have British Columbia, the west, the north, Ontario, Quebec and the east. In all general elections we have had since 1867, there have only been two occasions where the voters have sent back a majority government with over 50% of the popular vote. If we went to a full proportional representation system, that would mean we would rarely, if ever, see the kind of majority governments the country needs in order to provide strong leadership. That is why we must reject any form of proportional representation federally. The country needs strong federal governments to carry it through the various crises it will face in decades to come, whether economic or otherwise. That is the strongest reason to keep the first past the post system.

Government Orders

Speaking as a person who is from the Conservative Party, out of self-interest, I would argue in favour of proportional representation. It was our party, our two legacy parties during the last 10 years, that had the most to benefit from PR. For the country's interest, which I place first, we need to stick with the current system.

The problem we have with our system is, to paraphrase the words of one John Diefenbaker, that Parliament is a much misunderstood institution. As parliamentarians, we need to better understand and communicate to Canadians the workings of Parliament and what it does. Our system of government has evolved out of hundreds if not a thousand years of Westminster tradition, and it is very important that we keep that in mind and not act rashly.

I will make a few quick comments as to what I think we can do to address some of this democratic deficit.

We need to reform question period. We need to lengthen the amount of time that people have to ask questions and the amount of time that people have to answer them. I would even be amenable to requiring written submissions of questions 48 hours beforehand, as is done in the United Kingdom Parliament. In that case, we would expect real answers from the government on the real issues we are questioning.

● (2210)

Ministerial statements need to be made in the House. Departmental announcements need to be made in the House, not outside. Too often the functioning of government, the key announcements of the day, are happening outside the House. They need to happen in this chamber.

Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake, CPC): Mr. Chair, I thank my colleague for his very learned intervention in this debate. I agree with a lot of the comments he made in relation to proportional representation and how it would not be of any benefit to Canada in the way this country can be governed by having good, solid majority governments. As we are seeing with the way the House is functioning right now in a minority situation, it has been volatile and does not lend itself to the best governance of the country.

One of the things we want to talk about in fixing the democratic deficit, as my colleague already talked about, is engaging citizens. I wonder if the member could talk to some degree about how we as members of Parliament could better engage our constituents and talk to the people we represent. We do have these very large ridings. There are 308 ridings covering 30 million people. On average there are close to 100,000 people per riding.

My riding is the most populated and the second largest geographically in Manitoba. My riding has over 90,000 people. To drive across it one way takes five hours and to drive across it the other way takes three hours. There are a lot of issues to deal with in getting out to talk to people. We try to do that as members of Parliament in coffee shops, by having our town halls and getting out and engaging with people, but in a rural riding in particular the MP is not going to get to every farm, every fishing camp or see everybody who lives in every corner of the riding.

How do we engage those people? There are a lot of different ways to do it. We could have more direct democracy by allowing them to have more input on some issues through ballot questions, similar to

what is done in some other countries. Having that type of engagement would give them the opportunity to express their views other than through voting for a particular party or person when election time rolls around, which on average is every four years.

I would appreciate it if the member would be kind enough to entertain us with some of the great ideas he brought forward.

Mr. Michael Chong: Mr. Chair, in response to the question about how we can engage voters, there is an irony in that academic research has corroborated that when Canadians are asked what they think of their parliamentary institutions, about the government in Ottawa, there is a very cynical response in general. However, when they are asked about their local MP, they very often give the opposite response, that they like their local MP, that they think he is working hard for them and he is accessible and they have a lot of respect for him. When asked the broader question about Ottawa and their parliamentary institutions, it is quite the opposite answer.

MPs in the House do undertake the difficult work of engaging their voters and their constituents through town hall meetings or attending events in the riding, by telephoning constituents and so on. By and large, members in the House do undertake the work to remain engaged with their voters.

Where the problem lies is in the way Parliament operates, in the way we have allowed this institution to become sidelined since the mid-1960s. We as parliamentarians need to address some of the key issues that have allowed Parliament to go into decline. I raised earlier the issue about how question period is conducted.

I could talk as well about how the role of the Crown is rapidly disappearing. Our Parliament is made up of the Senate, the House of Commons and the Crown. The Crown is diminishing in importance in this country. We as parliamentarians and the government across the aisle need to do a better job of making sure that this is not allowed to continue, because the Crown is an integral part of our system. The change in the letters of recall and credence at the end of last year was a very sneaky under the wire act which I disagree with completely. The Queen is our head of state. The Governor General is her representative here and should remain as such.

A sort of republicanism by stealth has been orchestrated over the last number of years in this country. We need to be very careful about not going down that path. When we talk about Parliament we are including the Crown and the Queen. The problem is not with individual MPs who work very hard in their constituencies. It is how we as parliamentarians have treated Parliament, the Senate, the House and the Crown.

Government Orders

Another area of reform which we need to make efforts to address is that ministerial statements, big announcements for government funding should be taking place in the people's chamber, on the floor of the House of Commons. I know it is very tempting to have very formalized photo opportunities. While there may be a place for those from time to time, we also need to make sure that big announcements do happen in this chamber. This was the chamber that people like Winston Churchill addressed. The great leaders of the country in past decades addressed this chamber. Too often in recent years we have not given this chamber the respect and attention it deserves. I do not restrict that to the current government, but I certainly think we all could do a better job here, and the government is included in that.

Another area of reform that needs to be looked at is the way we as parties in the House elect our leaders. There is a bit of a conundrum in that our party leaders are elected by party members and not by the members in this House. As a result, they are not accountable back to us.

• (2215)

Everything this place runs on is a result of party leaders' decisions, the way party leaders decide to appoint people to committee and whatnot. I see that the Chair is asking me to wind up, so I will finish by saying that there is a power imbalance here that needs to be addressed.

• (2220)

Hon. Mauril Bélanger (Deputy Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Minister responsible for Official Languages, Minister responsible for Democratic Reform and Associate Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I suspect that we might have heard the last speaker for this evening. If it is not the case, then I will gladly stay to listen to any others, but in case he was the last speaker I just want to thank him and my other colleagues who have participated in tonight's debate and assure them that apart from the moment during which I had to be away I sat here and took note, which is what this debate was supposed to be about in the first place.

Mr. Michael Chong: Mr. Chair, I want to thank the minister for taking note and for listening to all we have said. I hope that he will take to heart the comments that were made about proportional representation, the comments I made about some of the procedural aspects of the House, and some of the comments I made about our parliamentary system of government, in particular the role of the Crown in this great land of ours.

The Chair: There being no further members rising, pursuant to Standing Order 53.1 the committee will rise and I will leave the chair.

The Deputy Speaker: It being 10:22 p.m., this House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 2 p.m. pursuant to Standing Order 24 (1).

(The House adjourned at 10:22 p.m.)

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