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Speaker: The Honourable Andrew Scheer

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Monday, September 29, 2014

The House met at 11 a.m.

Prayers

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

● (1105)

[*English*]

NATIONAL HEALTH AND FITNESS DAY ACT

Mr. John Weston (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, CPC) moved that Bill S-211, An Act to establish a national day to promote health and fitness for all Canadians, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

He said: Mr. Speaker, rarely in the House one discovers unity around an issue that brings together the people of Canada and their representatives rallied in a common cause. Occasionally, a bill to which we speak already has such broad support that it has gained sweeping support from coast to coast to coast, and sometimes in this chamber we witness a powerful unstoppable energy unleashed when Canadians unite in common cause to defeat a national adversary. It is a great honour to rise on one of those occasions today as I sponsor Bill S-211, an act to establish a national day to promote health and fitness for all Canadians, also known as the national health and fitness day act.

In the remarks that follow, I will outline the health and health care crises that led to this bill and explain how the bill responds to those needs. I will also pay tribute to some champions of health and fitness, and for those who decide to get involved, suggest some practical ways to do so.

We are facing a battle. An implacable adversary is slowly and insidiously killing Canadians and dragging us down as a nation. I say implacable because unlike a human adversary, there is no person or group to target in making the situation better. The adversary is a pattern of behaviour that has progressively undermined Canadians' level of physical fitness. What is it that I am calling our national adversary? Our national adversary is inactivity. It is costing us and it is killing us.

Canada's inactivity problem drives deep. It is rooted in our culture and wedded to the routines we have developed in our schools, our work and our play. The problem relates to the progress we have made in technology which enables us to communicate by computer seated in the comfort of our homes, of our classrooms and our workplaces. Similarly, screen time, whether in front of a TV, computer or smart phone, has taken our kids off playing fields and put them on chairs instead.

Statistics Canada has reported a continuous decline in sports participation which, from 1992 to 2005, went from 45% to 28% among Canadians age 15 and older. That is less than one out of every three Canadian adults who is as active as they should be. Less than 7% of Canadian children and youth meet the guideline of 60 minutes of activity daily six days per week. Among Canadians age 20 and older, two-thirds do not meet the recommended physical activity levels, that is, to be active at least two and a half hours per week to achieve a health benefit. That is only 20 minutes per day to meet the minimum standards for adults and we are not even doing that.

Statistics Canada has delivered more disturbing news. In the period between 1981 and 2009, measured obesity roughly doubled in most age groups for both sexes. Data from 2009 suggests that approximately one in four Canadian adults age 18 years and over is obese. In 2008 the combined overweight and obese proportion was 62.1%. Nearly two out of three adult Canadians is either overweight or obese.

This trend has dramatic implications since children who are overweight are more likely to be overweight as adults. Among other things, studies have shown that adolescents who are overweight have a fourteen-fold increased risk of a heart attack before they turn 50. Excess weight in childhood is increasingly linked to illnesses once seen only in adults, including type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, abnormal blood fats, abnormal blood clotting, and thickening of the arteries.

Psychologically, evidence suggests a positive relationship between physical activity and psychosocial health in employees, including emotional well-being, improved mental health, and reduced depression, anxiety and stress. They have all been associated with regular physical activity as well as reduced symptoms of fatigue, enhanced mood, increased quality of life and life satisfaction.

The support for the bill before us is not related to high-performance athletes, but instead to Canadians who are not necessarily involved in athletics. This is not a sports bill; it is a health and fitness bill.

As I biked to work this morning, I was thinking in fact of those Canadian heroes like Terry Fox and my friend Rick Hansen who have shown the world that participation in physical activity is not just for able-bodied people.

More and more persons with disabilities—I prefer the term "adaptive athletes"—have made the point really clear. Look at Jody Mitic, the Canadian veteran who lost his legs in Afghanistan, who runs marathons anyway and is now campaigning to be an Ottawa city councillor along with Matt Fleury, another great champion of health and fitness.

Initiatives such as Soldier On and Ottawa's Army Run bring out many of our wounded warriors and others, inspiring with the realization that one does not have to be Wayne Gretzky or Nancy Greene Raine to participate and improve one's health through physical activity.

Our declining health and fitness rates are clearly an economic problem, not just a matter of life quality. The Public Health Agency of Canada has concluded that costs of obesity are estimated to be $7 billion. That is the total cost of the obesity-related diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, and stroke.

Members may have heard the quote from Roman times that a healthy mind relates to a healthy body.

In addition to direct and indirect health care costs, the quality and productivity of our work in Canada will improve if our people become healthier, if only by decreasing the number of sick days. Indirect costs of poor health include the value of economic output lost due to illness, injury-related work disability, and premature death.

It has been estimated that, on average, compared to an active person an inactive person spends 38% more days in hospital and uses 5.5% more family physician visits, 13% more specialist services, and 12% more nurse visits.

The bill that I sponsor today, Bill S-211, tackles problems that touch every Canadian in terms of our health, our quality of life, and our economy. The bill aims to increase the health of Canadians by increasing our physical participation rates.

Specifically, supporters wish to encourage local governments, non-government organizations, the private sector, and all Canadians to recognize the first Saturday in June as national health and fitness day, or NHFD, a day marked by local, provincial and national events to promote health and fitness.

The bill makes particular mention of local governments as they own and operate many of our nation's health and fitness facilities. NHFD supporters want to encourage local governments more aggressively to promote the use of such facilities. Furthermore, we encourage cities and towns to mark the day with local events and initiatives celebrating and promoting the importance of using local health, recreational, sports and fitness facilities.

People around the world know that Canada's mountains, oceans, lakes, forests, parks, and wilderness also offer recreation and fitness opportunities, and we ought to benefit from what we share collectively.

The month in which NHFD falls, June, is not only a time of great weather, but is also parks and recreation month, a time in the calendar already set aside to foster heightened appreciation of our outdoor assets.

The bill is an amended version of a private member's bill I introduced in this House previously which had widespread support, but for procedural reasons did not progress. To be clear, NHFD is not a legal holiday; it will not incur costs of lost productivity. In fact, it is not just a day at all. It is about a dramatic change in lifestyle.

On a personal level, my wife Donna and my children Shane, Jake, and Meimei have inspired me to promote the bill. Donna is a personal trainer. My children all earned black belts in tae kwon do at an early age and are dedicated athletes. I am a pretty active person myself, finding that physical activity keeps me healthy, energized, and effective in my public service.

With the privilege of representing West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country in B.C., I can say that constituents in the riding I represent are among the most active in the country. Where I live, people love the outdoors and are concerned about the physical inactivity problem Canada is facing. I personally learned much from the people in my community, who have inspired me to promote health and fitness as a gift they give to the rest of our great country. I bring Bill S-211 forward today in paying special tribute to the wonderful role models for health and fitness who live in the riding I represent.

The bill was tabled appropriately by my friend and everyone's athletic icon, Canada's female athlete of the 20th century, Senator Nancy Greene Raine. Senator Greene Raine, who is here today, Nancy to her millions of fans, is a proud British Columbian and an articulate spokeswoman for all Canadians in many areas of public policy, but in promoting health and fitness no one can surpass her. Demonstrating great leadership, Nancy won unanimous support for Bill S-211 in the Senate.

I also thank the Minister of Health and the Minister of State for Sport, who have gone out of their way to support NHFD at every turn.

I also want to thank my colleagues across the floor. This bill already enjoys a rare element of enthusiastic cross-party support.

Another distinctive aspect of the bill is the fact that it has already been implemented on a broad scale well before it has become law. Over 155 cities and towns across Canada have proclaimed the day, including Vancouver, Calgary, Ottawa, Halifax, Yellowknife and Pond Inlet. I am especially proud that the earliest adopters included the towns and the cities in the riding I represent: West Vancouver, Whistler, Squamish, Sechelt, Gibsons, Lions Bay, Bowen Island, North Van district and Powell River.

● (1110)

Led by Premier Christy Clark and the energetic MLA, Michelle Stilwell, last spring B.C. became the first province to endorse NHFD, followed quickly by Yukon as the first territory.

On May 30, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities passed a resolution at its annual conference encouraging all member municipalities to proclaim the day, and just two weeks ago, the Union of Quebec Municipalities followed suit.

Members would be amazed at the number and influence of non-government organizations that have endorsed the bill and begun to promote its objectives even before it passes. These include: the Canadian Medical Association; Lisa Ashley and the Canadian Nurses Association; Chris Gray and the Heart and Stroke Foundation; Chris Jones and Physical and Health Education Canada; Bob Elliott and Sport Matters Group; Participaction; Debra Gassewitz and the Sports Information Resource Centre; C. J. Noble and Canadian Parks and Recreation; Richard Way and Canadian Sport for Life; Trisha Sarker and the Fitness Industry Council of Canada; Arne Elias of Canada Bikes; Canadian Interuniversity Sport; Rob McClure and the Ottawa Bicycle Club; Trans Canada Trail, championed by Laureen Harper, Paul LaBarge and Deborah Apps; and one of our recent supporters, Movember.

Additionally, I am grateful to private sector organizations for their support: The Running Room, Canadian Tire and Jumpstart, Kunstadt Sports, Glacier Media, Capital Hill Hotel and Suites, Tractivity, and GoodLife Fitness.

Like most good things in life, the bill comes about due to the efforts of a large team of people over many years. The broad public support for NHFD reflects a unity in this House that began in 2008 during the lead-up to the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Games. As a large part of the games was to take part in the riding I represent, I spent much time with people asking what we could do to ensure a lasting positive legacy from the games. While gold medals were a crowning glory, we wanted something that all Canadians could claim as their own on an ongoing basis.

The key tragic event that spurred us on was the untimely death of Tom Hanson, a renowned Canadian Press journalist who died in 2009 while playing pick-up hockey. Tom was a young man, only 41. The Prime Minister took the occasion to remind us that we needed to take care of our health.

I had Mr. Hanson's sad experience in mind along with the Prime Minister's words when I met two great heroes of mine, Pierre Lafontaine and Phil Marsh, who have left an indelible imprint on Canada for their advocacy of health and fitness. Pierre and Phil are the energetic coaches of our parliamentary fitness initiative, which I began in 2009 with the support of the members for Sackville—Eastern Shore and Etobicoke North, each of them from different parties in this House.

When I met Pierre in 2009, he was coach of Canada's national swim team. He continues in his role of promoting national health and fitness now as president of Canadian Interuniversity Sport. Phil Marsh is regional manager of the Running Room in Ottawa, who with his boss, John Stanton, is a major force in promoting fitness for all Canadians. Both Pierre and Phil are great men, generous with their time, who volunteer to coach our MPs and senators in running and swimming, each once a week whenever Parliament is in session.

I have also worked with others to create companion events that have supported NHFD, including Bike Day on the Hill, Bike Day in Canada and National Life Jacket and Swim Day on the Hill.

With all that support and all this national enthusiasm, I have to ask the most important question: will a bill like this make any difference to Canada's battle against inactivity? National health and fitness has far-reaching implications, including physical health, mental illness, life expectancy, school performance, national productivity, economic performance, and health care costs. If we do not change our current patterns, this is the first generation of Canadians who will die at an age younger than our parents. We must change our direction.

Bill S-211 will be Parliament's statement that MPs and senators wish to instill in Canadians an awareness of the significant benefits of physical activity, and to encourage our people to get more active. Supporting NHFD is not the whole solution, but it is part of the solution. I encourage all Canadians to take the field in the battle against inactivity, and to be sure to approach their mayors and councillors if they have not already proclaimed national health and fitness day.

I thank colleagues in this House for their support. I welcome them to join me in the parliamentary fitness initiative, for their own health and to demonstrate their commitment to their constituents. I ask that they support Bill S-211. Canada's health and fitness depends on them.

● (1115)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Dany Morin (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. member for introducing a worthwhile bill, Bill S-211, which is coming to us from the Senate. The NDP feels it is important to encourage people to engage in physical activity, for all sorts of compelling reasons.

This bill is about prevention, in my opinion, but no funding is being requested.

Does my Conservative colleague not think that the $36 billion in health care cuts that the government is making at the provinces' expense will limit the financial ability of the provinces and territories to invest in prevention? When cuts are made to health care budgets, prevention is often the first thing to go, unfortunately.

This bill encourages people to exercise and it encourages our partners to invest in prevention. However, health care cuts will limit their ability to focus on prevention.

Mr. John Weston: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for his question. I appreciate the support this bill is getting from the opposition benches.

This bill does not set any limits. It is an effort to spark discussions across the country and encourage the municipalities, the provinces and all Canadians to shoulder their collective responsibility to improve health levels in our country.

It is clear from the support for this bill that everyone understands this. We need to take immediate action to make Canada the healthiest country in the world.

● (1120)

[*English*]

Mr. Arnold Chan (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, first I want to congratulate my hon. friend from West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country for introducing this bill in the House, and to also thank members of the Senate and Senator Nancy Greene Raine for introducing this important bill in the other place.

My question to the hon. member relates to this particular issue, which in many ways follows upon the earlier question. There were reports from Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne, who by the way is a well-known runner herself, about issuing a directive to her minister of education, as part of her ministry mandate, to encourage young people to have at least 60 minutes of physical activity daily.

Would the hon. member like to comment on whether this is an important initiative that should be extended across all provinces, and perhaps something that should be considered by all education ministers across the country?

Mr. John Weston: Mr. Speaker, I have to applaud the premier for demonstrating her devotion to health and fitness, and would certainly invite her to have national health and fitness day proclaimed in Ontario, as it has been done in British Columbia and the Yukon.

Furthermore, we need all Canadians to pull together. Although education is a provincial jurisdiction in our country, we as legislators in the House have a role to play, both as role models and in encouraging our provincial counterparts to introduce what was once a national expectation that there be physical education in the classrooms.

We know what pressure our teachers are under. We have certainly seen that profiled in British Columbia in recent weeks with the strike that has just been resolved there. There needs to be more physical activity for students, one way or another.

Mr. Mike Wallace (Burlington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my question is simple. This bill has had a bit of history. Often bills do not start in the Senate and come here.

Why is the history of this bill and how it got here important to its development and today's events?

[*Translation*]

Mr. John Weston: Mr. Speaker, I would like to highlight the major contribution of Pierre Lafontaine, whom I met in 2009 on a flight to Vancouver. He was the national swim team's coach.

We talked about the lamentable state of Canadians' level of physical activity in general, and we decided that something had to be done. We also talked about how MPs and senators should be role models for everyone.

That is how we came up with physical activity initiatives for all parliamentarians. Ever since, people on the Hill have been inspired. Phil Marsh, the manager of the Ottawa Running Room, got on board with the project and added running to our roster of activities. We now have two permanent, national-calibre volunteer coaches.

Every week, a group of parliamentarians energetically takes on the challenge of swimming and running. The snowball effect is taking over. This month, the Union des munipalités du Québec announced its support for national health and fitness day, and things are rolling along.

Mr. Dany Morin (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is my great pleasure to speak to Bill S-211. I rarely agree with what comes from the Senate, but I have to admit that the bill before us today is excellent.

Bill S-211 would designate the first Saturday in June as national health and fitness day. The day would be an invitation to organize local events and initiatives to emphasize the importance of choosing a healthy lifestyle, and it would promote local health, recreational, sports and fitness facilities.

As my Conservative colleague mentioned in his speech, this day would not be a legal or statutory holiday. Rather, it is a symbolic day that fits in nicely with Canadian Environment Week, which is the first week of June. Such a day of awareness would serve as an opportunity to encourage Canadians to think about their physical health. As my Conservative colleague mentioned, the health of our young people could be a lot better. Some young people have unhealthy diets. Many young people—the adults of tomorrow—begin their lives in conditions that are less than optimal. Furthermore, inactivity rates are on the rise in Canada. Of course, all of this can lead to shortened life expectancy, as well as an increase in the number of health problems people have during their lives, especially in old age. This will put additional pressure on our health care system.

Given that the federal government plays a very limited role in providing direct health services, it is the provinces and territories that will be hardest hit. In Quebec, a significant portion of the budget goes to health. Over thousands of years of human evolution, we have learned the importance of investing in health. The saying "an apple a day keeps the doctor away" suggests that prevention plays a crucial role in the collective mindset. The bill fits in nicely with a preventive approach.

The NDP supports the bill because it meets our party's health objectives, which include prevention as well as an approach based on the World Health Organization's social determinants of health. As I said earlier when I asked my Conservative colleague a question, this is an excellent bill. I am pleased that there is a consensus on it, or at least I think there is. We will see when it comes time to vote in the House of Commons.

The Conservative government claims to be in favour of prevention and helping Canadians live healthier lives. However, in the past year, there has been a lot of media coverage of the $36 billion in cuts that the federal government is making. The provinces and territories will not have that money to maintain public services. A number of provinces are tempted to adopt a two-tier health care system and offer a smaller range of services. That concerns me. Before becoming a politician, I was a health care professional. I have always been involved in the community, and I decided to help people by becoming a chiropractor. When I was practising, people with health problems would come to my office. Some had acute health problems, while others had chronic issues. My work as a chiropractor was related to muscles and joints. Other social determinants that affected my patients' health were a lack of physical activity, smoking, alcohol consumption and a poor diet.

● (1125)

Other health care professionals in Canada and I clearly see that social determinants of health, such as a lack of exercise, are risk factors for a number of reasons. The main one is that people who are not very physically active are more likely to suffer from cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure, osteoporosis and depression. When we exercise, our brain releases hormones that make us happier, which mitigates anxiety. Exercising is good for a whole host of reasons.

It is important that the government promote this day, which is to take place on the first Saturday of June. However, we need to take a comprehensive and holistic view of prevention. We need to stress the importance of physical activity but also ensure that Canadians are eating right and making healthy choices.

The government has been dragging its feet when it comes to food labelling. It proposed a new approach to food labelling, but I am not convinced that that will make it obvious to Canadians what food is good food.

As a parliamentarian and a health care professional, because my former profession is still very dear to my heart, my goal is to help Canadians live longer, healthier lives. The $36 billion in cuts to health care will undermine the prevention programs provided by the provincial and territorial health care services. That is a shame.

When governments have to make tough budget choices, they often cut prevention programs, unfortunately. Even though this bill encourages people to exercise more, the government's other measures will undermine prevention programs and people will neglect their health.

Let us come back to the bill, since that is what we are actually talking about. We think that every level of government—the federal, provincial, territorial and municipal governments and even community governments—must encourage Canadians to adopt an active lifestyle.

A number of measures can encourage people to be more active. For example, we could make it easier to access federal parks and local physical fitness centres and get involved in community sports teams. The government cannot solve all the problems, but if it can be a facilitator, then all the better.

What is more, the NDP believes that the federal government should work with the provinces and territories to ensure that every child can lay the foundation for an active and healthy life. Many schools need breakfast programs because some children arrive at school with an empty stomach, which is not ideal for their bodies or their minds.

Still today, in 2014, not every young Canadian is lucky enough to start their day of learning and exercising in the best conditions. If our children do not eat a healthy breakfast, then it is very hard for them to have enough energy to be physically active.

I do not want to generalize because I know that there are difficult choices to be made. However, when I went to school, we had a lot of gym classes. Even though it was not my favourite class, in the end I reaped the benefits of physical activity. Therefore, I encourage everyone who makes decisions about the level of physical activity of children to remember that they need to be active.

● (1130)

Even though I do not consider myself to be athletic and am not really a cycling enthusiast, as the honorary chairman of the Tour Solidaire I cycled 265 kilometres over three days this summer. It was really tough.

However, I was in much better shape after this activity and so I want to keep up the good habit of being more physically active.

● (1135)

Hon. Geoff Regan (Halifax West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today we are discussing a matter that I believe is very important for all Canadians: our health and what we can do to maintain or improve our health.

First of all, I know that this is not possible for everyone because, in some cases, serious illness prevents some people from being as active as others. However, in my opinion, people should do what they can.

[*English*]

Before us is Bill S-211, an act to establish a national day to promote health and fitness for all Canadians. I actually prefer the short title, the national health and fitness day act.

While the bill has already been passed in the Senate, it was introduced in the House back in June. I think it was June 16. I know its sponsors hope to have it passed by the end of the year.

In that regard, its sponsor in the Senate is Senator Nancy Greene Raine. At the risk of embarrassing her just a tiny bit, I have to mention that I was on the Ski Martock Nancy Greene ski league team when I was 12 years old, which is remarkable, considering she looks younger than I do. I do not know what that is about.

Hon. John McKay: It has been downhill ever since.

Hon. Geoff Regan: M. Speaker, it has been downhill ever since, as my colleague says.

While the goal of the bill is to make Canada the fittest nation in the world, there are tremendous benefits at all levels. The support that the organizers of the bill have pulled together is truly impressive. That is why this kind of legislation is very easy to get behind and is also something that will, I hope, touch the lives of millions of Canadians. Increased physical activity promotes not only physical health but also mental and emotional health.

I see my colleague, the sponsor of the bill in the House, out running in the mornings. He has kindly invited me to join the group that runs Tuesday morning. We sometimes cross paths. We will see. One of these days I will meet up at the right time with them and join them for one of these runs.

What I find is that one of the great benefits is the psychological benefit. People may not believe it, but this job can be stressful at times, and one of the great things about regular exercise is it lowers stress levels and makes people feel better emotionally and mentally. That is important.

For each of us in the country, our health, our outlook on life, our well-being, and our personal performance can all be improved if we ensure that we eat properly and exercise regularly—that is, those of us who are able to do so. Personally, it would be a lot easier if someone had not invented cookies or ice cream, but I digress.

As we grow older, maintaining a fit lifestyle becomes even more important. In fact, that is why I was delighted to have about half an hour or so yesterday to do a little kayaking with my wife. We put our kayak on the car and took it down to the water, to Bedford Basin, which is fortunately only a couple of minutes' drive away. It is salt water. We went for a paddle for a little while, and then we had to get back home because we had to have supper and I had to take off and come to Ottawa. However, it is good to get out to do things, even for these little bits of time, especially when we do them together.

We know that many Canadians are living unhealthy lifestyles, which leads not only to the risk of premature death but also to increases in chronic diseases. It impacts on our quality of life and puts pressure on our health care system. There are things that most of us can do to try to reduce this problem and reduce the cost to our health care system.

Those are just some of the reasons that I agreed to second a similar bill that was put forward by my hon. friend, the member for West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, several years ago. It is also why I am pleased to support this legislation.

As many members of the House know, I strongly believe in the benefits of fitness and I do try to practise what I preach in this regard. In fact, I ran this morning, and I am training right now for the Valley Harvest Half Marathon coming up in the Annapolis Valley of Nova Scotia on Thanksgiving Day weekend.

● (1140)

I am looking forward to running it with our eldest daughter, Kate. She is busy doing her law articles this year, but she is somehow finding time, not easily, to train for that as well.

It can be a challenge. I do not know if I will ever do a marathon, because a marathon takes a lot of time to train for, but we will see.

My hon. colleague spoke a moment ago about cycling; I cycle each summer in the MS Bike tour, and I also cycled to work this morning with my colleague. For me it is a pretty short ride, but the bike is great for getting around Ottawa to get groceries or to go for some exercise. I also run each year in the Blue Nose Marathon 10K, although not the full marathon.

This all helps, whether I am on the ice playing hockey or occasionally playing with the MP soccer team and trying not to look like a pylon in either case.

Of course, we are all aware here that Bill S-211, which originated in the other place, would designate the first Saturday in June of each year as national health and fitness day. The goal is to highlight the need to increase the level of fitness in this country and encourage Canadians of all ages to curb our bad habits.

Rates of obesity and lack of physical activity have continued to grow over the past several decades, and that is extremely worrisome. It should be worrisome to all of us. Many Canadians are living unhealthy lifestyles with longer work hours, consuming more and more processed foods, and finding it hard to fit regular exercise into their busy lives.

This trend is bad news. The good news is that we can change. We may need a little motivation, but I know we are up to the challenge, because Canada, after all, is a nation of doers.

Sometimes we just need a little incentive, and I think that Bill S-211 seeks to engage communities and Canadians in providing a bit of that incentive. It seeks to engage us in living healthier, more active lives. It builds on the fact that communities across Canada have already expressed support for a national health and fitness day. I am hopeful that more and more will support us in this effort.

In fact, it is my understanding that more than 150 Canadian municipalities have already proclaimed some sort of health and fitness day. In my home province of Nova Scotia, there is a strong commitment to promoting health and fitness, and there is a growing list of communities on board, including the Cape Breton Regional Municipality, Chester, Guysborough, Halifax, Kentville, Middleton, New Glasgow, Port Hawkesbury, Hantsport, Lunenburg, Shelburne, and Stewiacke. I look forward to many more joining that list. Kudos to those communities and to the many more that we expect to follow suit.

My caucus colleagues in the Liberal Party have a long history of promoting healthy living. In 2005, the previous Liberal government invested $300 million over five years to the Public Health Agency of Canada for the integrated strategy of healthy living and chronic disease. One of the key pillars of that investment was promoting health by addressing the conditions leading to unhealthy eating, physical inactivity, and unhealthy weights.

To sum up, I am delighted to be speaking in support of the bill. I encourage all of us in this House to get out there and be physically active and lower our stress levels. That might help around here, as a matter of fact. Who knows what impact that might have in this chamber?

I look forward to voting in favour of Bill S-211.

Mr. Mike Wallace (Burlington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is my honour to stand here today and talk about why I support Bill S-211.

I want to challenge my colleague across the way. On the same weekend that he will be running the half marathon, I will be running a full marathon in Moncton. It will be my eighth marathon, and I am trying to do one in every province. I will have Newfoundland and Manitoba left to do after this. I have done the Bluenose already, so I know the member can do it, and I want to congratulate him on his effort.

In the few minutes I have here, I would like to talk about the 10 top reasons that I support Bill S-211, an act to establish a national day to promote health and fitness for all Canadians. It is a coincidence that I am borrowing the top 10 list from talk show host David Letterman, who went to Ball State University in Indiana. My daughter went there on an athletic scholarship, so there is a bit of a connection with respect to health and fitness and stealing his top 10 list.

I am excited that this legislation seems to have the full support of all members in the House and that in the near future the first Saturday of every June will be a national day to promote health and fitness for all Canadians.

Let me mention all 10 of the reasons that I support this legislation in case I do not have time to mention them all.

First of all, this bill is universal. It affects everyone.

Second, the bill aligns with a motion I put forward in the House on obesity, a motion that was unanimously passed.

Third, it brings awareness to the problem. Nobody can fix a problem if they do not know that there is one. A day promoting health and fitness would let people know about the problem. It would coordinate efforts to promote health and fitness across municipalities, provinces, and the whole country. It would help to provide opportunities to promote health and fitness.

A national day would provide an opportunity to celebrate the success of those who have made a difference and are making a difference in their own lives and the lives of their families, communities, provinces, and country.

As the mover of the motion has said, this is not all about elite or pro athletes, and I will come back to that.

As a practical point, health and fitness reduce health care costs, and those costs affect every taxpayer across this country.

A national day to promote health and fitness would be a national statement. It would be about our country and where we are going in this particular policy area.

I would like to say a few nice words about the supporters of the motion, both in the other place and in the House, but first I would like to talk about the universality of a national day to promote health and fitness.

Health and fitness affects everyone from eight to 80. In my own family, a number of my immediate relatives have lived past 90. Health and fitness play a significant role in the quality of their life, as well as in the quality of life for young people, middle-aged people, and seniors. significant role in the lives of our youth and seniors.

Quality of life has several aspects. Having the financial support to look after oneself is also important, but one area that is absolutely under the control of individuals is their own physical health. They can take advantage of all opportunities available to them to make sure they do what they can to stay as healthy and fit as possible.

As I mentioned, I had a motion in the House on obesity that passed a number of months ago. I used myself as an example. I was elected to the House of Commons eight and a half years ago, and it did not take long for me to gain 40 pounds. On the Hill there are a lot of receptions and other things that go on, and I became a little heavier than I should have.

● (1145)

As a result, I was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes. There is no diabetes in my family, except for maybe my 95-year-old grandmother, and that onset came with age. There is no history of it in my family. It was obvious that physical fitness was one of the aspects that was missing, and proper and healthy eating was another part.

I have lost that 40 pounds. I have made a commitment to physical fitness, as I mentioned before. For me, it is running. I do not run because I love it, but because it helps me stay physically fit. I have a commitment to my family to stay physically fit, so I can be here when I am 96 to see my great-grandchildren. I have a grandmother who had great-great-grandchildren. I am hoping I am going to be one of those.

This motion brings awareness to the problem. I had not given it any thought prior to my own personal issues. I had very athletic, very active children. They went to volleyball, track and field, gymnastics, swimming. They were high performers. They worked out, sometimes for two different sports for three or four hours a day.

It was not that physical fitness was not around me, but I never considered it for myself. I did not think about it being a problem until it hit me at home.

A national day to promote health and fitness will bring that issue forward, at least on that first Saturday in June. It is an opportunity to make sure that we understand there is a problem, which was very well articulated by the mover of the motion. It would coordinate efforts and allow municipalities, provinces, and the country to have a focus. We can coordinate promotion and have the opportunity to talk about physical fitness and health on a particular day in the calendar year.

It has already happened in a lot of municipalities across this country. I hope it will continue, and that coordinated efforts will help bring that message to a higher level. Hopefully, that message gets through.

It does give opportunities to promote what is available to Canadians. It is not all about elite sports. There are lots of activities: walking, hiking, whatever the activity, as long as it is healthy.

In my area of Burlington, there are a tremendous amount of opportunities for a variety of different ways to get involved, to get active. This day will give organizations and individuals an opportunity to promote those opportunities.

We should be celebrating success. When communities, individuals, or organizations are doing a great thing on the physical fitness file, that day could be a day where we celebrate their success.

I have mentioned that I am one of those who watches pro sports on television. It is not all about being an elite athlete. I cannot outrun my daughter. I cannot outvolleyball them. I cannot outdo a lot of things they do. I may be a little smarter than them, but do not tell them that.

It is not about just sitting on the couch and watching; it is about participation. That is what is important. Being healthy simply reduces health care costs. If people can avoid going to the doctor and to the hospital, it reduces costs. It is not a hard message to understand; it is national in scope.

Finally, I want to thank the two key movers behind this motion: first, the member for West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country—and I hope they change the name of that riding—for that member's efforts to promote a healthy lifestyle here on the Hill and throughout this country, and our national hero, Senator Nancy Greene Raine. She is a role model, and not just for physical fitness, but also for many women across the country. She has brought this bill to the forefront to have this day acclaimed in this country.

● (1150)

Mr. Mike Sullivan (York South—Weston, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate my colleague from West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country and Senator Greene Raine for bringing forward this bill to draw attention, once a year, but hopefully every day, to the fact that we need to pay closer attention to our health. To do so, we need to pay closer attention to our level of fitness.

I am not a poster child for a person in great physical condition, but I used to be, until my knees gave out in my thirties. The arthritis in my knees has made it very difficult for me, as it does for many Canadians, to get the level of exercise we need to stay as healthy as we should.

This bill, by drawing attention to the issue of fitness, will hopefully draw attention to the problems that many Canadians face in keeping themselves and their children fit. Senator Greene Raine suggested in her speech that kids spend more time than ever in sedentary activities, such as looking at their tablets, phones, and other things, to play non-active games. She is right.

How many kids carry their baseball gloves or tennis balls to school anymore? How many spend their whole summer riding their bikes to frog ponds, parks, and neighbourhood pools? How many actually spend an hour or two every day playing tennis, football, soccer, or a game of tag in their local park? Fewer and fewer kids are doing that. By drawing attention to this fact, perhaps we can find a way to get kids active again. It is those kids who are going to take care of us as we get older.

"We need to change" were the words of Senator Greene Raine. Hopefully, this bill will be a catalyst for such change.

Sadly, my riding is mostly designated as a "priority" neighbourhood in the city of Toronto. Almost all of it is now a priority neighbourhood. It is designated based on 15 categories, sections of the city that need special attention. One of those categories is on the health of the residents in the riding. All of Keelesdale-Eglinton West, Rockcliffe-Smythe, Weston-Pellam Park, Weston, Mount Dennis, Rustic, and even Beechborough-Greenbrook, which has $2-million homes in it, are designated priority neighbourhoods by the City of Toronto, as places that need special attention. One of the reasons they need special attention is the health of the constituents, including the children, which is not great.

The social determinants of health are what we in the NDP like to focus on in trying to find ways to improve health, which is what this bill is partly about, through smart approaches to health promotion and physical activity. One of the things the government can do, for example, is to change the nature of the health and fitness tax credit. It is currently not a refundable tax credit, so it has almost no application in much of my riding. People do not have the ability to pay first and then wait for a tax credit that they are not going to get because they pay no taxes anyway. A single mom on Ontario Works or ODSP has absolutely no use for this tax credit. It is difficult for that person to have access to an organized fitness regime for their children.

The other thing in my riding is that as a result of financial pressures on our city, the city is closing the doors and locking away some of the sports facilities so that kids cannot get at them. They used to be able to kick a ball around in the Weston Lions Park soccer field. It now has astroturf and it is locked up tight. We cannot get in it unless we are part of a league or a team, and, even then, the leagues or teams are very expensive to join. These kids cannot afford it. We have shut them away from much of what they could use to become more fit.

The good thing is that being a priority neighbourhood means that recreation and fitness activities in my part of the city are free for many kids. The trouble is that they are only in the recreation centres, and only in the recreation centres in priority neighbourhoods, of which there is only one. We are chasing our own tail.

● (1155)

As MPs, we can do things to encourage people to be more fit. I ran a "Bike with Mike" day, where we gathered a bunch of people in the community, got on bikes, and road 15 kilometres down to the lake and back. We had a bus for those who could not ride back, but those people were active for at least a day. It showed them a beautiful section of the riding. There is a bike trail along the Humber River, which runs from the centre of the riding down to the river.

I have also encouraged the local tennis facility to share its facility with less privileged kids who cannot afford it. A kids' drop-in centre and training facility, called Frontlines, is going to be given free access and a trainer for some of the kids, starting in the next few weeks. It is a great example of how we can coordinate and get kids active who would not otherwise be able to do it.

In closing, I want to thank the movers of the bill from this House and the other place for bringing attention where attention is necessary to the state of physical fitness. We will perhaps save a few dollars in health care costs in the bargain.

● (1200)

Mr. Barry Devolin (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I realize I only have about three or four minutes this morning.

Some of my colleagues may be surprised to see me on my feet speaking to this motion today. It has been six years since I stood in my place and participated in a debate. Given that I am not reoffering in the next election, this could be the last time that I participate in a debate in this place.

I am here today to support my colleague, the hon. member for West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, on this bill. I know it has come from Senator Nancy Greene Raine at the Senate, but the principal mover of it over the last several years has been my hon. colleague from the west coast. We often discuss whether people who talk the talk can walk the walk. In this case, I think my colleague from that riding lives the values that are embodied in this bill.

My colleague from Burlington, and others this morning, talked about some of the challenges of maintaining health and fitness while we are members of Parliament. It is a challenge. We are constantly offered free food that is very tasty, and it is easy to get busy and not take care of ourselves. I have also been on the roller coaster. I am not sure that the highs and lows were quite to the extent that the hon. member for Burlington has experienced, but they were along the same vein. It is something that we all need to work at.

I think a collaborative effort whereby the federal government takes leadership and we identify an aspirational goal for our communities, so that municipalities large and small across Canada can come together and make their facilities available on a particular day where we focus on these values, is very important.

Statistics around childhood obesity and health are common, and I think we all know those numbers. However, it is a delight to rise in this place today to discuss something we all agree on. That is a rare moment. It is something that I am pleased to participate in. Therefore, I would encourage all of my colleagues in this place to not only support this motion and vote in favour of it, but to get back to their communities and make it real, both in their own lives and in the lives of their constituents.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The hon. member for Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock will indeed have additional time to address the House and debate on this particular question. In fact, he will have seven and a half minutes to do so when the House next resumes debate on the question.

The time provided for the consideration of private members' business has now expired and the order is dropped to the bottom of the order of precedence on the order paper.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

● (1205)

[*Translation*]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—CHANGES TO STANDING ORDERS

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP) moved:

> That Standing Order 11(2) be replaced with the following: The Speaker or the Chair of Committees of the Whole, after having called the attention of the House, or of the Committee, to the conduct of a Member who persists in irrelevance, or repetition, including during responses to oral questions, may direct the Member to discontinue his or her intervention, and if then the Member still continues to speak, the Speaker shall name the Member or, if in Committee of the Whole, the Chair shall report the Member to the House.

He said: Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the intelligent and well-spoken member for Louis-Saint-Laurent. She will take the second half of my time, and I have no doubt that her speech will be excellent.

We moved this motion today in response to the public's reaction to what happened last week in the House. People from all across the country called in to radio shows, sent emails, and shared their thoughts on television and in newspapers. They were all saying that question period needs to be improved so it can become an answer period too.

All Canadians want is that the government give intelligent and transparent answers when we ask an intelligent question—a question seeking transparency in an area of public administration, such as the questions that the leader of the official opposition asked last week. These answers enhance the debate so that everyone in this great country can understand the direction the government is taking. The answers also give the government a chance to defend the decisions it has made. It does not get any simpler than that.

That is why we are proposing today to amend Standing Order 11 (2) to include the answers provided during question period.

The NDP is not trying to make a huge change today. We are simply saying that we already have rules about the relevance of debates in this House. As you know, Mr. Speaker, on numerous occasions you have enforced the rules on relevance that already exist for debates in the House, as you have also enforced the rules on the relevance of the questions we ask. The NDP is proud of the fact that we ask relevant and intelligent questions in the House. However, Mr. Speaker, you also have the right to say whether these questions are relevant.

All we are asking and all we want to do is to fix the loophole surrounding the answers to questions during question period and to ensure that the answers are just as relevant as the questions the minister was asked.

This is also not a huge change because these practices are already in place in other parliaments around the world. As we know, the speaker in the United Kingdom's legislative chamber has the right to question the relevance of answers. The level of debate is higher because the questions must be relevant, of course, but so must the answers.

On the weekend, like any good New Democrat, I did some research. That is usually what we do: we use research to delve deeper into the subject. I watched several clips from the Australian parliament, and the speaker of the house called the prime minister to order because his response was irrelevant.

What we are proposing today already exists in our Standing Orders, as well as in the rules governing other parliaments around the world. What is more, we feel it is a matter of respect. What we are asking is that the government and this Parliament respect the fine Canadians who have been questioning the standards in recent days. We want the House to support this motion, which is designed to establish guidelines for the answers provided during question period.

● (1210)

I would like to mention something else that I feel is important. There are fewer than 49 weeks before the election is called. In 2015, on approximately September 12, the writ will be dropped for Canada's 42nd national election. We hope that the NDP will form the government after Canadians across the country cast their votes. It will be up to Canadians to decide, and we will have to respect their decision, just as we respect the fact that recent comments from across this country have been very clear. We need to hear relevant answers to the intelligent questions that are asked in the House. We need to respect the will of the people of Canada.

I would like to take a few moments to mention another worrisome issue. The Leader of the Government in the House of Commons will rise to speak in a few minutes. It is not yet clear whether the Conservatives support this motion. I hope that they will support it. Public opinion is clear. The Leader of the Government in the House of Commons has said that there is plenty of accountability in the House during question period because the ministers are always present to answer questions.

Good New Democrats that we are, we did our research over the weekend. We found that, since the beginning of this sitting of Parliament on September 16, parliamentary secretaries have responded to nearly 50% of the questions asked of ministers during question period. How can we speak of accountable government if parliamentary secretaries answer nearly half of the questions asked of ministers? Parliamentary secretaries are not supposed to be making decisions. They are not accountable to the people. They have no executive power. Ministers are the ones who are accountable. The Prime Minister is accountable. It is up to them to answer the intelligent questions people ask in the House. Nothing less. It should not be half and half. Ministers should not be answering just one out of every two questions. Ministers should be able to answer every question. From time to time, a parliamentary secretary might answer, but that is happening systematically and it shows a lack of respect for Canadians.

[*English*]

I was first elected in 2004 with my colleague from Hamilton Centre and was very proud of being elected. My first seat was right over there, in the corner. I had to get a shoehorn to get into it.

I remember the first time I asked a question in the House. I remember standing and thinking that it is a strength of Canadian democracy that I can ask a question and that a minister has to answer. However, I quickly realized, as all rookie MPs do in the House, that the question, yes, is powerful, but until we get to the point where the response has to be equally intelligent and equally relevant, we have not completed what is a fundamental part of Canadian democracy.

I represent one of the most diverse ridings in the country, where over 100 languages are spoken and people come from all over the world. They come to Canada because they believe in our democratic system. Even people in my riding who are strong Canadians, proud Canadians, new Canadians, many of them believe that question period should be improved. They believe that Canadians should be treated with the respect they deserve. They believe that intelligent questions asked on this side of the House merit equally intelligent and thoughtful answers from that side of the House.

Transparency requires that when any opposition member or government member asks a thoughtful question, the government's answer should be as transparent and complete as possible. It is not an idle dream. This is the basis on which our country developed. These are the parliamentary traditions, which came from other countries, that have helped to broaden and deepen, hopefully, the debate in the House.

Sometimes we reach the level that Canadians expect of us. One of them was just last week when the leader of the official opposition spoke very passionately on Iraq here in the House of Commons. That was a high moment for so many Canadians.

● (1215)

However, we also have low moments when answers do not correspond to the intelligent questions that are asked. That is why we are offering the motion today. We want to make question period a question and answer period so that all Canadians can benefit from transparent, thoughtful answers to thoughtful questions asked in the House.

We hope we get the support of every member of the House.

Mr. Bob Dechert (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Justice, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened to the member's speech quite intently and I have read the motion, but it seems rather one-sided to me. It does not say anything about questions from the opposition member or any member during question period. It only talks about responses. It seems to me that we have all seen lots of irrelevance here on both sides. We will often see the same question asked six or more times by members of the opposition. They continually read the same talking point over and over again.

I wonder why the member chose not to include questions and responses in the motion in terms of relevance.

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Speaker, it is because you, as Speaker, already enforce the rule of relevance on questions. The member has been in the House long enough to understand that. The first day I stood as opposition House leader there were a couple of our questions that the Speaker chose to disqualify. We certainly raised them in points of order afterward, but the Speaker already has that power.

This is what is completely dysfunctional. The questions are thoughtful. They have to be relevant, have to be pertinent, but as we heard from some columnists as far as some answers are concerned, I am quoting Michael Den Tandt who said, with the reasoning of last week:

> ...it now becomes acceptable for a government MP to say anything at all in Question Period. [A member from the government] could, when confronted with an opposition question, begin chanting in ancient Greek. He could speak in Sanskrit, or in tongues; he could say "Lalalalalalalala" while plugging his ears, the way kids do. He could read his grocery list. He could recite the ageless "To be or not to be" soliloquy from Hamlet.

He could do anything he wants.

That is disrespectful. That is why we want to have intelligent answers to intelligent questions. That is all we are—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Questions and comments, the hon. member for Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor.

Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I promise I will not put forth any soliloquy for the member to mull over, but I do respect his speech. I think there were a lot of pertinent points. Good research being the exclusive domain of the NDP, however, I take issue with. Nonetheless, I do appreciate his speech. We both were elected in 2004.

I will launch into some of the main points he talked about in my own speech, but I have a quick question concerning what we regularly call S.O. 31s, or members' statements. Does he not feel also that members' statements, which take place only 15 minutes of the day, also constitute what I consider is an egregious error in the House by making them partisan attacks?

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Speaker, I congratulate the member on our 10th anniversary of the class of 2004.

I believe the Speaker has dealt with these issues in the past. We have had a number of points of order around members' declarations. What the member states is true, about it being too partisan. There has been some improvement in that. There is still a ways to go.

The biggest hole right now in our Standing Orders is the hole that says it does not matter what the answer is. The question has to be relevant. Debate has to be relevant. Even members' statements have to be relevant, but an answer can be whatever it wants.

That is why we are offering what is a modest contribution. It is only half of a line, but it gives the Speaker the power to say: that is not a relevant answer, that is repetition. That will improve the aura of this place, improve the tone of debate, and it will improve above all the transparency of the government. It is a modest contribution that will make things work better here in Ottawa. That is what we are all about.

● (1220)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the member across the way, the Conservative member, said that the same question was sometimes asked six times in a row.

[*English*]

Is it because the government is not answering the question?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Speaker, the fact is that we never ask exactly the same question.

I should point out that we noticed the exact same intervention three times last week.

If the member opposite were to listen closely, he would see that questions about complex and complicated issues might be asked from several different angles. As the official opposition, our role is precisely to ask questions like that to get an answer.

After the next election, when the Conservative Party falls to third place and the NDP is in government answering intelligent questions, I hope that the Conservatives will ask intelligent questions. It would be so nice to have that kind of exchange between two parties in the House.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse (Louis-Saint-Laurent, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank you for allowing me to participate in this debate.

In my opinion, the motion moved is extremely important if we want to give Canadians some hope and restore their confidence in our democratic system, especially during question period.

We have decided to use our opposition day to discuss one of my favourite subjects, that is the Standing Orders of the House of Commons. I am very pleased to be a member of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, which gives me the opportunity to study the Standing Orders in more depth. Ultimately, the Standing Orders of the House of Commons are the foundation of democracy and Parliament. In my opinion, it is important to be able to make changes directly, that is in the Standing Orders, so that we can improve the system.

Our current goal is to give the Speaker the authority to apply the relevance rules to oral question period. As my colleague from Burnaby—New Westminster just explained, this rule already exists and applies primarily to debates in the House of Commons. For example, if I am supposed o debate a bill and I start talking abut whales in the Great Lakes, the Speaker has the right and the power to call me to order by stating that my comments are not related to the matter at hand. What an MP talks about must be relevant to the subject being debated. No one questions the authority of the Speaker to call to order a member who is speaking about something completely different, because this is a simple and basic principle. The rule applies to debates in the House and committee meetings.

The chair of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs does an excellent job. I have seen him call to order MPs from all parties many times when their speeches were not really pertinent. This is not about partisanship. When an MP gives a speech that is not relevant or that is repetitive, the committee chair has the authority to call him or her to order so that they focus on the subject at hand.

Given that the Speaker of the House of Commons represents the entire democratic institution of Parliament, it is really important that he or she be able to apply the rule during question period.

We all know what prompted today's debate. Basically, it comes as a result of an exchange that we all witnessed last week. Indeed, last Tuesday, the Leader of the Opposition asked some very specific questions about precise aspects of Canada's military involvement in Iraq. One of the responses was not even a semblance of an attempt to answer the question. There was not even any suggestion in the response that the parliamentary secretary had any desire to answer the question. In the end, the answer given was completely absurd and had nothing to do with the question. At that moment, for many Canadians, political commentators and people who follow Canadian politics, this crossed the line. For me personally, I think it is important to draw a very clear line. Of course, we know that the government's responses will not always be what the opposition wants to hear. The role of the opposition is to question the government and hold it to account. We will not always be satisfied with the answers we get, but there needs to be a limit. When it comes to relevance there must be a line we cannot cross if we do not want Canadians to start thinking there is no point in following Canadian politics because what we do here is nothing but a ridiculous spectacle.

I think the motion simply aims to draw a clear line to say that if the absurdity and irrelevance go too far, it will be up to the Speaker, the keeper of our democracy, to call the member to order. That is what happens when the person speaking does not stay on topic during debates in the House, during committee meetings and within other current institutions.

● (1225)

Members must be called to order when what they are saying does not even come close to an answer. Government members must provide relevant answers. We are not asking that they provide answers that satisfy the opposition, but they have to respond to the question that has been asked. This seems so simple to me that I have to wonder why we need to spend a whole day debating this issue. It is really too bad that it has come to this.

As a young woman who has been participating in the debates in the House since being elected in 2011, I must admit that it is sometimes very difficult to attend question period. I am not an aggressive person and I do not like to yell.

When I realized that I was in the House of Commons to work with all of my elected colleagues in deciding the future of our country and then I saw people yelling at each other like second-grade children, it was a rude awakening.

I think that there are many other steps we need to take before we have a more respectful parliament. In this regard, it would not be a bad thing if we were able to make some improvements to question period today.

There are many very interesting people who would do a great job in Parliament but who may have decided not to get involved when they saw the tone of question period, the insults being hurled and the yelling that goes on. As my colleague pointed out, this could also completely discourage some people from participating in democracy in the simplest way possible, namely by voting.

By making this small change today, we could show Canadians that we want to improve our system. This is not the first time that the NDP has moved motions or proposed small but effective solutions or changes. Two years ago, on an opposition day, I participated in a fairly similar debate on closure motions, since the government was breaking records in the use of this measure. It was a similar discussion because we wanted to give the power to the Speaker.

We are not saying that closure motions are always a bad thing. We understand that there may be urgent reasons that would justify their use. However, why not give our Speaker that power, since he is the keeper of the House?

Then, since he would be the one responsible for assessing the situation, he could decide on the relevance of the reasons given to justify the use of a closure motion. He could refuse, on the basis that the reasons were insufficient or that too many members wanted to speak, for example. This is the only place where members can debate bills, and it is our duty to do so.

We thought this excellent suggestion could be useful, but it was not passed. We made several other suggestions. For example, we suggested that omnibus bills be prohibited. They make no sense, because they sometimes amend 100 different acts in one fell swoop. This does not help Canadians regain their trust in and their respect for our democracy, which we have been losing in recent years. We could also change the rules with respect to prorogation. It is the same principle.

We could reform so many aspects of our parliamentary system to greatly improve our debates, to help us do our jobs and to help us better represent our ridings without the side show that is question period, during which members yell at each other without giving any kind of answer.

● (1230)

If I rose in the House today and started talking about any old thing in my speech, it would be in your power, Mr. Speaker, to stop me. I simply think it makes sense to apply this rule to question period.

I sincerely hope that we will have the support of all members for this motion.

[*English*]

Mr. Mike Wallace (Burlington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to follow-up.

As chair of a committee, we have orders of the day. We know exactly what is going to be discussed. In the House of Commons, we have orders of the day. It is in writing, what is going to be discussed.

It makes sense that the Speaker, or the chair, is able to rule someone out of order if they are not relevant to what is listed. Is the member advocating, based on that logic, that all questions to the cabinet and the Prime Minister would be in writing, 24 hours in advance, so that answers can be prepared?

People need to know that there is about 30 seconds to ask a question and about 35 seconds to respond. I think this place would operate better if everything was in writing. Speakers could then, in my view, rule whether an answer was relevant or not, if the questions were given in advance.

Is the NDP advocating for questions to be given in advance?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague from Burlington for his question.

I think that it is quite clear, as my colleague from Burnaby—New Westminster explained earlier, that currently, if questions are not relevant, for example, if a member asks a question about the status of the whales in the Great Lakes, which has nothing to do with the government, the Speaker has the right to stop that member. During oral question period, the Speaker has the right to cut off a question that is not relevant. I therefore do not see why we would have to provide our questions in advance to be sure that the government is able to answer them.

I would add that we already have a system for written questions in our Parliament. This has been heavily criticized in recent years because even when there are written questions we do not manage to get answers that make any sense.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for her speech. I absolutely agree with today's motion. I want to thank the official opposition for giving us the opportunity to talk about something so vital to respect for Parliament. It is clear that the goal of having a respectful Parliament, as my colleague mentioned, is important.

In the Standing Orders of the House of Commons, there is a section on oral questions. Standing Order 37(1) states:

> Questions on matters of urgency may, at the time specified in Standing Order 30 (5), be addressed orally to Ministers of the Crown, provided however that, if in the opinion of the Speaker a question is not urgent, he or she may direct that it be placed on the *Order Paper*.

I mention that because I think that ties in with the power that the Speaker currently has and does not traditionally or habitually use. The Speaker has the power to stop questions; why not answers as well?

● (1235)

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Mr. Speaker, I would like to sincerely thank the hon. member for Saanich—Gulf Islands. She has been advocating for a more civil Parliament from day one. I am very pleased to have her support today.

She got to the heart of the problem. We are aware that many of the Standing Orders are not always enforced by the Speaker at this time. We understand that, and we clearly understood the Speaker's response last week. That is precisely why today we want to ask that this rule, which already exists, be enforced so that it does not become one of the many rules not really enforced by the Speaker. We do not want people to be able to continue answering when they have clearly crossed the threshold of absurdity. Responses need to be more tangible and concrete.

[*English*]

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today's debate is on the opposition motion, sponsored by my NDP counterpart, the hon. member for Burnaby—New Westminster. He suggests that the House change Standing Order 11(2) in respect to responses given to oral questions. That is not in respect to questions, merely in respect to responses.

Question period is fundamental to our system of parliamentary government. It is democracy in action. Canada's approach to the parliamentary questioning of the government makes the House of Commons a leader in the world for accountability. Simply put, there is no similar forum in the world as openly accountable as Canada's question period. Every single day, when the House of Commons sits, the prime minister and ministers are held to account for their policies, the decisions that they make and the actions of their departments. For 45 minutes, the opposition can ask any question on any subject, without any forewarning, without any notice at all.

Question period is also a key forum for providing members of Parliament and the public with information about the government's plans and priorities. That is unlike, for example, in the U.K., a country that has played a fundamental role in our own country's parliamentary evolution. Here, ministers are not given the benefit of a formal prior notice of the questions they may be asked. I know perhaps once a week a minister might get a warning from a member opposite, but the norm is no notice at all. Instead, ministers must come to question period every day prepared only with the sound knowledge of all the workings and policies of the departments for which they are responsible, ready to answer any and all questions, those foreseen and those unexpected.

The very nature of Canada's question period ensures that the debates are always topical and relevant. We have even seen an issue arise outside the House during question period and asked at that very moment.

In the United Kingdom, for example, it is different. In Britain, members of parliament often have to give up to two weeks' written notice of the question they plan to ask a minister in question time. In the U.K., each sitting day, but never Fridays, as we have here on Fridays, only some ministers are scheduled to answer questions. This, of course, significantly limits the range of subjects on which questions can be asked on any given day to just a minority of the full range of government responsibilities. The prime minister answers questions only one day each week and most other ministers even less frequently. The minister then arrives in the chamber of the House of Commons in the U.K. supplied with a prepared answer to a question that is often outdated. Supplementaries must be tightly relevant to the question put on notice.

[*Translation*]

In Canada, however, questions cover a broad range of subjects and departments, every day, without warning. The Prime Minister and ministers must be ready. The issues of concern to Canadians change quickly, and the questions put to the Prime Minister and cabinet members change just as quickly.

[*English*]

Furthermore, if a member is not satisfied with the answer to an oral question, he or she can pursue the question at greater length during the adjournment proceedings, which we all affectionately call the “late show”.

I have yet to have anyone point to any country with as much accountability as our question period here in Canada.

[*Translation*]

Our neighbours to the south have no question period that allows legislators to hold the president and his cabinet accountable. There is no forum to hold the administration and Congress directly accountable.

● (1240)

[*English*]

In the United States, there is no process at all like our question period, at any time, for the president and his cabinet to be held accountable by legislators.

I next want to turn to the actual wording of the motion before us. It states:

> That Standing Order 11(2) be replaced with the following: The Speaker or the Chair of Committees of the Whole, after having called the attention of the House, or of the Committee, to the conduct of a Member who persists in irrelevance, or repetition, including during responses to oral questions, may direct the Member to discontinue his or her intervention....

This change, as I pointed out, would affect responses to oral questions but it would not touch the actual questions. This is yet another greatly cynical, one-sided proposal for the NDP. It wants to improve Parliament insofar as it helps the NDP, but not insofar as it would help the government, for example, to have more information on which to provide those answers. “Do as I say not as I do” has been the watchword for the New Democrats throughout this Parliament and here it makes yet another appearance.

Apparently, they do not want to be subject to the same rules that they want to see applied to others. The Leader of the Opposition would prefer to make question period a one-way street. He wants the rules changed to keep him from facing any tough questions or cold facts in the House about his own party's operations or policies. In reality, he wants to avoid facing any basic facts in the House, since he wants to ban repetition of answers. The facts will not change simply because an individual asks the same question over and over again.

If people watching this debate think that what is proposed is a simple fix, well, it is not. Let me quote a distinguished former speaker, Speaker Milliken, the individual who had the longest tenure in that big chair you are sitting on, Mr. Speaker.

On enforcing the concept that the NDP is proposing, Mr. Milliken told the *Ottawa Citizen*:

> There’s nothing a speaker can do about that. ...what constitutes an answer? There’d be constant argument about it.

In fact, there would be points of order raised interminably at the end of every question period.

There has been a lot of recent commentary related to what the change is, and I will come back to the substance of today's motion in a bit, but why the change is being proposed is somewhat obscured by a recent event.

[*Translation*]

What people really need to understand about the NDP leader's motion is that it is an oversensitive reaction to efforts to hold the New Democratic Party and the Leader of the Opposition accountable on certain issues. The Leader of the Opposition wants the rules changed so that he will not have to answer hard questions or have the whole truth be known here in the House of Commons.

[*English*]

The Leader of the Opposition does not want to answer for the NDP misuse of House resources on inappropriate mail-outs. The Leader of the Opposition does not want to answer for the NDP inappropriate use of taxpayers' dollars in setting up unauthorized satellite offices, which, curiously enough, just happened to be at the same place that partisan NDP work was taking place.

New Democrats have been caught breaking the rules and abusing taxpayers' dollars, but most regrettably, they do not want to be held to account or for anyone to be even reminded of it, all of which is witnessed—

Mr. David Christopherson: You're the government.

An hon. member: Maybe you should keep your voice down.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Order, please. The hon. government House leader has the floor. Members will know, and one member has recognized, that other members are to listen to the presentation that is before the House, or if they have other commentary with their colleagues, they may wish to take that to the respective lobbies.

Hon. Peter Van Loan: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member for Outremont also must not want to be reminded that for almost two decades, he kept knowledge of bribe attempts to himself. The Leader of the Opposition does not want to explain to Canadians his risky high-tax schemes, like his $21-billion carbon tax that would hurt Canada's economy and kill Canadian jobs. Maybe it is that he does not want anyone to know about his employment insurance plan that would cost Canadians nearly $8 billion, or a 30% hike in EI premiums paid by hard-working Canadians.

However, I am not alone in being struck by this stark contrast between what the New Democrats proposed and how they actually behave. Let me quote from Martin Patriquin, of *Maclean's* magazine, from his appearance on CBC on Friday afternoon. He said that the Leader of the Opposition "...knows very well [that] being disingenuous in the House and deflecting questions. The guy practically invented it when he worked here in Quebec...it is an interesting switch of roles". That is the take of a seasoned political observer in Quebec, where the hon. member for Outremont served in the legislature for over a decade.

Today we are going to hear a lot said by the New Democrats that everyone should be supporting this motion today because of the apology tendered in the House on Friday by my hon. friend, the member for Oak Ridges—Markham. However, that is one apology more than we have ever gotten from the leader of the NDP. We have yet to have an apology for the NDP's use of House resources for its mailings. What is more, we have likewise yet to have an apology for the NDP's use of House resources for satellite offices. It is interesting that in the discussion of those resources, we have had efforts by the NDP to pin it on the Clerk of the House of Commons and House staff. There was no apology after that.

There were other occasions. I remember when the hon. member for South Shore—St. Margaret's was the subject of a bit of an episode with the member for Outremont. There was no "I am sorry" back then, none at all. In fact, in the incident we are talking about right now, the member for Outremont, in this House, in that very same question period, said that the Speaker was biased, which is highly inappropriate and highly inaccurate. Do we see any apology for that now? Up to this point, there has been no apology whatsoever.

In fact, I can look to an exchange of my own. When I came across the House and we exchanged words, using somewhat inappropriate language, I apologized to this House for that inappropriate language. I invited my friend to apologize for having used the exact same inappropriate parliamentary words. Did any apology ever come? No. It is not surprising.

It is a two-way street. In fact, seized with his own hyperbole, the member called the finance minister a racist this past spring. There was no apology for that. Meanwhile, his fellow Quebec provincial politician, Yves Duhaime, was on the receiving end of some defamatory comments by the Leader of the Opposition, then an opposition MNA, including some startling four-letter names, which I could never repeat in this chamber. Mr. Duhaime had to take his grievances to trial in the Superior Court of Quebec for vindication through judgment and some $95,000 in damages.

The only way he will ever apologize for anything he does that is inappropriate is if one actually gets him in front of a judge and gets the judge to referee it and settle the dispute.

I hope that perhaps sometime today we will get that apology to the Speaker for the inappropriate comments the Leader of the Opposition made about him last Tuesday.

That is not the first time he has shown a distrust of an institution that does not do as he pleases. In April 2013, the Leader of the Opposition slammed the Supreme Court of Canada, the highest court in the land. Back then, he said:

> The Supreme Court has already indicated they are going to carry out their own probe, but it's a little bit like when a complaint is made against a professional's conduct. You can't have the professional investigate themselves.

With the conclusion in hand, he was not deterred from impugning motives when he said:

> You won't find something you don't ask for....
>
> It's a clear indication that the Supreme Court had no intention all along of ever dealing with this issue seriously.

Is this an insight into how the New Democrats would govern? If the Leader of the Opposition is trying to change the rules to protect himself from hearing critical questions and uncomfortable facts in opposition, we can imagine what he would do to change the rules to protect himself if he were in government. In fact, Mr. Milliken, whom I quoted earlier, told the *Ottawa Citizen* that he was "surprised" that the Leader of the Opposition would be raising this topic.

● (1245)

To wrap up, the motion put forward by the hon. member for Burnaby—New Westminster is flawed. It is based on motivations one is bound to question, and it is just the latest example of the "do as I say not as I do" approach of the New Democratic Party.

In closing, I move:

> That this question be now put.

● (1250)

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Mr. Speaker, for anyone who thought, with the outrage that came back from Canadians from coast to coast to coast after the profound disrespect by the Conservative government in the House of Commons, or after the apology on Friday, or after the government actually was trying to answer questions in the House, that this government was actually turning over a new leaf, I think any thought of that nature has now been exposed as just idle thinking.

Obviously, the Conservative government does not intend to, in any way, be respectful to the Canadian population. The Conservatives do not intend to actually respond to what Canadians want to see, which is thoughtful questions, of course, and occasionally answers that are actually relevant to the questions that are asked.

There is so much wrong with what the government House leader just said, I do not know where start. He has been the government House leader for a long time. The pretense that somehow relevance does not apply to questions is absolutely absurd, and quite frankly, he should be ashamed of himself for even saying that in the House. He knows that questions are routinely ruled out of order by the Speaker because they are not relevant to public administration.

Putting that aside, which was the only reason he really gave for opposing this motion, what the government House leader has just said is that the Conservative government is doubling down. We will have even more absurd and irrelevant answers in the weeks to come. Government members should be ashamed of themselves.

Will the government House leader now confirm that the Conservatives will now double down and be even more disrespectful to Canadians in question periods to come?

Hon. Peter Van Loan: Mr. Speaker, we will continue to come to this House of Commons, which has the firmest, and as I indicated, the strongest accountability mechanism of any legislature in the world, to answer questions every day without notice. We will do so in a respectful fashion as fully as we can, more respectful, I might add, than some of the questions we hear from the opposition.

I think of questions occasionally from the member for Timmins—James Bay or his seatmate, who often in their questions seem to have preambles that are not government business but rather are lengthy strings of perhaps ad hominem attacks, personal attacks, or smears. That is not our approach. We will not be doing that. We will be answering questions, and we will also be putting policy debates to this House.

This is where policy debates should occur. This is where differences in perspectives should occur, and just because one does not like it when we answer with a policy perspective in a policy debate, it should not mean that one can shut down the possibility of doing that, which is what the opposition would like.

Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, my question pertains to the debate itself. I will leave the other comments about the question being put.

The hon. House leader mentioned in the beginning of his speech, and it was also mentioned by the member for Burlington, the concept of supplying the question before the question is to be answered, which is a practice in other Westminster jurisdictions. At what point did the Conservatives advocate that when they were in opposition?

Hon. Peter Van Loan: Mr. Speaker, I should make it quite clear that I am not advocating that as an approach here. I think our forum for accountability is good. However, in answering, evaluating, and debating, we should realize where we sit on the ladder of accountability compared with other jurisdictions and do not require this. It would add a different measure.

Everyone should understand clearly that when they are hearing questions being asked in the U.K. parliament and seeing them on television, in most cases, those members have notice in advance. In fact, the current Speaker in Britain, Mr. Bercow, who has attracted a lot of controversy, was asked what his greatest change was in increasing accountability in Parliament. He said that it was the restoration of something called the "urgent question" whereby a member can write a letter to the Speaker that morning to say that a new subject has just broken and the member would like permission to ask a question on that urgent subject that day. The Speaker then decides if it is appropriate and gives notice to whoever the minister is for the subject of the question to be raised to please come to the House to answer questions on it.

That notice, on the same day, of the questions that are going to be asked is regarded as a radical approach and a step toward accountability in the U.K. Here we have it on every subject, on every issue, every day. We come here and do not know what we are going to face, and we have to get up and answer. We have to know our facts and be prepared to deal with any question—

● (1255)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Questions and comments, the hon. member for Saanich—Gulf Islands.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I do not think I am alone in feeling a fair degree of shock in the approach taken by the hon. government House leader in his response to an opposition day motion. I am afraid, as much as I could agree with him about partisanship on the part of the official opposition on many matters, that I do not see that as the primary motive here.

Turning the response to a suggestion about how we govern ourselves in question period to produce more respect in the House by once again using it as a partisan platform to attack the official opposition was disappointing. I had expected more, not moving that the question now be put to further reduce our opportunities to discuss this critical matter, taken in the interest of Canadians, in a non-partisan way.

I do not include all the other backbenchers, because, as the hon. member for Edmonton—St. Albert has pointed out in his new book and as I point out in my book, this place is about holding the Privy Council, the executive, to account. That is responsible government.

What we have is really bad high school theatre masquerading as Parliament. To put an end to that, we should hold ourselves to account and not heckle. We should hold ourselves to account and ask respectful questions, and we should hold the executive to account by expecting responsible, respectful, factual answers. That is not too much to hope for, but the government House leader has once again shown that his party wants to keep us in the gutter.

Hon. Peter Van Loan: On the contrary, Mr. Speaker, I would say that in the time I have been in the House, the one thing I have noticed most of all is that the tone of question period is set by the questions. Almost always, the tone of question period is set by the questions. I know certainly that when I have answered them, I have always answered in kind to the tone of the question that was asked. That is something all should reflect on when there is a motion before the House that is very one-sided and only seeks to affect what the government can do.

I will provide an example. Suppose there was a question, as we have had, on the government's policy on its recent EI job credit. It is a legitimate question to debate the alternatives. Is the opposition now saying suddenly that the government should not in response compare our policy with the policy, practice, or record of another party and what it did on the same issue in government? Is it saying that this kind of debate is no longer to be allowed? That is what this would do. They are saying that question period is only there for the government to lie prone while opposition members jump at the gun and beat it.

Government would no longer be allowed to respond with the record, statements, or positions of the other side. In fact, debate would no longer be debate. Debate would merely be an attack by the opposition, with no opportunity for the government to respond with comparisons of policies, track records, or approaches. Then we will be spending every day after question period with lengthy points of order debating whether what I said was responsive or was debate on something else to do with their separate policy on the same file and whether it was on topic or not on topic. We could see that this place would grind to a halt.

Debate should be debate. It should be free-ranging. People should be able to have an exchange of views and not a one-sided exchange.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to know whether the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons understands that we are talking about the relevance of answers to questions in terms of the subject that was being discussed. We are not talking about the quality of the answer. If I ask a question about X, the minister, the Prime Minister or the leader can certainly stand up and thank me for my interest in the subject and say that, unfortunately, he does not have the information with him to answer me, but that he would be pleased to provide it, or he could invite me to meet with him to talk about it. That would be enough for the Speaker to consider the answer to be relevant.

We are not talking about submitting written questions in advance; we are just talking about relevance. If I ask about potatoes, the answer should be about potatoes. If I ask about bananas, the answer should be about bananas. It is as simple as that.

As to the quality of the answer, the Speaker would intervene only if it were off topic and way out in left field. That is what we are talking about, not the quality of the content. The Leader of the Government in the House of Commons seems to have taken this in another direction entirely. We are just talking about the relevance of the answer to the question that was asked.

● (1300)

[*English*]

Hon. Peter Van Loan: Mr. Speaker, I will use a simple example to illustrate the problem posed in this change of rules.

If the opposition were to ask a question about supply management and free trade, under its rules, we would be barred from saying that the NDP has a history of opposing free trade agreements, as we saw with NAFTA. Of course, the question was not about NAFTA; it was about supply management. They are going to say that is unreasonable, but then they are going to get up and argue it on a point of order in front of the Speaker, or we are going to argue it on a point of order in front of the Speaker, and so it will go with every question.

What they want is an environment that is very simple: they would get to ask whatever question they want on any subject without notice, and we would be forced to play in that very narrow kind of arena. We cannot talk about their past history on the same kinds of subjects, similar issues in the past, because they are not asking about the past; they are asking about today. We cannot ask about their track record. If they want to ask questions about ethics, we cannot point out their hypocrisy; that would be inappropriate, but guess what? They do not want question period to be about debate. They want it to be about a one-sided free hand to punch the government while the government has its hands tied behind its back.

Mr. David Christopherson: That's what question period is.

Hon. Peter Van Loan: That is not what it should be. It should allow for a free and frank exchange.

I heard him say that's what he said it should be.

Mr. David Christopherson: It is.

Hon. Peter Van Loan: Mr. Speaker, my friend from Hamilton thinks it should be a one-sided pummelling with the government with its hands tied behind its back. That is not what it should be. It should allow for a reasonable dialogue and exchange of views.

Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure for me to rise in the House and debate this motion for several reasons.

I have been here since 2004 and I have heard the debate go back and forth. I have also sat through question period in all its grandeur and not so much grandeur. I have said before and I will say it again that I have always considered question period to be one of the most expensive dinner theatres ever run in this country.

An hon. member: Bad dinner theatre.

Mr. Scott Simms: Mr. Speaker, is bad dinner theatre at the best of times, but I cannot say that without taking some of the responsibility. Having been here for 10 years I have asked a few questions myself, theatrics included in some cases.

I have even gone to members on the other side to let them know what it is I am going to ask. I did that because it allowed them time to prepare an answer to give me. These were specific questions about things which the minister might not have been briefed upon. I was never compelled to do that and the other side was never compelled to give me a straightforward answer. In turn, we were never compelled to ask something specific to a specific minister. Even when we did at times go after a specific minister, another minister would pop up in place of the other minister. We would ask one minister and another minister would respond. It was like a constant game of whack-a-mole that just never ended.

One of the reasons we do that and continue to get away with it is that nothing has really been codified. For the most part, after looking at the research that we have done, most of it is simply by convention, by practices of the past. Past Speakers have made rulings as to how they thought question period should be handled, and by extension, other parts of debate which do not have relevance.

Let us take ourselves out of question period and talk about orders of the day, private members' business and so on, but especially orders of the day when we are arguing government bills. The Conservatives more often than not rise on a point of order to complain about the relevance of a particular speech being given by the Liberals, the NDP, or even the Green Party for that matter. I find it ironic that we find ourselves in the situation where relevance is not accepted as the norm in the House by the government when it complains so much that relevance does matter.

The convention that I spoke of earlier was laid down by Speaker Bosley, Speaker Jerome and Speaker Milliken. I will get to some of those in a few moments, but there is one Speaker I want to quote from primarily and that is Speaker Jerome. In addition to making some of these rulings back in the mid-1970s, he also wrote a book. Chronologically, it was in 1964 when there was actual codification about how question period should operate. O'Brien and Bosc's *House of Commons Procedure and Practice* outlines how the evolution of question period came about.

We now have television and the press gallery, which has been around for quite some time. Question period talks about the relevant issues of the day. That is why it gets most of the attention. People go to school or work in the morning and they read the headlines, and the headlines invariably show up in question period as pertaining to government administration.

Rules have been put forth by Speakers indicating how we have to operate when it comes to question period. Most have to do with relevance, is it an issue of government administration or not. Peter Milliken talked about that earlier in his book of decisions, but I will get to that in a moment.

● (1305)

I want to quote Speaker Jerome, who made a statement in the House affecting the conduct of question period. He established that asking oral questions is “a right, not a privilege, of the members”. He established several things by going back to previous decisions. He talked about how, if we look at it, there are not a lot of rules. As far as timing goes, we ask a question that is 30 seconds long, and the answer is 35 seconds. The only rule laid out in the House about how that operates is not the amount of seconds for a question, but the fact that there is a 45-minute block in and around the proceedings.

We look at that, and Speakers have judged accordingly on issues that come up in the House and whether they have relevance or not as pertaining to the question, but not pertaining to the answer. Speaker Milliken famously said that it is question period, not answer period.

I wrote down some of the ground rules that were put down. Speaker Bosley, in 1986, also quoted Speaker Jerome in many instances. Here are some of the issues that he put out there as to how we should behave in question period: “ask a question; be brief; seek information; ask a question that is within the administrative responsibility of the government”, which is mostly when the Speaker intervenes about a particular question and whether it has relevance. At that point the Speaker usually goes on to the next questioner without the minister's or parliamentary secretary's response. A question should not seek an opinion, legal or otherwise.

Speaker Bosley also pointed out that maybe it should be hypothetical. God knows that when we get 35 seconds to speak, we tend to use it in the preamble leading up to the question that we want to ask, and which we want voters to hear.

A question should not seek information that is secretive in its nature, such as cabinet proceedings or advice given to the crown by law officers. We stay away from that as well. A question should not refer to proceedings in the Senate. We do not get into that. We do not refer to the Governor General.

These are the factors that really encapsulate the spirit of what question period is supposed to be, despite the lack of rules around it.

What we are doing here today with Standing Order 11(2) is we are trying to codify some of the behaviour. Therein is a fundamental shift. The House leader for the New Democrats talked about it being a small change. I am not sure if I totally agree with that. What we would do here is codify within the Standing Orders how we should behave in question period and what that answer should entail. It would do two things. It would codify behaviour and it would bring answers into the point of question period.

We use examples from the United Kingdom, as well as other jurisdictions, such as Australia, which have similar Westminster systems. However, in every case, if they act differently than we do, it is primarily because of the Speakers themselves. The Speaker has been the one proactive in saying, “I am sorry, but according to convention, members should not behave that way”. Even if it does not pertain to convention or past practices, maybe we should start curbing our behaviour in certain matters. Being more proactive in the role of the Speaker has been the modus operandi of change regarding question period.

It has also been argued that television has contributed to less than positive developments within the House. Of course, CPAC and the general media have access to what we are doing here in the House. We see the cameras here. They are on all the time when we are in session, and of course, the theatrics start to take over. This is where, as I have said before, we have now become the most expensive dinner theatre in the country, and not necessarily good theatre either, but that is a personal performance issue.

If we want to ask a question that pertains to our constituents, we should ask it regardless of codifying rules or convention that has been practised in the past. The answers should also be as respectful as the question which came in, but that is sorely lacking right now. This was evidenced last week, a few weeks ago, and even into the spring through some of the activities of the Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, notwithstanding his apology.

● (1310)

I thought the apology he brought forward in this House was a sincere one. The fact that he was not sticking to the subject caused him a lot of stress. I will leave it at that, because I do not want to speak on his behalf. The member has a seat here, and he can do so himself.

The lesson here is that it is okay for members to think outside of the box, but I do not think it is okay to think outside of the warehouse. The reason is that in doing so, we completely wipe out any proactive measure in this House that allows the House to be accountable. Imagine the concept of being accountable. Therein lies the reason we are debating this issue today.

This is why I will be voting for this motion, because it is a step in the right direction, one that is proactive and that could be worked upon. If it is a small measure, as the New Democrats say, then so be it; however, we are going in the right direction.

That is why I have also talked about Standing Order 31, statements in the House. Personally, I think statements by members should be just that. If a prominent person in a member's riding has passed away, it deserves a mention in the House. If someone is having an anniversary, it deserves a mention in the House. As far as I am concerned, everybody in my riding should be mentioned in this House. I understand time is of the essence, but, my goodness, that would be a great thing to do.

Instead, the statements have become these 30-second negative ads toward the other party. I have said many times that when many of the Conservative members read their S. O. 31s, they leave out one very important point at the end, which says, "I am the Prime Minister and I approve this ad." That is the only thing that is missing.

Let us not lose sight of the fact that we are all in this together. If the behaviour from the other side is something that a member is not impressed with, then, my God, it is about time we started practising what we preach. That is for all of us to do.

Earlier this spring we talked about expenses and transparency. The Liberal Party decided to be proactive and not to wait for something to come toward us that would force us into a corner. We knew it was right and we did it, and now everybody is doing it—at least, I think so. Well, we are almost there.

Nonetheless, behaviour has a way of trending and has a way of influencing others to behave in the best way and, dare I say it, in a manner that is accountable to the average Canadian, as this House was meant to be.

I have referred to Speaker Jerome and Speaker Bosley. Now I would like to turn to Speaker Milliken.

There are no restraints on content, which is what Speaker Milliken talked about. He is right in that sense. I could get up right now and talk about muppets, puppets, and other things with no relevance whatsoever to what is happening in the country, unless one is into puppets.

We expect the government to answer about relevant situations, but not about the exact issue that I bring up if it is not relevant to the debate in this country. This is where I say we have to practise what we preach. I like to think that many of us do.

I do not want to accuse any member in particular, or any party in particular, of taking the rules and stretching them to absolute absurdity. I have seen that in this House, and practised by all. Unfortunately, I have seen it practised by the government recently to a point where it is almost as though the government thinks nobody is watching. I like to think people are, whether it is here or on camera.

I mentioned Standing Order 31s being the same sort of thing, personal attacks. I want to quote Speaker Milliken in a decision on December 14, 2010, about an issue regarding personal attacks, as he said something rather pertinent:

> The proceedings of the House are based on a long-standing tradition of respect for the integrity of all Members. Thus, the use of offensive, provocative or threatening language in the House is strictly forbidden. Personal attacks, insults and obscenities are not in order.

That pertained to personal attacks.

● (1315)

What this does, which is very important, is that it also extends that respect to other members, given the subject matter, given the fact that we have to respond in kind to the issue at hand. I believe some members in the official opposition brought this up earlier and jokingly said that if it is not an answer to my direct question, at least stay within the ballpark when it comes to the issue itself.

The House leader brought up a situation with free trade, saying we did not support NAFTA, so what about this other free trade agreement, or supply management? I may not like the answer, but at least it ties into the subject matter to the point where it is somewhat acceptable.

What is not acceptable is what occurs when I have a grievance with the government. Let us remember that we have only 45 minutes of the day. When I have a grievance with the government and state what it is, the response is "No, I have a grievance with you." The government responds that it has a grievance with the other party. There is no linkage to the issue that was brought up in the beginning, none whatsoever.

We need to stay within the context of the House. Otherwise, it is an absolute waste of money. It truly becomes the most expensive dinner theatre ever produced in this country, and as my hon. colleague from Ontario would say, it is not even good theatre.

Those are personal attacks.

This is from daily proceedings on March 27, 2001. We talked about what could be asked. The Speaker's response was:

> —In summary, when recognized in Question Period, a Member should—ask a question that is within the administrative responsibility of the government or the individual Minister addressed.

What this issue came from was the administrative responsibility of the government and questions ruled out of order because they were not directed toward that. The issue at the time was about taking trips abroad to further one's education as a member, which is fine; that is what we do here. However, the trip was paid for by someone else externally, not the government, so therefore the Speaker ruled the question was not admissible because it was not related to the administration of the government. Oddly enough, the precursor to the Conservatives at the time, the Canadian Alliance party, argued that it was part of relevance because it was the behaviour of a particular person.

Again, if the Conservatives felt that question period was a farce at the time, why practise now what they thought was totally wrong? Why would they now practise what they preached against? Not that much time has passed in 14 years that we do not remember that some of the people who are currently in the House vehemently argued for relevance in question period of the day's happenings. Everything was talked about as the answer, yet it was not codified.

I suspect if we do not do something soon, this dinner theatre will become the theatre of the absurd in the most profound way, and 45 minutes of the day will be completely and utterly wasted on the Canadian public that pays for this charade.

However, I pledge to the House, like many others, that we need to practise what we preach. It is time for us to look at question period and codify this. It is time for us to look at the decisions handed down by people such as Speaker Milliken, or Speaker Jerome in the 1970s, who wrote about this issue quite a bit. Speaker Bosley as well accentuated in a very profound manner what question period is and is not, in the spirit of allowing Canadians to see the House of Commons the way it should be: accountable and, for goodness' sake, effective.

● (1320)

Hon. Judy Sgro: Mr. Speaker, I am rising on a point of order to address some comments I made in an article published this morning. I am concerned that these comments may leave people with the impression that I was questioning the neutrality or the authority of the Speaker. I wish to assure the House that this was not my intention. Please accept my apologies, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): I appreciate the clarification and the hon. member's bringing it to the House quickly.

Questions and comments, the hon. member for Acadie—Bathurst.

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I do not know if my colleague from Newfoundland and Labrador agrees with me that what the House leader of the Conservative Party was concerned the most with today is that he wants to be able to raise questions. If that is the case, he should switch over to the opposition, because as far as I am concerned, the mandate of Parliament is for the opposition. When I was visiting different parliaments in the world, they said that parliaments are for the opposition, because the government has the majority and the power. Parliament is there for debate and to ask questions of the government.

However, that is not what I heard from the leader of the government this morning. Rather, he is worried that he cannot ask questions of the opposition. In that case, he does not know his role. The government's role in a democracy is for the opposition to be able to question the government. That is what it is all about. It is a question period, and the answers come from the government.

That is why the government is worried. It wants to play a political role in Parliament instead of answering questions from the opposition.

Does the member agree with me that the problem with the government today is that it wants to control everything? It does not like questions being raised. All Canadians know that. People are talking about it throughout Canada. Does he agree with me, yes or no?

Mr. Scott Simms: Mr. Speaker, if I said no, the member would be shocked. Yes, I do agree with him, and on many levels.

The Speaker can challenge me as to whether this is relevant or not, but if I want to make a call to find out about a particular individual in my riding with respect to, for example, a fishing licence, I used to be able to call a mid-level bureaucrat and get answers right away. I am not talking about anything political; I just want the answers with respect to this constituent. I am that person's direct representative and I have the right to do so. However, the bureaucrat cannot answer the question because I have to call the minister's office for the sake of efficiency.

Quite frankly, I think what the Conservatives are trying to do is funnel the message toward them. I do not know if they want to find out what would be in question period the next day or whether I am trying score political points or so on. They can even listen to the conversation if they want, and they would know that my intentions are sincere.

Coming back to the relevant matter, question period is about the opposition. It traditionally always has been and it always will be. Even when I first came in here as part of the government, there were a lot of questions that came up. I was sitting on the government backbench. I did not like the questions, but I certainly liked and appreciated the fact that question period existed. Now it almost seems as though the fact that question period exists is sacrosanct to fundamental elements of democracy. Where does it go when we reach that low point?

● (1325)

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate the member on his speech and his mention of theatre. As an amateur actor, he is absolutely right. Sometimes that is exactly what question period looks like. It is another way of getting messages across.

The member has been here as long as I have, and on many days after question period, we see members who feel that they have been wronged during question period. They think that their point was not made in debate or that someone made a point about them that they did not think was fair. They stand on a point of order, and the Speaker has to remind them that it is a matter of debate and not a point of order in order to correct the record.

A problem I see with this change to the Standing Orders is that there would now be a direct standing order to stand on a point of order to say, "Mr. Speaker, sometime during period someone said something about me in a question that wasn't exactly what I'd like to hear and, as it is relevant, I would like to have it corrected." It would go back and forth, and we would have a whole section after question period that would be another level of theatre.

Therefore, I ask the member this: does he truly believe that what he would like to see happen is that we codify the theatre after the theatre?

Mr. Scott Simms: After all I have said, Mr. Speaker, that was a pretty relevant and direct question. I appreciate the hon. member for doing that.

I share some of his concerns. I truly do. I speak honestly; I speak openly. I am sure that the frequency of points of order following question period would be on the rise given this situation. However, then it falls back to the Speaker of the House. If we were reticent to codify the behaviour in this House that we feel has gone to the theatre of the absurd, then everything would be done by convention and would run off the rails rather quickly.

I expect that we would codify this and deal with the aftermath in a way that is respectful, in a way that I believe you, the Speaker, can handle based on your experience.

Quite frankly, people stand up on points of order now on everything. It is happening anyway. Beyond question period, we do not further the debate. There is a place for that. It is what we call the late show or the adjournment proceedings. That is where that happens. The hon. member could perhaps change the Standing Orders so that adjournment proceedings only deal with that. That is perhaps a possibility.

However, as a step in the right direction, despite the fact that I share his concerns, that is why I will vote yes for this measure.

Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it seems to me, after listening to the debate for an hour or so, that this boils down to what you would rightly chastise me for if I asked a question. If I did not ask a question within the administrative responsibility of the government, you would stand up and rule me out of order. However, on the other side, if the response has nothing to do with the administrative responsibilities of the government, you would not rule that response out of order.

It seems to me, Mr. Speaker, that if you are in the position where you are compelling members of the opposition to restrict their questions to the administrative responsibilities of government, similarly, the Speaker should restrict the response to being within the administrative responsibilities of the government rather than the perfidious thing that some member of some party might have done at some time in the past.

If that were the outcome of this debate, it seems that we would have actually made some progress in terms of making Parliament relevant. I would be interested in my learned colleague's comments on that.

Mr. Scott Simms: Mr. Speaker, I am not saying it because the hon. member and I are of the same colour, but that is a fantastic question. It comes to the nub of the matter, which is the fact that we do have some restrictions.

I would like to read for the record very quickly a decision from the chair of Peter Milliken, in 2009. He said:

> I must point out that there is virtually nothing in the rules about the content of question period. For example, there is nothing requiring each question and each answer to take only 35 seconds. It merely states that 45 minutes are allocated for the entire question period, nothing more.

However, he goes on to talk about the administration of government. Therefore, if a question is not relevant to the administration of government—I have seen it in my 10 years here; he has been here longer—it has been overturned. That has been put aside.

That is basically the vast majority of action that has taken place, without directly insulting a member, where we go on to the next question and disregard the question that was asked. If the onus is on that person to keep the question within the realm of government administration and that is satisfied—

An hon. member: Then they cannot complain.

Mr. Scott Simms:. That is right, Mr. Speaker. The dance is for two people. The answer has to accompany and come back to the particular issue of the administration of government.

● (1330)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse (Louis-Saint-Laurent, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his speech. I also thank him for supporting the motion that we moved today.

I will be brief. We have heard many comments and questions from government MPs and the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, who has accused the opposition of wanting all kinds of things.

The truth is that during question period, all members of the House have the right to ask the government questions. I think that even applies to members of the party in power who do not have portfolios. They have the right to ask the government questions too.

I would like my colleague to comment on that.

[*English*]

Mr. Scott Simms: Mr. Speaker, that is a valid point. I did not bring that up in my speech, but it is true. There is time allotted for members of the government to ask their own ministers questions. Recently I have seen more questions and answers in government, if they want to look at that as complete satisfaction, that have been satisfied more, and exceedingly so over the past little while. It always comes with flattering comments toward the minister, which is fine; rhetoric is rhetoric, and we all do it. However, at the same time those questions are always addressed directly, so the capability of doing that is there.

We have seen this time and again. We would only ask that if they cannot come up with the answer directly that they at least have enough respect for other members, as well as for the Canadian public, to stay within the realm of possibility, or certainly stay within the realm of what pertains to the subject at hand.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Philip Toone (Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today I have the honour to present my ideas on the motion on oral question period. Unfortunately, the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons changed the motion.

[*English*]

The motion now reads "That this question be now put".

[*Translation*]

He turned the question on its head. It is quite troubling that the government chose to proceed in this fashion.

[*English*]

Let me explain. When the words "That this question be now put" is on the floor, as is described in O'Brien and Bosc, page 650, "the previous question restricts debate and expedites the putting of the question..". It does so in two ways.

> First, the previous question precludes the moving of amendments to the main motion and, therefore, any debate that might have ensued on those amendments.
>
> Second, the previous question can have the effect of superseding a motion under debate since, if negatived, the Speaker is bound *not* to put the question on the main motion at that time. In other words—

according to O'Brien and Bosc,

> —if the motion "That the question be now put" is not adopted, the main motion is dropped from the *Order Paper*.

I will add, Mr. Speaker, that I will be splitting my time with the member for Hull—Aylmer.

So here we are. The House leader of the government side has made it so that we are going to have a vote later on, possibly tomorrow, at some point soon, where the government has used a procedural trick to ensure that the question "That this question be now put" will likely fail. By the traditions of this House, the motion then disappears.

The Conservatives do not want us to be able to discuss this motion. They do not want to be on record that they are opposed to question period actually serving its purpose, which is to hold the government to account. They do not want people to know that they do not want to be held to account.

The Conservatives came into power almost 10 years ago now, with much ballyhooed principles that they were going to hold the government to account, that they would be transparent, that they were going to put in acts, such as the Federal Accountability Act, which was supposed to make this place more transparent, more accountable. Well, the Federal Accountability Act did not go very far.

If we use the example of what we see in front of us with question period, we know for a fact that the Speaker right now is tied. He only has power over the quality of the question, and apparently not any particular power when it comes to the quality of the answer.

According to the House of Commons compendium, the question has to be within the administrative responsibility of the government; the question has to be brief, and the question has to seek information.

However, when it comes to the answer, we do not have a lot to work with.

We have Speaker Jerome, in 1975, telling us that the minister who is answering the question, or his representative, has a number of responses that are possible. He may answer the question. He may defer the answering of the question. He may take notice of the question. He may make a short explanation to why the answer cannot be furnished at this time, or he could say nothing.

The Speaker has to have much more control over what is being done in this place. The Speaker is there to ensure that the question is pertinent. The Speaker is there to ensure that the House has a certain decorum, so the question can be asked in a manner that is well understood. The Speaker seems not to be able to tell the answering side what the quality of that answer is going to be.

The motion in front of us, before it was superseded by the House leader's procedural trick, was to give the Speaker exactly that power, so he could intervene if a responder does not respond to the question properly, does not respond to the matter at hand. The answer should have to bear the same controls as the question. The answer should have to do with government business.

● (1335)

The answer should not be what the person's pizza preferences are. The answer should not have to do with whatever image pops into the head of the member answering at that particular moment. It cannot be questions about what a particular member may or may not have done in the last 100 years. The answer has to deal with government business. That is the point of having question period.

According to the compendium, when asked the question, "What is the point of question period?", Speaker Jerome stated:

> If the essence of Parliament is Government accountability, then surely the essence of accountability is the Question Period in the Canadian House of Commons.

The point of question period is to hold government to account. The point of the answers that we seem to be getting is to defer any responsibility. Conservative members do not want people to be thinking about what the government has done. They do not want people to think that the government is actually accountable to the representatives of the people.

The House of Commons is the place for the government to be held accountable. We have a form of government in this country called responsible government. Responsible government does not mean that the government is held responsible in any general fashion. Responsible government is the particular way that the House of Commons in the U.K., the House of Commons in Canada and other commonwealth nations have chosen to form government.

Responsible government means that the ministers are held accountable in the popular assembly, the place where the people are represented. The people, through their elected representatives, can ask questions of their government and expect to hear answers. We are not getting those answers. We have seen time and time again that the government does not seem to be in any position to give any answers.

The current government will spend enormous amounts of money to fly people across this country and around the world to make statements, for instance, on pensions, which it did in Switzerland and not in the House. Instead of giving answers when it comes to European free trade, it will fly European legislators around on very expensive trips, but again it refuses to answer questions in the House.

We need accountability and we simply do not have it. The motion before us is so that the Speaker will have the tools to ensure that the answers have to do with the questions and with government business, specifically the government business asked about in questions by members of the House.

Members of the House have a responsibility. It is largely the role of the opposition, but it is also the role of members who are not ministers or parliamentary secretaries, members who are in the governing party but are not members of the government per se. All members of the House who are not directly connected to the government have a role and responsibility to ask questions of their government to make sure that the government is being held to account.

When we hear questions on this side of the House, they are generally directed to a particular minister and certainly have to do with government business. If they are not, the Speaker controls it. When we hear questions from members of the Conservative Party, they are generally infomercials for the government's particular issue *du jour*. We need more accountability in this place.

Responsible government presumes that the members of the House want their government to be held accountable. It seems that over the last many years, slowly but surely, that power has eroded. The executive sits in the House, unlike in the United States where the executive sits apart from their house of assembly. The executive sits right here in front of us and we have the opportunity to ask questions directly to it, but for historical reasons that have crept up very slowly but very insidiously over time, we have allowed the government to get away with things.

We have allowed government members not to answer questions. We have allow them not to be held accountable in the manner that they must. We have allowed them to pass omnibus bills that are almost impossible to get through in the time allocated for us to study them. We cannot possibly ask all of the questions that are pertinent to a brick that is several hundred pages long.

We need the tools. The House has created specific offices to help us with that control. The Auditor General's office, the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer and various tools have been created. The problem is, for instance, the Parliamentary Budget Officer's budget is simply insufficient to do the work that he needs to do, especially when the government introduces omnibus bills that are very difficult to get through. The executive seems to be making a point of making it as hard as possible for government members to be held to account.

● (1340)

As legislators, as members of the House, we need to start taking our role of control over the executive seriously. The motion is one step toward that. It is a small step, but a step in the right direction. We cannot forgo our responsibilities. We have to be held to account as members, and as members we have to hold our government to account.

I am very happy to see that the other opposition party seems to be supporting the motion. I certainly hope that the governing party is going to as well.

Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as I see it, this place is not unlike a boardroom where board members get to come together and ask questions of the operating officers, the chief financial officer, the chief operating officer, the chief executive officer, and get answers about the operations of the organization or company.

What has happened over the past many years is, as my friend has stated, the reverse is starting to happen. While it did happen in previous parliaments with previous parties, it seemed to accelerate in the last eight years since, in my respectful opinion, the Reform Alliance element kind of took over the Progressive Conservative Party and instead of debating and attacking policy and platform, they started to attack people and parties instead of having sensible conversations about things.

While I will support the motion, and I agree changes should be made, I am wondering if the member does not think more robust changes are required in order to force compliance with what used to be honoured custom, and is now custom being ignored. Things that would have been found in Motion No. 517 from the member—

● (1345)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The hon. member for Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine.

Mr. Philip Toone: Mr. Speaker, certainly, more robust change should be looked at very attentively. There have been attempts in the House. For instance, the motion he mentioned toward the end of his question, that bill is going to go through an amendment process, where it is probably going to be denatured to the point that it will not change all that much in the House. However, the will of many members that there should be changes in the House has been voiced and I certainly hope it is going to take a much more concrete form.

We have certainly seen in other parliaments, such as in the U.K., there have been concrete changes made, where the speaker does have a lot more control over the proceedings. It would be interesting for the committees that are accountable to these items, such as the procedures and House affairs, to look at this more attentively.

That is not the motion in front of us today. The motion today is to give the speaker more control over question period. However, that we start going back toward accountability in this place is something that is laudable. It is something that should be the target, and we should never lose sight of it.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the member returning to Speaker Jerome's 1975 ruling, because that seems to be the most authoritative piece on the responses from ministers. This should not be entirely parenthetical, but I will mention that when we look at past copies of *Hansard* there was not so much of a need for the speaker to regulate this matter. In other words, ministers of the crown, in previous generations in this place, were very unlikely to be found heckling and really unlikely to give a response that was in fact insulting to the questioner. If we go back to the decisions of Lucien Lamoureux, we see a House of Commons that was very different in its content.

I would like to ask the hon. member whether, given the guidance we have from previous speakers, such as the judgment he cited by Speaker Jerome and previous speakers, do we need to change the rules, or do we need to encourage the speaker to use the rules that are at hand? I do not refer only to the current speaker but to several generations of speakers, probably going back to Speaker Jerome, who did not enforce as many of the rules as they had within their powers to use.

Mr. Philip Toone: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the question and it certainly is a question for debate.

What has happened in this place seems to be that the culture has changed. It had seemed rather normal and expected that if one asked a question, one would get an answer. It seemed appropriate that if one asked a question, the answer would have something to do with the question being posed. Perhaps in the past, the House treated questions with more respect. It treated the duly elected representatives of the people of Canada with more respect and actually answered questions with an answer that proved that respect. Unfortunately, today, we do not seem to be at that point.

We need new tools. The tools of the past I do not think were anywhere near as clear or necessary as they are today. I do not think that in the past the level of disrespect that we see in the House today was anywhere near as bad. This place is degrading. Question period has become more of an art than a science. We need to have some ground rules, and I think the motion is going to be the first step in that direction.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nycole Turmel (Hull—Aylmer, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak today, and I thank my colleague from Burnaby—New Westminster for his motion, which is so very important to the health of our democracy.

I must say that I find it very disappointing that we have to move this type of motion today to try to improve democracy and bring some order to the discussions in the House. I am also thinking about the general public and how cynical they are about the discussions we have here in the House. It is very unfortunate.

Moving a motion like this today in order to allow Canadians to get clear answers to their concerns makes perfect sense. Nowhere in society do we tolerate people we interact with answering questions inappropriately. For example, one of my granddaughters is studying law at the University of Ottawa. Imagine if during an exam she is asked to discuss the rules of law that apply to a specific case and she responds by summing up the rules for Monopoly. How many marks do you think she would get for that answer? It has gotten to the point where we have to wonder. People are wondering. She could always try to convince her professor that her answer is relevant because the question was on rules, but between you and me, I doubt she could convince him. She would certainly fail her exam.

If we do not tolerate such ridiculous answers from our students, why do we accept them from our government? The fact is, we are accountable to our constituents and the general public for the actions and decisions of this Parliament.

I think we can agree on the fact that, last week, the government's answers to rather simple and non-partisan questions reached an all time level of absurdity. It is high time that that ended.

The motion moved by my colleague today seeks to put an end to this dialogue of the deaf that is undermining our democracy. The motion proposes changing the Standing Orders to truly give the Speaker of the House the power to crack down on members who persist in irrelevance or repetition. This is a simple yet effective measure that would bring meaning back to question period by ensuring that the opposition parties get clear answers to the questions they ask on behalf of Canadians.

As journalists and others have said time and time again, members of Parliament do not just represent one person. They represent an entire riding. Canadians have the right to expect that the person who is asking the question, the member who represents them, is shown some respect. I think that that has been forgotten over time.

I hope that all the parties will support this proposal. The Conservative government must be accountable for its actions. That is essential to our democracy. As I mentioned, this motion also seeks to combat cynicism and apathy among Canadians.

Our democracy is based on the fact that the government must take responsibility for its actions and be accountable to Canadians. One way it must do this is by answering the questions it is asked by the opposition parties That is not really difficult. If government members know their stuff, they should be able to answer questions. Canadians expect straight and honest answers from their government. I do not think that that is too much to ask.

Nevertheless, last week, when the leader of the NDP asked the government important questions in a clear and non-partisan manner about the deployment of Canadian troops to Iraq, the answers he got were ridiculous and completely unrelated to the questions asked. This was an exercise in futility.

I believe I can count on one hand the number of times since I was first elected that the government has provided a clear answer to one of our questions. Whether we are talking about the deployment of troops to Iraq, the Senate expense scandal, the robocalls or the Mike Duffy affair, the Conservative government has been stonewalling us. Canadians deserve better, and the NDP is not alone in believing that.

● (1350)

I will give some examples in which journalists even expressed some concerns. My first example is from Tasha Kheiriddin at the *National Post*. She said that the events of last week had given rise to a bigger debate. She wondered whether Parliament and question period should be reformed, so that there is more substance. She said it was disappointing to the Canadian public that is watching and wondering why our elected officials cannot answer such obvious questions and why they try to avoid them.

Chantal Hébert also touched on this situation last week. She said:

[*English*]

> "But there is a larger issue. Even when you do have a minister answering, you are still not getting real answers to questions that are legitimate and part of the job of the opposition parties to ask...".

● (1355)

[*Translation*]

This is unacceptable, and we must take immediate action to change things if we want the public to have faith in what Parliament is doing and must do to represent them.

The Standing Orders already provide for ministers to answer oral questions to the best of their knowledge, but that does not seem to be good enough. A number of speakers have said that they did not have the procedural tools to require that the government answer the questions it receives.

In the previous Speaker's statement in the House, on January 28, 2014, the Speaker said that the Chair had previously ruled on the content of questions, but not answers.

That is very clear. No matter what the government says, speakers of the House are the only ones with the power to challenge or stop a question if they do not feel it is on topic, but they do not have the power to stop an answer or to force a government representative to answer the question. Our motion would change this by giving the speaker of the House and chairs of committees of the whole clear procedures to put an end to irrelevant comments.

This motion is also very important because question period is the part of our work here in Parliament that draws the most media attention and that therefore reaches the most Canadians. Just look at how many Canadians are here in this place during question period. Imagine their reaction when they see what goes on in the House.

What message does it send the public when the leader of the official opposition asks a direct question to the government in the House of Commons, in front of the media, and does not even remotely get an answer to his question? It is simple: it sends the message that the government is untouchable and that it does not listen to the public.

Journalist Michael Den Tandt, of the *National Post*, did a good job expressing this perception last week. He said:

[*English*]

> First, by this logic, it now becomes acceptable for a government MP to say anything at all in Question Period. [The member for Oak Ridges—Markham] could, when confronted with an opposition question, begin chanting in ancient Greek. He could speak in Sanskrit, or in tongues; he could say "Lalalalalalalala" while plugging his ears, the way kids do. He could read his grocery list. He could recite the ageless "To be or not to be" soliloquy from Hamlet.

[*Translation*]

It is time for that to stop. In my riding, at events that took place over the weekend, people told me that they feel it is impossible to talk to the government. They feel that Parliament has become a media show because the concerns of those who do not think like the government are never taken into account or never taken seriously. A number of people quite simply are no longer interested in following politics. There is a great deal of cynicism and apathy, especially among youth.

Last spring, I held a forum on democratic reform. In their presentations, young people said that they feel as though they do not have the power to influence decisions, because when a majority government is elected, it can do whatever it wants without consulting anyone.

By providing any old answer to questions asked in the House, the government is only reinforcing this perception.

Democracy does not happen just once every four years. It must be evident every day in our communities and in the House.

I am now ready to answer my colleagues' questions.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The member for Hull—Aylmer will have five minutes for questions and comments when the House resumes debate on the motion.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

[*English*]

SOUTH ALBERTA LIGHT HORSE

Mr. LaVar Payne (Medicine Hat, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am honoured to speak about the South Alberta Light Horse, Alberta's regiment, which is based in my riding of Medicine Hat.

I was fortunate to be able to attend the change of command ceremony, which took place September 14, at the Court of Queen's Bench in Medicine Hat.

Lieutenant Colonel Colin Michaud, who has served with distinction as regimental commander since 2011, passed the baton to Lieutenant Colonel Troy Steele who is very enthusiastic about serving as the new regimental commanding officer. Colonel Steele has been a member of the South Alberta Light Horse since 1978.

As a former member of the South Alberta Light Horse myself, I was honoured to be on parade with my son, Major Scott Payne, who has been a dedicated officer in the regiment for a number of years.

From the Northwest Rebellion, to the Battle of Ypres in World War I, to Afghanistan in our day, the South Alberta Light Horse regiment has served its country and its people with great pride and humility. On behalf of all Canadians, I wish the whole regiment all the best in what promises to be a very bright future.

● (1400)

MUNICIPAL LEADERSHIP IN NORTHERN ONTARIO

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to pay tribute to three great northerners who have served our region with distinction and honour.

Mayor Tom Laughren of Timmins, Kirkland Lake Mayor Bill Enouy and Gilles Forget, the mayor of Iroquois Falls, will be retiring from municipal life.

I worked with Tom Laughren on many files. This man has always put the interests of the city of Timmins and the people of the north ahead of any personal interests.

Bill Enouy is a dedicated fighter for Kirkland Lake. The thing with Bill is that we always know where he stands and Kirkland Lake is a better place because of his public service.

Gilles Forget has done the heavy lifting in Iroquois Falls as we have struggled with the declining paper economy and the struggle with our mill, yet he maintained a strong and viable community.

The great thing about living in the north is that before one's affiliation or political title, one is a northerner first and foremost. I would like to thank these dedicated servants for representing the north and I would like to wish well all the people running for municipal office in the great region of northern Ontario.

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RETIREMENT OF PREMIER OF ALBERTA

Mr. James Rajotte (Edmonton—Leduc, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to recognize the retirement of my friend and provincial colleague, Dave Hancock. Dave recently announced that he would be stepping down as the 15th Premier of Alberta and as MLA for Edmonton—Whitemud, a position he held for 18 years.

Dave spent his entire provincial political career in cabinet, holding many key portfolios in government, including intergovernmental and aboriginal affairs, justice and solicitor general, government house leader, health and wellness, education, human services, advanced education, and deputy premier.

These key roles in government are a testament to his wealth of knowledge and breadth of experience. It has been a pleasure to serve with Dave representing southwest Edmonton for the past 14 years. He exemplified the best of public service in all of the various roles he held within government and will be remembered as a universally respected and thoughtful legislator, especially as a passionate advocate for children fulfilling their potential.

He is also one of the most decent men I know. I send best wishes to him, his wife Janet and all their family as they move on to the next endeavour, and I thank Dave very much.

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HAMPSTEAD CENTENNIAL

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise to salute the Town of Hampstead, which is in the midst of celebrating its 100th birthday under the theme “Looking back, moving forward”. Last week I was pleased to attend the town's centenary parade and festivities, along with celebrants representing communities from across Montreal, and indeed, around the world.

[*Translation*]

In fact, the Town of Hampstead's centennial highlights the diversity of our rainbow riding as more than 60 groups participated in the parade.

[*English*]

Designed originally as a garden city, Hampstead remains a tranquil, distinctively green residential oasis.

I commend Mayor Steinberg, the town council, hard-working town employees and the centennial committee for their vision and hard work, as Hampstead moves from last week's celebrations to its time capsule and Centennial Lane dedication. I offer my congratulations for a century of success and best wishes for the hundred years to come.

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CLEAN WATER INITIATIVE

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Mr. Speaker, recently, along with the Minister of Public Works, I was pleased to celebrate major milestones of a project I have supported since 2006, the Huron-Elgin-London project for clean water, more commonly known as the HELP clean water initiative.

It is exciting to see the clean water initiative come together as a result of the funding partnership between the Government of Canada, the Province of Ontario and the HELP clean water regional partnership. I am proud to be part of it. This initiative will enhance the quality and reliability of clean drinking water for over half a million people in 14 municipalities in southwestern Ontario between Lake Huron and Lake Erie for generations to come.

Thanks to our government's Building Canada fund, I was proudly able to see this project come to fruition during my time as the member of Parliament for Elgin—Middlesex—London. I thank all who played a part in this successful initiative.

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CHILD POVERTY

Mr. Craig Scott (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am so impressed and indeed inspired by letters I have been receiving from students at the Duke of Connaught Public School located in Toronto—Danforth. These students are extremely concerned about the rising rates of child poverty in this country and they are calling on the government to take action now.

They are participating in a campaign called Keep the Promise Canada, which calls on parliamentarians to honour the motion put forward by former NDP leader Ed Broadbent to eliminate child poverty by the year 2000. That motion was passed by the House in 1989, yet here we are in 2014 and poverty rates remain high.

Specifically these students want to see an increase of the minimum wage and the implementation of a national child care program. As one young person put it to me, "If lowering prices [of child care] and raising wages keeps the poverty level down and keeps families off the street, start doing it".

I could not agree more.

* * *

● (1405)

PROPERTY RIGHTS

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, thanks to Canada's foreign investment protection agreements, Canadian investors in dozens of countries, from the U.S.A. to China, know that in the event of expropriation they will enjoy full compensation.

The same works in reverse. In this country, all levels of government must compensate for the de facto expropriation of foreign-owned property.

How ironic then that in Canada compensation is denied to our own citizens. The ability to use the land is the basis of the rural economy, yet in this country the life savings of rural Canadians are almost routinely destroyed by new regulations that impose ruinous costs in order to carry on existing farming or milling activities.

For the past three years I have had the honour of participating in an annual conference on property rights. This year's conference takes place in Calgary on October 15 to 17. High-quality speakers will continue the task of establishing a sound intellectual foundation for a renewal of property rights in this country. MPs and senators of all partisan stripes will be welcomed at the event.

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WIND TURBINES

Mr. Gary Schellenberger (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Health Canada announced a study in 2012 to research the impact of wind turbines on the health of Canadians. The result of this study, expected later this year, may come too late for some. Though the study remains incomplete, windmills have been constructed at unprecedented levels.

While I applaud our government for launching such a study, I ask those responsible locally to reflect before prescribing a policy they would never want in their own cities and penthouse apartments.

Wind turbines continue to go up in many ridings throughout rural Ontario despite objections from countless community members. Wherever windmills go up in Ontario, so does the price of electricity, while neighbouring residents see their quality of life and property values lowered.

The people in rural Ontario are tired of having our communities ignored, our health jeopardized and our rights denied.

Statements by Members

CHILD POVERTY

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, this year we mark the 25th anniversary of the unanimous resolution by Parliament to eradicate child poverty by 2000.

On November 25, the all-party anti-poverty caucus, a caucus that I am honoured to co-chair, will mark that anniversary in partnership with Campaign 2000. In 1989 we had the collective will, the values and the conviction to want to eliminate poverty, but a quarter century later, we still do not have a concrete plan to make it happen.

As a result, Canada is now ranked close to last in UNICEF and OECD reports on the welfare of children. We spend the least on early childhood education and care. We are the only industrialized nation without a national affordable housing strategy. Only one in five children has access to regulated child care. We do not have a universal food program for kids. The federal minimum wage has been eliminated, and over 60% of Canadians do not have access to EI.

It is time for all of us to recommit to building a Canada where no one is left behind. It is about justice, not charity. It is about human rights.

On this 25th anniversary of the Broadbent resolution, it is time to keep the promise to make Canada poverty free.

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KOMAGATA MARU

Mr. Devinder Shory (Calgary Northeast, CPC): Mr. Speaker, 100 years ago today, over 300 passengers of Sikh, Hindu and Muslim background were returned to India, where 19 of them were killed.

I am proud that our Prime Minister stood up publicly, in front of thousands of people, and expressed Canada's official apology on behalf of the government and Canadians for historical policies that led to such a tragic event.

I am also proud that we are the first government that funded documentary projects, unveiled a commemorative stamp, and erected the first public monument in memory of the *Komagata Maru* passengers, which will remind future generations how Canada transformed into a multicultural and pluralistic society.

As Canadians, we can all be proud that Canada has been built into the tolerant, open and diverse society that we all enjoy today.

* * *

[*Translation*]

HOUSE OF COMMONS PAGES

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Mr. Speaker, every year, 40 students are selected from secondary schools and CEGEPs across the country to work as pages in the House of Commons.

I am very pleased to congratulate Emilie Stewart from Beresford, who was chosen from among 175 candidates to be a page in the House of Commons for the 2014-15 school year. Emilie is studying political science and history at the University of Ottawa.

Becoming a House of Commons page gives young people an opportunity to work at the heart of Canadian political history. Their participation in the parliamentary machinery is crucial to the operation of the House of Commons and to members' functions.

I encourage all young Canadians to apply to this program during the next recruitment campaign. It is a unique experience that only a few Canadians will have in their lives.

Once again, congratulations to Emilie and all the pages. I look forward to working with you. Thank you so much for all your hard work.

* * *

● (1410)

[*English*]

FIREARMS

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canadians know that they can count on a Conservative government to put forth safe and sensible firearms policies.

This summer in my riding, I heard from constituents who were concerned that the Canadian firearms program had reclassified two commonly used rifles. This was done without any approval or consultation and impacted thousands of law-abiding gun owners. This is clearly unacceptable to Conservatives who believe in the right to use and own private property. The Minister of Public Safety took action to ensure that lawfully purchased firearms remain lawful.

Our Conservative government will introduce the common sense firearms licensing act in the near future. Contrast that with the third party. The third party leader said recently:

> I voted to keep the firearms registry...and if we had a vote tomorrow I would vote once again to keep the long-gun registry....

My party and I are proud to stand with law-abiding hunters, farmers and sport shooters, and the right to own and use private property. On this side of the House, we stand for freedom.

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AUTO INDUSTRY

Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Scarborough—Guildwood has the good fortune to be the home of Toyota Canada. This year, Toyota is celebrating its 50th anniversary. It employs over 24,000 Canadians and has sold 4.6 million vehicles made in Cambridge and Woodstock.

Toyota is an environmental leader. The Toyota Evergreen learning grounds initiative has created over 2,000 green spaces in Canadian schools. Among its many research initiatives with Canadian universities, it created the cold weather testing facility in Timmins. During its time in Canada, it has sold over 100,000 hybrids. In fact, 75% of all hybrids sold in Canada are Toyota models.

I am sure my colleagues in the House will join me in thanking Toyota for its investment in Canadian industry, jobs and building a greener economy. Here is to 50 more successful years in Canada.

TERRORISM

Mr. Corneliu Chisu (Pickering—Scarborough East, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in the dark and dangerous world we live in, it is important that any responsible government takes steps to keep Canadians safe. That is why our Conservative government has made it a criminal offence to go overseas to engage in terrorism. We have also taken steps to be able to strip the citizenship of those convicted of terrorist offences.

Despite this, the Liberal leader has a different approach. He says that the Boston bombing was caused by a feeling of exclusion. The senior Liberal member for Kingston and the Islands says that Liberals see a light and beauty inside every person, specifically citing a terrorist who beheaded three western journalists. Most shockingly, the Liberal leader goes shopping for votes in an extremist mosque in Montreal and has the temerity to expect the government to tell him he should not associate with those who condone the subjugation of women.

Our Conservative government will stand up for law-abiding Canadians against radical extremists.

* * *

[*Translation*]

THE SENATE

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, after the miserable failures of Brazeau, Wallin, Gerstein, Duffy and the like, we realized that the Conservatives' selection process was pretty haphazard.

However, we have just learned that they offered a Senate seat to Julie Snyder, who has ties to Ms. Marois and is the wife of an aspiring Parti Québécois leader. I have nothing against Ms. Snyder. On the contrary, she turned down the offer.

The Conservatives' hypocrisy is the issue here. They usually go after the big bad separatists, but apparently anything goes when it is time to stack the Senate. It is pretty obvious: if they ever get hold of the mascot Badaboum, they will likely appoint him to the Senate. That is how desperate they are.

We will let the Conservatives find their future Senate lackeys and the Liberals sort out who they are: Liberal senators who are not Liberals, but who espouse Liberal ideals nonetheless.

The NDP is the only party to have figured out that the senators themselves are the problem.

● (1415)

[*English*]

TERRORISM

Ms. Roxanne James (Scarborough Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, terrorism is a very real threat in the world today, and our government will do what is necessary to protect the safety and security of our country. We have the power to revoke passports from those fighting with terrorist groups and we will revoke citizenship from those who are convicted of terrorism.

We are acting to protect Canada from those who pose a security threat. In fact, four out of five Canadians agree with our government's decision to revoke passports. Despite having the support of Canadians, the Liberal Party continues to be offside with what Canadians expect. Its comments and actions in the past weeks are irresponsible, and quite frankly, incomprehensible.

The Liberal Party believes that those who seek to harm our country should keep their Canadian passports and that we should see the light and beauty in terrorists. This is a clear indication that the Liberals are in way over their heads.

Unlike the Liberal Party, the Conservative government will continue to act in the best interests of our country, while protecting all Canadians.

ORAL QUESTIONS

[*English*]

NATIONAL DEFENCE

Ms. Megan Leslie (Halifax, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in the past week we have heard a great deal from members of the government about Canadian involvement in the mission in Iraq, but unfortunately, none of it was here in this House before members of Parliament.

Canadians have a right to know what their government is planning when it comes to our troops operating on foreign soil. Does the government plan to send Canadian Forces to conduct air strikes in Iraq?

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the fanaticism of this terrorist movement is a direct threat to the region, a direct threat to our allies, and a direct threat to Canada. The government has taken a number of measures in providing support, including humanitarian assistance, military assistance.

We have been asked to do more by the Obama administration. I can report to the member opposite clearly no decisions have been taken.

Ms. Megan Leslie (Halifax, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Canada cannot deal with the humanitarian and security threats that ISIL poses without a clear strategy.

The Conservatives have evaded question after question on the Canadian participation in Iraq. Canada should not sleepwalk into a war that our allies have acknowledged would be years long.

When will the Prime Minister bring Canadian involvement in the military mission in Iraq to a vote in this House?

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, whenever this government has sent or renewed combat missions, we have always consulted Parliament and had a vote.

Let me tell the House what we have done. As Minister of Foreign Affairs, I took the critic for foreign affairs of the member's party and the critic for foreign affairs of the third party to Iraq so they could ask questions and see the situation for themselves. We voluntarily called back the parliamentary committee a week before Parliament resumed so that we could present and discuss it there. We supported an emergency debate within 48 hours of Parliament resuming.

I will say very clearly, if there were to be a combat mission, we would seek to bring it before Parliament as a matter of confidence.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in less than 30 days, the Conservative talking points on Iraq have evolved quite a bit. Last week in New York, the Prime Minister announced that he is now considering Canadian involvement in airstrikes. However, there has been no debate or vote in Parliament and the government is not answering our questions.

My question is very straightforward: how many of the 69 special forces personnel are on the ground in Iraq right now?

[*English*]

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I do not have an hour-by-hour number to give my colleague opposite, but I would be very happy to get the specific numbers and relay them to her directly.

The government has not taken a position on further requests from the Obama administration. What we do know is we are dealing with a fanatical terrorist movement that is a direct threat not just to Iraq, Syria and the region and our allies, but a direct threat to Canada. Standing back and doing nothing is not an option. That is why we are working with virtually the entire civilized world to confront this evil before more religious minorities are targeted and before more violence takes place.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we have long been asking how many of the 69 military personnel are on the ground. The current mission will conclude on Saturday, and we have yet to receive a response. What is more, we still do not know what their mandate is or what specific role they are playing.

When will the government finally report to the House on the current mission? When will it hold a real debate in the House on Canada's military involvement in Iraq and put it to a vote?

● (1420)

[*English*]

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the opposition members are demanding a debate and vote in Parliament on a combat mission. They are pushing against an open door. The Prime Minister and this government have always brought such matters before this House and have always had a vote. That is exactly what we do.

We have not brought forward normal routine matters. We have the HMCS *Toronto* in the Black Sea. The NDP did not ask for a debate and a vote on that. We sent troops to Poland and a reassurance package for NATO. The NDP did not ask for a vote on that. We have CF-18s in the Balkans. The NDP has not asked for a vote on that.

When there is a combat mission, if there is a combat mission, there will be a debate and a vote.

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BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ms. Megan Leslie (Halifax, NDP): Mr. Speaker, question period is an opportunity for opposition parties to ask about government business. Common sense dictates that having a period for questions assumes answers. The NDP has proposed a practical motion simply requiring answers to be related to the questions that are asked. To be clear, Conservative ministers would still have the right to be wrong; we are just requiring them to be relevant.

Will the Conservatives now do the right thing, stop their procedural tricks and support our motion to make Parliament more honest and more accountable?

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our Parliament enjoys the most accountable question period of any Parliament in the world. Questions come without notice on any subject and we have to be ready to answer them, unlike in the U.K. where, for example, notice is required, and only a limited number of ministers is available in any particular question period.

However, I will say that the NDP motion, which is a one-way street, seeks to fully constrain the government without applying any new standards at all to the opposition to elevate the level of question period. This is simply unfair. We believe in two-way debates. We also believe that question period should be a two-way street, and the government should not be left with its hands tied while the opposition has a free hand.

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[*Translation*]

NATIONAL DEFENCE

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we have learned through media leaks that cabinet will be discussing plans to involve Canadian planes in the air strikes against ISIS forces. Can the government tell the House when that meeting will take place and what plans cabinet will be considering?

[*English*]

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, talking about a leak, the Prime Minister was at the United Nations, and when asked that question, he said that the United States had made additional requests to Canada and that the government would soon be reviewing the decision. He came back to Canada. The government does meet on a regular basis; cabinet meets; caucus meets; committees meet. We have not made any decision with respect to additional involvement, but we will reflect on the request that has been made. We certainly welcome any advice that the member opposite would have.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the government chose to leak information about the possible deployment in Iraq rather than bring the debate to the House of Commons where it belongs. I do not need to remind the minister that in this House the government has to be open and truthful to Canadians about what precise planning is going on.

Perhaps the minister could tell Canadians what the parameters are that the government is considering for a possible deployment of Canadian Forces to Iraq.

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, cabinet has not considered this matter. We have a request from the Obama administration for further support in the campaign against terror. This fanatical terrorist organization is a direct threat to people in the region, to our allies and to Canada. We think it is important to play a constructive role.

We called the committee back early and debated the issue. We took the Liberal Party's foreign affairs critic to Iraq.

If there is going to be a combat mission, we will bring it before this House for a debate and a vote, and we look forward to hearing from the member opposite.

Ms. Joyce Murray (Vancouver Quadra, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Parliament needs to be consulted about sending the Canadian Armed Forces into combat. What is the time period that the government is considering for the deployment of the Canadian Armed Forces?

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, yes, if the government proposes a combat mission to Iraq, we will bring it before Parliament. We will have a debate. We will have a vote.

The member opposite wants to know what is the time period. The government has made no such decision. We recently got a request from President Obama. We will review that request. If we do propose a combat mission, and we have not yet made a decision as to whether we will, we will bring it before this House just like we have done in every other instance.

I wish the previous Liberal government under Paul Martin had brought these issues before Parliament.

● (1425)

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, what we do know is that when that party was in opposition, its members asked for a vote in the House every time we deployed troops. It is not just good enough when it is on their time and their dime; it is about when we send people abroad.

While we have been trying to get answers from the government on how many troops have been sent to Iraq, what they are doing, what their mandate is and what the assessment will be, we could have actually been saving lives. We could have been building refugee camps. We could have been supporting minorities who need our protection. We could have been doing that right now, instead of trying to figure out what the heck the government is doing over in Iraq with our troops.

Why are we not helping our people—

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canada and Canadian taxpayers are providing relief supplies and emergency shelters. We are helping protect civilians. We are providing financial support to the International Committee of the Red Cross and to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees on the protection of minorities. We are working to support initiatives on sexual and gender-based violence.

If there will be a combat mission, this government has said repeatedly, and I will say it again, that we would bring it before Parliament for debate and a vote.

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, even the minister himself, on September 9, said that we are not doing enough to help support refugees, as well as some of the other issues that we asked for support for.

Saving lives in Iraq must be our top priority. That is what Canadians want to see us doing, not playing politics. U.S. Ambassador Heyman said, this weekend—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order. The member for Ottawa Centre still has the floor, and I will ask members to let him finish putting the question.

The hon. member for Ottawa Centre.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Mr. Speaker, U.S. Ambassador Heyman said on the weekend that it is a multi-pronged approach and that Canada can help to do what we can to help save lives.

We believe that is the case. The question is, what did Mr. Obama ask us to do, and did we offer or were we the ones who were asked?

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the ambassador from the United States was very clear that the President of the United States, President Obama, asked.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Élaine Michaud (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, NDP): Mr. Speaker, a lot of basic questions about Canada's military involvement in Iraq remain unanswered.

For example, our soldiers have been in Iraq for nearly 30 days, but we still know nothing about the logistical problems they have faced.

Can the minister tell us whether an agreement on the status of the forces on the ground was in place to ensure legal protection for our soldiers when they arrived in Iraq?

[*English*]

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as we indicated before, our armed forces have obtained full diplomatic status. They are there at the request of Iraq. They are providing strategic and tactical advice.

We have been very clear on that. It would be nice if the NDP got on side with the important work that are our armed forces are doing over there.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Élaine Michaud (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, NDP): Mr. Speaker, unlike the Liberals, we are not willing to give the government a blank cheque. There are too many unanswered questions.

The British debated and voted on this in the House, but the Prime Minister chose to go to New York to announce his plans to boost Canada's military involvement in Iraq. It looks like the Prime Minister cares more about the Americans' opinion than about Canadians' opinion.

When will we have a real debate and a vote in the House on Canada's involvement in Iraq?

[*English*]

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we called the committee back early. We brought the official opposition foreign affairs critic to Iraq so he could ask questions and see things himself. We had a debate within 48 hours of Parliament returning for this session.

We have said that if there is going to be a combat mission, we will hold a vote. We will hold debate.

What we saw, though, in the United Kingdom was the opposition parties, including the social democratic Labour Party, stand up and fight terrorism. That is what we need to see from this social democratic party.

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EMPLOYMENT

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims (Newton—North Delta, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the farce that the government has made of the temporary foreign worker program continues.

Today we learned that the government granted labour market opinions and work visas for a company that did not even exist. As a result a worker from Iran is out $25,000 to a shady immigration consultant, and he still has no job.

Is this what the minister considers due diligence? How are the minister's paperwork-only inspections going to catch this kind of violation the next time?

● (1430)

Hon. Jason Kenney (Minister of Employment and Social Development and Minister for Multiculturalism, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the application was made by a third party, not the company in question. What happened was absolutely outrageous, which is why there is a Canada Border Services Agency investigation, as well as one led by my ministry.

The good news is that the stronger new penalties we put in place can be imposed on abusive employers and on crooked immigration consultants who facilitate such fraud. There should be no quarter for such people, who exploit vulnerable immigrants and cheat our immigration system.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé (Saint-Lambert, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is becoming increasingly difficult to believe the minister.

His reform of the temporary foreign worker program is supposed to address the serious labour shortages in Canada. However, he seems incapable of getting any reliable data on the labour market from his department. Employers are saying that the statistics on the number of temporary foreign workers in this country do not reflect the reality.

How can we believe that the minister will get the temporary foreign worker program back on track when he cannot even tell us what is really going on?

Hon. Jason Kenney (Minister of Employment and Social Development and Minister for Multiculturalism, CPC): Mr. Speaker, unfortunately, the hon. member is wrong.

The data relative to the program is multifaceted. We know exactly how many foreign workers are entitled to work in Canada. For instance, one set of data is provided by employers. Our research shows that most of the discrepancies recently reported in the media come from information provided by employers.

In the new system, we will verify all the information provided by employers.

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé (Saint-Lambert, NDP): Mr. Speaker, there have been more and more cases of abuse of the temporary foreign worker program.

In Alberta, an employee who was paid less than the legal minimum for several years never received her raise when the labour market opinion was renewed in 2012. It was very tragic for this young woman, who lost everything when the company went bankrupt.

Clearly, the new administrative controls do nothing to protect workers from exploitation by unscrupulous employers.

Will the minister do something to put an end to these abuses?

Hon. Jason Kenney (Minister of Employment and Social Development and Minister for Multiculturalism, CPC): Mr. Speaker, once again, the hon. member is completely wrong. Indeed, we have the power to penalize employers who do not follow the rules.

I thank the public servants in Alberta who brought this violation of their wage regulations to our attention. Naturally, my department is now conducting an investigation. There are serious penalities—which are even more serious since the new legislation passed in June—for employers who violate the rules of the program.

[*English*]

Ms. Linda Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Alberta Federation of Labour has released information revealing that the government routinely grants labour market opinions to Alberta companies who significantly underpay temporary foreign workers. Some LMOs are being granted without even listing a prevailing wage, which is a violation of the law. Far too many companies have been allowed to significantly increase their percentage of temporary foreign workers for skilled jobs.

Why is this minister not enforcing the law in Alberta to protect Canadian workers?

Hon. Jason Kenney (Minister of Employment and Social Development and Minister for Multiculturalism, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am and we are. In fact, there is an absolute, unconditional obligation for employers to have their labour market opinions approved, and, in the past and under the new system, to pay at the prevailing wage rate unless there is a collective bargaining agreement that is below the prevailing wage rate, which is the case in the instance that the member raises.

What I find really peculiar is that after reforms in June, her colleague, the NDP finance critic, complained that employers said that the new rules were far too stringent and that they needed more temporary foreign workers in his constituency, so could the member tell me what the position of the NDP really is?

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, another day and another example of mismanagement of the temporary foreign worker program, but it does not stop there. Conservative mismanagement is taking its toll on the economy too.

Today S&P slashed growth forecasts for Canada in just the latest condemnation of the Conservative record. For far too long, Canadians have faced low wages and persistent unemployment under the Conservative government. When will the minister switch course and introduce a plan to create good, full-time, family-sustaining jobs?

● (1435)

Hon. Kevin Sorenson (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member knows that thanks to our Conservative government, Canada has emerged from the global downturn with one of the strongest economies. In fact, undoubtedly, Canada's economy is envied by most of the world. Over 1.1 million net new jobs have been created in this country. Again, the majority of those are in the private sector, and overwhelmingly they are full-time jobs.

Both the IMF and the OECD recognize Canada's future. Coming through this global downturn, Canada is the economy that is going to come out strong.

Mr. Arnold Chan (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister's last-minute change to the agenda of the visiting EU delegation meant that Canadians had to swallow $300,000 to fly the delegation home on a government Airbus. Meanwhile, hard-working families in southern Ontario are struggling to make ends meet, yet the minister of state for economic development is missing in action. Despite a budget of $177 million to help create jobs, the minister has only invested $79,000 this year.

When will the minister finally do his job and address the unacceptably high rate of unemployment in southwestern Ontario?

Hon. Ed Fast (Minister of International Trade, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member referred to the comprehensive economic and trade agreement that we just signed with the EU, which is great news. Last Friday's events saw the launch of a huge coalition of Canadian businesses and stakeholders, which are committed to taking advantage of the most comprehensive trade agreement in Canada's history. This coalition represents hard-working Canadians from coast to coast to coast who understand the benefits of this agreement to Canada.

However, it should surprise no one that the Liberals would continue to undermine Canada's trade agenda. On this side of the House, we know how important trade and investment are to Canada's long-term prosperity.

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EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Hon. Scott Brison (Kings—Hants, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, economists like Jack Mintz and Mike Moffatt have warned the finance minister that his new EI tax credit will actually discourage job creation. They have called it a "disincentive to growth".

Does the minister understand that his tax credit perversely rewards employers for laying off workers? Does he see the flaw in his tax credit and, most importantly, will he agree to fix it, because Canada needs growth and jobs, not incentives to fire workers?

Hon. Jason Kenney (Minister of Employment and Social Development and Minister for Multiculturalism, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Liberals keep claiming that people have criticized this job-creating payroll tax cut introduced by the Minister of Finance, and it turns out not to be true. For example, they said the CFIB was opposed, when in fact it said it is "...fantastic news for Canada's entrepreneurs and their employees, and as such, can only be a positive for the Canadian economy."

However, what the member is not telling us is the real Liberal EI agenda, which is to increase all sorts of benefits and programs to the tune of $6 billion, which corresponds to a 33% increase in job-killing EI payroll taxes.

Hon. Scott Brison (Kings—Hants, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order, please. We have moved on to the next question.

The member for Kings—Hants now has the floor.

Hon. Scott Brison: Mr. Speaker, the minister should be trying to fix the flawed Conservative plan and implementing the strong, sensible Liberal plan that actually rewards firms for hiring workers, the Liberal plan that is endorsed by groups like Restaurants Canada, CFIB, and the Canadian Manufacturers & Exporters association.

Will the government listen to these job creators and adopt the Liberal plan, which actually rewards firms for hiring new workers?

Hon. Jason Kenney (Minister of Employment and Social Development and Minister for Multiculturalism, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as the Canadian Manufacturers & Exporters said, this government's small business job credit will help make the Canadian economy become more competitive. The CFIB said it was fantastic news.

However, I want the member to come clean, because he is skating around the fundamental issue. His party in the past few years has demanded that people should be able to qualify for EI benefits in 45 days. That costs $4 billion. Liberals have advocated another series of changes that would cost an additional $2 billion.

That equals a 33% increase in those premiums. Is that still the policy of the Liberal Party of Canada?

* * *

● (1440)

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Speaker, last year the Prime Minister flew over to Europe and confidently announced "mission accomplished" for the trade deal with the European Union—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: I think there may have been more. I think government members may have been a little early in applauding the question. I will ask them to hold off until the member for Skeena—Bulkley Valley is finished asking his question.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Mr. Speaker, they will have to hold their applause, because I am not done yet, and apparently neither is this trade deal.

Almost a year ago, the Conservatives said it was just technicalities and a little legal scrubbing that was left to do. Unless the Conservatives think serious opposition from the German government's economy minister is a technicality, they have a problem.

I have a simple question. Is the Prime Minister open to the changes from the German economy minister, yes or no?

Hon. Ed Fast (Minister of International Trade, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to report that today we found out that the new trade commissioner for the European Union, Cecilia Malmström, just said that the CETA, the trade agreement with the EU, is very good for the European Union and that the dispute settlement provisions in the agreement address the EU's concerns relating to transparency and its ability to regulate in the public interest.

This agreement is going to add over 80,000 new jobs to the Canadian economy. That is equivalent to $1,000 in additional income for the average Canadian family every year. That is good news.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Guy Caron (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives are essentially asking us to blindly accept a trade agreement without knowing all the details. More specifically, we still do not know anything about the government's strategy for compensating the sectors affected by the agreement with Europe.

The Prime Minister and his friends can go ahead and pat themselves on the back, but entire sectors of the economy are waiting for an answer. For example, what compensation will be provided to cheese producers? What compensation will be provided to the provinces affected by the increased cost of drugs? When will Canadians have clear answers?

[*English*]

Hon. Ed Fast (Minister of International Trade, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is passing strange that the New Democrats would get up in the House and claim that they still want to have more information about the deal. A few months ago, they said they were waiting for the final text to be released to the public. We did that last week, and now we hear the same old anti-trade, anti-investment rhetoric.

On this side of the House, we know how important new opportunities for trade are to our Canadian business people, our investors, and our consumers. On this side, we are getting things done.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Ève Péclet (La Pointe-de-l'Île, NDP): Mr. Speaker, last week, the Prime Minister gave a group of European delegates the royal treatment after insisting that they join him at a reception in Toronto. They got to go back home on board an Airbus on the taxpayers' dime. The total cost of the operation was $300,000.

At a time of budgetary restrictions and cuts to public services, how can the Prime Minister justify giving the royal treatment to leaders who clearly do not need it?

[*English*]

Hon. Ed Fast (Minister of International Trade, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this trade agreement is a historic one. In fact, last Friday's event saw the launch of a huge coalition of Canadian businesses and stakeholders who are committed to taking advantage of this historic agreement. The coalition represents hard-working Canadians across the country, from every region of our country and every sector of our economy.

It should surprise no one that the New Democrats would want us to cancel the event. They wanted us to cancel this event because we know they are anti-trade, anti-investment and have no credibility on trade whatsoever.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the downside of the Prime Minister's very bad week was that it cost Canadian taxpayers half a million dollars for a photo op. The Conservatives tell us that there is no money for veterans offices, they cannot afford to deliver the mail, and 65-year-old miners cannot afford to retire, but they can take a couple of European bureaucrats and fly them across the ocean for a photo op.

I would like the minister to tell us how much it cost for flights and security for this faux second signing of this trade deal.

Hon. Ed Fast (Minister of International Trade, CPC): Mr. Speaker, why would the opposition want us to cancel such a critical element of this event, the Canada-EU summit? We know that the NDP is anti-trade. Not once has it stood in the House and supported any one of the free trade agreements that Canada has ever signed.

On this side of the House, in a short eight years, the government has signed free trade agreements with 38 different countries, and there are many more to come. On this side, we understand how important trade and investment are to driving economic growth and long-term prosperity in the country.

* * *

● (1445)

PUBLIC SAFETY

Ms. Joan Crockatt (Calgary Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we live in a dangerous era. The Islamic State poses a threat to Canada. In fact, it has even made a propaganda video where it encourages radical jihadists to attack Canadians.

Our Conservative government is standing up strongly for Canadians against anyone who would pose harm to us. In fact, we have even taken measures to stop people from travelling abroad for terrorist purposes.

Would the Minister of Public Safety please tell the House today what we are doing to deter and repel the threat posed by ISIL?

Hon. Steven Blaney (Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for Calgary Centre for this excellent question.

[*Translation*]

We introduced legislation for combatting terrorism, despite the NDP's opposition. Four out of five Canadians agree with revoking the Canadian passports of terrorists.

[*English*]

Shockingly, the Liberal leader opposes this common sense policy. He has called the revocation of passports an affront to Canadian values.

We, as a Conservative government, never agreed that our passports ought to be shared with terrorists who want to cut off our heads because we disagree with them.

* * *

[*Translation*]

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Mr. Romeo Saganash (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today Amnesty International is marking the 10th anniversary of its “Stolen Sisters” report. It is a sorry anniversary that reminds us of yet another decade of inaction by the government, another decade of frustration for the families of the 1,200 missing or murdered women.

Will the government finally launch a national public inquiry into the fate of these women?

[*English*]

Hon. K. Kellie Leitch (Minister of Labour and Minister of Status of Women, CPC): Mr. Speaker, what I would like to put very clearly is that we have acted and the NDP has not. We are moving forward.

Let me quote the National Association of Friendship Centres.

> Violence against Aboriginal women and girls is completely unacceptable, and we all have a role to play in ensuring the safety, health and wellness of our communities. The Action Plan [our government's action plan]...will provide the investments that our communities need.

I encourage the NDP to quit voting against everything, to get on board, and to make sure we are dealing with these victims of crime.

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskasing, NDP): Mr. Speaker, on this side of the House, we are not going to wait another decade; we will not even wait another year. We will call a national public inquiry into the issue of missing and murdered —

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order, please.

The hon. member for Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskasing has the floor.

If the minister of Minister of the Environment wants to answer the question, she can answer it after I have recognized her, but not while the member is asking the question.

The hon. member for Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskasing.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: Mr. Speaker, we will call a national public inquiry into the issue of missing and murdered indigenous women within the first 100 days of a New Democrat government. As Amnesty International and NWAC reminded us today: no more stolen sisters; no more inaction.

What is the government so afraid of? What is it trying to hide this time? Will the government finally listen and put in place a national public inquiry into the missing and murdered indigenous women?

Hon. K. Kellie Leitch (Minister of Labour and Minister of Status of Women, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I have said in this House before, we are acting.

Unlike the NDP, unlike the opposition, which would rather hide behind a bunch of lawyers, this government is taking action to ensure we are focused on what aboriginal women and their families have asked for.

Having toured across the country and spoken to those families in confidence, we are moving forward with a plan that supports them, that puts in place preventative measures, and also that ensures we are protecting them.

Unlike the NDP that votes against matrimonial property rights, against shelters for women who have been the victims of violence, we are acting today because that is what we have been asked to do.

* * *

ETHICS

Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives have done it again, with conflict of interest and spying.

First, the former chair of SIRC had to resign because he was working for an oil company. Now, SIRC's Yves Fortier, a former pipeline company board member, has been asked to review CSIS' illegal spying on environmentalists concerned about pipelines.

Spying on law-abiding Canadians is very serious. Any investigation by CSIS must be above suspicion.

What will the minister do now to address the conflict of interest that the Conservatives have created at the Security Intelligence Review Committee?

● (1450)

Hon. Steven Blaney (Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Security Intelligence Review Committee is made up of prominent Canadians who oversee our security services. These Canadians include a former NDP member of a provincial parliament.

We have full confidence that they will impartially review actions taken by our security services to protect Canadians against threats from any activists or radicals.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Rosane Doré Lefebvre (Alfred-Pellan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Security Intelligence Review Committee has appointed an oil lobbyist, Yves Fortier, to investigate spying on environmentalists. Spying on law-abiding Canadians is very serious. This requires a rigorous and objective investigation. Mr. Fortier is neither impartial nor credible enough.

The Conservatives have created a conflict of interest. Will they stop making partisan appointments to the CSIS review committee so that investigations can be completely objective?

Hon. Steven Blaney (Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I just explained to my colleague, the Security Intelligence Review Committee is an independent committee made up of people with impeccable reputations. Even some former NDPers are members of this committee. That is why I have full confidence in their ability to continue to protect Canadians against potential threats from extremists.

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INTERGOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent—Cartierville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, when asked about her refusal to provide scientific evidence concerning the impact of exploratory drilling in Cacouna on the health of belugas to Quebec's minister of sustainable development, the environment and the fight against climate change, the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans responded that she does not want to get involved in a provincial process. She is refusing to share scientific information even though the best marine mammal experts work for the federal government.

How can the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, if this government has one, tolerate such bad federalism? This is detrimental to informed decision-making about the environment and the economy. We have had enough of the federal government's silo approach; we want co-operation.

[*English*]

Hon. Gail Shea (Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the authorization that was granted by the federal government was for minor exploratory work only. Any application for the building of a terminal has not even come forward yet, and when it does it will be subject to the full NEB environmental process.

However, the Quebec court decision has nothing to do with the review conducted by DFO. Quebec conducts its own reviews, under its own laws.

DFO conducted its review and delivered an authorization which was based upon scientific expertise, and under the strictest conditions.

* * *

EMPLOYMENT

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, when the human resources minister's predecessor boasted that she had loosened regulations on temporary foreign workers, making it quicker and easier to get workers, we knew that decision was based on no information, and it hurt Canadian workers. Now this minister is trying to clean up her mess, using bad information and hurting Canadian businesses. It is like being on an elevator with no numbers on the button; we just keep pushing to see where we land.

When will the Conservative government admit that it has lost this program, turn it over to a committee of the House for study, and fix this program that is important to both workers and business?

Hon. Jason Kenney (Minister of Employment and Social Development and Minister for Multiculturalism, CPC): Mr. Speaker, follow the bouncing ball of the Liberal position on this.

First, the Liberal leader lobbied that we overturn a decision so that his favourite restaurant could get low-skilled temporary foreign workers. Then the Liberals voted to completely shut down the low-skilled temporary foreign worker program and the leader said we had to dramatically reduce the numbers coming in. Now we have made some fundamental reforms, and the Liberals are saying that those reforms are hurting businesses. The Liberal position on this is completely incoherent.

Our position is that Canadians should come first and the temporary worker program should be a last and limited resort.

* * *

[*Translation*]

CHAMPLAIN BRIDGE

Mr. Hoang Mai (Brossard—La Prairie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the NDP has been opposed to a toll on the future Champlain Bridge for a long time now. We are talking about a replacement bridge, not a new bridge. The Liberals are not opposed to the toll.

The entire region is against the toll, yet the solution the Minister of Infrastructure comes up with is to impose more tolls. Well done.

Can the minister at least admit that a toll on the Champlain Bridge would cause traffic problems on the other bridges in Montreal?

● (1455)

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, for Official Languages and for the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the good news is that there is going to be a new bridge.

A new bridge will be built and the project will create 30,000 jobs in Montreal, Quebec and Canada. That is very good for economic prosperity.

In the meantime, we are staying the course and continuing to move forward with the project, including the toll.

Mr. Hoang Mai (Brossard—La Prairie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today, the Minister of Infrastructure said that he was open to imposing tolls on the federal bridges in Montreal. That would mean tolls on the Champlain Bridge, the Jacques-Cartier Bridge and the Honoré-Mercier Bridge. Once again, the government is making things up as it goes along.

Before even thinking about a toll and running the risk of making a complete mess, why does the minister not sit down with provincial and municipal stakeholders in Quebec and develop a coordinated transportation plan?

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, for Official Languages and for the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the minister is working closely with the Government of Quebec and all the stakeholders from the south shore and Montreal.

We are staying the course. A new bridge will be built and 30,000 new jobs will be created. All of this will be done on time, and things are even ahead of schedule.

* * *

[*English*]

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Mr. Earl Dreeshen (Red Deer, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government recently announced its plan to reduce premiums for small businesses that pay less than $15,000 in total EI payments, with the goal in mind to help stimulate job creation. The Liberals opposing this have come out with their own plan, which is scarce on details.

Can the Minister of Employment and Social Development update this House on what the Liberal plan for employment insurance would mean for Canadian workers and businesses?

Hon. Jason Kenney (Minister of Employment and Social Development and Minister for Multiculturalism, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for his question and for supporting lower taxes for small businesses.

The small business job credit recently announced by this government will reduce payroll taxes for over 90% of Canadian businesses by some $550 million over the next couple of years. According to the CFIB, this will help create over 20,000 new jobs.

However, the Liberal plan is to massively increase the cost of the EI program. They have announced a 45-day work year, if members can believe it. Cumulatively, that is $6 billion, or a 33% increase in payroll taxes, a job-killing—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Saint-Maurice—Champlain.

* * *

[*Translation*]

FORESTRY INDUSTRY

Ms. Lise St-Denis (Saint-Maurice—Champlain, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the closure of the Resolute Forest Products mill in Grand-Mère is yet another devastating blow to the industry in Canada.

The Mauricie resource region, which is losing its niche market in the forestry industry, is entitled to expect solutions from the federal government.

Does the minister have any concrete proposals for communities in the Mauricie region that remain powerless as their industrial heritage is destroyed?

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, for Official Languages and for the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canada Economic Development for Quebec Regions is working closely with all communities and players to help forestry companies. I can assure members that any suggestions that come in will be assessed on merit.

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THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr. François Lapointe (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, NDP): Mr. Speaker, scientists who study belugas are worried. They think that we are on the verge of a catastrophe.

This summer alone, biologists in Tadoussac found nine dead belugas, including five babies and pregnant females. This is a big deal for an endangered species with a population under 1,000. As a result, before disturbing the beluga habitat with an oil port project, the government should be cautious and should seek the advice of marine mammal experts. That is the only appropriate approach. The only one.

Why does the minister refuse to let scientists at her own department's science branch speak? Does she have something to hide?

[*English*]

Hon. Gail Shea (Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this decision was made by scientists and was based on science. After DFO conducted its review and delivered the authorization based on scientific expertise, under the strictest conditions, this minor exploratory work was granted. Authorization was granted.

As far as scientists speaking, the House should know that over the last two years, DFO scientists have done over 600 interviews with the media.

● (1500)

CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION

Mr. John Weston (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the *Komagata Maru* arrived in Vancouver harbour in 1914 carrying 376 passengers of Indian descent, most of whom were not allowed to land. After two months under difficult conditions, the ship and most of its passengers were forced to return to India, where in a subsequent clash with British soldiers, 19 passengers died.

Would the Minister of State for Multiculturalism please inform the House about what our government is doing to commemorate and educate Canadians about this tragic event?

Hon. Tim Uppal (Minister of State (Multiculturalism), CPC): Mr. Speaker, the tragic events of the *Komagata Maru* truly are a regrettable chapter in Canada's immigration history. Our Prime Minister is the first prime minister in Canadian history to apologize on behalf of Canadians for that tragedy.

Further to that, Canada Post released an historic stamp earlier this year. We funded multimedia education materials. We funded a permanent monument in Vancouver, a museum to further educate Canadians, and a great exhibit, called "Lions of the Sea", which will be going right across the country. I encourage Canadians to visit it when it is in their part of the country.

While the opposition plays politics with this issue, we are working to educate Canadians.

* * *

NORTHERN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Mr. Dennis Bevington (Northwest Territories, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the call for the expression of interest for the northern greenhouse initiative opened less than a month ago. Projects to increase food security in the north should be a priority, but many communities, farmers, and individuals are not aware of the program or that the call for the expression of interest is open, let alone that it closes tomorrow.

Will the minister consider extending the deadline and ensuring that all those concerned, northerners included, are aware of this program?

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq (Minister of the Environment, Minister of the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency and Minister for the Arctic Council, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the program was announced in the Northwest Territories over the summer tour. The information is available online. Information is available through the NRCan website.

[*Translation*]

MARINE TRANSPORTATION

Mr. Jean-François Fortin (Haute-Gaspésie—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia, Ind.): Mr. Speaker, business people who contact the government want it to understand their needs and support them in their activities. Transport Canada's administrative burden forced Meridien Maritime in Matane to abandon its plans for a dry dock in Gros-Cacouna. The project would have created about a hundred long-term, high-quality, environmentally friendly jobs, but it became a casualty of paperwork when the company asked for a short extension to produce some documents.

The other project under way in that area, an oil port, is getting all of the government's attention and enjoying the fewest constraints possible.

Why the double standard?

[*English*]

Hon. Lisa Raitt (Minister of Transport, CPC): Mr. Speaker, when Transport Canada officials assess projects or when they are undertaking whether or not vessels can be utilized in certain harbours and safe ports in our geography, they do take into consideration safety and security, other people who work on board the vessel, and other people in the area. That is their primary focus, and in this case, that is exactly what happened.

* * *

[*Translation*]

TAXATION

Mr. Louis Plamondon (Bas-Richelieu—Nicolet—Bécancour, BQ): Mr. Speaker, in 2015, the government will be eliminating the federal tax credit for labour-sponsored funds even though it has not carried out any real impact studies or consultations.

According to one study, the gradual withdrawal of the tax credit will halve annual investment in Quebec businesses from $521 million to $250 million in three years.

Rather than eliminate the tax credit, will the minister here commit to carrying out a closer review of the labour-sponsored funds' new proposal to create a new partnership with the federal government based on mutual interests?

[*English*]

Hon. Kevin Sorenson (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, when we are dealing with taxes, of course, we are attempting to leave more money in the pockets of Canadians. As to the specific tax credit the member is concerned about, I will take it under advisement, and perhaps we can get together and talk a little bit about what he is suggesting here.

* * *

EMPLOYMENT

Mr. Brent Rathgeber (Edmonton—St. Albert, Ind.): Mr. Speaker, all Alberta MPs are hearing from their constituents regarding our unique labour shortages. In fact, the new Alberta premier, our former colleague, Jim Prentice, has indicated that changes to the temporary foreign worker program will be the first order of business he wants to discuss with the Prime Minister.

Last week the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association president, Helen Rice, implored the government to reverse the changes announced last spring, stating that Alberta MPs are not listening to Albertans and that Alberta employers desperately need access to both temporary workers and permanent immigration.

When will the employment minister and Alberta MPs start listening to Albertans and Albertans' elected representatives and reverse the ill-thought-out changes to the TFW program?

● (1505)

Hon. Jason Kenney (Minister of Employment and Social Development and Minister for Multiculturalism, CPC): Mr. Speaker, unlike the member opposite, we are listening to Albertans who want to ensure that Albertans come first for Alberta jobs and that the temporary foreign worker program is only a last and limited resort. We are concerned about the 110,000 Albertans who have no work but are looking for it.

We take note of the growth of the labour force by 100,000 people a year in Alberta. We have seen immigration double since our government came to office. We will continue to work with Albertans to ensure that they get the first crack at available jobs.

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[*Translation*]

PRESENCE IN THE GALLERY

The Speaker: I would like to draw attention to the presence in our gallery of His Excellency Ramtane Lamamra, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

* * *

[*English*]

POINTS OF ORDER

ORAL QUESTIONS

Mr. Jeff Watson (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, CPC): Mr. Speaker, during question period, the member for Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskasing, when she was interrupted in her question, turned and said, in reference to the Minister of the Environment, “Isn't she disgusting?”

That is clearly a personal attack and unparliamentary. I ask that the member rise in her place, withdraw the remark, and unreservedly apologize for the unparliamentary language.

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskasing, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is shameful that we go through what we do here in the House, but I do apologize, and I withdraw the remark.

The Speaker: I thank the hon. member for that, and I remind all members about the rules of decorum and about not heckling during questions while they are being put as well.

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

[*English*]

ASSAULTS AGAINST PUBLIC TRANSIT OPERATORS

Mr. Corneliu Chisu (Pickering—Scarborough East, CPC) moved for leave to introduce Bill S-221, An Act to amend the Criminal Code (assaults against public transit operators).

He said: Mr. Speaker, it is a great honour to introduce Bill S-221 in the House for first reading. I would first like to thank and recognize the recent hard and diligent work on Bill S-221 and the carriage of this bill by Senator Runciman in the other place.

This bill aims to address the far too frequent abuse and mistreatment of our public transit operators by implementing stricter penalties for those who aim to harm these people while they are carrying out their duties. This bill would act as a deterrent against violent incidents upon public transit operators in our communities and would increase overall safety on public transit.

(Motions deemed adopted and bill read the first time)

* * *

PETITIONS

INTERNET SERVICE PROVIDERS

Mrs. Patricia Davidson (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to present this petition, on behalf of my ratepayers, requesting that Parliament require Internet service providers to provide a mandatory opt-in Internet pornography filter as a tool parents can use to protect their children from Internet pornography.

VICTIMS SERVICES

Mr. Craig Scott (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise to present a petition in support of victims of crime. The petition is signed by about 120 members of my riding, Toronto—Danforth. The petitioners ask in particular for the government to create a meaningful country-wide system of public support for the loved ones of murder victims as well as for the victims of crimes who survive those crimes against them and to ensure adequate funding. This is in the name of Kempton Howard, who died in 2003.

I wish to also note the death by murder this weekend, in my riding, of Nahome Berhane, a leading member of the Eritrean community, who also died through public violence.

● (1510)

GENETICALLY MODIFIED ALFALFA

Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, petitioners in southwestern Ontario continue to ask this Parliament to impose a moratorium on the release of genetically modified alfalfa. The signatories on this petition join the many others presented in this House over the last many years. Canadians remain justifiably worried about cross-contamination, co-existence, transportation, and production and call upon the government to impose a moratorium on its release until such time as a proper comprehensive analysis of the impact on both organic and non-organic alfalfa is done.

AGRICULTURE

Hon. Ron Cannan (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is an honour to rise to table two petitions on behalf of constituents.

One petition is calling on Parliament to refrain from making any changes to the Seeds Act or the Plant Breeders' Rights Act through Bill C-18.

SEX SELECTION

Hon. Ron Cannan (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the second petition calls on the House to condemn discrimination against females through sex-selected pregnancy termination.

KOMAGATA MARU

Mr. Jasbir Sandhu (Surrey North, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I present a petition to this House signed by thousands of people with the help of the Prof. Mohan Singh Memorial Foundation and Sahib Thind. The petitioners are bringing forward to this House that this week marks the 100th anniversary of the return of the *Komagata Maru* to Budge Budge Ghat, where 19 passengers were killed by the British government at that time.

As members know, the *Komagata Maru* is a dark chapter in Canadian history. The ship was forced back, on July 23, 1914, from Burrard Inlet, based on racist, exclusionist policies of that government at that time. We live in a more tolerant country today. However, the petitioners are asking for the current government to officially recognize the *Komagata Maru* and apologize in the House of Commons so the healing process can begin.

NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Mr. Ted Hsu (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have two petitions today. The first is from residents of Kingston, Ontario. They are asking that the Canadian government work with other countries who have ratified the nuclear non-proliferation treaty to demand that signatories comply with the disarmament conditions in the treaty.

AGRICULTURE

Mr. Ted Hsu (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the second petition is from people in the eastern Ontario area. They are calling upon Parliament to enshrine in legislation the rights of Canadians to save, reuse, select, exchange and sell seeds, and to not infringe upon those rights through Bill C-18.

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise to table a petition that has been signed by individuals who are concerned with the growing number of murdered and missing aboriginal girls and women across Canada, which is well into the hundreds. They are calling upon the government to have a national public inquiry that would study the high number of missing and murdered aboriginal women and girls. They are looking for answers. That is one of the reasons there was a sit-in protest that went on for weeks just outside the Manitoba legislature. They have taken the time to sign the petition and have asked me to bring it forward. They are calling upon the Prime Minister to do the right thing and call for that public inquiry.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to present two petitions. The first is from residents of Qualicum Beach, Campbell River, Galiano Island and other locations within Saanich—Gulf Islands. They are calling upon the House to recognize the inherent dangers of coastal tanker traffic in British Columbia, to honour the moratorium that has been in place since 1972, to respect the first nations' constitutionally enshrined rights, and to reject the Enbridge project.

HUMAN RIGHTS

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, the second petition has hundreds of names from residents primarily of the greater Toronto area. They are calling upon the government to speak up very clearly and forthrightly to the People's Republic of China about the persecution of Falun Dafa and Falun Gong practitioners.

In a related matter, I note the persecution and the life sentence given Ilham Tohti of the Uighur community, the Muslims in China, who are also being persecuted.

* * *

QUESTIONS ON THE ORDER PAPER

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I ask that all questions be allowed to stand.

The Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

● (1515)

[*English*]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—CHANGES TO THE STANDING ORDERS

The House resumed consideration of the motion and of the motion that this question be now put.

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Speaker, there has been a great deal of turmoil over the last little while over the conduct particularly of the government in question period. For a long time question period has suffered and not met the standard which I think a lot of Canadians would hold. When questions are put, the ministers dodge or are evasive. As of last week, it had got to an extreme level where even the Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister found himself issuing statements that he was not proud of and apologized, and we took his apology.

What we have offered here today is some guidance through you, Mr. Speaker, to the ministers and parliamentary secretaries who answer questions on behalf of the government to do something as radical as have the answers bear relevance to the question. I understand that is so offensive to the current Conservative government it is trying to not even allow us to have a vote on that idea.

In the context of a question last week being so badly and I would suggest offensively answered by the government, which the member apologized for, we now have a proposition put forward, and the government's response is to completely suppress the conversation, to put closure on this conversation and not allow a proper and fair vote.

I think Canadians are going to be discouraged.

I wonder if my colleague from Hull—Aylmer has some comment on the process that the Conservatives have now heaped on top of this one progressive and positive idea to reform our Parliament and improve our question period.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nycole Turmel (Hull—Aylmer, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. member for his question and comments.

I personally think that this government is acting true to form. The government is saying in the House that we are the ones who should be answering questions. What has happened to democracy? The Conservatives are trying to find another way of avoiding the main issue, namely the motion that we have moved.

The government needs to be honest and tell us exactly what it wants to do. The Conservatives need to answer questions. We were elected to ask those questions. If the government does not want to answer questions, its members will find themselves on this side of the House after the next election. Conservative members will then be able to ask as many questions as they would like.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. member for Hull—Aylmer for her speech. I agree that the behaviour here in the House is disrespectful. It is unacceptable and I agree that we can find some other way to work together.

Does my colleague feel that the current Standing Orders provide for another means of protecting the rights of members to ensure they receive relevant answers?

Ms. Nycole Turmel: Mr. Speaker, that is exactly what our motion does. It gives you, as Speaker of the House, the authority to evaluate the question and determine whether the answer actually responded to the question. It would also apply to any committees we are part of. We need to work together to try and find solutions, or amendments if necessary, to bills that are introduced. They are always introduced to help Canadians.

However, we have a majority government that allows no opportunity for discussion or amendment and that muzzles us. I think this is the 78th time the government has used time allocation. That is unbelievable. That is not going to solve problems or improve Canada's democracy.

[*English*]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to pick up on the member's last comment in that when we see a majority government there seems to be a change in attitude. We see that in question period in that the government feels no sense of obligation to provide an answer that is even relevant to the question that is being posed. We are seeing more of that taking place.

I wonder if the member senses any sort of an overall disrespect for the proceedings in the House, beyond just question period.

● (1520)

Ms. Nycole Turmel: Mr. Speaker, I am quite pleased to hear my colleague say that when it is a majority government that is what happens. The Liberals know very well the way they worked, and now the Conservative government is doing the same thing. It is really sad to see that.

As I said in my presentation, it is sad that we are representing thousands of people and disrespect is being shown toward them. I hope that will change with this motion. I encourage the government, as well as the Liberals, to vote in favour of our motion.

Hon. Michelle Rempel (Minister of State (Western Economic Diversification), CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to have an opportunity to speak to the New Democratic Party's opposition day motion brought forward by the NDP's House leader, the hon. member for Burnaby—New Westminster.

As I understand it, the motion proposes to amend Standing Order 11(2) to empower the Speaker to enforce the standing rules of relevance used in debates for answers given in question period. Currently, the standing order applies to debates on legislation and motions.

I am going to try to take my partisan hat off as much as possible. I would like to start by discussing what I believe to be each of our general responsibilities in this place as it pertains to debate and discourse. The Parliament of Canada's website states that the chamber:

> —is where Members help to make Canada's laws by debating and voting on bills. The Chamber is also a place where MPs can put local, regional or national issues in the spotlight. They represent their constituents' views by presenting petitions, making statements and asking questions in the House.

In late 2012, Speaker Scheer made a ruling, and per a CBC article, stressed that holding governments to account is an indispensable privilege of elected MPs and reminded the government House leader that Canada has a parliamentary democracy, not a so-called executive democracy, nor a so-called administrative democracy. There we have it. The role of members is to hold the government to account, and indeed the government also has a responsibility to legislate and ensure that the government continues to operate.

How does the execution of these responsibilities work in practice? I believe that the answer to that question is as varied as there are 308 members in this place, because each of us brings our own approach to this responsibility, some more successfully than others, because it is our own individual responsibility to execute our responsibilities here and we should all be individually measured by our electorate by our willingness and ability to do so.

In this, the member has an individual responsibility to respect the level of debate in this place by providing thoughtful, understood content and reasoned arguments, and the elector has the right to measure our capability in doing so. This is at the heart of the principle of civic engagement.

As an example, this morning I was asked by a reporter on my way into this place what I thought of this motion. I responded that I would comment once I had read the form and substance of it, as I had not at that time, and that I would form an opinion once I had reviewed the content. After I read it, I expressed a desire to speak to the motion in the House today and formulated by myself the content of this intervention that I am delivering at present. This is how many of us approach interventions in this place.

Last week I spoke to Bill C-36 at report stage, after speaking with several interested parties in my constituency and having read the testimony presented by witnesses at committees. There was a particular theme that I felt had not been adequately debated in the House: that of our broader emerging cultural, not legal, definition of sexual consent and how the variety of legislative options the Bedford ruling could present the House could potentially impact the same. I asked the Library of Parliament to complete some research for me and then spent several hours of personal time collating the information into an intervention which I delivered.

In another example earlier this year, the NDP presented the House with a motion which would effectively cut operating funding to the Senate for the remainder of the fiscal year. After reading this motion, I felt compelled to deliver an intervention in this place. I argued that the motion should not be supported given how our country's governance model is set up. Bills would not pass and the wheels of government could grind to a halt, including those bills currently in front of the Senate put forward by NDP members. One of the biggest compliments in my parliamentary career came on that date when I had one opposition member come to me and state, “Your speech made me change my vote.”

I was parliamentary secretary to the Minister of the Environment and now as Minister of State for Western Economic Diversification, I know it is my responsibility to understand my respective files to a degree where I can be prepared to debate and defend the government's positions on issues related to the same. I would argue that the majority of my cabinet colleagues take this responsibility to heart and have demonstrated great competence in this regard. Many of my opposition colleagues come well prepared to engage in meaningful debate as well. Occasionally, on all sides of the House, this is not the case.

However, being prepared for debate, engaging in it and preparing a rational argument should be separated from the notion of putting forward a position that all parties here say they would like. In fact, a large pitfall of the role of a member of Parliament and for those who would put seeking approval over good sound policy is that there are many who will disagree with one's opinion, but the opinion has been put forward and put forward a policy to debate.

● (1525)

A laudable goal in this place would be to use committee study and House of Commons debate to sway position, to develop personal relationships that balance the theatre which invariably accompanies politics with something that resembles work. In my experience, this happens far more often than is reported on in the media.

This goal needs to be further contextualized within the reality of our political system, as our political parties have positions on which they seek mandates. Indeed we will disagree with one another here and we will try to sway the public toward our position, as we believe that each of our respective policy stances is in the best interests of the country. This means at times we will vociferously disagree with the content of each other's debate, but this does not mean that the content is automatically irrelevant.

Let us carry this concept through to question period wherein members have the direct opportunity to question government on its business, the core of today's motion. I believe that the heart of the motion is related to whether members have adequate recourse if they feel their oral question was not adequately answered and subsequently propose new recourse that does not currently exist in the Standing Order.

Let us first discuss whether there are recourse options available to members. I will note that in 1964, this place debated recourse for members who felt that their questions were not adequately addressed. Again, this is from the Parliament of Canada website:

> In a review of the Standing Orders in 1964, the House adopted a procedure committee proposal for the first-ever Standing Order to regulate Question Period. At that same time, the House agreed to the committee's suggestion that a rule on the Adjournment Proceedings be adopted to complement the Question Period Standing Order. The committee proposed a procedure whereby Members who felt dissatisfied with an answer given by the government to their question during Questions Period could give notice that they wished to speak further on the subject matter of the question during the Adjournment Proceedings.
>
> At the start of this maximum 30-minute period, from 6:30 p.m. to 7 p.m. on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, a motion to adjourn the House is deemed to have been moved and seconded. No more than three brief exchanges are allowed on predetermined topics. Each of these topics may be debated for at most 10 minutes of the 30-minute period set aside for Adjournment Proceedings. No later than 5:00 p.m., the Speaker must tell the House which matter or matters are to be raised that day.

Certainly there are opportunities to follow up on question period, but I want to speak from my experience as a parliamentary secretary. My staff may disagree, but I did enjoy adjournment proceedings. They allowed for a fuller expansion on the government's position on an issue than the short time allowed for during question period, and oftentimes allowed for some personal engagement with one's opposition critic. Sometimes these proceedings became the nucleus for committee study, or provoked a minister to delve into a policy issue with more vigour. Sadly, adjournment proceedings are rarely reported on or followed by Canadian media or the public.

I should also note that members frequently submit written questions via a formal process to ministers. Again, from the Parliament of Canada website:

> Provisions allowing for written questions to be posed to the Ministry have been included in the rules of the House of Commons since 1867. The rule, virtually identical to today's Standing Order 39(1), provided that questions could be asked of private Members as well as Ministers, although it appears that, from the beginning, the practice saw questions directed only to Ministers. That practice has continued to this day, and has been periodically reinforced with additions to the Standing Order referring to the manner that answers are to be provided to Order Paper questions; in each case, questions to Ministers appear to be assumed.
>
> While oral questions are posed without notice on matters deemed to be of an urgent nature, written questions are placed after notice on the *Order Paper* with the intent of seeking from the Ministry detailed, lengthy or technical information relating to "public affairs".

I believe that recourse as it pertains to the proposal of today's motion does already exist, and, as such, I do believe that today's motion is somewhat redundant. However, that said, I do believe this proposed new recourse is worthy of debate.

Earlier today, I believe that the leader of the Green Party said that question period resembled high school theatre. The government House leader responded with a point that the responses to question period are often set by the tone of the questions.

I think there are grains of truth in both of these statements, and why is this so? The press gallery is most populated during question period because QP gives the sound bites for 140 character tweets and the evening newsreel. It is also the time when the House is most populated by members, as ministries are required to be represented to answer any question from any topic pertaining to government business.

● (1530)

This indeed can be a recipe for theatre, including borderline slanderous opposition statements, which would not be made without the benefit of parliamentary impugnity.

Certainly there are times, found throughout *Hansard* since its genesis, where government members have given a response which was hot under the collar or ill-advised. That said, in the majority of cases, members on both sides of this House strive to bring light and statesmanship rather than heat to question period. Many of my opposition critics care more for their files than making sensational and farcical statements at the start of their questions. Many of my ministerial colleagues are subject matter experts on their files and bring that depth of knowledge to their answers.

Many of us here do not spend time away from friends and family for any other reason than to argue policy that will in our minds make Canada a better place. Unfortunately, these moments, which are frequent, do not make a provocative headline or tweet, and as such I would argue that these instances are vastly under-reported.

This type of recourse has also been studied in previous Parliaments, and I would like to discuss some of those findings. As today's debate has shades of a question of decorum, let me turn to previous studies undertaken on the same subject.

Under Standing Order 10, the Speaker already has the power to preserve decorum. This power has been a duty of the chair since 1867.

The Speaker's responsibility to preserve decorum was a significant challenge in the early years of Confederation. In fact, Speakers at that time were regularly confronted with rude and disorderly conduct that they were unable to control, including the throwing of papers, books, and, in one case, firecrackers.

O'Brien and Bosc note that this disorderly behaviour by members in the early years of Confederation may have been due to the fact that "a much-frequented public saloon plied "intoxicating liquors" to Members seeking "refreshment" during lengthy evening debates". The saloon was closed in 1896, and O'Brien and Bosc noted, "The early twentieth centre House was calmer and more austere [...]"

A review of O'Brien and Bosc also indicates that the current challenge of preserving decorum in the House has been an ongoing challenge since at least the 1950s. It is not unique to our time.

These challenges have led to committee recommendations to enhance the power of the Speaker to preserve decorum. For example, in 1985, the McGrath committee recommended "that the Speaker be empowered to order the withdrawal of a member for the remainder of a sitting". This power was included in the Standing Orders in 1986, and it is a power which has indeed been used.

In 1992, the special advisory committee to the Speaker on unparliamentary language and the Speaker's authority to deal with breaches of decorum and behaviour released its report dealing with decorum in the House of Commons. The report included a number of draft amendments to the Standing Orders, which would have strengthened the Speaker's power to suspend sittings of the House and set out specific guidelines for the suspension of members.

The revised Standing Orders would have provided for a range of suspension periods, depending on the number of suspensions imposed on a member, with a 20-day suspension period imposed for members having three or more suspensions. The amendments would also have allowed for suspensions from serving on committees and the loss of right of access to the parliamentary precinct.

This report was never tabled in the House, nor were its recommendations implemented or formally debated.

In the 39th Parliament, the procedure and House affairs committee also studied the issue of decorum in the House. The committee conducted its study in light of concerns raised by Canadians about noisy and boisterous behaviour in the House, particularly during question period. The committee was tasked with revising the amendments to the Standing Orders proposed in 1992 by a special advisory committee to the Speaker.

The committee heard from a number of highly respected witnesses, including the clerk and a former clerk of the House of Commons. The witnesses noted that the lack of decorum and respect for the rules is not a new phenomenon, nor is this only an issue in the Canadian House of Commons.

While the committee's report noted the Speaker's powers under the Standing Orders to maintain decorum, the Speaker requires the co-operation and assistance of all members, since the Speaker is the servant of the House and reflects the collective will of the chamber.

During this committee's hearings on decorum, witnesses urged the committee to proceed with caution in recommending rules-based changes to decorum. These witnesses noted that such changes could weaken the traditional authority of the Speaker with respect to decorum, which would be a fundamental change to House practices.

Given these concerns, the committee came to the conclusion that the existing powers of the Speaker are extensive and encompass a range of options. The committee urged the Speaker to exercise the full extent of his disciplinary powers, firmly, forcefully, and fairly, to improve the decorum in the chamber.

● (1535)

On this point, former Speaker Peter Milliken noted in the *Ottawa Citizen* last week that adding new black letter rules may not be the most effective means of enforcing standards of decency. He relied upon the uncodified principle that one must catch the Speaker's eye to be called upon to address the House. He stated in the article:

> There was one member who used unparliamentary language, and I asked him to withdraw the remarks and he refused. I didn't kick him out because in my view that isn't any punishment.
>
> I told him he wouldn't speak again in the House until he apologized to the Chair and withdrew the remarks, and he never did and he never spoke again … for the rest of the Parliament. A year and a bit, I think,...

Specifically on the content of replies in question period as it stands, O'Brien and Bosc note, on page 510, "The Speaker, however, is not responsible for the quality or content of replies to questions".

This is based on a ruling by Speaker Gilbert Parent from October 9, 1997. At that time, Speaker Parent had this to say:

> With respect to all members of Parliament, I am not here to judge the quality of a question or the quality of an answer. I am here to see to it that a question is properly put and that the minister, the government or the person to whom it is directed has a chance to answer.
>
> What the member is asking me to do is outside the purview of the Speaker. If that were the case, should I judge on the quality of all questions in the House?
>
> I urge all hon. members to pose questions that will be of interest to most Canadians, or at least to a certain part of the country, perhaps a constituency where a specific answer is needed on something.
>
> I decline to ever judge on the quality of either a question or an answer.

This is what I believe is at the heart of the matter in front of us today, and I am trying to be as non-partisan as possible. Our roles as members of Parliament, as well as the choice of how we choose to execute those responsibilities or not is each of our individual responsibilities.

Getting to the core of the matter put forward here today, should this additional recourse be supported? Again, if civic engagement is a partnership between a member taking personal responsibility for providing thoughtful content in debate and the engagement of the electorate in the same, I would argue that the further recourse proposed by the opposition in this motion is not looking in the right place. Rather, we each, regardless of political stripe, need to look inward and to our constituents as the true sources of accountability on how question period and debate here is governed.

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of State for Western Economic Diversification has been here for a little while now. I listened to her speech and enjoyed it. She did it by herself and put a lot of work and information into it.

Does she understand, though, that the House of Commons is for questioning the government? Does she understand that the government has a majority and can make decisions, and this is the place to question the government?

It seems that she listened to the speeches today because she said she heard what the leader of the government talked about. He said this motion would take away the right for government members to question the opposition. The Conservatives had many years to question the government when they were in opposition, and they may have a lot of time next year. However, right now in Parliament, it is the opposition questioning the government, to keep it accountable to Canadians. That is what the House leader was worried about.

On top of that, he moved the motion that the question be now put. That means we will probably not be voting on the motion of the NDP. To me, it goes against democracy and the responsibility of the House.

● (1540)

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Mr. Speaker, I welcome the question from the hon. member for Acadie—Bathurst because it is an important one.

I agree that question period is a time in which opposition members are to put questions to the government, and the government is to take that responsibility seriously. As many of us have spoken about, I remember my first experience in the House taking questions on the environment file. Something that incentivized me to answer questions was the fact that the media took notice of the exchange between me and the now deputy leader of the NDP. It was fun. To characterize all debate in the House as irrelevant is not true. That was the point of the speech that I made.

To my colleague across the way, we have certainly heard about beaver testicles in NDP questions. There are certainly times in this place when we are tired and the temperatures get high. We are away from our families, and we are human. What we need to do today, rather than talking about trying to legislate our responsibility in this place is to simply take it upon ourselves. That is the point I am trying to make. We can change the Standing Orders all we want, but each of us is responsible for his or her own actions and behaviour. That is why we are gifted with the responsibility of being members of Parliament.

Mr. Brent Rathgeber (Edmonton—St. Albert, Ind.): Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. minister for a great speech. I really enjoyed it.

I agree with her that it is up to the members of the House to take ownership of the House. If we look like buffoons or disinterested on TV cameras, that reflects badly not only on the individual in the camera shot but on all of us, and I think on that we can all agree.

The member made a good argument that order paper questions and adjournment proceedings are a good avenue to pursue questions not answered in question period. However, does the member not agree that question period is the apex of the day in the House of Commons? It is when the media is watching, when the gallery is full and the House is full. That ought to be the time when the government, policing itself, ought to take ownership of the quality of answers.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Mr. Speaker, I respectfully disagree. I agree with the principle that question period is an important time in which members can question the government. I spoke about the need to have respectful questions and well-informed answers. That said, I think it is a very myopic view on the responsibility in this place.

This place is woefully underpopulated at this point during the day. Some of the most important business facing our country comes in front of the House at any point in time. Therefore, to say that the work that happens in committee, in debate during various stages here, or in the other place does not have the same footing as question period, I disagree.

I certainly hope that the Canadian public and media will also wake up to this point.

Mr. Bob Dechert (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Justice, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the minister for her speech. I know that she has answered many questions in the House during question period, both as a minister and previously as a parliamentary secretary.

I have noticed in the question periods that I have witnessed in the six or so years that I have been here is that there is often a lot of repetition from the other side of the House. We will get the same question asked over and over, even when the minister gives a full answer, which perhaps refutes the accuracy of the question being asked. The next person will read the same talking points and ask the question again. It is like they do not even listen to the answer that the minister has given.

The motion of the NDP, to me, seems one-sided. It does not say anything about the repetition or relevance of the questions being asked. It just talks about the responses. I wonder if the minister could give us her thoughts on that.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Mr. Speaker, I will not speak to the question period practices of any party in the House, but I will say that one can tell the difference between those who understand the core of their question and it is coming from their hearts, those who understand the core of their answer and it is coming from a seat of knowledge, from those who do not. We are all guilty of that across the party aisles here.

Again, I think this reinforces the point of personal accountability in this place. We are not always perfect. I am not always perfect. However, when we all try to strive to maintain this principle, this becomes a better place.

I would like to say that somehow the motion would completely reduce the theatre that is question period, but it would not. That is up to each and every one of us. It is up to our party leadership. It is up to how we choose to answer questions. Therefore, I think this topic needs to be given more respect and debate than just the core of the NDP's motion here today.

● (1545)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Raymond Côté (Beauport—Limoilou, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I feel I must draw attention to what the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Justice said. There is nothing more distasteful than to see a Conservative member portray himself as a victim when his party holds a majority of seats in the House.

I really want to thank the minister of state for her speech. Still, it is the responsibility of all 308 members of this House to be accountable to all Canadians. This responsibility is difficult to fulfill; it is very challenging. I agree with the minister of state that question period can be a time when things come to a head and emotions run high.

However, the fact remains that it is the duty of the representatives of the executive branch in particular to be accountable to the House. This problem has often been raised by elected representatives in other countries, including African countries.

Is she aware of the executive branch's special responsibility?

[*English*]

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Mr. Speaker, I would like to think that we are coming to a consensus on this topic. There is room for improvement. Each of us has our own responsibility to take that improvement component on. There are going to be times when it is hot under the collar here at the end of our four-week rotations. Stuff happens, but at the end of the day, if we all ingrain in every action that we do here a respect for the electorate, who also engages back with us in good faith, we have done our jobs as members of Parliament.

I do not disagree with what is being talked about here today, but I do disagree with what is being proposed to rectify it. I look forward to taking questions. Should anyone have any questions on western economic diversification or taking late shows, I enjoy debate here—

Mr. Yvon Godin: I have one.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Mr. Speaker, great. Tomorrow.

I really hope that we can acknowledge that the Speaker is empowered to make choices. I know I sound repetitive now, but I do think it is relevant that it is up to each and every one of us to elevate the debate here.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé (Saint-Lambert, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the member for York South—Weston.

The opposition motion I am defending here today is directly related to the unfortunate incident that happened here in the House last week during question period.

On September 23, in response to some very specific questions from the Leader of the Opposition about our soldiers' involvement in Iraq, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister gave answers over and over about Israel. It seemed as though the parliamentary secretary was giving prepared answers no matter what the question was.

This incident would be laughable if it had only happened once. However, it is happening more and more under this government. Hardly a day goes by when a member of the Conservative government does not sidestep or evade a question during question period or refuses to answer the legitimate questions we ask on behalf of Canadians. We are witnesses to the grotesque spectacle of ministers who, when they do not simply repeat their talking points like puppets, sidestep the issue altogether.

It is simply unacceptable that the government refuses to answer members who are sent here by their constituents to hold the government to account. Just last week, in addition to the parliamentary secretary, the Prime Minister also refused to clarify our soldiers' involvement in Iraq.

At the very least, could the Prime Minister explain to the House why he plans to send our sons and daughters to shed their blood in Iraq?

The Minister of Citizenship and Immigration put on the same sorry spectacle. When asked several times about welcoming Syrian refugees, he insisted on talking about Iraqi refugees.

This would be laughable if it were not so awful. It is awful because it fuels the public's growing cynicism towards politics and the merits of our democracy.

Quite frankly, when I see the contempt that this government has for the parliamentary system, I understand why more and more voters tell me they no longer trust politicians. They also tell me they do not understand what is going on with question period. They even think it should be renamed from question period to non-answer period.

It is precisely this denial of democracy that illustrates the basic contempt that this government shows with the silent and sorry agreement of its majority.

Allow me to remind all hon. members with all due seriousness that our predecessors, Baldwin and La Fontaine, fought to establish a responsible government in Canada. It is a principle they passed down to us. It is up to us to apply it every day.

To oppose the proper functioning of this parliamentary system, is to disrupt the balance of powers. It is to oppose the essence of democracy and betray the spirit of the founding fathers of our parliamentary system.

To illustrate, I will quote a few words taken from the works of the hon. James Jerome. For those who may not remember, James Jerome was the Speaker of the House of Commons from 1974 to 1980. Through his exemplary work as Speaker, he helped establish the rules for our Parliament. He is known for his book, *Mr. Speaker*. I will take a quote from there. I ask every member in the House to listen carefully and ponder over this remarkable thought. It is a reminder to us all about our role here. This is what Mr. Jerome said:

> If the essence of Parliament is Government accountability, then surely the essence of accountability is the Question Period in the Canadian House of Commons.

That is what is at issue here: getting answers in the name of exercising democratic power. Without this right to ask the government questions, we do not have an accountable government. This government is then accountable to no one.

● (1550)

That is why the Standing Orders of the House are so clear. I would like to quote chapter 11, which reads:

> The right to seek information from the Ministry of the day and the right to hold that Ministry accountable are recognized as two of the fundamental principles of parliamentary government. Members exercise these rights principally by asking questions in the House....[T]he search for or clarification of information through questioning is a vital aspect of the duties undertaken by individual Members.

Let us make no mistake about it. Today's events will be a milestone in our political history. They will show how each member sees his or her role and responsibilities as an elected representative.

Those who vote in favour of this motion will show their support for the responsible parliamentary system established in Canada in 1848. The others, those who vote against the motion, will show that they support the sorry spectacle that they took part in on September 23. I understand that from time to time, members may get carried away. We are very passionate about our commitment. We are passionate about serving Canadians. I also acknowledge the sincere and emotional apology that the parliamentary secretary made in the House.

I acknowledge the member's apology, his comments and the applause of his Conservative colleagues, and I understand what they mean. However, what concerns me, beyond the incident itself, is what it says about the majority government, about what the Conservative members think of our parliamentary system. The facts speak for themselves. This government does not think it is accountable to Canadians and their representatives. The government thinks that those representatives are accountable to the government, and the Conservatives members accept that role. That is unacceptable.

I therefore solemnly warn Canadians that we are at a crossroads. On one hand, we have a tired Conservative government that, by refusing to be accountable, is violating Canadians' fundamental rights. On the other, we have the Liberal Party, which, true to form, will not change a thing. Finally, we have the members of the NDP, who are preparing to govern this country and are acting accordingly. We want democratic renewal in this country. We want to change the way politics works. We want the Canadians we represent to get answers to their legitimate questions. We do not want this type of unfortunate incident to ever happen again.

It is therefore high time to give the Speaker of the House the means to intervene and force the government to be accountable to Canadians.

Therefore, I am saying that it begins here and now. As a New Democrat, I want to change this country, I want to change the way we do politics and I want the government to be accountable to Canadians. That is why I unequivocally support this motion. That is also why I am asking government members not to look the other way. Our role as parliamentarians is at stake. Today, they all have an opportunity to erase the memory of the incident of September 23. They can prove that they hold a noble view of their mandate, of our mandate. They must not hesitate, they must not toe the party line and they must vote as representatives of the people and not of the government. I urge them to support the motion.

● (1555)

[*English*]

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member passionately shared with us why she would like to see a change in the Standing Orders from a question period point of view. She offered some examples of things that have happened in question period. Then she stood there and said that the Conservatives do not believe they are accountable, that the Liberals are the same, and that the NDP is holier than thou. She went on about a number of things.

If we are trying to fix what is said in the House, then we have to take personal responsibility and say things properly. If we want to attack, there is a way to attack. If we do not want to attack, then we will not. If we want question period to be a time for questions and answers, I would ask the member to please listen to the words she is using herself.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé: Mr. Speaker, what we are focusing on today is this motion to change the Standing Orders, and which will affect the procedure that makes this institution democratic.

Today, we want to talk about the fact that we expect answers in question period, hence the name. It is time for the government to assume its responsibilities. We are not talking about just individual responsibilities, but also about the responsibility of the party that is in power today. We expect it to assume its responsibilities.

[*English*]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to pick up on what the chair of the procedure and house affairs committee just made reference to. The member is not the only one who tends to take shots by blaming the party in government or the Liberal Party while trying to give the impression that the NDP is pure on this particular issue.

I can assure the member that the NDP is not pure. The NDP government in Manitoba sat 35 days in one year and 37 in another year. There was no question period. There was question period avoidance, and so forth, so the NDP is not pure on this issue.

The issue we have before us today is to what degree a standing order or possibly the Speaker could be involved in order to improve question period by ensuring answers are more relevant to the questions.

Specifically, does the member believe we should be taking a look not only at this particular issue but at others as well as we consider changes to our Standing Orders?

● (1600)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for his question. He used the right word: “improve”.

The objective of today's debate is to improve question period, because what is happening is unacceptable. For example, when I return to my riding, my constituents ask about what happens in question period and why does the government not answer our questions. That is what we are conveying today with this motion.

I am asking all members to take a step forward for once and to vote for this motion so that the Standing Orders can be changed. This will allow this institution to truly do the work that it was created to do and that we were elected to do.

Mr. Dany Morin (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I also want to thank my New Democrat colleague for her excellent speech. Last week we hit a new low in the parliamentary saga of Canadian democracy.

A number of my constituents spoke to me about what happened. I saw what people were saying on social media and in the traditional media, and it was not good.

Did my colleague hear from people about what happened last week in the House of Commons? We often hear that people do not care about what happens in the Ottawa bubble, but I think that people paid attention to what was going on in Ottawa last week, and they were very disappointed.

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his question. Yes, I heard from quite a few people about what happened last week, and they were appalled. As my colleague said, we hit a new low.

We are talking about making a change to the Standing Orders regarding question period. The Speaker of the House already has the power to rule on the content of questions, but not on the answers. Members must vote in favour of this motion.

[*English*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): It is my duty, pursuant to Standing Order 38, to inform the House that the questions to be raised tonight at the time of adjournment are as follows: the hon. member for Thunder Bay—Superior North, Natural Resources; the hon. member for Newton—North Delta, Social Development, and the hon. member for Drummond, Natural Resources.

Resuming debate, the hon. member for York South—Weston.

Mr. Mike Sullivan (York South—Weston, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise today to speak to this very important issue.

We are having this debate because we think that there has been a loss of respect for the institution of Parliament. It has shown itself in a number of ways, and not just in the attitude toward question period, a situation that came to a head last week.

When I was elected to this august place, I was told by my leader, Jack Layton, that our party was to change the way Ottawa did things. We were not to heckle. We were to refrain from being part of the childish screaming that goes on in this place.

[*Translation*]

The French word *chahut* is the equivalent of "heckling".

[*English*]

The heckling has continued. Unfortunately, people watching on television do not know who it is coming from. It is largely coming from members to my left and members across the way—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Mike Sullivan: Mr. Speaker, there they are. Generally speaking, we are as respectful as we can be in terms of heckling.

Another lack of respect is the use by previous governments and the current government of omnibus bills, which allow them to gleefully shout out in their speeches and otherwise, "You voted against it". These were measures that we would have supported, had they not been part of an omnibus bill that had the destruction of the environment at its core. For that reason, we could not have voted for them.

Then we have time allocation and closure. The Conservative government has now moved time allocation and closure more than any Westminster style government in the world. Why? It is because the government insists on limiting debate. Debate is fundamental to a parliamentary democracy, and the word "Parliament" has at its core the word "speaking", yet the government time and time again wants to limit debate.

One of the places where we can get at some of the central questions that Canadians are telling us concern them about the country is in question period. Question period is only 45 minutes a day. It is actually not very long. It is one of the few times that everybody shows up for work.

We have a situation in which question period has become part of the irrelevant Parliament that I think some members of the government would prefer it to be. If they make it as irrelevant as they can, people will start losing interest in democracy entirely. Once they have lost interest in democracy entirely, fighting elections will be much easier for some parties in this august place.

We have a government House leader who said today in the House that the Leader of the Opposition would prefer to make question period a one-way street, but question period is a one-way street now. Opposition members ask the government questions. That is what it is all about. It is not a period of time when the government gets to ask members of Parliament generally or members of another party questions that they would like to ask. That is not what question period is. I gave the House leader more intelligence than that. To suggest that question period should be a two-way street is a little bit telling.

He also suggested that we want the rule changes to keep us from facing any tough questions. Again, we are not here to face tough questions; we are here to deal tough questions. We hope that those tough questions will be answered with straightforward, clear, and transparent government answers.

The government and the ministers opposite are responsible to the people of Canada for the spending of their money and for the administration of this country. We have 45 minutes a day to ask the government how it is doing with that. The government, time and again, does not want to tell us.

People talk about how some members duck questions and some ministers obfuscate, but what happened last week made it very clear that question period has become quite broken. That is one of the reasons that we have put forward this motion: to try to repair the question period that we all know and love.

It is why we all come back here every afternoon. This is the one place where we get to hold the government's feet to the fire, as it were, to make sure that the government is telling us the truth and that the truth is out.

● (1605)

Last week, of course, we had the spectacle of a question being asked that dealt with war. One of the most serious things that ever happens involving the Canadian government is whether we are at war with another country, or with Islamic terrorists, if that is what is going on. However, to determine that a very serious question about whether the country is at war is to be answered by a non-minister, in non-parliamentary language, with a non-sequitur, totally unrelated, is very telling of the Conservative government's attitude toward reasonable questions being met with complete non sequiturs.

We are asking the Parliament assembled here to agree with us that this should change. We are not suggesting that ministers would not be able to fog their way around an answer in such a way that one would not really know if one received an answer. However, we did get some pretty clear answers today on whether there is going to be a vote. We could not get that last week, but we got some answers today.

We did not get any answers on what is going on at the moment in Iraq. We had the Prime Minister saying in New York that we have boots on the ground in Iraq now, but we had his minister saying that there are not actually boots on the ground in a combat role. Anyway, we did finally get an answer. We tried to ask that same question last week and got nonsense instead of an answer. That is why we are asking for this change in the Standing Orders.

As the Minister of State for Western Economic Diversification said, individual members must hold their own heads up and take their responsibilities seriously. If there were a consequence for not taking one's responsibilities seriously, a consequence from the Speaker of this place, who is our leader, as it were, then that consequence might cause how the government behaves in question period to change, which is what we are looking for.

We are not looking to create a nonsensical series of points of order about specific answers following every question period. It is very clear that we are looking to prevent what happened last week from happening ever again. Last week was the lowest one could go.

Members opposite suggested that if we do not like an answer, we can always turn to adjournment proceedings. Well, I was the recipient of ad hominem attacks by the member for Essex during adjournment proceedings that had nothing to do with the question I was asking. If those adjournment proceedings are to be as contaminated as question period has become, then we must look for answers, as the Minister of State for Western Economic Diversification said, from our own core values.

Our core values include that we are not going to behave like children. There are frequently children in the gallery watching question period. For us to behave as if we are in some kind of high school classroom is beyond the pale. It is something I will not tolerate, and I remind my colleagues about that every week.

● (1610)

Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am going to support the motion moved by the member for Burnaby—New Westminster, but I want to make several points.

I think the previous Parliament, as we all know, overwhelmingly voted for a motion calling on the procedure and House affairs committee to examine reforms for question period. Despite that motion being overwhelmingly adopted by the House, a rubric of which was to examine the convention that ministers need not respond to questions, nothing ever came of it. Here we are, four years later, once again debating the reform of question period.

The other thing I would say is that we need to avoid turning these debates about parliamentary reform into partisan advantage or disadvantage. I think it is really important to focus on the substance of what is at hand.

In closing, if making members of Parliament and members of the ministry respond to questions is going to be a responsibility of the Speaker, then so too should it be the responsibility of the Speaker to make sure that irrelevance and repetition are not part of a questioner's line of attack when asking questions. I think we need to focus on the substance of the issue here.

I will be supporting the motion, and I encourage members not to turn it into partisan advantage or disadvantage.

Mr. Mike Sullivan: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the member for Wellington—Halton Hills for the support he is obviously going to show for this motion. I appreciate that.

I agree with him that we should be debating the substance of this motion, not using it for partisan purposes. The ability of a minister to respond is of utmost importance to Canadians.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we again have another member who has spoken about the heckling that goes on between the Liberals and the Conservatives. I need not remind him that immediately following question period, it was a New Democratic member of Parliament who had to stand up and apologize for heckling today in question period. Therefore, it is something that goes around. All political parties participate in heckling.

Having said that, picking up on the idea that a number of reforms are necessary to make sure that the House becomes better in terms of operations, decorum, and so forth, I wonder if the member might comment on the importance of taking a holistic approach to changes to our Standing Orders that would make our House much more workable in the future.

● (1615)

Mr. Mike Sullivan: Mr. Speaker, I would love to take a holistic approach to all the Standing Orders of the House, including such things as the ability of governments to introduce omnibus bills and such things as closure and time allocation. However, we are dealing with a specific issue and are dealing with it in a specific way, with a specific motion, and that is the matter for debate today.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Francine Raynault (Joliette, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his speech on the importance of question period.

Question period is meant to inform the Canadian public about what is going on in the country. However, it is sometimes very difficult to hear the questions and answers because there is too much heckling in the House.

I would like my colleague to tell us whether the cynical attitude towards Canada's Parliament is one of the reasons why people are not interested in Canadian politics and why they do not exercise their right to vote. Fewer and fewer people are voting, and this is especially true of young people. Is the noise in the House one of the reasons why people are no longer interested in politics?

[*English*]

Mr. Mike Sullivan: Mr. Speaker, I believe the member is right that there is a certain disconnect between what goes on here and the Canadian public and that the Canadian public becomes less likely to be supportive of the political system in general when they see and hear the results or the actual discourse here. Sometimes it is not discourse; it is shouting. Sometimes it is not Parliament; it is an attack in one direction followed by an attack back.

We need to return to a system where we are asking clear and simple questions in the hope that we will get clear and simple answers from the government, and we need a Speaker to be able to help us get there.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to join today's debate on the opposition motion to make reforms to question period by changing the Standing Orders. As is my custom, as I am sure most members in the House are well aware, I never read from a written speech. I do not believe, frankly, in that. I particularly do not like the practice that seems to have become common in this place whereby members come into this place and read a speech, which someone else has written, not even knowing the content of the speech. They are just reading words. It is almost like white noise.

I can appreciate the fact that some members, in order to collect their thoughts and give them a coherent stream, do write their own speeches, as did my colleague the Minister of State for Western Economic Diversification today, and a good speech it was. I have no real objection to that. However, I take a different view. If members have knowledge of a particular subject, they should be able to speak here for 10 to 20 minutes, at least, and converse with their colleagues to impart their views and opinions on the subject at hand.

While my thoughts today may be somewhat random, I hope I can connect them in a way that will be somewhat understandable to my colleagues opposite.

I have been listening to the debate throughout the day. That is why it has taken until now for me to formulate my thoughts. I will start by saying that I will be opposing the motion, as opposed to my colleague and good friend from Wellington—Halton Hills, who will be supporting it. I am going to be opposing it for a couple of reasons.

First and foremost, I do not believe that Parliament should be changing the Standing Orders in a one-off manner, as the NDP is trying to do here.

I have been involved for the last two and a half years, believe it or not, at the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, in examining potential changes to the Standing Orders. I have been absolutely frustrated, not because we have not had goodwill on all sides of the House to try to make changes that would fundamentally improve the functioning of Parliament, and that is the objective we all had, but because we keep getting interrupted. Much of this is outside of our control. There are pieces of legislation that come to our committee that take precedence. There are private member's bills or matters of privilege and those types of things. We have always been interrupted.

I point that out because I believe that if we finally get to a point where we have members from all sides of the House on a committee dealing with reviewing the Standing Orders to see if there are things we could do to improve the functioning of Parliament and the House, whether it be in question period, at committee, or otherwise, it would benefit us all.

As I mentioned to a few of my colleagues today, when we were meeting again about the Standing Order review, when I leave this place, whether willingly or because of ill health, that being, of course, because my voters get sick of me, and someone asks me years from now what difference I made in Parliament, I would like to be able to answer with something substantive. If I could say that I was part of a committee that changed the Standing Orders in Parliament and improved the way Parliament works, I would be one happy individual. I hope we can actually do that. That is primarily why I have opposition to this one-off approach the NDP takes.

I have a few other problems with it. I feel that question period as identified and as illuminated by some of my colleagues on the opposition benches is primarily an opportunity for the opposition to question the government of the day. I have no issues with that whatsoever. However, I also feel that opposition members must also follow the principles and guidelines as established in O'Brien and Bosc. I do not even know if most members here realize that there are principles and guidelines governing questions asked of the government, but there are. There are clear guidelines.

We have heard before that we cannot be repetitive. Today one of my colleagues told me he thought there were 12 questions in a row on ISIL. They were all the same question. The Minister of Foreign Affairs was giving a proper response, saying that there will be a vote in Parliament and a debate in Parliament if it is the government's view that we should be entering into a combat mission.

● (1620)

One question, when answered, should have sufficed, yet we had the same question 12 different times. There were 12 different variations, but of the same question and receiving the same answer. Does that benefit anyone? Of course not.

We have to look at not only how the government responds to questions but how questions are posed. Rather than this one-off on the relevancy of questions or answers, I would like to see a more comprehensive review of Parliament as a whole. That is something I am still going to try to spearhead over the course of the next few months. Perhaps it might even go into the next Parliament.

All of us need to be accountable to Parliament, and it is not just question period. Most of the members of the opposition when debating the motion today have focused in on question period. I understand that. It is their 45-minute opportunity each and every day to try to question the government, to try to score partisan points for themselves and to get public opinion on their side. I understand that. Similarly, a lot of the answers we give are obviously going to try to make the government look in its best light. That is the nature of adversarial politics. That is the nature of Parliament. However, we cannot view that in isolation. We have to look at a larger picture.

I have also heard members of the opposition say it is the role, and only role, for opposition members to be questioning government. I disagree. As expressed by my colleague, the minister of western economic diversification, every single member here needs to be accountable.

For example, while members of the opposition question the government on its future plans to deal with ISIL and other terrorist threats, I have yet to hear in Parliament an articulated view from members of the opposition parties, both Liberal and NDP, of what their plans would be. Do they, or would they, support combat missions to join with the United States and allies, if that in fact was what the request was? I have not heard that, not in this place at least.

I have heard outside of Parliament some news reports saying that the NDP has said it does not agree to any mission, combat or non-combat. I have heard outside Parliament members of the Liberal Party saying they would not support a "boots on the ground" movement but would perhaps support limited air strikes. I have not heard them say that in here. Therefore, there is a need for accountability by even members of the opposition in dealing with issues that affect Canadians.

I know my next few comments will not be viewed with any delight by members of the opposition, but I do want to point this out because my House leader mentioned it in his intervention this morning. An issue that is before Canadians is the issue of illegal mailings and satellite offices by the NDP. What I do not think most Canadians are aware of, however, is the background to that. I want to spend just a few moments on that because, frankly, there is a need for accountability from the NDP when it comes to these very issues, because we are talking about a lot of taxpayers' dollars here.

Most Canadians who may be watching this are aware that most members of Parliament, hopefully all members of Parliament, send out communiqués to their constituents on a regular basis. They are usually in the form of ten percenters or householders. Ten percenters is an inside baseball, inside politics term. Basically, for those Canadians who many be watching this debate, it is a small brochure that one could fit inside a coat pocket. They are sent out by members of Parliament at various times throughout the year, sometimes half a dozen times or more. Householders are a larger format, more like a newsprint. They are sent out usually four times a year. I say this as background.

The issue at hand is that the board of internal economy stated that the mailings the NDP sent out last fall during a time there were three by-elections being held in Canada, one in Bourassa, one in Provencher and one in Brandon—Souris, were illegal. Why is that? It is because the rules quite clearly state that these communiqués that members of Parliament send out should not be political in nature. They should not be there to promote elections or anything like that.

● (1625)

In the case of the mailings in question, the NDP did a couple of things, which on the surface would appear to be extremely strange.

As members know, and as most Canadians know, all of the ten percenters and householders that I was referring to are normally printed by House printers and they are paid for by the good taxpayers of Canada. They allow us to communicate with our constituents, to give information to our constituents about what is happening.

I found it extremely odd that the tens of thousands of brochures that were sent out by the NDP during the time of these three by-elections were not paid for by the House and were not printed by the House. The New Democratic Party went to an outside printer, paid for them itself, and then mailed them out in franked envelopes, franked envelopes meaning taxpayer paid-for envelopes. The NDP did not have to incur the cost of postage.

Why would those members do that? The answer is quite simple. They knew if they put the content of those brochures before House administration, House administration would say they could not be mailed out because the content of the brochures did not fit the guidelines we have to follow. Why? Because they were campaign documents. They were documents meant to promote the candidacy of the NDP candidates in those three by-elections.

The NDP went to an outside printer to get them printed, and there is nothing wrong with that. The New Democratic Party paid for those brochures itself, and there is nothing wrong with that. The New Democratic Party should have paid for those brochures because they were campaign documents. Then that party used—

Ms. Elizabeth May: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. I would be grateful if the hon. member would make his comments relevant to the motion before us, which is related to question period, not mailings.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The Chair has the floor. Is the hon. member rising on the same point of order?

● (1630)

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: May I respond, Mr. Speaker?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): No. I will respond.

The hon. member for Saanich—Gulf Islands has raised a question of relevance. I am sure the irony is not lost on some members of the chamber that there is a discussion today about questions and whether the Speaker ought to be more proactive in terms of ruling on issues of relevance. I am also not certain whether the hon. parliamentary secretary structured his comments in such a way as to test the bounds of relevance today.

There is a specific motion before the House and as is often the case, members take the principle embodied in a specific motion or bill and then speak about the principle and then expound in quite a different direction in terms of another example of another issue that might relate to that same principle, even if it quite obviously does not reflect what is before the House.

Members in this place have raised the question of relevance many times. My colleagues and I in the Chair have risen to respond, pointing out to all members that the responsibility rests with them to keep their comments relevant to the matter that is before the House. The Chair gives significant latitude to members to do so in the understanding that members will not deliberately, or in some cases in almost a provocative way, stray from that to talk about something that is in fact quite unrelated.

With all of that as a preamble, I would remind the hon. parliamentary secretary of the actual motion that is before the House today and ask that he keep his comments related to that. If he takes some small detours that is understandable, but long detours that relate less to the matter start to get close to that line. I am quite certain that the hon. member would not want to put the Chair in that position.

With that, I give the floor back to the hon. parliamentary secretary.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, I would just explain the background of what I feel to be the need for accountability in this place, and that was my whole point.

To date the NDP has not spoken on that issue. It has not been accountable to taxpayers. That is my purpose in bringing up those examples. I will leave it at that. Suffice to say that I wish the NDP would speak of it. I do believe there is a need for accountability from the opposition benches, as well as the government. We have heard the term "one-way street". I agree that it cannot simply be a one-way street.

In question period, yes, without question, the role of the opposition is to question the government. The role of the government is to respond to questions. However, the questions have to be phrased properly, and the responses from the government have to be on topic.

Let me give an example. I spoke earlier about the fact that there are principles and guidelines for questions to be posed in this place. I am not sure how many members know there are such guidelines in place, but there are. I want to give an example to members opposite, who feel they have free rein to ask a question on any topic in any fashion they wish, of how they have failed.

If in fact members want to change the Standing Orders, if they want to take a look at conduct in question period, let us look at conduct in question period not only from the government side but the opposition side.

There are many guidelines in place. One of them is that a question should not be on a matter that is *sub judice*. Again, for Canadians who may be watching, that basically means questions cannot be posed in Parliament on a matter that is before the courts, because it might unduly influence an outcome. We have privilege. We have immunity in this place. A question cannot be asked that is *sub judice*.

However, if we go back in *Hansard*, particularly over the last eight to 10 months, these questions have been asked literally hundreds of times, whether it be on the Duffy affair or others. The Leader of the Opposition has posed them himself. Those are questions that should not be posed.

The opposition is stating that it wants to see the Speaker be the arbiter only to force the government to answer questions that opposition members think should be answered in a manner in which they think should be answered. How would that be administered?

How does any Speaker say that they think it is relevant? Does that mean the Speaker would have inside knowledge of the government's policy decisions? Or is it merely that the Speaker would say that based on what he or she heard that it may be relevant? However, the opposition members would probably clamour to their feet at that point saying that it is not relevant at all and that it is not giving the information they demanded.

It puts the Chair in an impossible situation. Conversely, if the Speaker were to be that kind of an arbiter, to enforce what the Chair believed to be relevant, then I believe the Speaker would have an equal opportunity, or at least obligation, to question whether or not the opposition members are posing their questions in a manner that is proper.

I would also point out that many times—and I will not offer motivation on behalf of the opposition on this—I believe questions are asked from the opposition to the government on matters that should not be questioned because it deals with security matters, whether it be national security or cabinet privacy. Opposition members, or at least this official opposition, seem to think they have the absolute right to ask questions on any issue whatsoever and demand an answer.

For a prime example of why that should not be allowed and why there should be more respect by all members who are posing questions, I would simply go back to the issue in 1979 when we had the Iranian hostage crisis. At that time the opposition, led by former prime minister Pierre Trudeau, kept hammering the government of the day, former prime minister Joe Clark and then foreign affairs minister, Flora MacDonald, on what Canadians were doing to help the Americans in hostage situations.

Our government was not prepared to say anything about that. We all know the story. They were hiding in the Canadian embassy. Eventually former prime minister Clark took opposition leader Trudeau into his confidence and told him what was going on. He told him that we had hostages hiding in the embassy, and asked him to lay off because lives were at risk. It did not help. If anything, it increased the opposition's desire to ask questions to try to embarrass the government.

● (1635)

Those are situations in which we all bear responsibility. For the opposition members simply to say that it is a matter for government to respond in a manner in which they wish to hear responses made is not good enough. There is equal responsibility that should be taken by both sides. I hope we all can agree on at least that.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Raymond Côté (Beauport—Limoilou, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague opposite for his speech. I would recommend that he use some notes or speaking points so that he does not go off on a tangent or lose his train of thought and so that his speech stays on track.

That said, and to come back to the issue at hand, I agree with my colleague on one point, namely the fact that we should not change rules in a one-off manner. I would invite him to go speak with some of his backbench colleagues, who tend to introduce minor bills to amend the Criminal Code. It is always very dangerous to amend the Criminal Code piece by piece. Then the government takes credit for all of that to get some mileage out of it and use it for marketing.

The Speaker has endorsed the long-established principle that question period is designed to hold the government accountable. That is very important, given that it is one of the three pillars of our democracy.

Does my colleague accept the fact that this particular responsibility provides meaningful accountability?

[*English*]

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, I think any government is obliged to give responses to the questions at hand. If it is a question on the foreign affairs policy of our government, then yes, the Minister of Foreign Affairs should respond accordingly. We saw a prime example of that today, but why were there 12 questions on the same issue?

I also want to point out that in the earlier part of the member's intervention, I think he was trying to make a point regarding government backbenchers bringing forward private members' bills on justice issues, but the issue we are dealing with here is a change to the Standing Orders, so I would ask the member opposite to please stay on topic.

We need a fundamental review of the entire operation of question period. That is what we will try to do. Frankly, in very short order, I will be speaking with members opposite, many of whom I have a great deal of respect for, to see if we perhaps can set up an all-party committee to deal with an overall review, to see if we can come to some agreement. What happens in this place affects all of us, and the rules we have to follow should be agreed to by all of us.

● (1640)

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the member's comments, but what brought us to this motion and this discussion today was a question about Iraq, which is not a casual question. The Leader of the Opposition asked a very serious question on behalf of all Canadians, because we all have great concerns with this issue. However, as parliamentarians we need to know that there will be an opportunity for all of us to be fully informed as we move forward.

Lots of times in question period, the questions are not necessarily answered, because it is not answer period; it is question period. However, on the issue of Iraq and the importance of those discussions, I would have to ask my hon. colleague, does he expect parliamentarians on this side to blindly go along with whatever tidbits of information we get from the government members or from the media?

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, clearly not, but I thought I made that quite clear in my presentation, and I thought the Minister of Foreign Affairs today in question period made it quite clear that if there is to be any suggestion from the government of a combat mission for our troops in Iraq, there will be a debate in this place.

Of course, in answer to my colleague, I expect there to be discussion and debate on an issue of that importance and of that sensitivity. I would also point out to my colleague to remember the words I spoke in the last few moments of my intervention, on what happened in 1979. I am not going to try to gloss over everything by saying that the government cannot answer because of national security, but I can assure her that there will be times when there will be some information which the government has that it probably cannot and should not reveal because of security issues.

I ask members of the opposition to please keep that in mind. Rather than repetitively asking the same question trying to get information on the same question, there are times when the government has an obligation to respect the national security of our country.

Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the parliamentary secretary made mention during his remarks that he welcomed other suggestions to reform question period.

One thing that I think would increase the relevancy of questions and answers during question period would be to do away with the 35-second rule.

Many members who were more recently elected may be surprised to find out that the 35-second rule came in after the 1997 election when there were five parties in Parliament. The five recognized parties in the House each wanted a slice of question period to ask their questions, and so the length of time was shortened from about a minute or a minute and a half to 35 seconds to ask and to answer questions.

One of the things the House should also consider to make question period more relevant is to lengthen the amount of time given to ask and to answer questions now that there are only three recognized parties in the House.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, it is true that since the early 1990s we have changed the way Parliament handles question period. It is more of a convention now than any hard and fast rule and could be altered. I know in other parliaments throughout the world, questions can sometimes be as long as two or three minutes, and there can be a lot of substantive information in an answer of two or three minutes as well.

That is a suggestion I have heard before, which I think is worth examining, but I do not know whether opposition members would agree to that, because it would limit the number of questions they would have each day. Questions may be longer, may be more substantive, and it may ultimately be the best thing for Canadians, but I sense there would be continuing opposition from whoever is in the opposition benches just because they would be reducing the number of questions their own members would be allowed to pose to the government.

The member makes a very good point that there are more ways to look at question period than the process and protocols we are observing today.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thought it was interesting that the parliamentary secretary affirmed, and we heard from the member for Wellington—Halton Hills, his intention to vote for it. The hon. member in his remarks I believe said that he was planning to vote against it. He is nodding his head yes. However, just a little while ago, his boss, the government House leader, moved a motion that this question be now put.

We understand, of course, that vote will be first. If that vote is first and fails, then the motion today would not be put and the hon. member for Wellington—Halton Hills would be denied his right to express his opinion on this motion, as would the parliamentary secretary. I am sure what I am describing is not true because it would be so against the spirit of what we are talking about: rights, respect and privilege.

I would like the hon. member to stand and clarify, clear the air for us and assure us that he will be voting against the motion to put the previous question so that the original motion can be put and we can all vote on it, including him and his colleague.

I would ask him to clarify that it is his intention, and I would think the intention of the caucus, to vote against that motion so that we could have the right and the respect to vote on the motion that is actually before us today.

● (1645)

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, my friend ought to bone up on procedure because the motion on the previous question was basically to prevent you from making any amendments. It does not stop the vote. You guys ought to get your procedure in order before you make an accusation like that.

We will have a vote on the NDP opposition motion. I am sure it will be making a deferral today for a vote that it does not even think is going to happen, but it will, and we will express our opinions at that time.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): I would remind all hon. members to direct their comments to the Chair. The reference was "you guys" should understand the rules and I am sure that my colleagues and I in the chair will take that to heart.

Resuming debate, the hon. member for Toronto—Danforth.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Craig Scott (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the hon. member for St. John's South—Mount Pearl.

[*English*]

The motion today quite simply is to add a very brief amendment to Standing Order 11(2), which basically makes clear that answers in question period are included within the rule that interventions in the House must be subject to the rules of relevance and non-repetition.

In a system of responsible government within our Westminster system as well, the accountability of the executive branch—the ministry, the cabinet, including parliamentary secretaries—to the House is absolutely fundamental. It is primordial. That accountability extends from the House to Canadians at large. Accountability includes the right in question period to seek information and also explanations.

Question period was a Westminster parliamentary innovation. It is called "question time" in the U.K. still. It has no equivalent, frankly, in non-Westminster systems. We should be proud of it, and we should be constantly figuring out ways to improve it or fix it when it becomes broken over time.

When one has a Westminster system that essentially involves a form of fusion of the executive and the legislative branches on the government side, one particularly needs question period to emphasize the very separation of the ministry from the House.

This is all the more the case when executive domination, indeed I would say Prime Minister's Office and prime ministerial domination, of the legislature has deepened gradually since the days of the Pierre Elliott Trudeau enhancement of the powers of the PMO and has accelerated, nobody will contest, under the current Prime Minister. For example, committees have been turned into, frankly, appendages of the PMO. When it comes to questions beyond legislation, the question of accountability, our committees at the moment are certainly not occasions for holding the executive to account.

To compare us to the U.S. Congress, for example, cabinet and senior civil servants are regularly called to testify at length in the United States in hearings where hard-hitting probing often occurs, but not here.

We have all kinds of other problems about which I will not go into detail, but I will say it is ironic that the government House leader would, in the context of this debate about accountability and the role of question period unaccountability, move a motion that this question be now put, in a way that is deliberately intended, as we heard from a parliamentary secretary, to block any amendments at all, including amendments that were beginning to be suggested by members from the opposite bench during the early parts of the debate simply clarifying that the rules of relevance and non-repetition also apply to the question, which is already the case in practice as is clearly outlined in the relevant authorities and enforced.

I have no problems with that kind of amendment, but we have just been blocked from entertaining it. It will make it much less likely that the members on the other side would vote for it for that very reason. I hardly think that was a good faith intervention by the government House leader.

We have heard from the government benches throughout the debate today to be even-handed and apply the rules to questions as well, that somehow or other we are asking for something that is unbalanced.

First, I do not know how many times it has to be said, but relevance is already enforced when it comes to the questions. It may not be adequately enforced from the point of view of the current government members. Examples were just given by the parliamentary secretary, some of which I have some sympathy for. However, the fact is, we have a list in O'Brien and Bosc of some 15 different subcategories of relevance that the average speaker has to keep in mind, and that members on this side do keep in mind so that questions generally are not posed in a way that breaches those relevance rules. Yet on the other side, we have the idea that relevance is somehow completely alien to the spirit of question period when it comes to answers. I frankly find that hard to understand.

The second question is on repetition. We have had lots of complaints that there is a repetition of questions by different members in the House. We should keep in mind that often this is because no clear answer has been given. Often what also seems to be a repeated question is a slightly different take on the same question, and that often happens by way of a supplementary question, certainly from the way in which the Leader of the Opposition tries to conduct his questioning.

● (1650)

It is also important to note that in a bilingual country, there are questions repeated in a second language. That is something I will gladly and frankly say occurs on our side. We often do ask a very similar question in a second language so that Canadians of that other language can hear, directly, the same answer in their language. There are no excuses and no apologies to be made about that.

Right now, customary interpretation by not only the current Speaker but by successive Speakers has created a distinction between all the interventions in this House and one subcategory, that being answers in question period.

Questions themselves in question period, as well as speeches, questions and comments on speeches, answers to questions during debate, and committee debate are all interventions that are subject to the rules of relevance and non-repetition. However, answers in question period somehow are not, to the point that successive Speakers have come to assert what they see as a truism: question period is called "question period" for a reason, which is that it is not answer period.

Unintentionally, this truism has come to be referenced almost lightheartedly, and when it is not lightheartedly, it is certainly referenced ruefully when Speakers bring up this point, so much so that the problem of this disjuncture between questions and answers in question period has gotten lost even by Speakers themselves.

I think also that the reference to relevance and repetition in Standing Order 11(2) has been interpreted as not applying to answers in question period, but other rules that have no specific sphere of application in how they are articulated in the standing rules clearly apply. *Sub judice*, disorderly conduct, and all of these other rules about keeping the House in order are enforced in answers as well, and not just in questions. Somehow this one has dropped out of the picture, as compared to the other general rules.

Colleagues across the way, including the House leader, have raised the issue of questions being asked without advance notice as a reason to maintain the practice that precludes the Speaker from enforcing the rule of relevance. The idea seems to be that ministers or parliamentary secretaries, unlike in the U.K., are not given the chance to reflect and formulate a response.

Now, it is a valuable contribution to the debate to note the difference between us and the U.K., but frankly, this goes to the quality of the answers. What can be expected of the answers, especially to questions that take a minister or a parliamentary secretary by surprise, has absolutely nothing to do with the base, the threshold question of relevance, unless it is the case that the person has misunderstood the question as a result of not receiving it in advance, so the argument coming from the other side is truly a red herring.

That said, I would not be averse to discussion. I hear the parliamentary secretary now suggesting an all-party committee, just when we know we have not been able to make progress of any consequence on this review of the Standing Orders except for what we are calling low-hanging fruit. That is going to be a valuable cleaning up of the orders, I hope, but it will not go into this kind of detail.

Therefore, if we have in mind for the next year some kind of all-party process that will take question period seriously, bring it on. I am absolutely hoping that will transpire somehow, but it cannot happen in the procedures and house affairs committee, or PROC, because as the chair of PROC across the way will acknowledge right now, we have a docket of something like seven or eight bills or motions. Therefore, if this is going to have to happen, it has to happen differently.

There are many things we could do to enhance the question and accountability function, including, for example, having periodic sessions every two months in the relevant committee, to which the minister would be called in to answer questions. That could be a kind of hybrid that would borrow a bit from the congressional system.

Let me just say finally that I personally would be content if the rule that we are suggesting were adopted. The Speaker would interpret that to require a manifest transgression, such as repeated non-answers or answers that are clearly contemptuous of the questioner in question period. Just the fact of relevance would not be the issue; the issue would be whether it was so much of a transgression that the Speaker, in his or her good judgment and good faith judgment, had to intervene.

That is the way it would work in practice, and that is the way it should work.

● (1655)

Mr. Dan Albas (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have heard in this chamber many times that the NDP believes that it is important to consult, whether it is with stakeholders about a particular bill or just the general idea of consultation.

My concern is that if the amendment that has been proposed today was conceivably to be approved by this place, it might put a Speaker, such as yourself, in a politically divisive situation. He may refer to it as the good judgment of the Speaker, but others might see it as being politically divisive and could call into question your integrity or that of those who do the important work of the Speaker.

Has the NDP, which believes in consultation, consulted with any current or previous Speakers in support of its proposal today?

Mr. Craig Scott: Mr. Speaker, I will give the member a straight answer. I actually do not know whether the movers of the motion have so consulted.

The fact is that this is something to do with all members in the House, and the opinion of one or two Speakers would not change what we consider to be a very small change, for the reasons that I gave in my speech. It is not as if this change would have a knock-on effect in the way that some changes to the Standing Orders would. It would simply include the answers in question period in the rules of relevance and non-repetition, as every other intervention in the House is except answers.

I honestly think that we are making too much of a deal of this proposal. On its own, it is not going to radically change question period. My colleague from Wellington—Halton Hills has made clear already the other kinds of problems that question period has, as did my colleague from York South—Weston.

I am not one to overstate what this would do on its own, but it is a start.

Ms. Yvonne Jones (Labrador, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for bringing forward this motion. We all realize in this place that there needs to be change in the way that things are conducted in question period. We very rarely get answers to important questions that are asked on behalf of Canadians in this country.

Does my colleague who just spoke to this particular motion feel that the government has made any effort, in light of what transpired in the House last week, which ended in a teary-eyed apology, to provide better-informed answers to the Canadian public?

● (1700)

Mr. Craig Scott: Mr. Speaker, I have to honestly say that the proof is in the pudding. After the incident in which one of our colleagues answered in the most absurd and offensive way, the answers that later came in the same period and over the next day or two tended to be a little bit more on point. There was a sense from some of the parliamentary secretaries and ministers in the House that a boundary had been stepped over, and we have seen the beginnings of answers to the very questions that he refused to answer being given the next day.

The answers on this topic today from the Minister of Foreign Affairs were pretty direct and pretty clear, with whatever kinds of hedges and evasion that he might have felt that he needed to engage in.

I would say that when attention is drawn to a problem such as we experienced last week, there is enough good faith in the House that people adjust their behaviour. However, without a rule change and without the Speaker being empowered in the way that this rule would allow, I do not think that we could expect that behaviour to last longer than it has already.

Mr. Ryan Cleary (St. John's South—Mount Pearl, NDP): Mr. Speaker, soon after I was first elected and came to the nation's capital, rookie members of Parliament were called to this chamber, this very esteemed chamber, for a one-on-one introduction on how Parliament works. It was a crash course on how to be a member of Parliament. The analogy or lesson I took away that day above all others was this: Ottawa is the moon, and the ridings, including my riding of St. John's South—Mount Pearl, are planet Earth.

I took that to mean that Ottawa is not the real world. Ottawa is a bubble. Much of what happens here does not resonate at home. People do not always pay a whole lot of attention.

However, they do pay some attention.

They pay particular attention when what happens here directly impacts them on the ground in the riding, in their living rooms, around the kitchen table, or in their pockets.

People pay attention to scandal when well-paid politicians abuse the public trust.

They pay attention to a skirmish, especially a colourful skirmish. People like a fight, like a fighting Newfoundlander, but then there is always a fight for Newfoundland and Labrador.

They also pay attention when politicians who are elected to represent them in these hallowed halls of Parliament make a mockery of Parliament, show contempt for Parliament, or embarrass Parliament. They pay attention when members of Parliament cross the line.

Canadians pay attention when their government sends them into harm's way—into conflict or into Iraq, for example—so when my leader, the leader of Her Majesty's official opposition, stood in this House last week during question period and asked the Conservative government to define the military deployment in Iraq, to confirm that the 30-day Canadian commitment in Iraq would indeed end on October 4, he deserved an answer. More importantly, Canadians deserved an answer.

However, the answer that came from the Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister was completely off topic. It was irrelevant to the topic at hand. It was insulting.

If Ottawa is the moon and my riding is planet Earth, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister , the member of Parliament for Oak Ridges—Markham, must be from another planet altogether. Maybe he is from Mars or some bizarro world called Harpertron.

MPs in this House, and Canadians, did not know where the member was coming from. What was worse, and what has rattled this House, Canadians, and people back home in Newfoundland and Labrador, is that the Speaker of the House of Commons apparently has no authority to force the Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister to give an answer that is even remotely on topic or relevant in any way.

There are rules in place to require questions to be relevant to parliamentary business, but not answers. The hon. Speaker apparently has no authority to judge whether any given answer is in fact an answer. The hon. Speaker can determine when an MP can speak. The Speaker can determine when language is parliamentary or not, but he cannot judge the content.

As has been said here today, that is why it is called "question period" and not "answer period". It is in that context that I stand in support of this motion by the hon. opposition House leader, the member of Parliament for Burnaby—New Westminster, to improve and enhance question period, make Parliament more democratic, and force the government to be more accountable, answer simple questions, and at the very least to stay on topic.

The motion likely will not make it to a vote, but if passed, it would give the Speaker the power to cut off a member who persists in irrelevance or repetition. The Speaker can do that already with a speech, but he cannot do it with an answer during question period.

How relevant were the answers last week by the Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister on the subject of Iraq?

The Telegram, the daily newspaper in my riding of St. John's South—Mount Pearl, described it as the "ever-worsening circus on Parliament Hill".

However, the quote that resonated the most with me was from an editorial in the *Ottawa Citizen*, and I quote:

> But it must make the decent MPs from all parties cringe. If this is what a successful MP looks like now,
>
> —referring to the Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister—
>
> why would anyone even want to go to Parliament, to play that cringeworthy part, to embarrass themselves, their government and their country over and over again? At some point, it stops being about strategy or even about the rules. This is a fundamental question of honour....

● (1705)

This brings me to Friday's apology in the House by the Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister who wept during his apology, but the apology was a little off. At the same time that the member's voice was quivering, he was saying that he will probably do it again. The MP said, "I do not think it will be the last time that I will get up and answer a question that does not effectively respond". I do not want to pick on the MP for Oak Ridges—Markham, the hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister. He is not the first Conservative lackey to the Prime Minister and he probably will not be the last.

The government's conduct in the House is a direct reflection of the leader's consistent contempt for Parliament. The House and the office of the Speaker must be given the power to override that contempt, a contempt that threatens to rot—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Order. The hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Justice is rising on a point of order.

Mr. Bob Dechert: Mr. Speaker, I have been listening intently to this debate the whole day and the NDP put the motion it says in good faith with bona fides to try to make this place a better place for debate, yet I just heard the member call the Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister a lackey. It does not sound like parliamentary language to me. It is not the kind of thing that is going to promote collegiality in this place. I would ask him to apologize for that remark.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The parliamentary secretary knows there is a list of words that have explicitly been identified as unparliamentary. I do not believe that word is actually on the list. I would again remind all hon. members to demonstrate a respect for the place and their colleagues in their choice of language.

The hon. member for St. John's South—Mount Pearl.

Mr. Ryan Cleary: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week in the House I posed a question during question period and the unbelievable happened. It was a first in my time in the House. I raised a question and I actually got an answer, an answer that was on topic. The question was about an extension to the fixed dates for the food fishery in Newfoundland and Labrador to take bad weather into account. The Minister of Fisheries and Oceans took to her feet, responded on topic and agreed to extend the fishery. I was floored. The crowd on this side of the House applauded the minister's answer and the fact that I got one. People paid attention at home and it played on the news. The fact that asking a question and getting an answer results in such fanfare, such surprise, tells us that we have a problem.

This past weekend I went back to my riding and I spent much of yesterday, Sunday, in a small wooden boat known as a punt. I was handlining for cod off a place called Petty Harbour. It was as real as it gets, the sea spray, the sun, the sweat, the wind, the taste of salt. Back to my original point, Ottawa is the moon. My riding of St. John's South—Mount Pearl is planet earth. The House must be the high ground in between the moon and earth. The House should raise the bar for truth, accountability, transparency and for honour. Too often, the bar under the Conservative government has been lowered.

● (1710)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am happy to have this opportunity to ask my colleague a question. I know that there have been several speeches today. The Conservatives do not seem to understand the fact that our motion is just about the relevance of a particular subject. The motion states that the Speaker will intervene when he deems that the answer has nothing to do with the question, when it is completely off topic. If the Speaker thinks that the answer could have been better, but that it was nevertheless on topic, the Speaker will not intervene. In other words, if a member is talking about the same thing, the Speaker will not intervene, but members will still have the opportunity to participate in adjournment proceedings.

Does my colleague get the impression that the Conservatives do not understand this simple motion that asks members to stay on topic? Has anyone commented to him that MPs were a little ridiculous, considering what happened on Friday, and has that had an impact on him in his riding?

[*English*]

Mr. Ryan Cleary: Mr. Speaker, I did get a sense of that in my riding this weekend. The people in my riding of St. John's South—Mount Pearl and right across Newfoundland and Labrador were outraged last week when, on an issue as important as Iraq, a pointed question from the Leader of the Opposition was asked directly of the government and the response was not on topic. The member asked a question about Iraq and the answer was about Israel. When that happened, people paid attention right across the country.

As one of the members on our side of the House mentioned a few moments ago in his answer, the Conservative government members have gotten that message loud and clear because the tone today in question period was totally different. They answered questions. If one good thing has happened, it is that they are starting to answer questions.

Ms. Yvonne Jones (Labrador, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I heard the member for St. John's South—Mount Pearl's speech, and I know we are dealing with a motion on the floor today that is talking about conduct in question period. I am assuming the member is supporting the motion. I do not know if he gave any justification as to why he thinks we need to do this. I heard about his fishing trip off Petty Harbour, but I did not hear a lot with regard to this particular motion.

Why does the member feel that the motion should be passing on the floor of the House today? I would like to say that I hope he used feather bait and not a jigger when he was down on Petty Harbour.

Mr. Ryan Cleary: Mr. Speaker, I did not do a whole lot of fishing actually. I dropped a line once or twice, but it was too windy. I had a great time on the water.

In terms of why it is important for an answer to be relevant, this past weekend my sons asked me about this. They heard about this in the news. They pay attention to the news. They know that I am a member of Parliament so they pay attention to the debate that is going on in the House. They said, "Dad, how come when you ask the Prime Minister or his secretary a question, he can't be forced to answer? How come they can't be made to answer a direct question?" I said to them that they should have to answer. It should be that way.

I tell my sons to tell the truth, be honest, be forthright. If that is how I want my children to be raised, those principles, which are pretty simple and straightforward, should be upheld in this House as well.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am going to start by rereading the motion before the House.

The purpose of the motion is to change six words in Standing Order 11(2). Those words are "including during responses to oral questions". The Standing Order 11(2) deals with repetitious comments provided in debate. It was entered into our Standing Orders around 1910 and was a direct copy of a rule adopted in Britain in the 1880s, in the Westminster House of Commons.

It was changed in 1927 and it has had the same form since that time, which suggests that, on the whole, it is a good rule and that we ought to consider changes to it with considerable caution. That is going to be a theme of what I say today.

I want to deal with three subsidiary topics as I go through this. First, I want to talk about the value of informal rules, such as the rules that govern question period and that would be replaced under this proposal with the formalized rule that I have just quoted.

Second, I want to deal with the neutrality of the Speaker and some of the problems that might arise for the Speaker's neutrality if this rule were to be adopted.

Third, I want to deal with the fact that there are in fact some relevant rules dealing with the underlying issue that I think is really at stake here, not so much the rhetorical issue but the underlying, legitimate issue that is at stake here.

Let me do these things in order. First, with regard to informal rules, right now the only formal expectation regarding answers to questions is, and I am going to quote O'Brien and Bosc on this point, which says:

> There are no explicit rules which govern the form or content of replies to oral questions. According to practice, replies are to be as brief as possible, to deal with the subject matter raised and to be phrased in language that does not provoke disorder in the House.

It is according to the practice of the House, not to any formal rule but to the practices that have been found to work by members in this place going back, not to the beginning of the House but certainly back to 1927 and 1910 when the current Standing Order 11(2) was adopted and then amended.

We have to think carefully about what is being said here. The test of an answer, whether an answer to a question is legitimate or acceptable, is whether or not it provokes disorder, whether or not there is a brouhaha because it was found to be an inappropriate answer in some respect or another.

I can think of a number of different examples of answers that have been given in the House over the course of the 14 years that I have been here that have provoked enough disorder, enough dissatisfaction expressed by members here, picked up in the media, conveyed to the public, that they have caused some form of withdrawal. It could be misstatements of fact that were usually unintentional but nonetheless occurred, and the appropriate response is for the minister to stand up and correct the record after it has been pointed out to him or her. There have been other kinds of overuse of rhetoric in the response. Questions have had the same effect, by the way.

That is the basis we have always used. The proposal here is to remove this informal test and to replace it with something else. I think that is a dangerous thing to do.

The test of looking at our practices and formalizing a practice so that it is now a formal rule means that we are moving away from something that, depending on its context, is known as a practice, as we call it in the House, a folkway as society at large calls it. A convention, which is what we refer to when we are dealing with the manner in which the government is structured outside of Parliament and what is permissible and impermissible, in practice although not in law or usage, is another term for these things.

These are absolutely fundamental to the way our society and our structure of government works. For example, on conventions, there is nothing in the Constitution of Canada that indicates that we have a government in which the Prime Minister, who is not named at all in the Constitution, is the key figure.

● (1715)

In reading our Constitution literally, one would say that the Queen is a dictator who rules through her Governor General and that Parliament very much plays a subsidiary role. There is no such thing as cabinet government. It is not even mentioned; it does not even exist. The only hint we have for the form of government we have is the preamble to the 1867 Constitution. It says that whereas the provinces of Canada, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick, the initial three colonies that became the first provinces of the new Dominion, are desirous of a constitution similar in principle to that of the United Kingdom, the following would occur.

That is significant. All we have done is to hint at the practices: the constitution, meaning the unwritten constitution of the United Kingdom, as the basis of our government. By the same token, we have a series of practices in the House that are not written down but are ultimately dictated by whether the House itself accepts the responses that are given to questions. We should move with caution when we deal with potential changes to informal rules.

Let me point out one of the kinds of things we should be worried about here.

Mr. Speaker, as I am addressing this to you, I would like you to consider the position you would be in if you had to make a decision during question period on whether a response to an oral question was repetitive, insufficiently relevant, or germane. You are given only a few seconds in the normal course of questions to indicate the next speaker. If you have to stop to say, "I do not think that was right. Try again.", or, "That was not satisfactory. Deal with it at some other time.", I am not sure what the remedial action would be in practice.

The insertion of this provision into the Standing Order, Mr. Speaker, suggests that you would name people. Presumably you would either do so in the middle of question period, which would create chaos, or you would do so at the end of question period. We would find out after it was over that the questions earlier on had been unsatisfactory and you had been sitting on your hands regarding the decision. I think it would be completely impossible for you to act as an impartial individual and arbiter in question period. There is a reason we have said that there can be no points of order during question period. It would break the whole process of question period down. It would completely collapse if we allowed that. By the same token, trying to deal with this problem in this way during question period would have a similar result.

The rule relating to relevance has to do primarily with long-winded speeches or filibusters in the House or committee of the whole, or potentially in subordinate committees. We have all experienced them. In fact, many of us have engaged in what probably would be considered by most standards to be a filibuster that was highly repetitious. I can think of a few examples in which I was on both sides of that, government and in committee.

I see a fellow member of the procedure and House affairs committee chuckling. I suspect she is recalling a particular occasion in which an opposition member was engaged in a filibuster and was running out of steam, and I tried to spell him off so he could reformulate his thoughts.

In such a situation it may be appropriate to speak of relevance, but that is in the context of debates that go on for very long periods of time. Our questions and answers are all less than one minute long. Therefore, trying to deal with these things through the direct intervention of the speaker, using a rule that was intended for an entirely different situation, would put an impossible burden on the Speaker. I, for one, would not want to serve as a Speaker under such circumstances.

There is a rule in place that deals with the fact that sometimes answers are not satisfactory from the point of view of the MP who asked the question. The most fundamental of these is that we frequently get a question and then a supplemental. The supplemental tries to focus a little more tightly, if the minister missed the point of the initial question. However, if that does not work, we have a rule that has been in effect for a very long time, since 1964, that allows for the MP to ask to have the matter raised during adjournment proceedings. This is Standing Order 37(3), which was adopted 50 years ago, in 1964.

● (1720)

This rule says the following:

> A Member who is not satisfied with the response to a question asked on any day at [question period]...may give notice that he or she intends to raise the subject-matter of the question at the adjournment of the House.

This is known as "the late show". That term has been used since the 1980s. Late show questions, or adjournment questions more precisely, are initiated by using a form which is circulated to members. I actually brought one. I am not sure it counts as a prop to wave a form around that is given to members of the House of Commons. It is perhaps just as well that I have misplaced the copy I had here. Normally they are placed in our desks. I went up to the Table and asked for a copy to show to everybody.

We fill in the form. We indicate that minister *X* has given a response that seems in our own discretion to be unsatisfactory. That form is then presented to the Table, and the minister or the parliamentary secretary to the minister then has to respond within a certain number of sitting days.

This allows for a more detailed response, in part because the responses at adjournment proceedings, the late show, are four minutes long. The member will re-pose the question, sometimes with a great deal more detail, and he or she will get a four-minute long response. I have posed questions at the late show.

The member then has a one-minute supplemental question, and a one-minute response from the minister or parliamentary secretary. This allows the member to focus on whether the minister or the parliamentary secretary has been digressing or missing the point once again.

Originally the rules called for simply one question and one response, and that was changed when it was found not to be good enough. I had the honour of being the first person to ask a question under the new rules that allow for the one-minute supplemental question and one-minute response. This was designed to ensure a little more spontaneity from the minister or parliamentary secretary because written responses were frequently given.

Attempts have been made for half a century, with adjustments in the 1990s, and again in 2001, to allow for more fulsome answers. I suggest that is an excellent way of dealing with the basic problem of relevance.

I do not know if the member who spoke a moment ago, from St. John's, took advantage of that opportunity, but I would say to anybody who finds themselves in a similar situation to do that. I always did it when I was dissatisfied with the answer. Sometimes I thought the answer was just fine, but I submitted one of the forms anyway. It is an option that can be exercised at the absolute discretion of the questioner.

That is a mature and thoughtful response to a legitimate problem. Sometimes in the hurly-burly of question period we cannot deal with a problem, or we cannot get something dealt with in a thoughtful way. We cannot get a considered response in 35 seconds. Sometimes the minister has misunderstood the question, and sometimes the questioner does not think that the response is legitimate.

Separate from that, we have a custom in the House that if the question and the response to the question cause some kind of disorder, then remedial action is taken. I suggest that a version of that is what happened last week, and I think that is healthy for the House.

In my view, there is no need for this particular change. However, if a change were to be considered, I would strongly suggest that it not take the form of an amendment to Standing Order 11(2), which was intended for something else. That is an unwise place to put this kind of change. The Standing Order was clearly intended to deal with matters that are entirely different, very long-winded debates that go on for hours, and not for a matter of just a few seconds.

● (1725)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse (Louis-Saint-Laurent, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague from Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington for his speech. I am always very happy to discuss issues like this with him. I respect the member very much because he brings a lot of substance to debates, and that is the case again today.

I listened closely to his speech, and I found it very interesting that, basically, this rule already exists, albeit informally.

Last week, the government gave a totally irrelevant answer to a member's question; the answer had nothing to do with the question. I am not talking about content or an answer that was not satisfactory.

If topics have nothing whatsoever to do with each other, which is what happened last week, what solutions does he offer to ensure that Canadians watching question period do not feel let downdo not say that what is going on in the House makes no sense at all?

I know that he thinks this is a very important situation and that he would like to see improvements.

How, then, does he see it? What solutions can he come up with?

● (1730)

Mr. Scott Reid: Mr. Speaker, the solution already exists in the practices of the House, in Standing Order 37(3), if I am not mistaken.

[*English*]

It seems to me that we already have the mechanism for dealing with this. The most important thing to remember in a situation like this, as she said, is that if the Canadian people find a response to be unsatisfactory, or a manner of carrying out a response to be unsatisfactory, that feedback gets back to the government.

We are politicians. We are all hypersensitive to public feedback. We are all very anxious to have public approval. We understand that public approval is necessary for re-election. For people who have the kind of job that could be ended very abruptly at the next election, that is more powerful than any formal rule.

Ms. Yvonne Jones (Labrador, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we cannot speak out on both sides of this issue. Either we support what is happening in the House of Commons right now, or we support reforming it.

One of the things that is expected of cabinet ministers, as documented by the Prime Minister's own guide, is that they answer questions in the House in a way that is informative and honest. This motion would give the Speaker some power to ensure that is the case and that it is actually followed.

Why would the member not support the motion that is tabled here today? The alternative is that you agree with the kinds of actions we have seen in the House and the responses coming from some of your colleagues over the recent days.

The Deputy Speaker: I would remind all members to direct their questions and comments to the Chair and not to other members of the House.

The hon. member for Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington.

Mr. Scott Reid: Mr. Speaker, the best way to respond to that question is to refer to the Annotated Standing Orders of the House of Commons. This is an excellent volume, which gives a bit of information regarding the rationale behind each of the Standing Orders.

Standing Order 11(2) deals with the kinds of rulings that have been made regarding relevance. I would suggest that it would be very difficult for a Speaker in the context of question period to indicate where the problem lies with relevance, given its rapid-fire nature. It is very different from the longer debates that go on. That is the reason this would not work.

Here is an example. A Speaker once asked the following:

> How can you tell if a Member is repeating until you have heard him, and once you have heard him he has completed his repetition and therefore you cannot ask him to swallow his words.

That is regarding repetition. With regard to relevance, one example says:

> ...the Speaker pointed out that debate on a motion for the production of papers in connection with steamship service between Montreal and Gaspé "could not properly include the terms of union between Prince Edward Island and the rest of the Dominion."

This is something that takes time to express. There are other similar examples. On another occasion it was pointed out that a member's remarks with regard to criminology had "little to do with import duties".

These are all things that cannot be expressed in a few words. They would involve the Speaker actively disrupting question period, or else, as the Standing Order assumes, waiting until the end of question period and naming the member. Essentially it is only at the end of question period that members would find out that an answer had been considered so inappropriate by the Speaker that the Speaker was going to take remedial action. That is very problematic.

● (1735)

Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member for Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington referenced early in his remarks the fact that the current rule, Standing Order 11(2), was modelled on a rule in the British Parliament from the 1880s. I would have thought that the current rule in our Parliament, Standing Order 11(2), would have been interpreted in a way that included oral questions. Clearly, previous speakers and the current Speaker have not interpreted it that way.

I note that in the U.K. Parliament today, the Speaker has the right to cut off members of the ministry if he does not feel they are properly answering questions. In fact, this happened on April 30, 2014, just a mere six months ago, when the British Speaker at Westminster palace cut off the Prime Minister, because he felt the Prime Minister was not being relevant during question period.

I would point that out to my colleague as an example of a sister parliament, where the Speaker gets more vigorously involved in making sure that the ministry adequately answers questions put to it.

Mr. Scott Reid: Mr. Speaker, I only quoted the six words that would be added to the Standing Order. Maybe if I read the whole thing, it would make the point as to why this is problematic. It states:

> The Speaker...after having called the attention of the House...to the conduct of a Member who persists in irrelevance...including during responses to oral questions,

That is the part that is added in. Then it goes back to the existing wording, as follows:

> may direct the Member to discontinue his or her intervention, and if then the Member still continues to speak, the Speaker shall name the Member or, if in Committee of the Whole, the Chair shall report the Member to the House.

The last part is not relevant, but it says, "the Speaker shall name the Member". Naming seems really strong. It has not happened once in the House during my career.

It also says that the Speaker may order the member to discontinue. If the Speaker says, "Make the comments relevant or I am going to cut them off, because that is not relevant" and goes back to the questioner, that is a different process than what is recommended here.

What is recommended here is simply the wrong weapon for the situation, because a Standing Order intended for an entirely different purpose is being used for this purpose. I suggest that it is like trying to fix a hole in a boat with something that is inappropriate, like barbed wire. It is the wrong tool for the situation. It is like using glue to repair a rip in a blanket. It is the wrong tool. That is the main problem with this.

If members want to come back with some other way of dealing with this issue somewhere else in the Standing Orders, we may have greater success, although I still go back to my thought that it is best to rely upon the practices of the House.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we are talking about answering the question and ensuring that the answer really addresses the question asked. The answer needs to be relevant.

I would like to know if the Conservative member listened to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, who was more worried about the fact that the government cannot ask the opposition any questions. In my view, when a question is asked, an answer normally follows. Today the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons defended himself, saying that this motion would take away the government's chance to ask the opposition questions.

Really, in any parliament, it is the opposition that asks questions of the government. There are also members on the government side who ask three or four questions during question period. This motion does not take away their right to ask questions.

Does the member agree with the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons that the motion would take away the government's opportunity to ask questions and cost him this privilege he thinks he has?

Mr. Scott Reid: Mr. Speaker, unfortunately, I was not here when the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons made the comments the member is referring to.

● (1740)

[*English*]

Ms. Linda Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise in support of the motion tabled by the member for Burnaby—New Westminster. As my colleague, the member for York South—Weston, has clarified, the intent of this motion presently being debated is to empower the Speaker to address the breakdown in question period, and consequently, the continued erosion of respect for this place.

Our concern about the lack of serious, informative answers to questions is but one of a litany of concerns we have about the erosion of respectful debate in this place. For example, we have an increasing number of omnibus bills, allowing for very limited debate. Second is the tabling of significant bills, including amendments to criminal law, by private government members, with the consequence of limited debate.

Also, as the member clarified, question period is in fact intended to be a one-way street. It is the time in this place when the opposition is provided specific time on the agenda to ask questions of the government of the day, and there is a reasonable expectation that the government will provide timely, informed responses.

How have government members responded to this motion? They have responded by alleging that our motion is one-sided, because it only talks about responses to questions and not the questions themselves. Incredibly, they have proffered that the opposition members merely seek to change question period to their own advantage. If the Conservatives cannot recall similar frustrations they faced while in opposition, perhaps they might give a care to a time in the future when even they are no longer the governing party.

Government members have also proferred that the Speaker has the current power to rule on the content of questions but not on answers. Indeed, the Speaker confirmed this view in his ruling on January 28, 2014, yet added his support for the principles laid down by previous Speakers, including, "But the Speaker must adhere to the longstanding principle that question period is intended to hold the government to account".

The Minister of State for Western Economic Diversification has argued that granting a power of scrutiny to the Speaker to command relevant responses to questions is unnecessary, as the standing rules were previously amended to allow for late shows. With all due respect to the minister, Mr. Speaker, I can attest from personal experience that this opportunity has been reduced to a hollow right. The ministers choose not to attend to respond, and in my experience, the responses have tended to be uninformative, despite the clear opportunity for the minister to become better informed and respond at this later opportunity.

Incredibly, the member for Regina—Lumsden—Lake Centre objected to addressing "one-off" amendments to the Standing Orders, this from a member who has repeatedly defended the tabling by his party of one-off reforms to important statutes. He then went on to advise that he is working on comprehensive changes to the standing rules.

As the member for Toronto—Danforth has pointed out, our party is more than enthusiastic about participating in an all-party, thorough review of the Standing Orders. Will the government undertake any or all such reforms, and will they be by unanimous consent and not imposed through government majority, as has been its practice? As the member for Regina—Lumsden—Lake Centre has suggested, will his substantive review of the Standing Orders proceed with all parties and be agreed upon by unanimous consent? That is what is important.

It is important to consider that when the OGGO committee tabled a close to unanimous list of recommendations for the government to reform the estimates and spending reviews in this place, the minister rebuffed a good number of the recommendations that could have ushered in a more thorough, inclusive review process.

Finally, a number of government members objected to the practice of opposition members posing questions repeatedly on the same subject. Would it not be terrific if more ministers provided a full response at the outset?

My colleagues and I take very seriously our duty to both our constituents and all Canadians to raise questions to the ministers of the crown on critical matters, matters of great importance to Canadians. Far too often members of Parliament have raised questions in the House, on behalf of constituents, regarding the failure of the government to respond to inquiries.

● (1745)

That is regrettably the situation that has arisen in this place that has required the official opposition to bring forward a formal motion explicitly proposing a change to the House procedural rules to explicitly empower the Speaker to require relevant responses to questions.

The Minister of State for Western Economic Diversification has today expressed her preference for self-governance of behaviour by the ministers in tailoring their responses to questions. At least this is consistent with the government's policy on self-governance in all other ways.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Justice complained that members of Parliament too often repeat the same question. Why is that? It is because of the failure to respond to the prior questions.

As my colleague has clarified, this motion we are debating relates specifically to question period, when the Prime Minister and his executive, the cabinet, has the responsibility to provide constructive responses to questions presented about matters impacting Canadians.

It is important to consider that this motion for expanded powers for the Speaker to intervene during question period is not so untoward. The Speaker already has the recognized power to intervene during question period, such as in response to a point of order made following question period that raises an issue about the nature of the question or response, including the use of unparliamentary language.

Second, in practice, the Speaker from time to time intervenes immediately during the course of questions, or even answers, to seek clarified or better use of language.

As laid out in the second edition, 2009, of O'Brien and Bosc, Speaker Bosley, in 1986, when addressing this very issue of guidelines for question period, called for recognition of four principles. I would like to reiterate one of those four principles, the third:

> While there may be other purposes and ambitions involved in Question Period, its primary purpose must be the seeking of information from the government and calling the government to account for its actions.

It is pretty clear.

I have long suggested to my constituents, who have expressed frustration to me about the lack of credible, cogent responses during question period, that I may need to table a motion calling for a name change from "question period" to "answer period". I used to think that this was an amusing concept, but it has become the reality, and I am pleased that this motion is exactly addressing that issue.

I am hopeful that all members in this place will recognize the seriousness of our motion and will vote to restore the credibility of this place in the minds of Canadians and those elected to represent them.

Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as the member opposite knows, I said that I will be voting for the motion. I am interested in her ideas, though, regarding question period, beyond just the issue of enforcing the irrelevancy and repetition rule.

One thing I think would be helpful for the government, and one day the Conservatives will no longer be in government and it will be a different party, would be to establish a rotation schedule for the first minister and other ministers so that they do not have to attend to the House every single day of the week to answer questions.

In the United Kingdom, the Prime Minister comes once a week for a full question period, and other ministers appear on a rotation schedule. One could be set up so that ministers of the crown appeared twice a week on a rotation schedule. It would allow members of Parliament who are interested in certain subject areas to attend during certain days to ask specific questions of specific ministers and for the House as a whole to attend on Wednesdays to hear the first minister, the Prime Minister, respond to questions about the whole of government.

I would be interested to hear the hon. member's views on going to that sort of rotation schedule.

Ms. Linda Duncan: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate that the member will support the motion.

I appreciate the suggestions the hon. member made. I think the time for that kind of discussion is during the time the member for Regina—Lumsden—Lake Centre has suggested he is considering many changes to the Standing Orders. We are hopeful that this will done with all parties and that the changes will be unanimous or with the consent of all parties. That is one of the many proposals.

The concern I have is that sometimes these questions are urgent. That is one of the four principles. The questions should deal with matters that are urgent. Therefore, there should be flexibility when we raise those.

The important thing is that the ministers stand and respond to the questions and that they in fact respond to the questions.

● (1750)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to pick up on the member's comments, when she talked about the erosion of respect. That is in fact what we have been witnessing. When we think of question period as a stand-alone issue as this motion suggests we do, it is important that we point out that one of the Conservative members made reference to the fact that it is difficult for the Speaker in a short time span to determine whether a question is repetitive or an answer is repetitive or relevant.

I would ask the member to acknowledge the fact that quite often it does not take much, a matter of seconds, to virtually determine that a minister's response in certain areas is completely irrelevant to the question that has been posed. We witnessed that last week on several occasions. It was not a question of having to wait until the answer or response was complete; we knew within 10 seconds that it was the intent of the minister not to provide an answer to the question.

Ms. Linda Duncan: Mr. Speaker, I am not totally clear on the question that is being raised, but I certainly can attest to the fact of sharing the frustration of rarely, if ever, getting a genuine fulsome response to any of my questions. I and my colleagues in the opposition have been raising some very serious questions on serious matters, such as the potential of engaging in war, the rights of Canadian workers, the treatment of temporary foreign workers, the health of Canadians, and the protection of the environment. These are serious questions that we raise on behalf of our constituents and all Canadians; therefore, it is incumbent upon the ministers to respond seriously to those questions. As we have been reminded by previous speakers, Canadians are watching and the failure to give respect to those questions further erodes their confidence in the role of elected officials.

We encourage that all members support this motion and proceed with making whatever reforms are necessary. It would be nice if they self-governed, but they have shown in their time in office that they are simply not self-governing in the public interest.

The Deputy Speaker: I need to inquire if the member intended to share her time.

Ms. Linda Duncan: Mr. Speaker, yes, I am very sorry; I was supposed to say that I am sharing my time with the member for Timmins—James Bay. I look forward to his remarks very much.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, as always it is a great honour to stand in this House. In standing and speaking for the people of Timmins—James Bay, I never forget the honour I have in carrying their trust and being part of an institution that predates me by many centuries, and which I hope to God will continue on. It is something we are all part of.

Tonight we are debating an issue which in the many lows I have seen in our Parliament may be among the lowest. This is not to dwell on it, but sometimes there may be a breaking point when parliamentarians need to step back and say that there is something fundamentally going wrong within this House. This is not to denigrate the role of the Speaker, but I was very surprised when the Speaker threw up his hands in response to such a crisis, and said that he reads the rules literally, and unless it was written literally, he is not able to act. I was very surprised by that. However, what we are attempting to do tonight is to provide those tools.

We need to look at the issue at hand and what sparked this motion.

In the 10 years that I have been here, I have seen a continual decline in the quality of discussion. I am not trying to present anything naive such that there was a glory day of Parliament. I think Parliament has always been somewhat of a challenged place because it is made up of human beings. This is what democracy is. We have had better conversations and we have had low-brow conversations within this House.

However, the most serious thing that we are ever asked to do as legislators is to consider sending men and women into harm's way. That is the most serious thing that will ever confront any of us. Therefore, when the Leader of the Opposition asks a respectful question in question period and is treated to ignorant gibberish as a response and the Speaker says it is allowable, then we have a problem. When the responder for the crown can swear in question period not once but six times over three questions and that can be considered parliamentary because it is part of question period, because as we are told, "Well, it is question period, not answer period", that is really not acceptable.

I have heard my hon. colleagues from the Conservatives tell us that this motion would somehow tie their hands unfairly. Yet, we know from within this Parliament that the Speaker has enforced the rules, that if the question is not pertinent to the issues of government, he cuts off the question. I have seen questions cut off numerous times in this session. The Speaker will tell us that if he feels the questions coming from the opposition are not respectful enough of ministers, he will cut off those questions, and he has cut off those questions. However, it is perfectly acceptable within his reading of the Standing Orders to treat the Leader of the Opposition to such contempt on the issue of Canadians going to war as somehow being parliamentary, but we know it is not.

We do have to address this issue. We have to address how it is in the interpretation of this House acceptable to swear six times in three questions and consider that to be parliamentary, or to respond on the issue of Canadians fighting in Iraq with some of the most ignorant drivel that I have ever heard in this House is parliamentary, but to call it out and question it is unparliamentary.

We see this pattern repeated again and again in this Parliament. We see it even with the apology. Normally when a member makes a mistake and comes into the House and gives an apology, the issue is considered done. It is sort of a gentlemen's and gentlewomen's code that we have always had. However, we saw an apology come after three days of defiant repetition of this side-show gibberish. The member stated in the apology that he did it on his own, that nobody told him to do it, but within minutes of that apology, we are seeing reports that that is simply not true. We are hearing that the plan had come right from the Prime Minister's Office and that the member was told by Alykhan Velshi, the director of issues management within the Prime Minister's Office, to say these lines.

Suddenly now it is parliamentary to stand up with an apology and not tell the truth, but it would be unparliamentary for me to challenge it because somehow, as an hon. member, we are supposed to take him at his word, even when the apology is simply not credible and not truthful.

● (1755)

What we are speaking about is something bigger than decorum. We are speaking about something that is bigger than just this charade that is being played out within Parliament, this contempt of democracy where we call each other honourable members and we stand and talk about the institution of Parliament and speak in the third person, but what we are seeing is that our parliamentary system is becoming increasingly a sideshow. It is a Potemkin democracy.

We see the officers of Parliament continually undermined in their work. Their role as independent officers of Parliament is to hold government and members to account. Yet we see that their ability to do their job is continually undermined.

We have seen how the parliamentary committees have been turned into a circus, once again, a sideshow, taking away the traditional role which the parliamentary committees had. We are not naive about this. There is a fundamental obligation to Parliament to work together, but that does not happen anymore. I have seen the deterioration.

The only thing that is left for Canadians to tune into now is that 45 minutes of question period where the issues of the day are supposed to be debated, where ministers of the crown are supposed to stand and answer. I used to tell my American friends that no matter what they say about the parliamentary tradition, we have a fundamentally vital Parliament because we know ministers of the crown have to stand and answer. However, it is getting harder and harder to tell Canadians that they can look to question period as a credible place to get answers.

This is not to say that in changing the Standing Orders the ministers cannot hesitate. It does not mean they cannot prevaricate when it comes to answering. It also does not mean they are not allowed to obfuscate, which we know they have done many times and they consider that part of the parliamentary tradition. It means they cannot denigrate this place through ignorant sideshow antics that take the fundamental credibility of the House to do its job and shoots it right down into a sideshow. That has to stop.

We know that in the parliamentary tradition the Speaker does have that obligation to stand and say that there is a bigger institution. I heard our hon. Speaker talk the other day about the obligation we all have to respect the office of the Speaker. I certainly believe that. But I do not believe it is the respect of the Speaker because he wears the black robe, but because the Speaker represents the obligation of Parliament to stand for something besides the cretin act that it has become. If the Speaker tells us that he does not somehow read the authority that stands in the Standing Orders that there have to be questions of relevance and answers of relevance, that somehow question period is exempt, then we have to change the Standing Orders because question period of all the periods of discussion in the House is when the matters of the day, the matters of national and international importance have to be addressed. If we see a pattern developing where this can be turned into something that is absolutely meaningless, then there is absolutely no credibility left in this Parliament.

I am sure many of my hon. colleagues have seen where the speaker in the British Parliament called out the prime minister of the day on questions of relevancy. That is a reminder of a larger obligation. We see within the British parliamentary system where within its committees if they do not actually have unanimous reports, it is considered a failure of the parliamentary system because within the committee system parties are supposed to work together. Under this present Conservative government that would never happen.

We are debating an important issue tonight and I actually hope that the government will even allow it to come to a vote. We saw the procedural shenanigans it came up with before. Once again, the opposition day is one of the few opportunities that opposition members have to set the agenda, and the first response of the government this morning was to attempt to play procedural high jinks and prevent it from getting to a vote.

I think the Conservatives felt the blowback from the Canadian people who say they are tired of this attitude, this contempt for Parliament. They want a vote. They want us to behave better than how we have been behaving. If the questions that are put in the House of Commons in question period have to be based on the relevance of government business, then there has to be a quid pro quo and recognition that the answers somehow must be relevant to that. I think all of us pray that we will never see such a spectacle again as we saw last week.

● (1800)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Raymond Côté (Beauport—Limoilou, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for his very enlightening speech.

One of the rules of the House is that ministers must reply to oral questions to the best of their ability. Another very important rule is that answers should not create disorder, or undisciplined reactions in the House. I would like my colleague to provide some examples of instances where members of the executive failed to follow these rules or meet the needs of the public we represent. Canadians need clear and meaningful accountability.

[*English*]

Mr. Charlie Angus: Mr. Speaker, in my 10 years, I do remember when it was considered contempt of Parliament to mislead the House in an answer. Again, one could obfuscate. One could make a mistake. However, someone who set out to mislead Parliament, that was considered the most egregious crime that a member could commit, whether it was a sitting prime minister of whether it was a minister of the crown, and there were consequences.

We are at a point now where people just respond somehow with "Get over it", "Come on", "Welcome to Parliament", "It's question period; it's not answer period". However, the fundamental respect for even telling the truth seems to have been lost within this last Parliament, and that is a concern.

The Standing Orders have always been clear, in terms of the obligation to respond as best one can and as truthfully as one can. The fact that we even have to make it clear shows the fundamental problem that we are seeing in this democracy right now.

● (1805)

Mr. Dan Albas (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I asked a question earlier of his colleague, the member of Parliament for Toronto—Danforth, and I want to ask him a very similar question.

The NDP has talked many times in this place about the importance of consultation, whether it be consulting with a group affected by a piece of legislation. Obviously, the group that would be affected by this proposed amendment to the Standing Orders would be yourself, Mr. Speaker, and the people who work in order to make this place function. Therefore, the concern I have is that by placing the Speaker as the arbiter to determine whether or not someone is relevant or where someone might see that someone is on topic or someone might see that, and I think the member for Toronto—Danforth mentioned this, in the good judgment of the Speaker, when the Speaker rules on something, as could happen under this, what we would end up with is a politically divisive issue that may undermine the working of the Speaker and the role itself.

Did the NDP consult with any current Speaker or previous Speaker before embarking upon this amendment?

Mr. Charlie Angus: Mr. Speaker, I do not want to sound like I am getting long in the tooth from my many years here, but what he is asking us is this. If the Speaker had the authority to rule whether a question was relevant, what would we end up with? We would end up with the Westminster parliamentary tradition.

I do not know where my friend thinks he is sitting, but the Speaker has that authority. What would we end up with? We would end up with the tradition of the Speaker that exists in every Parliament in the western world.

What we are saying is that when the Speaker comes to the House and says that he does not have the authority to tell someone who stands and swears six times in a row and produces ruthless, ignorant gibberish in a question about going to war, if the Speaker says he does not have the authority to fix that, then it is our obligation, all parliamentarians, to do the right thing and fix the Standing Orders.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I think that some of the Conservative members during the day today have asked that questions should also be put more respectfully. I would like to go on record as saying I think that would also help question period, that questions spoke to specific areas of facts that the opposition members want to receive. This is essentially part of responsible government. However, the answers must be relevant as well.

I ask my hon. colleague if he does not think it would improve things around here if members of Parliament, in a number of parties, were not summoned to do something as ludicrous as question period preparation, QP prep, where people rehearse their questions and rehearse their answers. I think that contributes to making question period more partisan, less respectful, and encourages what I have referred to earlier as bad high school theatre.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Mr. Speaker, I take my role very seriously.

The fact that I practise my questions does not make me unparliamentary. I think it makes me more professional. I would like to think that my hon. colleague would come here prepared, as I do.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, if time permitted, I would share what little time is left on this issue with my colleague from Labrador who is also interested in this particular issue and who brings a great deal of experience, in terms of House rules and procedure, to the table.

It is important that we recognize what we have witnessed in the current government over the last number of years is a genuine lack of respect for the chamber. I would suggest that we have seen a growing lack of respect. Canadians are, and should be, justifiably concerned in regard to this issue. It is a very important issue before us. Liberals, in speeches and in questions, have clearly indicated that we are supportive of the New Democratic motion today.

I do not say that lightly. We have had time allocation brought into the chamber in record high numbers. No government in the history of our country has used time allocation in the same fashion that the government has used time allocation. It is almost as if it were a normal part of the process, as if it were a part of the Standing Orders.

It severely restricts the engagement of members of Parliament on important pieces of legislation. We have seen a growing abuse in the way in which budgets are brought in. These budgets are massive, huge, multi-hundred page documents, which change numerous pieces of legislation that are totally irrelevant to budget issues. This is something that has been given life under the majority Conservative government, and the list goes on.

Today we are talking about question period. We can go from the Conservative contempt of Parliament to the Prime Minister's own guidebook for ministers, which was entitled "Accountable Government" and states that:

> Ministers are accountable to Parliament for the use of all powers vested in them. This demands constant attention to their parliamentary duties, including being present in Parliament to answer honestly and accurately about their areas of responsibility....

This is not the case in most questions that are put forward to the government. The responses that we have been getting to the questions have been lacking. It does not meet the requirements that this Prime Minister, when he took government, said his expectations of his ministers were.

Last week was nothing more than just a good, tangible incident that occurred that everyone in this chamber, even the member who answered the questions, would today acknowledge was wrong. When a question is put forward, not only does the government choose not to answer the question but its answers are completely irrelevant to the question that has been put forward.

This is not the first time, the second time, the third time, and I could keep going to the hundreds if I were to list each instance. This is an ongoing problem that is getting worse with the government, and it needs to be addressed.

My colleague, the member for Guelph, made reference to the administration of government. When we put forward a question, we have to have a question that is relevant to the administration of the government. If that does not happen, the Speaker will stand in his place and say that question is out of order. Quite often we will then lose the question. That has happened on a number of occasions.

Hopefully through this, we will see guidance to the Speaker's office in regard to the need for us to make sure the government is in fact not only relevant to the questions, but hopefully if the ministers respond to what the Prime Minister had initially indicated that the area—

● (1810)

The Deputy Speaker: Order, please. It being 6:15 p.m., it is my duty to interrupt the proceedings and put forthwith every question necessary to dispose of the business of supply.

The question is on the motion that this question be now put. 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 yeas have it.

And five or more members having risen:

● (1815)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé: Mr. Speaker, I propose that the division be deferred until tomorrow, Tuesday, September 30, at the expiry of the time provided for government orders.

[*English*]

The Deputy Speaker: So ordered.

Hon. John Duncan: Mr. Speaker, I request that we see the clock at 6:30 p.m.

The Deputy Speaker: Is it agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

* * *

PROTECTION OF COMMUNITIES AND EXPLOITED PERSONS ACT

The House resumed from September 26 consideration of Bill C-36, An Act to amend the Criminal Code in response to the Supreme Court of Canada decision in Attorney General of Canada v. Bedford and to make consequential amendments to other Acts, as reported (with amendments) from the committee, and of the motions in Group No. 1.

The Deputy Speaker: It being 6:30 p.m., the House will now proceed to the taking of the deferred recorded division on the motion at report stage of Bill C-36.

Call in the members.

And the bells having rung:

● (1830)

[*Translation*]

The Deputy Speaker: The question is on Motion No. 1. A vote on this motion also applies to Motions Nos. 2 to 52.

● (1840)

[*English*]

(The House divided on Motion No. 1, which was negatived on the following division:)

(Division No. 235)

YEAS

Members

Allen (Welland)
Andrews
Angus
Aubin
Ayala
Bélanger
Bennett
Benskin
Bevington
Blanchette
Boivin
Borg
Boulerice
Boutin-Sweet
Brahmi
Brison
Brosseau
Caron
Casey
Cash
Chan
Charlton
Chicoine
Chisholm
Choquette
Christopherson
Cleary
Côté
Cotler
Crowder
Cullen
Cuzner
Davies (Vancouver Kingsway)
Davies (Vancouver East)
Day
Dewar
Dion
Dionne Labelle
Donnelly
Doré Lefebvre
Dubé
Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona)
Dusseault
Eyking
Fortin
Freeland
Freeman
Garrison
Genest
Genest-Jourdain
Godin
Goodale
Gravelle
Groguhé
Harris (Scarborough Southwest)
Hsu
Hughes
Hyer
Jacob
Jones
Julian
Kellway
Lamoureux
Lapointe
Larose
Latendresse
Laverdière
LeBlanc (Beauséjour)
Leslie
Liu
MacAulay
Mai
Marston
Martin
Masse
May
McCallum
McGuinty
McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood)
Michaud
Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue)
Morin (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord)
Morin (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine)
Morin (Laurentides—Labelle)
Morin (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot)
Murray
Nantel
Nash
Nicholls
Nunez-Melo
Pacetti
Papillon
Péclet
Pilon
Plamondon
Quach
Rankin
Ravignat
Raynault
Regan
Rousseau
Saganash
Sandhu
Scarpaleggia
Scott
Sellah
Sgro
Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor)
Sims (Newton—North Delta)
Sitsabaiesan
St-Denis
Stewart
Stoffer
Sullivan
Thibeault
Toone
Tremblay
Turmel
Valeriote
Vaughan– — 120

NAYS

Members

Ablonczy
Adams
Adler
Aglukkaq
Albas
Allen (Tobique—Mactaquac)
Allison
Ambler
Anderson
Armstrong
Aspin
Baird
Barlow
Bateman
Benoit
Bergen
Bezan
Blaney
Block
Boughen
Braid
Brown (Leeds—Grenville)
Brown (Newmarket—Aurora)
Brown (Barrie)
Bruinooge
Butt
Calandra
Calkins
Cannan
Carrie
Chisu
Chong
Crockatt
Daniel
Davidson
Dechert
Del Mastro
Devolin
Dreeshen
Duncan (Vancouver Island North)
Dykstra
Falk
Fantino
Fast
Findlay (Delta—Richmond East)
Finley (Haldimand—Norfolk)
Fletcher
Galipeau
Gallant
Gill
Glover
Goguen
Goldring
Goodyear
Gosal
Gourde
Harper
Harris (Cariboo—Prince George)
Hawn
Hayes
Hiebert
Hillyer
Hoback
Holder
James
Kamp (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge—Mission)
Keddy (South Shore—St. Margaret's)
Kenney (Calgary Southeast)
Kent
Kerr
Komarnicki
Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings)
Lauzon
Leef
Leitch
Lemieux
Leung
Lizon
Lobb
Lukiwski
Lunney
MacKay (Central Nova)
MacKenzie
Maguire
Mayes
McColeman
McLeod
Menegakis
Miller
Moore (Port Moody—Westwood—Port Coquitlam)
Moore (Fundy Royal)
Nicholson
Norlock
Obhrai
O'Connor
O'Neill Gordon
Opitz
O'Toole
Paradis
Payne
Poilievre
Preston
Raitt
Rajotte
Rathgeber
Rempel
Richards
Ritz
Saxton
Schellenberger
Shea
Shipley
Shory
Smith
Sopuck
Sorenson
Stanton
Storseth
Sweet
Tilson
Toet
Trost
Trottier
Truppe
Uppal
Valcourt
Van Kesteren
Van Loan
Vellacott
Wallace
Warawa
Warkentin
Watson
Weston (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country)
Weston (Saint John)
Wilks
Williamson
Wong
Woodworth
Yelich
Young (Oakville)
Young (Vancouver South)
Yurdiga
Zimmer– — 144

PAIRED

Nil

The Deputy Speaker: I declare Motion No. 1 defeated. I therefore declare Motions Nos. 2 to 52 defeated.

Hon. Peter MacKay (Minister of Justice, CPC) moved that the bill, as amended, be concurred in at report stage.

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 yeas have it.

[*And five or more members having risen:*]

● (1845)

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

(Division No. 236)

YEAS

Members

Ablonczy
Adler
Albas
Allison
Anderson
Aspin
Barlow
Benoit
Bezan
Block
Braid
Brown (Newmarket—Aurora)
Bruinooge
Calandra
Cannan
Chisu
Crockatt
Davidson
Del Mastro
Dreeshen
Dykstra
Fantino
Findlay (Delta—Richmond East)
Fletcher
Gallant
Glover
Goldring
Gosal
Harper
Hawn
Hiebert
Hoback
James
Keddy (South Shore—St. Margaret's)
Kent
Komarnicki
Lauzon
Leitch
Leung
Lobb
Lunney
MacKenzie
Mayes
McLeod
Miller
Moore (Fundy Royal)
Norlock
O'Connor
Opitz
Paradis
Poilievre
Raitt
Rempel
Ritz
Schellenberger
Shipley
Smith
Sorenson
Storseth
Tilson
Trost
Truppe
Valcourt
Van Loan
Wallace
Warkentin
Weston (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country)
Weston (Saint John)
Wilks
Wong
Yelich
Young (Vancouver South)
Zimmer– — 143
Adams
Aglukkaq
Allen (Tobique—Mactaquac)
Ambler
Armstrong
Baird
Bateman
Bergen
Blaney
Boughen
Brown (Leeds—Grenville)
Brown (Barrie)
Butt
Calkins
Carrie
Chong
Daniel
Dechert
Devolin
Duncan (Vancouver Island North)
Falk
Fast
Finley (Haldimand—Norfolk)
Galipeau
Gill
Goguen
Goodyear
Gourde
Harris (Cariboo—Prince George)
Hayes
Hillyer
Holder
Kamp (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge—Mission)
Kenney (Calgary Southeast)
Kerr
Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings)
Leef
Lemieux
Lizon
Lukiwski
MacKay (Central Nova)
Maguire
McColeman
Menegakis
Moore (Port Moody—Westwood—Port Coquitlam)
Nicholson
Obhrai
O'Neill Gordon
O'Toole
Payne
Preston
Rajotte
Richards
Saxton
Shea
Shory
Sopuck
Stanton
Sweet
Toet
Trottier
Uppal
Van Kesteren
Vellacott
Warawa
Watson
Williamson
Woodworth
Young (Oakville)
Yurdiga

NAYS

Members

Allen (Welland)
Angus
Ayala
Bennett
Bevington
Boivin
Boulerice
Brahmi
Brosseau
Casey
Chan
Chicoine
Choquette
Cleary
Cotler
Cullen
Davies (Vancouver Kingsway)
Day
Dion
Donnelly
Dubé
Dusseault
Fortin
Freeman
Genest
Godin
Gravelle
Harris (Scarborough Southwest)
Hughes
Jacob
Julian
Lamoureux
Larose
Laverdière
Leslie
MacAulay
Marston
Masse
McCallum
McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood)
Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue)
Morin (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine)
Morin (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot)
Murray
Nash
Nunez-Melo
Papillon
Pilon
Quach
Rathgeber
Raynault
Rousseau
Sandhu
Scott
Sgro
Sims (Newton—North Delta)
St-Denis
Stoffer
Thibeault
Tremblay
Andrews
Aubin
Bélanger
Benskin
Blanchette
Borg
Boutin-Sweet
Brison
Caron
Cash
Charlton
Chisholm
Christopherson
Côté
Crowder
Cuzner
Davies (Vancouver East)
Dewar
Dionne Labelle
Doré Lefebvre
Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona)
Eyking
Freeland
Garrison
Genest-Jourdain
Goodale
Groguhé
Hsu
Hyer
Jones
Kellway
Lapointe
Latendresse
LeBlanc (Beauséjour)
Liu
Mai
Martin
May
McGuinty
Michaud
Morin (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord)
Morin (Laurentides—Labelle)
Mourani
Nantel
Nicholls
Pacetti
Péclet
Plamondon
Rankin
Ravignat
Regan
Saganash
Scarpaleggia
Sellah
Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor)
Sitsabaiesan
Stewart
Sullivan
Toone
Turmel

Valeriote Vaughan– — 122

PAIRED

Nil

The Deputy Speaker: I declare the motion carried.

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

● (1850)

[*English*]

COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

ACCESS TO INFORMATION, PRIVACY AND ETHICS

The House resumed from June 16 consideration of the motion.

Mr. Scott Andrews (Avalon, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to get up here today and speak to the statutory review of the Conflict of Interest Act.

Statutory reviews are quite important. They are put into the statute for an annual review so that every five years members of Parliament can review the conflict of interest legislation through their committee and make meaningful recommendations. In this case, we are talking about the five-year review of the Conflict of Interest Act. The whole idea is that a committee of members from all parties of the House will listen to a number of witnesses and make some meaningful recommendations.

In this case, the report that has been presented here today is a complete farce, because the eight or nine recommendations that we see at the end of this report do not even resemble the text of the report itself.

I will highlight that. The text of this report was well put together by our committee, by our analysts, and by those in the Library of Parliament. The committee listened to a lot of the recommendations that came from a number of different witnesses. We held a number of meetings on this subject with witnesses from different universities, Democracy Watch, the Privy Council, York University, the Canadian Bar Association, the office of the lobbying commissioner, and different conflict of interest commissioners from across the country, including our own conflict of interest commissioner, and that is where I will start with trying to compare why this report is such a farce.

Our own conflict of interest commissioner made some 75 recommendations through her experience with the Conflict of Interest Act. Some of them were quite technical, and others were quite in depth in nature. She made some really good recommendations through her testimony. One only needs to read the body of the report to realize some of the recommendations that our commissioner put forward.

However, they did not make their way into the recommendations at all, except for one or two. That is sad, because after we listened to all of the testimony she gave, we could not come up with even some of her recommendations.

The body of the report is very well put together. It talks about the commissioner coming before the committee and making some 75 different recommendations, such as inserting new chapters into the act, definitions, rules of conduct, compliance measures, post-employment roles, and administration and enforcement. According to the commissioner herself, they are quite broad. She stated:

> Some are quite broad in scope, some target specific provisions of the Act, and others are largely technical in nature.

It did not even include some of the technical amendments that she was recommending from her experience with the act, nor did it include her general themes and priorities, such as increasing transparency around gifts and other advantages, strengthening the act's post-employment provisions, narrowing the overall broad prohibition on engaging in outside activities, narrowing the overall broad prohibition on holding controlled assets, introducing some disclosure and reporting obligations for non-reporting public office holders, addressing misinformation regarding her investigative work, adding administrative monetary penalties for breach of the act, and harmonizing the Conflict of Interest Act and the members' code, most of which were very practical in nature.

Other witnesses also came forward and made similar recommendations. There were some that varied a bit. As a committee, we heard from a lot of good witnesses and a lot of good individuals who spoke to the different areas of the act that needed to be changed.

Members should keep in mind that some of the recommendations that we looked at came from the Oliphant commission, which was one of the predecessors to this bill being brought forward to Parliament. There were some leftover recommendations from the Oliphant commission that we did not even entertain at all.

● (1855)

One of the things in the act that was talked about was post-employment and cooling-off periods for members of Parliament, particularly members of cabinet and parliamentary secretaries, and how some of the rules around that needed to be tightened up and adjusted. However, we did not see any of that make it into the recommendations of this report.

The Canadian Bar Association came forward, and Mr. Guy Giorno, a Conservative himself, made some good recommendations around changes to the act on the different assets people have and disclose, and how these changes needed to be made as well.

Both the Canadian Bar Association and the commissioner recommended giving the commissioner the ability to impose administrative monetary penalities in the act. Right now the commissioner cannot impose any fines or administer any penalty if someone contravenes the act.

We heard a lot of this during the testimony, and we could have taken the opportunity to incorporate some of these things and make a meaningful document. My recommendation to the people who write legislation for the government is to dive into this report, see what was recommended, and see what people actually put forward as concrete suggestions in trying to modernize and update our conflict of interest legislation.

As I mentioned, this was a statutory review. It only comes around every five years, so when it comes, we have to look at some meaningful recommendations. I would not expect the government to take all the recommendations; I get that, but at least when making recommendations, the government should come back to what we heard and to some of the suggestions that were made.

It is disappointing that this report does not reflect the hard work of the committee. As I said, some of the witnesses had some very good suggestions, but they were completely ignored.

I do not think that this report has done Parliament any good. It has not managed to strengthen our conflict of interest legislation at all.

I wanted to make those few comments on this report. I and the Liberal Party will present a minority report in which we outline what I have spoken about here today.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I listened with great interest to my hon. colleague, because he sat on this committee alongside me.

We went into this committee to deal with a very important piece of legislation on parliamentary rules, the Conflict of Interest Act, which is a commitment that the current Conservative government made following the sponsorship scandal to ensure that there was some level of credibility and accountability for public office holders. However, what we saw in these hearings was unprecedented in anything that I have ever seen in Parliament.

Numerous credible witnesses were invited to come forward, untold tens of thousands of dollars were spent hearing testimony, and then the Conservatives came in with recommendations that did not reflect in any way anything that had been said by anybody, so what is being perpetuated on the Canadian people and the parliamentary system is a fraud. The work of the committee was completely ignored. The recommendations that were brought forward have nothing to do with any of the testimony.

However, the most serious and more egregious abuse is the fact that now the designation of a public office holder will include anybody who is in a bargaining unit under the federal government.

We asked the ethics commissioner about this, and she told us that it would be in the nature of 260,000 people that she would have administer. It would mean that if someone was working in a call centre for Service Canada in Moose Jaw, that person would now be under the same rules as the finance minister. We see a government undermining the act by including anybody in any position anywhere in this country. An office cleaner for the federal government could suddenly be under the act.

The ethics commissioner said that it would swamp her office and make it absolutely impossible to function. It would also allow for all the backroom corruption, all the insiders, and all the friends to basically get off scot-free, because they will be thrown into this massively large pool that has nothing to do with what the Conflict of Interest Act is supposed to be about.

I would ask my hon. colleague what he feels the message is that the Conservatives are sending in terms of not only their contempt for the parliamentary and committee process and for all the witnesses who came forward, but also for the fundamental act that got them elected in 2006, which was their promise to bring transparency and accountability to this House.

● (1900)

Mr. Scott Andrews: Mr. Speaker, I could not agree more with my hon. colleague from Timmins—James Bay.

First, on his point about the definition of "public office holder", absolutely, broadening the scope of the Conflict of Interest Act to some 215,000 individuals in the public service is ludicrous. One of the things the commissioner told us is that with the number that she has now, it is manageable to talk and deal with those individuals one on one if they have something that could be a potential conflict. It would just bring a huge amount of unneeded work to the office of the conflict of interest commissioner.

When we look at public office holders, do we want to tighten up that definition? Do we want to bring it down to certain levels, such as deputy ministers and directors? Maybe, and let us have that discussion, but to broadly take it to all the members of collective bargaining with the Government Canada would make it totally unmanageable and unrealistic.

The member talked about how the government rode in on the white horse of accountability, but it might as well have been a pink My Little Pony, because everything the Conservatives railed against, everything they said they were going to change, and raise the bar on has not been done. We only need to look at the thing that the Conservatives tout the most, which is its "Accountable Government: A Guide for Ministers and Ministers of State - 2011". They should read this guide at least once a month so it will sink in, because a lot of the things that they highlight in it to do with conflict of interest and other reasonable recommendations from ministers of the crown are completely ignored.

It is actually quite laughable when we take even the first letter signed by the Prime Minister to his ministers. We get to about the second paragraph and we can point out that they are not practising that. They are not doing that. That is not one of the rules that they are following.

It is quite disturbing that once they have come in, railed on this stuff and set the bar so high, they do not achieve it.

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskasing, NDP): Mr. Speaker, this is basically what we have been seeing over and over again. It is a government that keeps saying it is all about transparency and openness. We heard the Minister of Foreign Affairs try to push that forward today in question period when we were talking about the war in Iraq.

Nothing could be further from the truth. I can see how people are just throwing their hands up in the air and asking, "What is this all about? Who should we trust?" They cannot trust the government. It keeps talking about transparency, but everything it does is against transparency.

Whether it is talking about the missing and murdered aboriginal women and the inquiry that needs to happen or whether it was the war in Afghanistan when we were trying to get all the documents together, there was no transparency and there continues to be no transparency. If anything, under the Conservative government, we have seen less and less transparency and more and more rights violations for regular Canadians.

Maybe my colleague could talk about that. I appreciate that he raised the issue. We have seen it in other committees, where what is being interpreted by the analysts gets all distorted, from what we have heard. Maybe he could talk about how the government distorts all of the information that is being provided to try to make Canadians believe that what it is saying is true. It keeps repeating it, but at the end of the day, it is really about taking rights away from people.

● (1905)

Mr. Scott Andrews: Mr. Speaker, I certainly understand why Canadians are throwing their hands up in the air, because as a parliamentarian, I often feel that I have to throw my hands up in the air and do not realize what is actually going on at committee.

Yes, in this place, there is theatre. There are questions. There is dodging. There is political jockeying going on. Everyone says that we have a great committee system; get something into committee and we will do well.

From my experience in the six short years that I have been here, I do not see the committee system working any better than Parliament does during question period. That is what is so frustrating. We hear this report. We spend hours and hours of time on a report. We get near the end and we think in good faith that the government will say to the other members of the committee, "Here are some avenues that we can give on. Here is what we definitely want to see in it. Do you agree with those? Let us go through the recommendations."

In this particular one, we had some 100 recommendations brought forward, 75 of which were from the commissioner. One would think we would go through them one by one and see if we had consensus and maybe we would have 10 that we are not going to get consensus on. That is how things should work. They did not even try to get consensus on any of these recommendations.

What the Conservative government does time and time again in committee is it comes in, takes out the pages from the analyst with the recommendations, throws them out, inserts its own pages and passes it off as a report of Parliament.

It is really sad to see that our committee structure is not working and functioning as it should.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in 2006, the Conservatives promised to give the ethics commissioner power to fine violators, enshrine the Conflict of Interest Code into law, allow members of the public, not just politicians, to make complaints to the ethics commissioner, make part-time or non-remunerated ministerial advisers subject to the ethics code. All that has been thrown out. Instead, they have gone after people who clean buildings for the federal government.

I ask my hon. colleague why he thinks it is that the Conservatives ran on a promise of accountability and then when it came to fixing this act, completely shredded it.

Mr. Scott Andrews: Mr. Speaker, if I am not mistaken, some of those things the member just mentioned came right out of the Conservative platform. We often see stuff that is on the Conservatives' platform, but when we try to insert their own words into a report or a recommendation, it does not happen. It bewilders me why the government would do this.

There are some really good people on committees, some really good members of Parliament who listen to this stuff. It is really too bad that this cannot happen.

Maybe, as the old adage goes, once members are in a long, tired government, they get this way. The only way I could chalk this up is that Conservatives have been in government so long they think they can railroad and get away with anything they want at committee and in Parliament.

Mrs. Patricia Davidson (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the hon. member for Edmonton Centre.

I am pleased to congratulate the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics for its report on the statutory review of the Conflict of Interest Act. The Conflict of Interest Act was brought in as part of the Federal Accountability Act in 2007. With the tabling of this report, the standing committee has fulfilled the legal requirement that the act be reviewed within five years of its coming into effect.

This was a thorough examination and I think we have heard that from previous speakers. The review took place over several months, between January and June of 2013. In the process, the committee heard evidence from stakeholders, including public servants, subject matter experts, university professors, interest groups and the Commissioner of Lobbying. It also heard from the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner who spoke at the start and at the very end of the review.

The committee's work represents a diligent and comprehensive effort to fine-tune the Conflict of Interest Act in this country and the government thanks the committee for undertaking it. We are pleased with the result. We welcome and support the 16 recommendations outlined in the report. I would like to thank the committee for a job well done. In fact, I think all parliamentarians should be proud of both the actual work that went into the review and its broader significance for our democratic institutions.

The committee's review and the resulting report honour both Canadian values and Canadian democracy. Across our land, it is Canadians' cherished belief in fairness, merit and equality that has made us who we are today and what we stand for in the world.

This report's recommendations are squarely in line with one of the abiding principles of Canadian democracy: the idea that those in positions of power must be accountable to the people they serve. Ultimately, that is what the review of this act and the act itself are all about: increasing the accountability and transparency of those who hold public office. Accountability is the bedrock value of democratic and good government, and it has been a pillar of our democracy since Canada achieved responsible government over a century and a half ago.

The report is also in line with our government's approach to accountability and to protecting Canadians' hard-earned tax dollars. We came into office in 2006 on the promise of protecting taxpayers' money and Canadian democracy. We understood that Canada's public institutions need to be accountable and transparent because that is what would continue to make us a great nation in the future.

That is why we implemented the Federal Accountability Act and its companion action plan in 2006. When this legislation received royal assent on December 12, 2006, one of the first things we did was move to reduce the influence of money in elections. We introduced a law banning contributions to political parties by corporations, unions and organizations and lowering the limit on individuals' political contributions.

The Federal Accountability Act also designated deputy ministers as accounting officers who are accountable before Parliament for the management of their departments.

We also cleaned up the procurement of government contracts by enshrining in law a commitment to fairness, transparency and openness in the procurement process. We appointed an independent procurement ombudsman to provide additional oversight of the procurement process.

We also implemented measures to give Canadians broader and better access to more information from public organizations than ever before.

Specifically, we extended the Access to Information Act to cover the Canadian Wheat Board, five foundations and five agents of Parliament, and most crown corporations and their wholly owned subsidiaries.

We acted to strengthen ethical conduct in government. We conducted open and extensive consultations with lobbyists and Canadians about a new Lobbying Act to ensure lobbying and government advocacy was done fairly and openly.

● (1910)

The result, as we know, was stricter rules for lobbying activity and enhanced powers to investigate and enforce them, and there were serious penalities for breaking the rules. The penalties for lobbyists found guilty of breaching the requirements of the Lobbying Act were increased to a maximum of $200,000 or imprisonment for a term not exceeding two years, or both.

We also brought into force the Public Servants Disclosure Protection Act. This act created an environment in which public service employees, and all Canadians, could honestly and openly report government wrongdoing without fear of reprisal.

We also created an independent Public Servants Disclosure Protection Tribunal and the position of an independent Public Sector Integrity Commissioner. We brought in the Conflict of Interest Act and named a Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner. By doing so, we have ensured that Canadians have the opportunity to voice their concerns about unethical behaviour in government and to hold violators accountable.

That is not all. To give these measures teeth, we introduced new criminal penalties and sanctions for anyone committing fraud against the crown. This offence carries a maximum penalty of five years' imprisonment for fraud of $5,000 or less, and a maximum penalty of 14 years for fraud over $5,000.

These are just a few of the steps we have taken to meet Canadians' needs for stronger and more accountable and transparent public institutions.

The measures we took at that time reflected the will of Canadians to do the right thing, and I see the same spirit in the work of the standing committee. The standing committee's report is consistent with our focus on accountability, transparency, and protecting taxpayer dollars. It reflects Canadians' sense of honesty and hard work. That is why we welcome and support its recommendations and will consider how best to implement these improvement, in a manner that would further the purposes of the Conflict of Interest Act. Doing so would help us build on the many achievements of the Federal Accountability Act, and it would help to ensure that our public institutions continue to reflect Canadian values and common sense.

● (1915)

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I normally like to see cross-party congratulations. However, I am very sorry that the current government is attempting to tell the Canadian people that the members of this committee somehow worked together, that there was a sense of fairness in the committee, or that it is thankful for the work of the committee. The members who were involved in this committee were fundamentally defrauded.

We heard witnesses. We heard from numerous experts. Yet, not a single witness came forward with this absurd recommendation number one. It says that anybody who works in any government department anywhere in Canada who happens to be a member of a union is now to be treated the same as the people who do the procurement, the people who make the decisions, the same as the top Conservative operatives who meet the lobbyists.

I sat in on every one of those meetings, and this recommendation was not brought up by anyone.

I would like to ask a question to the hon. member who brought forward this recommendation. Who in the Prime Minister's Office told them to treat our committee as puppets for a recommendation that is an embarrassment to Parliament and an embarrassment to the act? Where did that recommendation come from?

Mrs. Patricia Davidson: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member and I do sit together on committee.

As a bit of history, we know that the Conflict of Interest Act was adopted as part of the Federal Accountability Act, in 2006. It came into force in 2007. It sets out statutory conflict of interest and post-employment rules for public office holders. These office holders include ministers, ministers of state, parliamentary secretaries, ministerial staff and advisers, and almost all positions appointed by the Governor in Council.

It also defines a category of reporting public office holders, and those reporting public office holders have additional and more stringent rules that apply to them. That category includes ministers, ministers of state, parliamentary secretaries, ministerial advisers, full-time ministerial staff, and full-time Governor in Council appointees.

We know that the Conflict of Interest Act is administered by the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner. The committee did make recommendations. It reflected on the assessment we heard many times that the Conflict of Interest Act is working well overall. The committee's recommendations generally proposed targeted improvements to the act rather than wholesale restructuring or repurposing. In particular, the recommendations sought to clarify ambiguous terms and concepts. Some of those are on preferential treatment, receipt of gifts, and so on.

Did the report include dissenting opinions? Yes, it did, as every report we have done at that committee basically does. There were dissenting opinions from the New Democratic Party and the Liberal Party of Canada. Those reports were attached to the initial report. In both of those cases, the dissenting opinions expressed the view that a wider set of amendments should have been recommended.

● (1920)

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I was not a member of the committee, but in reading the report, the evidence, and the dissenting reports, this is not the normal process of a committee working together. I have never seen such strong dissent.

In reading this, I see that most of the recommendations seem to have been put forward without having had any witnesses making the recommendations. The advice of the Canadian Bar Association, Democracy Watch, even the Conservative platform from 2006, were ignored in favour of some quite bizarre recommendations. I am at a loss to know how recommendation number one is possibly workable, that the definition of public office holder would be so extraordinarily expanded. I do not know how the Office of Conflict of Interest and Ethics could possibly keep up with it, nor why public office holders should suddenly include so many federal employees.

Could the hon. member possibly explain what seems to be a hijacking of the committee process?

Mrs. Patricia Davidson: Mr. Speaker, we heard over and over again that the Conflict of Interest Act is working well overall. Therefore, the committee's recommendations in the report generally propose targeted improvements to the act rather than wholesale restructuring. We did take into account very significantly the fact that it is working well now.

Hon. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is an honour and a pleasure to stand in this place to speak to the government's response to the report of the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics on the statutory review of the Conflict of Interest Act.

At the outset, I would like to thank the committee for undertaking a review of this important piece of legislation. I sat on the committee for most of that.

The government welcomes and supports the 16 recommendations outlined in the committee's report. The committee's recommendations were wide-ranging, and call on government to amend the Conflict of Interest Act and any other necessary acts of Parliament in a variety of ways.

The committee recommended tightening up the definition of public office holder to ensure that all appropriate people are covered, and to align the definition of reporting public office holder with that under the Lobbying Act.

The recommendations take action to prevent vague and arbitrary rulings, to better define what is meant by preferential treatment, and to clarify conflict of interest in the context of expected duties of public office holders. There needs to be a relationship.

Measures would also give the commissioner the clear authority to permit certain activities by public office holders, such as participating in or volunteering for charitable organizations and events.

The committee calls on the government to make amendments to the Conflict of Interest Act in order to enhance fairness and protect the rights of those public office holders who may be the subject of a request before the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner. For instance, it includes that the examination of a complaint remain private until a formal report is made public by the commissioner; that the complaint filing and examination process be standardized; that a section be added to the Conflict of Interest Act that specifies the rights of the individual public office holder who is subject to a request; and that the act be amended so that any order or decision of the commissioner is subject to judicial review where there is an error in law.

We live in a world where some people seem motivated to make requests that could only be called frivolous, vexatious, or in bad faith. It is recommended that where the commissioner determines that such a request has been made, the commissioner be obligated to publicly disclose the identity of the member of the Senate or House of Commons who made the request. One should not be able to hide behind anonymous and frivolous requests.

It is also recommended that complaints filed by members or senators which the commissioner does not see fit to investigate be publicly disclosed, along with the complainant's name.

Finally, a number of recommendations suggest that the government take action to ensure there is more consistency between the Conflict of Interest Act, and other acts of Parliament, conflict of interest codes, and codes of ethics. It only makes sense to standardize some of those measures.

In carrying out its study, the committee heard testimony from the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner, academics, subject matter experts, and other interested stakeholders. The committee is to be commended for hearing from a diverse group of witnesses and for considering a variety of perspectives.

It is clear that government and the committee both agree that the Conflict of Interest Act plays a vital role in ensuring Canadians that their elected representatives and public office holders make decisions in the public interest, without any consideration of personal gain. In fact, this principle is so important that it is incumbent on governments, at all levels, to take necessary measures to achieve this objective. That is exactly what our government has been doing by giving Canadians the information they need to judge for themselves.

We have all heard the saying that information is power. By making information accessible, we increase transparency and empower Canadians to hold their government to account. In fact, Canada is a leader in providing accessible information to citizens.

We were one of the first countries to enact access to information legislation almost three decades ago. That is why since coming to office, our government has been working hard to throw open the doors and windows of government and to make information available, not only to parliamentarians but to all Canadians.

For example, in 2006, the government introduced the most extensive amendments to the Access to Information Act since that act came into force in 1983. Most importantly, we broadened the reach of the Access to Information Act to more public institutions. Effective April 1, 2007, the Canadian Wheat Board, five foundations, and five agents of Parliament came under the act's provisions. It was about time.

All told, the Federal Accountability Act added 69 additional public institutions to the list of those covered by the legislation.

As a result, there are now some 250 public organizations that are subject to the access to information law. The services that these institutions provide are wide-ranging and far-reaching and involve many activities and services that are important to Canadians.

Ensuring greater transparency and accountability goes beyond just expanding the coverage of the act to more institutions.

● (1925)

We have also been working hard to improve the flow of information through the access to information system. For example, in April 2013 we introduced a pilot project to receive access to information requests and payments online from three participating departments, a number that has since grown to 21, which represent 80% of all ATIP requests.

The project provides better service to Canadians by making the process of requesting government records simpler and more convenient. Instead of printing, scanning, and mailing forms to the participating departments, individuals can now simply submit their requests online. Requesters can also securely pay the application fee for their access to information and privacy requests online using a credit card, further simplifying the process.

We also made it a requirement for all departments and agencies that are subject to the Access to Information Act to post summaries of their completed access to information requests. Each summary includes a request number, a summary of the completed request, and the number of pages disclosed, and I am pleased to say that the departments, agencies, and crown corporations are complying with this new requirement. These summaries can now be searched online from a single location: data.gc.ca.

Over 100 organizations are already posting summaries of completed access to information requests, and a full list of these organizations is also available at data.gc.ca. Indeed, this year we provided Canadians with more access to government information, over six million pages, than ever before.

Our efforts do not end there. We are also opening the records of the Government of Canada. We have taken measures to post online three million pages of archived government records that were previously restricted. Our objective is to put more and more information about government activities into the hands of the public and parliamentarians, who can use it to hold the government to account.

I am proud to say that our government is meeting that objective. For example, last year the President of the Treasury Board unveiled the expenditure database, a new searchable online database that, for the first time ever, consolidates all information on government spending in one place. We are talking about everything from spending on government programs to operational spending on things like personnel and equipment.

What this means for Canadians is that they now have a more complete picture of how taxpayer money is spent, and we as parliamentarians are now better equipped to do our jobs, which is to analyze, assess, and consider government expenditures. We all know how difficult and time-consuming it can be to go through numerous complex financial documents to try to get a whole-of-government picture of what is being spent and where. Now, with a few simple clicks, users can find out in one place what every department and agency is spending on items such as transfer payments to provinces.

Clearly, our government has taken historic action to promote accountability in government and to ensure that the powers entrusted in all of us by our citizens are being exercised in the public interest.

We welcome and support the 16 recommendations outlined in the committee's report to further strengthen the Conflict of Interest Act. The committee's work is vital to ensuring that the act is providing the clarity, fairness, and accountability Canadians rightly seek, and its members are to be commended for their efforts.

● (1930)

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskasing, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the two government members are trying to tell us that they are very pleased with the report, that it is open and extensive, that it has been fair, and that it holds violators to account, except for the Conservatives. It does not hold the Conservatives to account. These are spin doctors. This is what we are seeing.

The member just mentioned how much information the government has put out. Let me tell the House that the government routinely tells the access to information officers that it will not comply with requests. It has delays of 300, 600, 900, and at times 1,000 days for the basic right to access information.

My question to the member is this: How open and transparent is this? Conservatives can fool some of the people some of the time, but they cannot fool all of the people all of the time.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Mr. Speaker, I have been called a lot of things, but doctor is not one of them. That is okay. I will accept that, if I would just be given a raise.

I understand why the opposition would object. That is what the opposition does, and I respect that. I sat through most of the hearings. I do not think I was in the committee for the whole time, but I was there for a good part of it. There was vigorous debate and vigorous disagreement, as there always is, especially when it comes to an area like ethics and accountability, because people have different viewpoints about what should be open, what should not be open, and what kind of limits should be put on this or that, and those are all fair points.

I will simply point to a couple of things I mentioned in my remarks. We have streamlined the process by putting it online. We have made it a lot easier for people to access it. The President of the Treasury Board has the expenditures database, which is open. All the information is there. It is verified. It is about how money is spent, where it is spent, and so on. It is there for anyone to review.

In terms of the amount of information, there were six million pages this year. Three million pages on actual government records have been opened up just this year.

There is a lot of work to be done. It is going to be one of those things, like a lot of things that government does, that is going to be an ongoing challenge. We are always going to be looking to improve it.

There is a statutory review every five years or so. There will be another one in five years, and between now and then, I know there will be a lot of debate, but government is trying to get it right. Did we get it right according to the opposition? Clearly not. That is the nature of opposition, but we are working toward it, and we are getting there.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, could the hon. member for Edmonton Centre tell us what witness or reputable body suggested that "public office holder" be expanded to include thousands of public sector workers? Could he also tell us what the rationale was and who recommended it?

Hon. Laurie Hawn: I have to honestly say, Mr. Speaker, that I do not recall where that came from. I do not have the report in front of me. I have not reread it in the last couple of days. There was a ton of information gleaned from various witnesses. There was a lot of information from the government side. There was a lot of information from bar associations and so on. The report compiled all of that information and sifted it into recommendations, which were intended to be focused and not so much broad brush and throwing the baby out with the bath water. It was intended to be focused. It was to take something that people generally agreed was working well and make it better. It focused on some things that we can make better.

Do we get it right all the time? Clearly not, and I will admit that as the government. From the opposition's point of view, we never get it right, and I accept that too. We are working in the right direction, and we are going to continue to do that.

Mr. Craig Scott (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is my pleasure to rise to speak to the ethics committee's report.

The bottom line is that this report, as we have heard in the speeches so far, clearly represents one of the more egregious, but unfortunately not uncommon, examples of a complete hijacking of the legislative process, in this case of the legislative committee process, by the executive.

There is absolutely no explanation for what happened in this committee and what has happened with this report other than that the Prime Minister's office and the government in general intervened not only to direct but to control what came out of that committee.

It is not at all surprising that the government's three-paragraph response to the majority report of the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics says simply, "The Government welcomes and supports the sixteen recommendations outlined in the Committee's report and agrees with the intended improvements to the COIA". Well, *pas de miracle*, it is not surprising. The committee majority clearly worked in lockstep with the government to produce these 16 recommendations.

When I say worked in lockstep, that is a generous categorization of what the committee members probably did. Given everything we know about the testimony that was heard and how well it was digested by the officials in the first part of the report, which was not at all reflected in the recommendations, it rather seems to me that these committee members from the government side, the Conservative Party members of the committee, either did not have minds of their own or were literally directed as to what to do and what to put in that report.

If we had a functioning parliamentary system, this committee would have done its work unimpeded by the executive branch. It would have issued its recommendations and then the government would have decided which recommendations it was comfortable with and which ones it was not. It would have had to have stepped up to the plate to say "this is what we are prepared to do", rather than creating a complete and utter travesty of the fusion of the executive and the legislature by saying, "Oh, we like the 16 recommendations that came out from the committee; we accept them". It is no surprise, because the books were cooked by the executive. This whole process was a waste of time for the witnesses and for the members of the committee who actually tried to make the committee work.

The dissenting report by my colleagues, led by the member for Timmins—James Bay, makes very clear how little listening there was on the part of the Conservative members of the committee, or as I have already described, the government sitting at the shoulders of or behind those members.

The ethics commissioner indicated in her own report of 2013-2014 in respect of Conflict of Interest Act that she suggested 75 different recommendations. On page 34 of her "2013-2014 Annual Report", she said, "I was pleased to see in the Committee's report that it agreed with a few of my own recommendations". She is biting her tongue. "In Recommendation 6, the Committee suggests..." and she described it. "In Recommendation 14, the Committee suggests..." and then she described it.

Out of 16 recommendations, the ethics commissioner isolated two recommendations that had come from her 75 recommendations. Of the 16 recommendations the majority of the committee put forward in its report, 11 of the 16, as the NDP's dissenting report itemized, were not reflected in the evidence in terms of either written or oral testimony.

Let us look at recommendation number one, which has rightly caused such outrage, and should. It says, in the majority report:

> That the definition of "public office holder" be changed to include:
>
> Members of organizations that collectively bargain with the Government of Canada;

● (1935)

Frankly, this is an out-of-the-blue, gratuitous, ideological attack on the very idea of unionized civil servants, quite apart from what I am about to get to, which is the complete unworkability of this.

Contrast it with how the majority somehow manages to avoid those in a contractual relationship with the government who are not subject to collective bargaining agreements. Somehow they are not included in the regime. Certain kinds of civil servants are, and other kinds of folks who work for the federal government are not. It is a pure attack on unionization, and it is a bloody ridiculous one as well.

The Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner, in her own report, says at page 31:

> ...the Committee proposes a very broad amendment to the definition of "public office holder". It recommends that all members of organizations that collectively bargain with the Government of Canada be included. The implementation of this recommendation would essentially bring all employees of the Public Service of Canada (some 260,000 public servants are members of the various public sector unions) under the Act as non-reporting public office holders. These employees are already covered by the Values and Ethics Code for the Public Sector, which sets out its own requirements for the disclosure and reporting of interests, and is administered within federal departments.

She basically says "Wow" in very diplomatic under-speak, but it is clear that she is concerned and it is clear that she cannot figure out why the government would do something so unjustifiable and brazen. On June 10, 2014, in the ethics committee, my colleague from Timmins—James Bay had the chance to question the commissioner, and basically asked about this very inclusion of, as she already told us, 260,000 additional people. He asked:

> One of the recommendations that the government brought forward on the conflict of interest review was to put all civil servants under the public office holders' rules.
>
> Have you examined how that would actually be enforced and who it would include?

Her answer:

> Yes. I found that a very surprising recommendation. I certainly read the minority report, which suggested that there would be something like 260,000 additional people whom my office would have to administer. That obviously says to me that it wouldn't be the same office. I found that a very surprising recommendation.

No wonder; it came from nowhere other than the ideological mess that passes for the Prime Minister's Office.

Then my colleague asked:

> Would you be able to operate if you had to keep tabs on an extra 260,000 people?

This goes to the workability. Her answer:

> No, I think it would have to be a rule-making body. It would be a totally different system, and somebody else would be administering it. Two-hundred sixty-thousand is a lot of people.

Clearly the commissioner is an expert at understatement, but she has made very clear what a travesty this recommendation is.

At this point I would like to quickly touch on some of the many recommendations from her and from other witnesses that were not acted upon, as also noted in the NDP's dissenting report.

Nothing was done on the front of penalties, for example. The NDP recommended increasing the penalties on the finding of a contravention to include suspension for a specified period, a suspension of a member's right to vote for a specified period, imposition of a fine not exceeding $5,000, and reimbursement of the value of any gift, hospitality or benefit. None of these make an appearance in the recommendations.

It is very important, speaking now as the critic for democratic reform and parliamentary reform that we have also asked that the act be amended to include guidelines that can then be interpreted and acted upon by the commissioner on fundraising and dealing with lobbyists.

> Ministers, Ministers of State and Parliamentary Secretaries—

I will now call them the ministry.

> —should not seek to have departmental stakeholders included on fundraising or campaign teams or on the boards of electoral district associations....
>
> [The ministry] should ensure that government facilities and equipment, including ministerial or departmental letterhead, are not used for or in connection with fundraising activities....
>
> [The ministry] should not discuss departmental business at any fundraising event, and should refer any person who wishes to discuss departmental business to make an appointment with the [appropriate person].

● (1940)

Finally, it says that the ministry should ensure:

> ...that fundraising communications issued on their behalf do not suggest any connection between fundraising and official government business.

Indeed, the commissioner added her own suggestion before the committee on June 10. She said:

> I have suggested in my five-year review document that the government consider making ministers and parliamentary secretaries not do any fundraising at all....

That certainly does not appear in the recommendations.

With that, I end my remarks, except to say that I would like to make a motion.

I move:

> That the motion be amended by deleting all the words after the word "That" and substituting the following:

The First Report of the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy, and Ethics, presented to the House on Wednesday, February 5, 2014, and related to its statutory review of the Conflict of Interest Act, be not now concurred in but that it be referred back to the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics with instruction that it amend the same by removing recommendation number one and amending the other recommendations with a view to: (a) give the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner the power to administer financial and administrative penalties; (b) enshrine the Conflict of Interest Code into law; (c) allow members of the public to make complaints to the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner; and (d) make part-time or non-remunerated ministerial advisers subject to the ethics code.

● (1945)

The Deputy Speaker: The amendment has been reviewed and it is in order.

Resuming debate, the hon. member for Miramichi.

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill Gordon (Miramichi, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will be splitting my time with the Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister.

I am very pleased to add to this discussion on the report of the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics on the statutory review of the Conflict of Interest Act. Before I do that, however, I would like to thank the committee for undertaking such a thorough review of this act. This process provided an important opportunity to examine the act to ensure that it is providing the clarity, fairness and accountability that Canadians rightly seek.

As the committee noted in its report, the act is working well in accordance with its objectives, but before this act existed, the situation was far from satisfactory. There was much concern, and with good reason. The government touches on all sectors of the economy. It does this in a multitude of ways, through regulatory agencies, legislation, tariffs and tax policies, to name but a few. Canadians need to have the confidence that public office holders are impartial and act with integrity, and this government took real action.

Our first piece of legislation, the Federal Accountability Act, included the Conflict of Interest Act, which gave Canada for the first time a regime to govern the ethical conduct of public office holders, both during and after employment. These changes represented a major improvement to Canada's accountability regime, and the government welcomes the 16 recommendations outlined in the committee's report and agrees with the intent and improvements to the Conflict of Interest Act. Canada now has one of the most accountable and transparent systems of governance in the world, and the committee's recommendations can help us make that even better.

We know that a high degree of transparency makes government more accountable and is vital to the effective participation of citizens and organizations in the decision-making process. However, accountability and transparency in public institutions is something we can never take for granted. That is why we have been working hard to make more and more information available to Canadians.

By proactively making government information available, it becomes accessible to anyone who may be interested. In that same spirit, the President of the Treasury Board recently took steps to ensure that information disclosed about public service contracts is accessible and easy to understand.

The new measures ensure that more detailed information is published on contracts for services such as professional services and management consultant contracts. For example, rather than simply providing a generic description of the awarded contract, a more detailed explanation of the type of work and context is now required. It is all part of the government's effort to provide our citizens with information previously stored within the government's vault, so to speak.

In fact, we are opening the lid on a vast store of valuable information that has until very recently been diligently collected and just stored away. The Government of Canada produces and acquires vast amounts of data. This data supports service delivery in the areas such as health, environment, agriculture and natural resources. Through our open data efforts, we are now releasing information in machine-readable formats by way of portals, meta data and search tools for reuse by governments, citizens, voluntary organizations and the private sector in new and unanticipated ways. The door is now being thrown open and the possibilities are truly exciting.

The open data portal at data.gc.ca is a one-stop shop for federal government data that can be downloaded free of charge by Canadian citizens, researchers, voluntary organizations and private sector businesses. It is a collaborative effort among Government of Canada departments and agencies to provide access to data managed by the government that can be leveraged by citizens, businesses and communities for their very own purposes.

● (1950)

These datasets, which now number around 200,000, include everything from building permits and wait times for non-emergency surgeries, to pollution emissions and lineup times at the border. Statistics Canada, for example, has made its community level health profiles available as well as 2001, 2006 and 2011 census data and socio-economic geographic data. Environment Canada has put out information about fish stocks and freshwater quality indicator data from the Canadian environmental sustainability—

Mr. Charlie Angus: Mr. Speaker, on a point of order, it is late. We are talking about the Conflict of Interest Act. We are talking about the evidence that was brought. We are not here to talk about fish stocks. There is an issue of relevancy. I would like the member to speak about this report. That is why we are here to debate, not to talk about fish stocks or whatever else she wants to talk about at this time.

The Deputy Speaker: I cannot say that it has not drifted some distance. I understand the theme that the member is pursuing, but I would invite her to try and bring it back toward the report itself.

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill Gordon: Mr. Speaker, it has also released information about suspected adverse reactions to health products. Industry Canada has supplied broadband coverage data and the technical and administrative frequency list that contains data on radio system frequencies.

The Treasury Board Secretariat is making data available on departments' and agencies' financial expenditures and on the 2008 and 2011 public service employee surveys. These are just a few examples. New datasets are being added as they become available. Without a doubt, our government is committed to improving accountability and increasing transparency. We have proven that not just with words but with action as well.

The measures we have put in place help provide Canadians with the open and honest government they deserve, one that acts transparently, ensures value for money and demonstrates accountability. The committee's recommendations will only serve to improve the system already in place, and the government will consider how best to implement these improvements in a manner that furthers the purposes of the act.

● (1955)

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we have the amendment brought forward by my hon. colleague from Toronto—Danforth. In this amendment we asked to give the ethics commissioner the power to fine violators, enshrine the Conflict of Interest Code into law, allow members of the public, not just politicians, to make complaints to the ethics commissioner, make part-time or non-remunerated ministerial advisers subject to the ethics code. None of this is in the recommendations that the Conservatives pushed through, but it was in the 2006 Conservative electoral platform. The Conservative Party ran on this. This was a promise they made to the Canadian people.

I am asking my hon. colleague, will she support having the 2006 Conservative Party platform on ethics and accountability if we bring that forward in a motion?

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill Gordon: Mr. Speaker, before the act existed, the situation was far from satisfactory, but now as the committee noted in its report, the act is working well in accordance with its objectives. I know our government welcomes the recommendations outlined in the committee's report and agrees with the improvements to the Conflict of Interest Act. Canada now has the most accountable, transparent system of government in the world. These recommendations help us make it that much better.

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskasing, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I find it ironic that the member talks about transparency and talks about all this data availability, yet just last week, when we tried to get some information from Statistics Canada, it said the census does not allow it. It is voluntary, and it does not get enough information now to be able to make decisions. It is quite problematic. For the Conservatives, it is "out of sight, out of mind": if no one knows about the information, then they do not have to do anything about it.

My understanding is that during the review at committee, there were numerous important recommendations from the ethics commissioner. I want to know why, when we have an ethics commissioner who makes a recommendation, they ignore the recommendation. That is my first question.

Second, there were other expert witnesses and there were recommendations made with respect to the proposals from the Gomery commission and the Oliphant commission. We have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars for reports and for courts to weigh in on the legal aspect, and then we turn around and ignore them. These are recommendations with respect to ethics and accountability that could have made improvements. Why is it that the member and her government continue to ignore the recommendations?

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill Gordon: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the member opposite for the question and say how much I enjoyed working on this committee. This was my first year working on the committee. As was said here earlier tonight, we know there is still more work to be done, and we will continue to work for the good of all Canadians.

The government is presently reviewing the committee's recommendations to determine how best to implement the proposed improvements to COIA in a manner that furthers the purposes of the act.

● (2000)

Mr. Rick Norlock (Northumberland—Quinte West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I know my colleague and friend in our caucus is quite concerned about the whole issue. The good thing is that she is on the committee, and I know she has examined the subject matter before us today. I know certain parts of it have piqued her interest and that she believes it is important for the House to know more about them. I wonder if she could share that with us at this time.

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill Gordon: Mr. Speaker, I want to ensure that all Miramichiers, and all Canadians as well, know that our open data portal at data.gc.ca is available. It is a one-stop shop for federal government data that can be downloaded free of charge by Canadians. It provides lots of information that all Canadians would want to be seeking.

Mr. Paul Calandra (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and for Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, over the last year, the member for Miramichi has spent a lot of time working on this at committee. The vice-chair of the committee, the member for Sarnia—Lambton, has been working on this committee for a long time and has truly become an expert on many of the things that have come before committee. Her input has been invaluable in helping to pursue some of the avenues that we are now attacking with respect to accountability in government since we were elected in 2006.

I would like to thank the member for Timmins—James Bay. He rightfully highlighted the fact that this government was elected in 2006 mainly on a promise of increasing accountability. It came after a time when Canadians were somewhat disappointed by the activities that they had seen from the Liberal Party beforehand with respect to the sponsorship scandal. Canadians work very hard day in and day out. They always want to make sure that the funds they send to us, that they entrust to their elected officials, are used wisely. They were rightfully outraged when information came out at the Gomery commission to show that was not the case.

In 2006, we ran on a platform of not only restoring Canada's economy and opening up new markets for our manufacturers, creating jobs and cutting taxes, but also on restoring balance in our justice system. A big part of that platform was about restoring people's trust and faith in the government and the institutions that support government. That is what brought the Federal Accountability Act forward.

The Federal Accountability Act was the first piece of legislation this government introduced after being elected. It was obviously very important. Members may recall at that time the conflict of interest commissioner, who I believe was appointed by Prime Minister Chrétien, reported only to the prime minister. He was not subject to Parliament and did not report to Parliament. He only reported to the prime minister. The prime minister at the time, I suppose, would accept reports and pass judgment on what he heard. We knew Canadians would not be confident with that mechanism.

As a result of the sponsorship scandal, we saw it was not working and that was why we passed the legislation in 2006, which subjected the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner to Parliament. Ms. Dawson, who is the commissioner right now, reports to Parliament. There was a provision in the act stating that it would have to be reviewed. It goes without saying that is something we would expect. As circumstances change, as our lives change as parliamentarians, and the tools that we use change, all pieces of legislation have to be updated. In this instance, all parliamentarians would agree that such an important act which highlights how government works in an accountable fashion, how it addresses accountability, needs to be reviewed. These things are top of mind to all Canadians. That review process is an important one.

The committee started its work in January 2013. I was not serving on the committee at that time. It took six months for the review and it finalized a report by June of that year. That report came back to committee in the fall of 2013.

The committee listened to hundreds of hours of testimony. It received recommendations from a number of individuals. By and large, we heard that people were happy with the act, but it contained some elements that needed to be addressed, some rules that needed to be clarified, and others that needed to be brought forward.

● (2005)

This would ensure that not just parliamentarians but the government as a whole and those who work within government, those who were entrusted to undertake the things that we have passed here in Parliament, would have that same level of accountability, because what we hear when we go back into our ridings, especially coming out of the sponsorship scandal, is that although parliamentarians are ultimately responsible for the decisions they make, what we saw in the sponsorship scandal was that parliamentarians enabled people down the line, people who work within the public service, to make decisions on their behalf, which then caused a lot of the trouble, as we saw in the sponsorship scandal.

We heard a lot of this through our consultations within our ridings and consultations at the committee. We heard that certain rules had to be tightened up and that certain people had to be brought within the scope of the Conflict of Interest Act. That is what we acted upon.

However, we also wanted to make sure that any changes reflected the fact that Canadians by and large, as well as those working under this act, could be confident that it was actually doing what it was designed to do: provide a set of rules for those of us who are elected, those of us who are ministers or parliamentary secretaries or ministers of state, to govern the way we act, the way we do our business, and to make sure that those activities are done in an honourable and ethical fashion.

I think what we have seen is that by and large, it is working. That does not mean that every single provision and every single thing that we have done with respect to improving accountability is perfect. Obviously that is why the five-year review was put in place: to ensure that we can improve on all of the things that we do.

One of the things that was highlighted, something that I think really underscores the differences between this act and what came before it, is the independence of the commissioner herself.

As I highlighted earlier in my discussion, the previous commissioner reported only to the Prime Minister. Under this act, the commissioner reports to Parliament. The commissioner can make investigations; those investigations are made public and are reported to Parliament. Parliamentarians can learn from the unfortunate mistakes that some of our colleagues might make. We can know what they did wrong or what they may have made a mistake with, and we, the rest of us, can learn from those mistakes.

Previously, that was not how it worked in this place, so that is a huge benefit over the previous system.

As I said, I reviewed a lot of the testimony, and what we heard from a lot of the testimony was very clear: we had to continue to do all we could to ensure that ethical practices were followed, that the act itself was working properly, and that this was not the time to throw out an act that was working well and completely start all over. However, some areas needed to be modified.

Recommendations came through the committee after almost a year of debate in committee. The report was finalized, if I am not mistaken, toward the end of October or early November. My colleague from Sarnia—Lambton can probably correct me if I am wrong on that. After almost a year of consideration, we came out with a report.

Obviously the opposition did not appreciate all of the recommendations that came through the majority of the committee members, but the process also allowed them to make a comment, and there was, of course, a minority report that was attached. It also becomes part of the public record for debate.

By and large, the committee actually did what it was supposed to do, what it was tasked to do. It looked at an act, an act that is a good act and that has fundamentally changed how public office holders work within government. It is transparent, it is open, and it gives clear indication to the Canadian people that their politicians, those they elect, are acting in an ethical manner, but it also says that as time moves on, we will make sure that we improve on it, and that is what we did. The committee worked in a very good fashion on this task. It took the time it needed, it listened to the witnesses that it needed to, and, after almost a year of study, it came up with these recommendations.

I think they are good recommendations. I commend the committee members, especially the member forMiramichi and the vice-chair, the member for Sarnia—Lambton, who did extraordinary work.

● (2010)

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I listened with great interest to my hon. colleague and the history lesson of what brought this act about. We certainly need to root out the horrific corruption that was endemic back in the Liberal years.

In this five-year review, which was a reasonable timeline to review because we did not know how the act was going to work, a lot of the testimony was focused on who should be under the act. We call them the public office holders. These are the people who hold power and make decisions. These are the people in charge of procurement, sometimes in the order of hundreds of millions of dollars, the people who are lobbied. Therefore, the question was this. Who should be under it and how should the act ensure that it is not too broad but it is broad enough to ensure that people cannot be corrupted or that they would not undermine their public roles?

However, at no point in any of the testimony that I heard, and I was at pretty much all of the committees, was there the idea that we were going to throw every civil servant in the country under the act, which now means, if we follow the recommendation brought forward by the Conservative government, that the ethics commissioner would have to oversee more people than live in the city of Saskatoon. Anyone looking at that would think it an absurd position to take, being that the people who are now under this act, along with the people who handle procurement, and the people who are being lobbied, sometimes could have the most minor position. However, because they are in the federal government they would be under the act.

I would like to ask my hon. colleague this. Where the heck did this recommendation come from?

Mr. Paul Calandra: Mr. Speaker, by and large what we have is a professional and honest public service. I do not for a second think that every single member of the public service would, at one point or at some time, be brought in front of the ethics commissioner for a conflict of interest investigation. That is not what this is about. Nor has every member of Parliament been brought in front of the ethics commissioner.

What the act is intended to do is to ensure that there are rules that have to be followed to ensure that the government and those who work with the government act in an ethical manner, that if that did not happen there would be someone who could investigate to see where the failing was, and if further action needed to be taken that would happen. That is what these recommendations highlight.

As the member said, it is something that came out of the years of corruption or mismanagement that we saw, especially highlighted throughout the sponsorship scandal and the final Gomery report.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask the hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister what set of witnesses he was looking at when he said that there is a sense that people are generally satisfied with the act. I note that Democracy Watch, in its recommendations, which were simplified in its press release, said that the Conflict of Interest Act and the ethics codes applying to ministers should really be called the "Almost Impossible to be in a Conflict of Interest" act.

The Conflict of Interest Commissioner herself tabled 75 recommendations, yet this report from the Conservative majority on the committee takes very few of them into account, and ignores the 2006 Conservative platform commitments, which would include some of those things that today the official opposition has put forward as amendments, such as allowing members of the public to make complaints under the conflict of interest code.

I wonder if the member wants to support the platform from 2006 of the Conservative Party.

● (2015)

Mr. Paul Calandra: Mr. Speaker, the member highlighted Democracy Watch. In the last Parliament, I was on this committee and I remember asking I think it was Duff Conacher of Democracy Watch, "If you had some advice to give and somebody wanted an opinion and they said that they would give you $1,000 for that opinion, would that change your outlook?" He said, "No, absolutely not." I said, "How about $2,000?" He said no. I said, "What about $5,000?" "Well, at that point then I'd start to have to look at the opposite side of the equation." Therefore, forgive me if I do not take Democracy Watch as the lead when it comes to how an ethical government should operate.

We have a system in a place that is far better than the system that we had before. Is it perfect? Absolutely not. It is not going to be perfect. I do not think we will ever get to a place where we can say that everything that we do is perfect. However, it is fair. That also has to be one of the equations that we look at. Is the act that we brought forward fair to the people who it intends to cover? I think it is. Does it provide more information than the previous act did? Is it accountable to the people of Canada through their Parliament? I think it is. That is why I think this report and this act are good and the changes that are proposed would make the act better and stronger for all Canadians.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am honoured to rise in this House, as always, to speak on behalf of the people of Timmins—James Bay.

I am not pleased that Parliament is looking at this report as it stands now. I believe that this report has made a mockery of the work of Parliament and the parliamentary committees and has undermined, in a very egregious manner, the objective of the Conflict of Interest Act and the promise that was made in 2006, when the present Prime Minister came into town promising accountability.

When we go back to 2006, after the endemic corruption that had beset Ottawa under years and years of a Liberal government, there were numerous problems identified. There was the revolving door around the Prime Minister's office; the easy access of the lobbyists to keep people in positions; the lack of accountability mechanisms for the people in the civil service at the very high levels, who were making the procurement decisions; and the inability to devise clear walls between the political operatives of the government and the senior civil service to ensure accountability to the Canadian people.

In 2006, the New Democratic Party worked in good faith with the incoming Conservative government, because we believe in the issue of transparency and accountability, regardless of which party is in power. The Canadian people expect this.

At the time, there were some obvious major failings in the efforts of the accountability act. We had pushed to have the Senate under the same code as the House of Commons so that Canadians could trust that even though the House is elected and the Senate is not elected, and I am not going to get into that issue tonight, there was a standard for ethical behaviour. The Canadian public will certainly agree that if the Senate had agreed to come under the Conflict of Interest Act and to have an empowered ethics commissioner and a lobbying commissioner a number of its members might not be facing fraud or be under investigation the way they are tonight.

That does not mean that the act itself, the way it was administered in Parliament, did not have problems. That was the reason for the five-year statutory review. The reason was that we needed to see what worked and what did not. Certainly over the period of five years, a number of problems came forward that the original enshriners of the act, the Conservative government at the time, working with the New Democrat opposition, may not have envisioned.

One of the problems was the interpretation of the Conflict of Interest Act. Present Commissioner Mary Dawson is very literal. There is no deviation on the issue of apparent conflict of interest.

Yet members will know that in dealing with lobbying or people looking to get access, the issue of apparent conflict of interest is as crucial as conflict of interest, because it is very difficult to prove an exact conflict of interest unless the actual body is lying on the ground, with a gun in the hand, and the ethics commissioner is jumping in the door as it is all happening.

The issue of apparent conflict of interest would have been a reasonable amendment to clarify the role of the ethics commissioner.

We needed to clarify the roles of the lobbying commissioner and the ethics commissioner, because we have had the bizarre situation where the lobbying commissioner has found that lobbyists have acted inappropriately, yet the same ministers who were under investigation through the ethics commissioner for the same act of lobbying were found to have done nothing wrong. There is obviously a problem if the lobbyist did something wrong but the ministers or senior civil servants did not. We had to clarify that. It would have been a good result of the act to clarify that, which would come down to the issue of the apparent conflict of interest role.

There are certainly issues in terms of clarifying the roles of financial remuneration, particularly for the top parliamentary secretaries and ministers of the crown, because these are the people who can be influenced.

Right now the reading of the act is very narrow. There has to be a personal benefit. A personal benefit is not necessarily money paid to a riding association, yet clearly there is a benefit to a lobbyist who is going to give money to a riding association.

This is not to be draconian on this. I am sure we could have worked it out.

● (2020)

If a senior minister has someone donate to him or her, one does not necessarily have the ability to check everybody who is donating, so that person is not necessarily in a conflict of interest. However, if that person is in his or her office and lobbyists are going to the office and the individual is saying he or she is doing a fundraiser, the person is potentially in a conflict of interest. However, if the word "apparent" is not being used, that issue is not being clarified. These were issues that needed to be addressed.

Certainly Canadians were wondering how it was possible that the most senior inside advisor to the Prime Minister could write a secret cheque for $90,000. Is that a conflict of interest, a breach of the act? These were things that needed to be clarified, so we all understood the rules. Unfortunately, that did not happen.

Let us talk about the administration of the act, the people who are under the act, and about how this whole process was undermined.

In terms of the administration of the role of the access to information, privacy and ethics committee, these are officers of Parliament who are some of the finest civil servants I have had the honour to meet. There is extreme professionalism traditionally, by the Information Commissioner, the Privacy Commissioner, Elections Canada, the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner, and the Lobbying Commissioner. They all play the role of ensuring that parliamentarians in government are accountable to the Canadian people.

However, we saw the full-on attack against the credibility of the head of Elections Canada, insinuating that he was somehow partisan. That undermined his office and his ability to do the work. We saw the attack on the former parliamentary budget officer, Kevin Page, which was relentless and completely out of line. The government was trying to undermine the work of an independent officer who was bringing forward the information that parliamentarians need.

The recent appointment of the Privacy Commissioner has caused a great deal of uncertainty in terms of his role. I hope he can fulfill his role with credibility, despite what has happened under the current government. Then we have the issue of the Conflict of Interest Act and how Mary Dawson is going to apply that act. We know she has proven herself to be very literal when she reads the act, so who is it that Mary Dawson or a future ethics commissioner should be overseeing? This was a big issue in terms of what we debated. We heard from expert after expert, right across the political spectrum. The key issue was who it is that the ethics commissioner should be overseeing. It is clearly people who hold power and who have the ability to make decisions.

If a backbencher writes a letter of support for a local business, because that is what backbenchers do, that is considered part of the job. However, someone sitting at the cabinet table is not supposed to do that because that person has the power to influence in a way that a backbencher does not. Therefore, there is a gradation, in terms of the roles of responsibility and accountability.

Elected members of Parliament have certain ethical standards that they have to meet, but the act is meant for key people who are able to influence power. Cabinet ministers, parliamentary secretaries, and key advisors around the Prime Minister, would be considered part of that. These are the office holders who can be influenced and who can influence. Who are the lobbyists attempting to influence? Who are they taking out to supper? Who are they buying gifts for? Who are they taking on trips? These are the kinds of questions that the ethics commissioner needs to deal with.

In the 2006 platform of the Conservative Party, there were a number of recommendations about empowering an ethics commissioner. One of the recommendations was that members of the public should be able to make complaints. It does not mean that the ethics commissioner is going to be burdened with all manner of spurious complaints. In fact, if the ethics commissioner believes a complaint is spurious, she can write it off. However, members of the public should have the right to ask for investigations, and the ethics commissioner could decide whether to apply it.

The issue of administrative monetary penalties was a fundamental principle in the 2006 Conservative platform. Administrative monetary penalties mean that the ethics commissioner as well as the Lobbying Commissioner have the power to enforce the act so that they can hold people to account.

● (2025)

We are being told it is simply enough that they have moral weight or that they ask people to stay after school or write an essay saying that they promise they will not do it again.

If someone is dealing with contracts that may be worth hundreds of millions of dollars and is seen as doing something inappropriate, the lobbying and ethics commissioners should have the ability to bring forward administrative monetary penalties, yet the government is against that. It does not want these independent officers to have teeth.

We have talked about the people who hold the power, the people who make the decisions, the people who get lobbied and the people who do the lobbying, the people who decide on procurement, the people who are appointed to key government boards and the big public boards that people are brought forward on. These are all the people we heard again and again should be under the act, to what extent they should be under the act, and what rules should apply to them.

That was the main oversight of our committee, yet all of that evidence was completely ignored. At the last minute, the *deus ex machina* recommendation dropped in from the Prime Minister's Office, right in the middle of the recommendation. Of all of the recommendations that we heard from the law societies and the experts, recommendation number one, which was rolled down right into our report as though it had actually been presented as evidence, although it had not, came down from the Prime Minister's Office and said that from now on, anybody who has a union card and works in the civil service is going to be treated the same as ministers of the crown.

Poor Mary Dawson was somewhat gobsmacked by that recommendation. We asked her how many people would come under the act and how many people she would now have to administer. It would be like telling Mary Dawson that in addition to making sure that the parliamentary secretary for finance is not being unduly lobbied and in addition to making sure that key ministers are not hanging out and going on weekend trips with key lobbyists, she will now have to look after more people than live in the city of Saskatoon or Longueuil. The number is double the population of Barrie.

Now she is going to have to administer that act herself. What that means in a very simple and cynical fashion is that the Conservatives have watered down the act to make her job functionally impossible. We asked her how she would handle this recommendation. She said that she simply would not be able to do it. The government would have to get some other body to it. What the government has done is it has decided that its number one recommendation, without any evidence or witnesses coming forward, is to make her office unable to do its job, which is keeping the key power brokers in the Conservative government accountable.

The other thing the Conservative government is pushing for is secrecy. This is the government that tells us how much it believes in openness and transparency. What it believes in is total transparency against its enemies and total secrecy for its friends. It wants to make it so that any investigation of any of its ministers or friends who are guilty of wrongdoing has to be kept secret.

The government members do not talk about that here tonight when we hear them talk about transparency, openness and datasets. It was talking about radio waves and fish stocks earlier, but it was not telling the Canadian public that one of the key recommendations they are bringing forward is to make the investigation process secret. How does that help the Canadian public? It does not, but it will certainly help the Conservative Party when it is about protecting Conservatives and hiding the information about whether or not any wrongdoing has been done.

We have enormous respect for these institutions, and we believe that when recommendations or questions for investigations are brought forward, the spurious ones will be looked at and thrown out, but the Canadian public has a right to know that an investigation is under way. They have a right to know that the ethics commissioner has the right, and should have the right, to be able to say, "Yes, I have launched an investigation", and the person who is bringing it should be able to say it. She should also have the right to say, "I looked at it and I found that it was an absolutely ridiculous request for an investigation. No, I am not doing it." That should be the power of an independent officer, which the government is taking away, but it has not said that.

There was a number of recommendations that the government ignored. What we are seeing here is a sham. This is not based on what we heard.

● (2030)

The Conservatives completely ignored the 70-some recommendations from the ethics commissioner. They ignored the recommendations that came from the law societies and the people who deal with the administration of government who look at these issues. They ignored all of those recommendations and basically brought in a whitewash that will undermine this act.

We believe that the power to bring in administrative monetary penalties is a key power that the ethics commissioner needs as well as the Commissioner of Lobbying. That should include the ability to suspend for a specified period, a suspension of a member's right to vote if they refuse to be compliant for a period of time, and require reimbursement for the value of the gift.

We spent hours and hours talking about the value of gifts and whether it should $30, $50, or whether there should be any limit at all. Personally, I think it absurd to think that somebody would be influenced by a gift of $30, a snow globe or a photo book of Saskatoon in the spring. What will influence someone is being flown around the country or flown around Europe and given tens of thousands of dollars in free gifts. That is an issue.

We spent hours arguing about gifts, which was fundamentally irrelevant because it treats the ethics abilities of the civil servants and key ministers and it makes it ridiculous. However, on the issue of gifts, at a certain point we have to set a reasonable fee.

We have to deal with the issue of fundraising and lobbyists, first, so that it is fair, but second, so that it is clear. However, none of that is in there.

> Ministers, Ministers of State and Parliamentary Secretaries should ensure that government facilities and equipment, including ministerial or departmental letterhead, are not used for or in connection with fundraising activities.

These are the straightforward, straight-up responsibilities that should be in the act.

The ministerial code of conduct that the Prime Minister himself brought in should be made part of the act. It is absolutely useless to have a code of conduct that is optional. How can we have a code of conduct for ethics that is optional? The Prime Minister had established what the rules were for ministers of the crown. We should put it in the act, and that should be the standard that people apply to.

Again, on the issue of bringing complaints, it should be fair. If the public believes a complaint should be brought, the Commissioner of Lobbying and the ethics commissioner should have the ability and power to decide whether it is reasonable or not.

Also, there is the extended definition of ministerial staff to include those working within the minister's office on contract work. This is not to say that if one is in a member's office and a student from one's hometown comes by that they should not be part of the act. That would be absurd. However, if one is dealing with a ministerial office and coming in to do contract work, while in the minister's office, one is part of the overall decision-making and under that period of time it would be a reasonable thing. Again, it would not be reasonable to apply that to every single person who comes in to volunteer at the office of a member of Parliament or even over in the Senate, if we imagine it ever did become accountable.

These are the lines that we have to start defining between what is a reasonable request and what is an unreasonable request, and what is doable and what is not.

We believe that we could reduce the gifts. As I said earlier, there was talk about $30 and $500. Right now it is $200, but we believe a $100 gift is fair.

If a member goes out to lunch with someone, the member's doors will not busted down if a member paid for someone's lunch at $100. I mean, I would love a Saskatchewan Roughriders jacket, but nobody has ever given me one. However, if it was under $100, that would be perfectly fine, but not if it was over $100. These are reasonable things.

Also, make automatic divestment rules for reporting public office holders with significant decision-making power and access to privileged information, including but not limited to ministers, ministers of state, parliamentary secretaries, chiefs of staff, deputy ministers, ministerial staff and employees in a minister's office. Keep those rules in place, but extending that to 260,000 civil servants across the country will make this act unenforceable. It will dilute the role of the ethics commissioner and it will make a mockery of the work of our committee.

● (2035)

The Deputy Speaker: I will advise the House that we normally would have 10 minutes of questions and comments, but time expires on this debate at 8:41 p.m., so we have about five minutes.

The hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister.

Mr. Paul Calandra (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and for Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this is so that I can get a better understanding of what the NDP is suggesting in terms of amendments and some of the things the member talked about.

I believe the member was here in 2004. I wonder if he might talk about some of the historical context that brought about the need for an accountability act.

I do note in the House that quite often the members of the Liberal Party chastise the NDP for helping to eject the then Liberal minority government.

However, to help me better understand some of the things that the NDP are talking about in the amendments, I wonder if the member might just refresh some of us who were not here in 2004 on some of the things that were happening back then between 2004 and 2006, before this act was brought in.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Mr. Speaker, in 2004 we were at about 11, 12 and 13 years of promises. They just ripped the cover off the red book every three years and put a new cover on it. They did not actually change any of the page numbers. They did not change any of the promises. Those broken promises, year after year, certainly did frustrate the Canadian people, but Canadians are patient. They were more than willing to keep waiting for the Liberals to finally start delivering on Kyoto, child care, first nations issues, but I do not know if they ever promised accountability.

What we were dealing with was endless amounts of corruption. They wrapped themselves in the Canadian flag and told Canadians that they had to allow corruption because it was the only way to save the country. That was such an insult to the people of Quebec, who said, “What? We have to be bought with flags? Is that how they are going to save our country?” The people of Quebec and the rest of Canada decided that maybe one thing they had to do was actually toss the bums out, which was why the Federal Accountability Act was brought in.

I would say to my hon. colleague that they have to watch the lessons of history. I do not want my hon. colleague tossed out on his petard the way I have seen some former Liberal members tossed out. Accountability is a fundamental issue. Accountability is what we have to bring here. We need to work together to ensure we never repeat those dim, dark days of the Gomery era.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I do not know if my friend from Timmins—James Bay was as shocked as I was when I asked the hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister about the substantive concerns of Democracy Watch, and the response from the parliamentary secretary was to attack the ethics and honesty of someone who has been an ethics champion in this country, Duff Conacher, whose reputation is beyond reproach. He is so non-partisan that in 2006 he tried to convince me that the Conservative Party's ethics promises were good enough that we should look forward to its forming government. He is totally non-partisan.

I wonder if the hon. member for Timmins—James Bay has any thoughts as well on the role played in pursuing a real conflict of interest act from Democracy Watch.

● (2040)

Mr. Paul Calandra: Mr. Speaker, on a point of order, I would be more than happy to actually find the quote that I was referencing for the member for Saanich—Gulf Islands and table it in the House tomorrow. I would be happy to actually provide you with a copy of the quote. Before you rise in the House and impugn my reputation, you might want to take a look at what—

The Deputy Speaker: I would remind the parliamentary secretary to address his comments to the Chair.

Mr. Paul Calandra: Mr. Speaker, I will be more than happy to do that for the House, to reference those comments that were made by Democracy Watch and provide a copy to the member for Saanich—Gulf Islands and table that in the House tomorrow.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Mr. Speaker, we certainly heard from a wide variety of witnesses. I have to say that one of the great things about the ethics committee is I have immense respect for the people who come forward at the ethics committee, because we deal with issues of access to information, issues of privacy and issues of ethics. I do not want to single out any particular witness, but I would say that we had such a high calibre of witnesses who came forward with such excellent recommendations across the political spectrum.

This is why I am so frustrated that these key recommendations were completely ignored and in fact undermined by this report. The respect that should be given to the people who came forward to be heard, to speak, to offer us their ideas were not heard, and that is really what needs to be in this record at the end of the day.

[*Translation*]

The Deputy Speaker: Order. It is my duty to interrupt the proceedings and put forthwith the question necessary to dispose of the motion now before the House.

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

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Adjournment Proceedings

Some hon. members: No.

The Deputy Speaker: All those in favour of the amendment 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 five or more members having risen:

The Deputy Speaker: Pursuant to Standing Order 66 the division stands deferred until Wednesday October 1, 2014, at the expiry of the time provided for government orders.

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

A motion to adjourn the House under Standing Order 38 deemed to have been moved.

[*English*]

NATURAL RESOURCES

Mr. Bruce Hyer (Thunder Bay—Superior North, GP): Mr. Speaker, three months ago, the Conservative cabinet approved Enbridge's northern gateway pipeline. Canadians from coast to coast including most first nations had spoken out against the dangers of the project. Economists and many other experts said it was bad for the economy and the environment. However, the Conservatives approved the pipeline anyway. They tried to do so very quietly. The Minister of Natural Resources hid from the media. He refused to take interviews.

Once upon a time the Conservatives could not stop talking about all the supposed "benefits" Canadians would receive from northern gateway. Now they cannot wait to change the subject.

Here is where we are now after eight years of haphazard energy policy from the Conservatives. Without the means to get western oil to eastern Canada, Canadians from Halifax to Thunder Bay have been forced to import the world's most expensive foreign oil from countries like Venezuela, Africa and the Middle East. All the while, the government has been shipping our unrefined resources to the U.S.A. at much lower prices. We are selling off our oil at a 30% discount, while paying much more for expensive imports.

My father was an investment banker. Dad taught me that the first rule of business is to buy low and sell high. However, the Conservatives do not seem to understand even basic business. They buy high, sell low and their approach is costing Canada $18 billion every single year in balance of trade deficits. We now export twice as much oil as we import and we are failing to meet Canadian energy supply or security needs.

We do not want more pipelines with lax safeguards to ship unrefined oil overseas at a discount. The first step is to develop and approve in Parliament a national energy strategy. We are the only G20 country without one. We need a clear plan to meet Canada's energy needs, address climate change and shift to sustainable energy.

We should look after Canadians' needs first. An east-west pipeline could allow us to do just that. It would reduce our dependency on foreign oil and would create long-term jobs here at home instead of exporting them to the United States and communist China, and FIPA makes that even worse. A cross-country pipeline would reduce our huge trade deficit, giving Canada self-sufficient energy security.

I am not talking about TransCanada's proposed energy east pipeline. I am opposed to energy east as it is currently proposed. Any pipeline from west to east must be brand new and double walled. It must have leak sensors between the walls and shut-off controls that are proven to work. Any pipeline must be virtually spill-proof. It also cannot carry diluted bitumen or dilbit, as proposed by energy east. Tar sands bitumen must be upgraded to synthetic crude before it enters Ontario.

The Green Party knows we will not stop using oil overnight. Any transition to sustainable sources will take time. However, climate change is costing Canadians in real environmental and economic terms. Future generations will face huge burdens if they are forced to pay for the damage climate disruption will do. My proposed carbon fee and dividend bill would dramatically reduce CO_2 emissions and end poverty at the same time.

We must go back to the drawing board and come back with a real plan for energy security that also protects the environment of Canada, west and east.

● (2045)

Mrs. Kelly Block (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Natural Resources, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my thanks to the hon. member for Thunder Bay—Superior North for asking about one of our government's top priorities, reducing our reliance on foreign oil while expanding our export markets.

Our government understands the importance of responsible resource development, creating jobs and economic growth while protecting the environment. When we take direct and indirect impacts into account, the natural resources sector represents nearly one-fifth of Canada's GDP, and of course energy resources are a huge part of that equation.

The opportunities for growth are unlike anything we have seen in our history. According to government analysis, there are hundreds of major resource projects currently planned or underway in Canada over the next 10 years. Those projects represent a total investment of as much as $675 billion. Our government wants to ensure that every dollar of that potential is realized. That is why the expansion and diversification of our energy markets, both within Canada and globally, is a priority for the Government of Canada.

As members know, the United States remains our largest trading partner, accounting for nearly 100% of all of Canada's oil and gas exports. However, as the U.S. becomes more self-sufficient, it is critical that we diversify our markets in order to benefit from the incredible opportunity that our natural resources provide. That is why our government, led by the Prime Minister, promotes Canada's resources in markets around the world. It is also why our government is aggressively pursuing new trade and investment opportunities for Canada in fast growing markets, like Asia-Pacific.

We are also looking at reducing our reliance on foreign oil imports. Our government welcomes the prospect of shipping western Canadian oil to eastern Canada, as long as it is proven safe for Canadians and safe for the environment. Unlike the NDP and Liberals, who have said they will decide which projects should or should not be reviewed, our government will make these decisions based on a scientific review. That is why the independent National Energy Board is tasked with undertaking a regulatory review of proposed pipeline projects that fall under federal jurisdiction. For example, the reversal of Line 9 from Sarnia to Montreal was approved by the National Energy Board and will reduce the amount of oil that is imported from foreign sources.

Refineries have also said that the project will protect jobs associated with Quebec's refineries. This is a made-in-Canada solution that will protect jobs and grow the economy in a responsible manner.

Other proposed projects will be reviewed by the National Energy Board in an open and transparent manner, and our government will make a decision on those projects once a recommendation is made. Canadians expect their government to make decisions based on science and facts, not ideology.

● (2050)

Mr. Bruce Hyer: Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives are digging our economy and ecology deeper into the tar sands. They are ignoring Canadians from coast to coast who are calling for leadership on climate change and energy innovation.

The government has no plan to meet Canadian energy needs. After eight years of stumbling along, their failure to plan has caught up with all of us. Luckily, we have an opportunity, after the next election unfortunately, to overcome Conservative mismanagement here. We need a national energy strategy, one that is approved in Parliament. We need to price CO_2 with carbon fee and dividends, which I will introduce soon. We need to meet Canadian energy needs, create jobs, and protect the environment.

We can achieve Canadian oil self-sufficiency. We can balance economic growth with smart choices about sustainable energy. We can create jobs here at home and become a global energy leader, not follower. Let us do it.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Our government's responsible resource development plan is creating jobs, growing the economy, and enhancing environmental protection. As I mentioned earlier, the natural resources sector generates close to 20% of all economic activity here in Canada.

We all know how important the energy sector has been to Canada's economic development over the past century. We recognize that Canada cannot continue to rely on the United States as our sole purchaser of energy products. At the same time, Canada must reduce its reliance on foreign oil in eastern Canada. That is why our government supports, in principle, the prospect of moving western Canadian oil to eastern Canada.

We have been clear that these projects will only be approved if they are safe for Canadians and safe for the environment. I am sure that all members agree that this is the correct way to move forward on this important file.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims (Newton—North Delta, NDP): Mr. Speaker, on every paycheque, Canadians contribute to safety nets that are supposed to help them make ends meet when they need it most, like employment insurance and CPP. Canadians expect that these services will be there for them should they run into hard times, but under the Conservative government, more Canadians are seeing their claims denied, and too many are waiting too long to have their appeals heard.

The Social Security Tribunal which was created by the Conservative government to hear appeals is a complete mess. Canadians are waiting a year or more to appeal decisions on employment insurance, old age security and Canada pension plan claims. Unlike the old system, which was not problem free, by the way, there is no guarantee of a fair hearing in a reasonable amount of time, and recently we learned that the Social Security Tribunal does not intend to eliminate the backlog of cases until 2017 at the earliest.

Seniors, Canadians living with a disability and those who are out of work cannot afford to live for months and years without any income. Why is the government leaving vulnerable Canadians to pay the price for its incompetence?

The government even set out with a specific goal of reducing the number of hearings by 25%. The new tribunal has more than delivered on that goal.

I would like the minister to tell us why the Conservative government refuses to fully staff the tribunal or to develop service standards for Canadians. I would like him to tell us why he is not collecting or releasing statistics.

I would also like to take this opportunity to mention that I have received several letters from people who have been so completely discouraged by the bureaucratic nightmare the government has created that they have actually given up on their cases and they are living in poverty. Sometimes I wonder if that is not part of the strategy: to make a system so incredibly discouraging that people actually give up on their claims.

On September 18, I introduced a motion that would see this House agree that the government should hear the entire backlog of cases in no longer than 365 days, hire more staff so that appeals do not continue to backlog, track wait times for appeals, and resume tracking the success and failure rates of all appeals.

In addition to my motion, I also have a motion on notice before HUMA asking that the committee study this badly broken program so that ailing and out-of-work Canadians do not continue to wait to have their cases heard.

I hope that the cases are heard as quickly as possible so that Canadians are not left suffering. We cannot have unemployed Canadians denied employment insurance, Canada pension plan or old age security benefits.

Someone who has been on the inside, someone who has seen first-hand how badly broken this current system really is and how much that is hurting people, that former member also emphasized that under the current system she felt rushed, and that there was a possibility to feel resentful under the workload expectations caused by understaffing. She talked about fairness to the client and fairness of the process in past tense, suggesting instead that the current process is only about production and getting cases out of the way.

We need to have a serious look at this tribunal and we need to see it fixed.

● (2055)

Mr. Scott Armstrong (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Employment and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my hon. colleague's question this evening is about the Social Security Tribunal.

We have taken steps to actually increase the efficiency of this tribunal. We now have added 22 new employees to the tribunal. They will be working shortly.

We are doing what we can to make sure that all Canadians who have their claims appealed at the Social Security Tribunal are treated fairly and efficiently in a timely manner. That is why we have added more staff.

It is true that we did have a larger than expected backlog coming from the former tribunals, the former system, as we transitioned to this new system. This new system was put in place in 2013, and as I said, we have added more staff.

We are making sure that Canadians are treated fairly. We are seeing some good results from this. In fact, because we added an extra layer within the department, people are having their appeals heard within the department before they actually get to the tribunal. Now 90% of EI cases are actually being solved at the departmental level, before they actually have to go to the tribunal.

The new system is working. We did have a backlog. The backlog will soon be taken care of. We will have an efficient system that not only delivers better for the people who have their appeals heard at the Social Security Tribunal, but one which is also better for the taxpayer. It is a more efficient and better system.

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague for his justification and a kind of a cover-up for what is happening to those who are waiting for hearings about their social security, their pensions, and EI.

First let me say that a lot of these people are now being told they are just going to get an administrative review, and for the first time, our government does not even have the numbers for those it rejects out of the appeal process.

What we are really talking about here are the most vulnerable in our society. Many of these people have no other income source. Others have very little. They usually have run out. I have dealt with constituents who have come into that office because they have used up their own resources, yet they still do not have a date for their review.

Let us have a system that looks after the vulnerable. They have paid for the system; let us not make them suffer.

● (2100)

Mr. Scott Armstrong: Mr. Speaker, of course we encourage the Social Security Tribunal to execute their appeals as quickly as possible and as efficiently as possible, but they have to take the time to make sure they get it right.

We want to make sure that all Canadians, as they have their appeals heard, are treated fairly and efficiently. However, the data information has to be there, has to be collected, and has to be administered. Then the tribunal has to look at it and compare it to the correct criteria to make the effective decision.

This is not only for those people who are having their appeals heard but also for Canadian taxpayers, to ensure that people who deserve to have their appeals approved actually get them approved and receive the funds that are due to them. It is also to make sure that people who do not meet the criteria are treated fairly and that the taxpayers are treated fairly.

We have a system now that we put in place. We have added extra staff to administer the system. We are making sure that all Canadians, including Canadian taxpayers as well as those who are having their appeals heard, are treated fairly.

[*Translation*]

NATURAL RESOURCES

Mr. François Choquette (Drummond, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise in the House to come back to a question I asked about the National Energy Board and the new role that the Conservatives gave it. By that I mean responsibility for the environmental safety of pipelines and major projects.

When I asked the question on June 16, we were rather concerned about the fact that the National Energy Board had decided to spend $21 million to move a few blocks, since that was almost double the amount of funding announced for pipeline safety. The Conservatives claim to be good at managing federal money, but this is a striking example to the contrary.

In June, there were some inconsistencies in my hon. colleague's response. He said that he was proud of the work done by the National Energy Board and that its decisions were driven by scientific data, contrary to our ideological approach.

I did a little research to find out whether the National Energy Board's work was really based on science. Given the changes made to the environmental approval process for pipelines, I submitted an access to information request to find out how many National Energy Board employees have training or a specialization in environmental impact studies; I also wanted to see what percentage of the National Energy Board's efforts are focused on environmental protection—since the organization was given responsibility for all that—versus energy development and resource exploitation.

I was completely blown away by the answer. The National Energy Board said that it did not keep track of the number of employees who had studied or specialized in environmental matters and that no information was available on the efforts made in the area of environmental assessments.

I was absolutely astounded to find out that all of this responsibility had been transferred to the National Energy Board in 2013 and that the organization does not have any information on the number of employees with a specialization in environmental science or on the percentage of the work done on environmental assessments. I was shocked to find that out.

Before Christmas last year, in December 2013, Ottawa further streamlined the environmental approval process for pipelines. The government transferred to the National Energy Board all the environmental responsibilities that once belonged to Fisheries and Oceans Canada—where we know how many environmental specialists there are and how much effort goes into environmental assessments. Now, it is up to the National Energy Board to do that work.

Even after I submitted an access to information request—I have a copy of it here—I was not able to get the information I was seeking on environmental specialists. The same thing happened to my colleague from Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, who was looking into beluga whales and the lack of scientific evidence to back up the action being taken in that area.

How many experts are there and what efforts is the National Energy Board making to protect the environment?

● (2105)

[*English*]

Mrs. Kelly Block (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Natural Resources, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to highlight the strategic importance of the National Energy Board. As members know, the National Energy Board is an independent federal regulator overseeing Canada's energy industry. Ensuring the safety of Canadians and protecting the environment are its top priorities.

For over 50 years, the National Energy Board has regulated all aspects of Canada's energy industry in the Canadian public interest, including trade pipelines and energy development. What many Canadians may not know is that the NEB's funding is cost recovered from the energy industry. This is an important fact because it means that taxpayers are not on the hook for these expenses.

Allow me, then, to talk for a few moments about what the NEB is responsible for and how it ensures the safety of Canada's energy infrastructure.

The National Energy Board regulates approximately 73,000 kilometres of pipelines, which carry over 105 billion dollars' worth of energy products annually to Canadians and to export customers, mainly in the U.S. We know that pipelines are a safe and economic means of transporting large quantities of natural gas and crude oil over long distances and our government has been clear that projects will only be approved if they are proven safe for Canadians and safe for the environment. That is why it is so important to have a strong and robust regulatory review board, and the results are promising. Canada's pipeline safety record is near perfect.

Between 2008 and 2012, over 99.999% of crude oil transported by federally regulated pipelines was transported safely, without incident. That is a very impressive number.

Today, our oil and gas industry is facing a period of tremendous opportunity. Right now, hundreds of major resource projects worth more than $675 billion are currently planned or under way. Few countries in the world are bringing on natural resource projects of this scale or at this pace, creating a truly once-in-a-generation opportunity. Therefore, this is a critical time for the National Energy Board with many important and high-profile activities under way across the country.

The National Energy Board's move took place in June with no disruption of services. The move allows the NEB to meet new Government of Canada Workplace 2.0 Fit-up Standards. As I mentioned already, the appropriations for the move were cost recovered from industry.

Our government will continue to ensure that the National Energy Board has the tools it needs to ensure that energy infrastructure in Canada is safe and well regulated.

[*Translation*]

Mr. François Choquette: Mr. Speaker, there is something I want to say right off the bat. The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Natural Resources said that the projects approved are safe. However, she did not say how she knows that, since no one knows.

We do not know how many environmental experts the National Energy Board has, or how much time and effort these experts put into their environmental assessments. We do not know. If she knew, she would say so. She does not know because she did not tell me.

A number of experts have criticized this new idea of transferring environmental assessments and approvals to the National Energy Board. Biologists at the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society have been critical, as have others.

The risk of spills is very high with pipelines. The number of incidents involving pipelines has doubled in Canada over the past 10 years.

Where are the environmental assessment experts at the National Energy Board? Who are they and what are their names? Why do we not have this information?

● (2110)

[*English*]

Mrs. Kelly Block: Mr. Speaker, it is no surprise that an opposition that voted against increasing pipeline safety would be attacking the National Energy Board. Canada boasts a near-perfect pipeline safety record. In 2012, our government increased pipeline safety inspections and audits to make sure that Canada has a world-class pipeline safety system.

The National Energy Board is an independent federal regulator overseeing Canada's energy industry, charged with protecting the safety of Canadians and the safety of the environment. Its purpose is to regulate pipelines, energy development and trade in the Canadian public interest.

Our government supports actions that will improve energy safety and security. That is why we have brought forward legislation to increase the liability limits in the event of an accident and implemented fines to hold companies to account. On this side of the House, we recognize that any incident is one too many. We will continue to take steps to make pipelines as safe as possible, and of course, taxpayers are protected as costs incurred by the NEB are recovered by industry.

[*Translation*]

The Deputy Speaker: The motion to adjourn the House is now deemed to have been adopted. Accordingly, this House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 10 a.m., pursuant to Standing Order 24(1).

(The House adjourned at 9:11 p.m.)

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