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Chair: The Honourable Bardish Chagger



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• (1140)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Hon. Bardish Chagger (Waterloo, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 19 of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

The committee is meeting today to review the main estimates for the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer.

I'd like to welcome the witnesses.

[*English*]

Mr. Perrault, I will pass the floor over to you. You can also introduce the people you brought along with you today.

Welcome.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault (Chief Electoral Officer, Elections Canada): Thank you.

With me I have Marc Limoges, chief financial officer, and Sue Torosian, executive director, public affairs and civic education.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Madam Chair, for the opportunity to speak with the committee this morning about Elections Canada's 2022-23 main estimates.

I will also briefly update the committee on the closing of the 44th general election and some of our priorities, as we move toward the next election.

Elections Canada is funded under two distinct authorities: an annual appropriation and an ongoing statutory authority.

The committee will vote today on the annual appropriation, which amounts to \$49.3 million and represents the salaries of some 530 indeterminate positions. The annual appropriation is used solely to pay the salaries of permanent staff members at Elections Canada. This amount is the same as that of last fiscal year's voted appropriation, with some variance for new collective agreements.

The ongoing statutory authority covers all other expenses of the agency.

This funding model ensures Elections Canada's independence by allowing it to access the funds required to plan and deliver elections, which, as we know, may occur at any time. Planned spending under the statutory authority is reported annually to Parliament for transparency and accountability.

The statutory appropriation, as reported in the main estimates, totals \$154 million. Approximately half of this amount—\$78 million—reflects operating expenses of the agency. These costs have remained stable over the last five years. The other half—\$75 million—represents expenses that are non-discretionary or that relate to the conduct of elections. This includes costs related to the last election and expenses for the preparation of the 45th general election, as well as expenses related to the work of the commissions charged with the redistribution of electoral boundaries.

As we close out the last election, Elections Canada is currently conducting regional meetings across the country to draw lessons from election workers in the field and find ways we can improve election administration.

Another important piece in finalizing the election is the audit of political entities' financial returns, particularly those of the candidates. Our goal is to complete the audit of all candidates' campaign returns by the end of January 2023, which is within 12 months of the original filing deadline.

• (1145)

[*English*]

A final piece in closing the election will be my recommendations to Parliament for legislative changes to the Canada Elections Act. A recommendations report is normally done after each election; however, following the 2019 election, our focus was on adjusting to the pandemic. Accordingly, this report encompasses lessons and reflections flowing from both of the last two elections.

The report will also include recommendations from the Commissioner of Canada Elections for better compliance with and enforcement of the act.

Madam Chair, in the past, the practice has been that after I present my recommendations, my officials are made available to the committee for the detailed review. I'd be happy to offer that as well.

I plan to submit my report to the Speaker at the end of May. Once tabled, the report will be referred to this committee. Of course, I look forward to working with the committee as it reviews the recommendations.

Moving forward, our immediate priority is to ensure the agency is well positioned to deliver the next election. Of course, this is especially important since we now have a minority government. With this in mind, the agency is currently focusing on two short-term priorities for the next election.

The first is the vote on campus initiative. Our goal is to be in a position to offer campus kiosks in all general elections moving forward, even outside of a fixed-date electoral calendar.

The second priority is to improve our service offerings in order to give electors in remote communities access to advance polls, even if this means having less than four days of advance polls in some locations. In doing this, we hope to improve services for indigenous voters in particular. This is in addition to the improvements we want to bring to the presence of indigenous languages at the polls.

These two priorities do not require legislative changes.

Madam Chair, while I am here today to discuss the main estimates, I'd also be happy to answer any questions from the committee or to clarify information the committee heard regarding its study on the inclusion of indigenous languages on federal election ballots.

Thank you. I welcome your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Perrault. Once again, welcome to PROC.

We will start six-minute rounds with Mr. Kmiec, followed by Mrs. Sahota, Madame Gaudreau and Mr. Bachrach.

Go ahead, Mr. Kmiec.

Mr. Tom Kmiec (Calgary Shepard, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'm going to ask you questions about the Inspire Democracy network. I'll give you time to go and find it in your notes, but I'm going to start by saying thank you for spending less money. I go to a lot of these meetings in committees, as I have in the past, and I don't think it is said often enough when a government agency comes before a committee to explain its estimates and is spending less, so thank you on behalf of taxpayers. I'll start with that. I know it's likely related to the election, but you have to be recognized when you're spending less.

On the cost of the Inspire Democracy network, I would like to know about Elections Canada's support for this network and how much is being spent.

The Chair: I'm going to pause quickly.

Mr. Kmiec, you're new to the committee and I know it has been a long time since you made an appearance at PROC, but at this committee, I would appreciate comments going through the chair.

Go ahead, Mr. Perrault.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Sure.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Thank you, Madam Chair. I do not have the detailed costs of the Inspire Democracy program. I understand there's a question that has been posed in the House, and we are preparing that information, so I'd be happy to provide it at that time or through this committee. Either way, I can do that.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Through you, Madam Chair, is there any information that you can provide to committee on how extensive the help is that is being provided to this network?

What is the number of events throughout Canada? What are the types of supports? Are there staff members who are assigned to assist them? That's also information I'm looking for.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Madam Chair, I'll ask Ms. Torosian to speak to that, as she is responsible for the program.

Ms. Susan Torosian (Executive Director, Public Affairs and Civic Education, Elections Canada): Through the chair, thank you for your question.

The Inspire Democracy program was initiated after a comprehensive review back in 2010 that was completed in 2012. It was launched roughly sometime in 2014, prior to the 2015 election.

It started out originally to focus on youth participation, because their barriers to electoral participation were quite significant compared to the general population. In subsequent years, we have expanded it to electors with disabilities who also face barriers to participation, as well as to indigenous electors and new Canadians.

In terms of the network, for the last election, we worked with 27 organizations in formal contractual relationships. The intent here is for them to share information with their constituents.

For example, young people tend to listen to organizations that they're familiar with versus information coming from Elections Canada, so we work with them to make sure they have accurate information about the election process and distribute that to their clientele. That's an example.

There were 27 contractual relationships, and then there are some 600 organizations that subscribe to an email, a kind of information blast that we send out based on electoral information.

• (1150)

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Madam Chair, I'm wondering about this contractual relationship. How are these organizations selected? Did they have to provide matching funds or contributions in kind? I'm curious about how that was done.

Ms. Susan Torosian: Through you, Madam Chair, the way we work on this is to look across the country and determine which organizations are working with youth and doing work in this space already, or with any of those groups that I talked about. It's a fee for service; it's not a funding arrangement. They may be creating a guide through which they will speak in their own voice, but they make sure that they have accurate information on the electoral process, validated from Elections Canada. Those are the kinds of things.

We also monitor and make sure that they all sign a non-partisan clause as well. That's another part of the contractual relationship, and we monitor compliance with that non-partisanship.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: You said that you review these guides that they write in their own language, because obviously they can communicate better with the people who follow them. Who has final editorial control? Is it Elections Canada or the organizations?

Ms. Susan Torosian: The way the process works is they submit their documentation to us, having been provided with the basic information from Elections Canada. The main content of that is what we call our "Guide to the federal election", which is distributed to all Canadian households across the country. It walks through all the elements of what you need to know to be able to register and vote in federal elections.

They then develop their own content, and we validate it and work with them to make sure that they have accurate information. It could be in a different voice—in more colloquial language, and those kinds of things—from what a federal government department or an independent officer of Parliament would use.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: These products are therefore edited by Elections Canada. Is that right?

Ms. Susan Torosian: That's correct.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: You then, therefore, have the final decision-making, just to make sure that what they are saying about elections is accurate and consistent with the Elections Canada Act, correct?

Has it ever happened that an organization has insisted on putting something out that wasn't accurate?

Ms. Susan Torosian: In the last federal election, no, we didn't have any issues.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: What about in prior elections?

Ms. Susan Torosian: No, we've never had any issues with accuracy.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: I want to ask you something as well, then, through Madam Chair, because I can't ask you this directly.

The support, you said, was a fee for service. Can you explain a bit how that would work?

Ms. Susan Torosian: For example, through you, Madam Chair, some contractors run events where... I can speak to, for example, blind electors. We have a mock ballot for blind electors or people with vision impairment. Some of the workshops that they may hold are about how to mark a ballot in terms of using the guide that we provide to electors, because it's a new thing for many people, particularly someone voting for the first time. They may run a workshop that shows people how to use that guide at the polls, as an example.

Those are the kinds of things. It depends on the relationship and the contractor we're working with.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Is my time done?

The Chair: It would be, yes.

Ms. Sahota, you have the floor.

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): Thank you.

Madam Chair, I'm looking forward to the report that's going to be submitted in May. I think there will be a lot of questions around how things can be improved for the next election or what things were learned in this election that might be implemented again, even though it was a pandemic election.

I'm wondering if the commissioner could highlight one thing that he thinks could be kept from what was learned in the pandemic election. Then I have a few other questions, so I don't want too much detail on that one.

• (1155)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: There are a few things, certainly, that we would want to keep. I'm thinking in particular of how we serve long-term care facilities, for example, with more flexibility in serving them at different times in the calendar between advanced polls and polling day so that we can secure their vote and make sure that they are able to vote in a way that works for them and for the institutions. That's certainly one thing.

We used drop boxes for the first time. That was by way of adaptation; electors could bring their special ballot to a polling station. That's something that we may want to include in the future. It's hard, once you've offered something, to take it back, right? People expect that service again.

There are a few things from the pandemic election that we would want to bring back even outside of a pandemic. Of course, we're still in the pandemic and we don't know when the election is going to take place. That, of course, will influence other measures of protection we would bring in.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Thank you; that's quite interesting.

Madam Chair, next I'd like to ask about the electoral boundaries readjustment that you oversee.

We've been getting some early information as to what some of the changes might be. I'm wondering if the elections commissioner could inform us of the work that's been done thus far and when we can expect the final versions to be coming out. The last election, perhaps obviously, took up a lot of your time. Was Elections Canada able to be involved in that process as they usually are?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Madam Chair, we provide support for the 10 independent electoral boundaries commissions, but we are not involved in the exercise of making decisions on the boundaries. We provide tactical assistance and we set them up and support them administratively. The commissions decide on their activities and on the recommendations that they want to make, and the work is ongoing in that regard.

I know that so far three commissions have published a proposal. Other commissions are receiving input from the public prior to making their proposals. They have different approaches.

Certainly we would expect that the commissions' final maps or proposals, having gone through public hearings and having gone through this committee as the act provides, would be completed in the fall, around October 2023. Things are in line for that.

It should be noted that once the maps are finalized, they must be approved by order in council. There is no discretion there. Then they apply to any election that takes place seven months afterward, so there's a seven-month period for Elections Canada as well as for district associations to get organized under the new boundaries and reappoint returning officers. There's a fair amount of work that needs to be done. Once the maps are proclaimed, they do not take effect immediately. That would take us to the spring of 2024.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Madam Chair, through you, does that mean the technical side of the work that you provide assistance on is more after the fact, after the drawing of the boundaries is done?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: No. We provide technicians and software to the commissions, for example, so that they can work with the boundaries and look at the data that we obtain from StatsCan. Using that data and using our software, they are able to look at the impacts of changing boundaries here or there. We support them in that aspect of the exercise as they look at different options and make proposals for public consultation.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Do the independent commissions ever ask for advice, since Elections Canada has a lot of experience with electoral boundaries?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: We never provide any advice to the commissions on the drawing of the boundaries. At the start of the process, we did hold a conference to bring the commissioners together and to have those who were part of the members of previous commissions speak to their experience. We had external speakers talk about the legal framework.

We set them up so that they're knowledgeable, but once they are in the process of working on the boundaries, they work entirely independently of Elections Canada. That's by design.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Thank you.

Madam Chair, through you, I'd also like to ask about the work that Elections Canada does in monitoring the information environment and whether there have been more security issue threats identified by your organization and what those might be.

Could you shed some more light on that aspect? Is there a growing concern on misinformation and disinformation?

• (1200)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: We do monitor. We starting monitoring in 2015. The 2015 election was our first attempt at social media monitoring. We've gained a lot of experience in that area since then.

We monitor in some 18 to 20 languages. We chose in the last election to monitor fewer languages to focus on those where there's more content, where it's more important. We look specifically for misinformation on the electoral process, and determining whether it

is domestic or international is not our focus; we look for misinformation on the voting process, not on campaigns and candidates.

We've been doing that now for the last three elections. Obviously, there is a fair amount of confusion out there; some of it may be disinformation. The important goal for us is that we are able to correct that and made sure electors have the right information.

The Vice-Chair (Mrs. Kelly Block (Carlton Trail—Eagle Creek, CPC)): Thank you very much. We are well over time.

Thank you, Ms. Sahota. We will now go on to Madame Gaudreau for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): I will gladly take the floor, Madam Chair. By the way, you are doing a great job in the chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses very much.

It's important to ask questions, too. I, for one, want to speak on behalf of my constituents. Obviously, we will get the report in May. We may not have enough time to review it, but I'd still like us to find a way to ask our questions, with a view to improving the train of events. I'm referring not only to redistricting, but also to the pandemic, which we will have learned from.

I have two concerns. You know me, I'm very practically oriented.

I did hear Mr. Perrault mention that his office needed more preparation time because of the pandemic. Of course, that came as a surprise, and in the end, there was no more time.

I'd like to know what the challenges were, given that you may not have had enough preparation time. I'm sure you are going to talk about labour. Other than labour, what challenges will you bring up in the report?

That's my first concern.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: They won't necessarily be listed in the report, because some things I have already talked about. However, certain things will come back in the report, such as mail-in ballots, for which there are various solutions.

We certainly faced several challenges. One of the issues came up when we were in the fourth wave, we will recall. In July, when we were preparing for the election, some landlords had agreed to rent their premises out as polling stations. They were mostly schools. Many of them changed their minds when the writs of election were issued. Returning officers had to go back to the drawing board and find new locations. Not only was it difficult to find polling stations, but we were also late getting the voter information cards, which must include the polling station. I would say that was the main consequence.

We also note in the report that, because we had four fewer days than the previous election, the percentage of mail-in ballots that were received late and therefore not counted rose from 1.5% to 7.1%. A few days can have a huge impact on the mail-in voting process.

I would say those are the two main issues related to the electoral period.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: What I've just heard is a bit shocking in that it seems to be necessary to promote our democracy. Elections Canada will be issuing its recommendations, including on the time frame it has to do its work. It is also important not to minimize citizens' participation in elections.

That leads me to my second concern. It has to do with technology and your position on it. The issue of cyber-attacks came up. What are you doing to ensure the participation of the next generation of voters? Even 40-year-olds would like another option for casting their ballots, something entirely different from voting by mail. Do you have an update on that?

• (1205)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: A parliamentary committee studied the issue in 2016, if I'm not mistaken. The only point on which a consensus emerged, or at least considerable agreement, was that the process of voting in federal elections in Canada should remain paper-based for the time being. Electronic voting has certainly gained ground at the municipal level. I believe Quebec will be implementing it at the school district level; that work is under way. In territorial elections, electronic voting is also used.

There is progress on that front. On our end, we are watching the issue with interest, but we are not working on deploying measures to support electronic voting. Instead, we are focused on using technologies such as electronic lists to better manage the voting process at polling stations, and thus minimize wait times and make optimal use of human resources—which, to be perfectly frank, are in decline. We had 195,000 election workers, and we don't expect that number to increase, even after the pandemic. That means we need to make the best possible use of workers, and I think technology can play a really big part in that, but not in terms of the actual voting.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: That's interesting. If they don't already know, voters will find out that Parliament now uses an electronic voting system. If Parliament can do it, there must be some openness to the idea. Obviously, we don't need another pandemic or other exceptional situation to advance.

You mentioned human resources. Something else that concerns me are the privacy and security gaps. As we all know, rental space is extremely limited and housing is in short supply across Quebec and Canada. Workers, too, are hard to come by.

Are there solutions? Better compensation and electronic voting are two possibilities. Do you already have solutions in mind for the next election?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: You talked about personal information and privacy. That does involve cybersecurity, but it also involves the electoral administration practices of the parties or candidates using voters' personal information.

We have been working closely with our federal partners on cybersecurity matters for a number of years. After the U.S. presidential election in 2016, cybersecurity became a top priority for election administration authorities all over the world. I have to say, we have an excellent partnership on that front. We have made significant investments in cybersecurity capacity. It will continue to be a priority as we deploy technology, not necessarily to allow electronic voting, but rather, to administer the voting process.

I should also point out that we are subject to the Privacy Act, whereas political parties are not. It's an issue I've brought up in the past. I know that the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics produced a report on the subject a few years back, and it's something I plan to revisit in my recommendations report.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you, Madam Chair, for letting the witness finish.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

[English]

Mr. Bachrach is next.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to start by thanking our Chief Electoral Officer and his team for their work, and for appearing at committee and answering our questions.

As the committee knows, my bill, the right to vote at 16 act, is currently at second reading.

Back in 2018, Mr. Perrault told the CBC that lowering the voting age is “worth considering”, because “Voting when you're 16 is voting at a time when most Canadians at that age are still in school, at a place where we can actually get to them and engage them.” He also said:

We know that Canadians who vote early in their lifetime will continue to vote, and those who don't vote in the first few elections will tend not to vote later on. So there's a real benefit to making sure that Canadians vote early, and voting when you're 16, there's an opportunity to reach out to them.

I'd like to ask Mr. Perrault if that remains his perspective.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I think these quotes were more separate in a conversation and were put a bit closer together than they were when I first spoke to the journalist. The reality is that they're all true, these statements. I still believe in all of them.

My main point there was that this is an important issue for Parliament to consider. It's for parliamentarians, for MPs, to have those discussions, and they're having them right now. My role is to support the work of this committee, should this issue come to the committee, by providing data and information on barriers to voting, and, should it move forward, explaining how we would implement any change relating to voting age.

I think this is fundamentally a policy decision for parliamentarians to make.

• (1210)

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Mr. Perrault.

Turnout among 18-24 year olds is the lowest of any age cohort in our country. Is Elections Canada concerned?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: We're concerned about turnout of all groups, but especially those who face barriers.

You're quite correct that youth do face barriers for voting. One of the main areas for us has been trying to make sure that youth can register early on. I don't have the numbers here, but we see that there is a registration gap in terms of youth under 25. When you look at the Canadian National Register of Electors, 96% of Canadians are on the register. Those who are missing are mainly young Canadians. Those are Canadians who have not received a voter information card to give them basic information about where, when and how to cast a ballot. That is certainly an area of priority for us.

As Ms. Torosian has explained, we also support groups by providing information on the voting process to groups that work with Canadians who face barriers, and those include young Canadians.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you, Mr. Perrault.

Through you, Madam Chair, to Mr. Perrault, what kinds of barriers do 18-year-olds face when it comes to voting in their first election?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Mainly, and I'll ask Ms. Torosian to complete this, they face informational barriers about the voting process. This is something that is foreign to them, and they're not used to it. They don't know how it works and they don't have the same level of understanding about the process as other Canadians.

Ms. Susan Torosian: I'll complement that. If you look at voter participation, you see that it's a very complex issue. There's no one particular thing that will make a difference in whether somebody votes. It's a combination of factors. I'd say it's a team sport.

Elections Canada has a very minor role. Our focus has been on improving access to the vote, meaning informational barriers and those kinds of things. When it comes to young Canadians, the biggest barrier that they face is actually, quite frankly—and I think you heard through your indigenous study on the language on ballots—lack of interest, which is probably one of the biggest, and that

comes in a couple of different ways. A lot of young Canadians feel that they cannot make a difference when they vote. We also know through our research that many young Canadians are not contacted by a candidate. It's less than most Canadians. That is from our research. This information is all available on our website.

They also don't view voting as a duty. They actually view it as a choice.

Those are some of the main factors. Those ones that I'm talking about are more in what I'd call the motivational side of things versus the access side of things. Mr. Perrault spoke to the access piece.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you, Ms. Torosian.

Through you, Madam Chair, to our witnesses, one of the other barriers we've been hearing a lot about is a geographical one. At 18, young people's lives are at a time of transition, and very many of them, particularly in rural Canada, such as the riding I represent, go away from their home region to another community to pursue school or enter the workforce. Is that seen as a barrier for voting for the first time among 18-year-olds?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Madam Chair, that is why we first piloted the campus kiosk initiative in 2015, and we expanded it in 2019 across the country. This is a program that I intend to bring back as soon as we can. We've never done it in a minority context, and with the pandemic that presented unique challenges. However, we are now looking at ways to do that without the benefit of a fixed-date election.

Of course, young Canadians are also often unaware that they can vote through other means—for example, at the local returning office at the university campus where they attend school, even if their vote is cast for their home riding. We also need to look at how we can better inform young Canadians of those options.

• (1215)

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Am I out of time, Madam Chair?

The Chair: You are out of time.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: I had more questions.

The Chair: I have no doubt. You're going to get another opportunity very soon, I'm sure.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: I look forward to it. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

We're going to now head into our next round.

We will go again with five minutes for Mr. Kmiec, followed by five minutes for Mrs. Romanado, and then two and a half minutes for Madam Gaudreau, followed by Mr. Bachrach. Then we'll go back to Mr. Kmiec for five minutes, followed by Mr. Turnbull.

Go ahead, Mr. Kmiec.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Chair, thank you.

I have one last question on the Inspire Democracy network.

Has a review or an analysis ever been done by Elections Canada on this network and the 27 community organizations and stakeholders that are part of it on whether it has been effective in increasing turnout or participation?

Ms. Susan Torosian: We actually are in the process of doing a review of that program. It's only been in effect since 2014. That's expected in probably two years' time. It's not going to be complete—

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Two years would be in May 2024?

Ms. Susan Torosian: Yes, roughly.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Is the cost for that analysis in the estimates, or is it just part of the work you're doing? Are there any additional resources to do this analysis, or is it already taken into account?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: No, it's part of the ongoing cost of operating. We do evaluations of our programs on a periodic basis, and it is part of our ongoing funding.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: I now have a question, Madam Chair, on a different administrative review that's being done on those 200,000 ballots and the breakdown of it because of Order Paper question 328. I was wondering what the cost of that review was.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: This is part of our ongoing activities. It's very difficult to separate that out, because we look at the data from all kinds of angles and for different purposes at the end of an election. I do not have a costing for that review specifically.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Okay. Subsection 267(4) of the act requires that it be provided in the response tabled by the government. It said April 2022, but it's May.

Is that report public now? Is the response public? I haven't seen it. I'm asking since you're here.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Sorry; do you mean the response on the—

Mr. Tom Kmiec: I've received the OPQ response, Chair, but that Order Paper question talked about a response about having completed the review of the ballots, what happened to them and the breakdown. It said April 2022. It is now May. I'm looking for a response.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: We do have a report. It will be in the month of May, though. It's not out yet.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: I've noticed it's not out yet. Thank you. I think, Chair, that we've all noticed it's not out yet.

Is it later in May? Is it a question of it being translated into French or into English?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I have not yet seen the draft. This is coming to me first, and then it will be translated and prepared. It's on its way.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Okay.

Madam Chair, how much time do I have?

The Chair: You have two minutes.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: There's legislation before the House right now, Bill C-14, on a change to the distribution of seats.

I would like to know whether you've taken into account in these estimates the possibility that the House might pass this legislation on to the Senate and that the Senate would pass it, and then the electoral boundaries commission in Quebec would have to redo its work.

In the anticipation of this possibility, are additional resources being set aside for this task?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: The main estimates were presented several months before today, so that bill did not exist at the time we presented the estimates. However, there is a statutory authority. When commissions do their work, the costs that are incurred are taxed by my office as appropriate costs in the sense that they relate to their work. If they need additional expenses, they would therefore spend that money. There is no need to ask Parliament for additional money for that. It's covered by the statutory authority.

Right now, the cost estimates for the redistribution exercise do not contemplate any extension of the work.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Okay.

Would you be able to provide to the committee—through you, Madam Chair—what you think the costing will be for this?

I know it will come in future supplementary estimates, but is that something you could provide to the committee ahead of time? I think that should be something for the committee to consider.

I support Bill C-14. I'll vote for it. I said so publicly on the floor of the House too, just so we're clear. It's nothing new, but I'd like to know the costing.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Mr. Limoges will correct me if I'm mistaken, but the overall cost of the redistribution exercise for the commissions is just under \$15 million, of which \$7 million is planned for this year. The bulk of their expenses, the \$7 million, is for this year. Of the remainder, a bit was for the prior fiscal year and then the next fiscal year.

I don't have the breakdown by commission. Of course, the cost will vary depending on the size of the commission, but I do not expect any significant cost, especially if no extension is required by the commission.

● (1220)

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Thank you.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mrs. Romanado.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado (Longueuil—Charles-LeMoine, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I'd like to welcome the witnesses with us today.

Mr. Kmiec asked the exact question I was hoping to ask, so thank you for that.

One thing we heard during the last election, Madam Chair, was the difficulty in finding people to work at the election, such as poll staff to count the votes on election night, and so on.

Could the commissioner or perhaps Monsieur Limoges elaborate a little bit on the expenditures and any increase required to get more folks interested in working on election day? We did have a lot of trouble finding folks in my riding who wanted to work during the election.

What kinds of initiatives are you looking at to increase that to make sure we have adequate resources at the polls?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Prior to the last election, we did seek an increase in the tariff of fees. This is something that is approved by the Governor in Council, and it was approved, so there were increases in the tariff of fees. For the first time, that also included provisions for overtime, which is now aligned with the Canadian Labour Code, so there was a significant increase in the labour force costs of the election; the amount is \$44 million in addition. Comparing the labour force costs of the last two elections, the last one cost an additional \$44 million in labour costs, so it's quite significant.

I honestly don't know that throwing more money at it would provide a significant increase. We're at a point where the workforce of people who are available on a Monday in a tight labour market is limited, and people who do have a job will not suspend their work for that.

Madam Chair, that's it.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Thank you very much.

Further to that, I know that I heard from folks who had worked at the election that there was a delay in getting paid. Some folks had difficulty receiving the pay for the work that they did; they were waiting weeks and weeks, if not months. Given that there's such a small pool of the population who are available to work, as the commissioner just mentioned, would that not hinder people who had a bad experience in terms of being paid on time from being recruited for the next election? What could be done to rectify that?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Thank you, Madam Chair.

On the whole, we're quite proud of the time for payment. It's in the range of 96% or 98% who are paid within four weeks, and when we're talking about 195,000 people whom we did not know just a few weeks prior, it's quite an achievement.

Unfortunately, in some cases there's information missing. There may be an error in the way the bank account number information is provided, or the name or social insurance number. Those errors, missing information or maybe a missing time sheet cause some delays for a small number, which can be significant, especially if the information is packed away after the election and it's held locally in the returning offices.

Over time, we are looking at changing our systems for recruitment and pay to make them better integrated and hopefully to have more access to the data remotely from headquarters, thus not wait-

ing for the time sheets from the local returning officers and reducing the number of errors.

For the bulk of the workers, we provide very quick payment.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Thank you very much.

My next question will be for Madam Torosian.

One other area we hear a lot about is a lack of information or education regarding the electoral process. For instance, during the last election, I was still explaining to folks that they could go vote at the returning office and that they don't need to have an excuse that they're going to be absent, because that is something I think used to be in place many, many years ago.

A lot of Canadians don't know that there are many options for how to exercise your democratic right. Could you elaborate a little bit on some of the initiatives you're doing to educate? I know we've talked in terms of candidates getting out to folks to tell them that they can do that, but what other outreach efforts are you making in terms of the budget?

Thank you.

● (1225)

Ms. Susan Torosian: Madam Chair, we spent a lot of energy focused on the four ways to vote in the last general election, and voting in the local office was one of those four options. The first was voting at your assigned polling location on election day, because that is how most Canadians still vote. The second was the advanced poll voting option. The third was the vote by mail or special ballot. The returning office was the fourth option. This is the order in which we presented them.

We started our promotion of all the voting options—what we call the “early voting” phase—one week earlier than traditionally in the electoral calendar. We increased our budget on that phase of the election because we knew that in the pandemic, people would be seeking other options to vote.

We also did a lot of outreach through our Inspire Democracy network of some 600 organizations to get the word out to the groups known to face more barriers to electoral participation. It was a very big focus for our campaign. This information is also noted in our “Guide to the federal election”, which is distributed to all Canadian households. All of the options to vote are presented there. It is also noted on the voter information card that individuals get.

We continue to put those messages out there. We use social media and advertising. It's very much a multimedia campaign. It's a very expensive campaign.

The recalls are quite good, but there are some segments of the population who are not always aware. We often chalk that up to people who generally aren't registered, because they don't get their voter information card. That's where most people remember what their voting options are. It's an individual card addressed to them with what their individual voting options would be. Some segments of the population will have less knowledge.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

I know the pride that you would have in the institution, but I find four weeks, when you're expecting a paycheque, to be a long time. We can talk about that off-line, but I feel that's a long time to wait for a paycheque, especially because we know how challenging it's been for people. I didn't know that, and I advertise for you all the time. It's one day of good work, but I feel that it's a long time. I wanted to put that out there.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Gaudreau, you may go ahead.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I have two and a half minutes.

The solutions are plentiful—so, too, are the problems, whether it's the four-week delay in people getting paid or the availability of space. More money isn't what will attract more people. You conduct multimedia advertising campaigns. The pandemic has changed how we do everything. Just think of vaccine passports. It's all electronic now.

It is up to us, as parliamentarians, to make sure that people are confident enough in the system to go vote. It is up to us to show that we can be trusted to build the future we all want.

Increasing voter turnout, however, requires the right tools. People in my riding of Laurentides—Labelle tell me that we know where to find them because they already receive communications via their devices, although not everyone has a device. We've done the rounds.

Is that an option? Are you there yet?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: We are absolutely there. We have quite a few things we want to prioritize, but one of them is certainly an app through which voters could receive the same information that currently appears on their voter card, but electronically. It would not be mandatory, but an app would allow us to remain in contact with voters wherever they go because people always have their cellphones with them. With an app, we could also notify voters of any polling station changes and send out reminders. It is definitely a tool we could leverage.

Ontario deployed an app for the upcoming provincial election. We are going to examine how successful it is and apply lessons learned to the federal process.

The answer to your question is yes, it is one of the improvements we are looking into.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I'd like to use my last 30 seconds to ask the witnesses what tools we, as parliamentarians, can give them so that they have the necessary latitude to achieve their goals. If adjustments are required to enhance privacy, for instance, that work has to happen ahead of time, if we are to do what needs doing and focus on what lies ahead. After all, the next election isn't that far off.

Thank you.

● (1230)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I agree. We live in a world of data, a world where crises of confidence are commonplace, even. I think we should celebrate the fact that Canadians continue to have a high level of confidence in Elections Canada. We mustn't have any illusions, however, because confidence is always fragile. We must take special care to maintain that confidence. Now more than ever, data privacy and security are at the heart of public confidence.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

Mr. Bachrach is next.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Over a dozen countries around the world, including Argentina, Scotland, Wales and several German states, have lowered their voting age to 16. I wonder if Mr. Perrault is familiar with the international experience with lowering the voting age, and if, on balance, those experiences have been positive ones.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Madam Chair, I am aware, especially of Scotland, but I think Brazil has also lowered its voting age. There are a number of countries that have done that. There is talk in the U.K. of extending that, so I understand that, but I can't speak more broadly about how it has been perceived or received in those jurisdictions. That is something I don't have here with me.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Madam Chair, for Bill C-210, the right to vote at 16 act, the coming into force date is six months after the bill receives royal assent. I'm wondering if Elections Canada would see any major logistical or administrative barriers to implementing Bill C-210 and providing the vote to 16- and 17-year-olds in Canada.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I'd be happy to appear before this committee, should the bill come here, but off the top I do not see major obstacles. We would have to, of course, adjust the register of electors to make sure that 16-year-olds can register directly online. Now they are in the pre-register of electors, and so there are some adjustments that would have to be made to our systems for that.

Certainly we'd have to come up with a voter education campaign to make them aware of that change, because it would be a significant change, but beyond that I don't see any major implementation issues.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you, Madam Chair. My final question in this round is the following.

Canada lowered its voting age from 21 to 18 back in 1970. What has the voter turnout trend among 18- to 24-year-olds been since 1970 when we lowered the voting age?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: My memory doesn't reach back to that date. I'd be happy—

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: I wasn't born, just so you know.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I can certainly provide the data that we have to the committee. There are ups and downs in voter trends in the various elections. There was an increase a few years ago in youth turnout, and then a bit of a decline after that, but I'd be happy, Madam Chair, to provide the data to the committee.

The Chair: Thank you. We look forward to that.

Mr. Steinley, the next five minutes are for you.

Mr. Warren Steinley (Regina—Lewvan, CPC): Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you to the witnesses for being here. I'm going to follow up on some of the questions by my colleague Tom Kmiec.

We're getting the boundary redistribution reports, the original proposals. There seems to be a delay because they have to be translated into French. Is that one of the delays? We've heard that some should be out, but it has taken a bit more time. Is there an issue with getting the translations done in a timely manner?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I've not been informed of any problems. Obviously translation takes a bit of time. I've not been informed of concerns, but I will follow up on that if there are any concerns or issues regarding translation. Obviously the reports do need to be provided in both languages for public consultation as part of the normal process.

Mr. Warren Steinley: Would that be at an additional cost? You talked about the budget already, so was that cost for the translations built into the budget you received last year, or is it in this budget coming forward?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Again, the costs of the redistribution process are paid out of the statutory authority. There's a planned expense, but it can vary, and should it cost more, then we can vary the expenditures.

My role in that is to certify that the expenses incurred by the commissions are properly related to their work, and once that is done, they are paid. There is no requirement to seek additional funding to cover their costs.

• (1235)

Mr. Warren Steinley: Thank you very much.

I'm going to ask a question related to my NDP colleague's comments on changes in the age of voting.

From an election readiness standpoint, if you had to add, say, two million more voters to the voter list and registry, what would that look like? Does the organization have to scale up for that? How long would the process take to ensure that we get everything in order and have those voters added to the voter list? What would that look like from your organizational standpoint, and would you need to scale up staff and a few other extra resources?

The Chair: Mr. Steinley, I want to remind you that comments are made through the chair.

It's always good to have you here.

Go ahead, Mr. Perrault.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I'd be happy to come back and give this some more thought. I was not prepared to speak to this subject today.

Certainly, if you increase the population, you need to increase the number of polling divisions so that there's not an inordinate number of people in each poll and they'll be better served. There may be requirements to increase the number of staff, not at headquarters as much as in the field, to support that increased balance and so forth. We'd want to look at that carefully before providing a definite answer.

Processing any significant increase in the voter population requires additional work and resources.

Mr. Warren Steinley: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I'll yield my time to Mrs. Block for the last minute and a half.

The Chair: Yes, you have time. You have two minutes.

Mrs. Kelly Block (Carlton Trail—Eagle Creek, CPC): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

The Chair: I'll give you three. Go for it.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I have a number of questions that I would like to ask you, but I'm going to have to focus my attention on a couple of them.

Through you, Madam Chair, to the witnesses, I noted that in your departmental plan, you have outlined some of your priorities. One of the first ones that I wanted to ask you about was monitoring “the information environment in order to identify security issues that could prevent the agency from delivering on any part of its mandate or that would impact electoral integrity”.

What you see as the major threats? What are the major threats to your agency and your ability to deliver on your mandate?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Leaving aside cybersecurity here, we're basically talking about two things in monitoring the information environment.

The most important one on an ongoing basis is disinformation or misinformation about the process. This is particularly acute around the election period, but we monitor it on an ongoing basis, and where appropriate, we take action to reach out to the platforms so that they can react based on their policies. There's the misinformation on the voting process, and I insist on that.

The other aspect is during an election. What we saw, unfortunately, in the last election was an increase of incidents of violence or abuse vis-à-vis poll workers. That is quite unfortunate. We had over 100 instances in which police had to intervene. These are ordinary Canadians serving their neighbours. We've seen instances that were quite disheartening in that regard. We need to be alert to that and monitor it to get some signals as to whether instances could happen, whether additional security is required and whether police forces need to be informed of that.

Mrs. Kelly Block: If I may, I have another question, through you, Madam Chair.

In addition to the priorities that you've outlined, you also state that Elections Canada intends to adopt a "hybrid and flexible work model" that would allow employees to work remotely. I completely understand that during the pandemic, work models needed to change in order to allow people to work from home.

Could you describe for us the model prior to the pandemic, and what the gains may be in moving toward a permanent flexible work model?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Until the pandemic, everybody working at headquarters was working from 30 Victoria Street in Gatineau. There was the possibility on an individual basis of asking for telework arrangements, but these were quite exceptional. To be quite frank, they were not in the culture of this organization much more than in any organization.

What we realized during the pandemic, after some initial adjustments, was that in fact the telework mode functions quite well for us. Over 90% of our workforce wished to continue to work remotely. Some have since moved during the pandemic to other locations, and are fully engaged in the work of the agency. We were able to deliver this election working pretty much entirely remotely. There were a handful of people at headquarters during the election. The rest were working remotely. It works quite well to engage remotely, whether you're in, for example, call centres or a task force.

That creates a lot of flexibility for recruitment. We are in a tight labour market. Young Canadians want that flexibility. We believe we can offer a very dynamic workplace with the hybrid model. We are fully embracing that.

Madam Chair, the additional point I would make is that in every election cycle, we spend a fair amount of time, effort and money—because we ramp up the workforce—finding space and setting up cubicles, desks, chairs and computers and then securing the lines. We talked about the security of those. We do that about a year before the election and carry it afterward, because closing an election takes about a year. For almost three years, we're in a ramped-up mode. Then we go down. Then we start searching again for space. It's expensive and it's not efficient.

We're not going to do that anymore. We can save quite a bit of money by having everybody work from home during the election, as we did in this election.

● (1240)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Turnbull is next.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.): Madam Chair, thank you very much.

Mr. Perrault, to you and your team, thanks for being here. As always, it's great to see you, talk to you and get a chance to ask you some questions.

I've heard throughout our conversation today two themes that I want to focus on: security and public trust.

I have a concern with the rise of misinformation and disinformation. I believe it has the potential to harm and is harming the public trust in our democratic institutions and in fact in our electoral process.

Do you share my concern, Mr. Perrault, through the chair?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Madam Chair, as I have indicated, the issue of misinformation and disinformation has been a concern of the agency for several years now. It's certainly not declining. It's a much broader issue than the electoral process.

My role is limited in that regard, but certainly it impacts democracy and society in a broader way. These issues go beyond Elections Canada, but in terms of my mandate, this is something that we feel is important and that we need to address.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you, Mr. Perrault.

Through you, Madam Chair, I want to follow up on that. When you appeared here in February, along with me and other members of Parliament on the committee, you expressed some deep concerns that have emerged over the last two elections. In one of your last comments, I think you alluded to the increased incidence of violence and hate and the level of vitriol. We've seen it for candidates and volunteers. Obviously, it's increased for election workers or poll workers as well.

It seems like the vitriol, hate and conspiracy theories are contributing and becoming more mainstream in Canadian politics. I think it's really eroding the quality of our political discourse. I note that recent polls at the Université de Sherbrooke show that a growing number of Canadians are falling victim to online conspiracy theories. Another researcher at Queen's University, a professor who studies extremism, says that the number is massive and absolutely surprising and worrying.

The consequence during an election campaign could be extremely serious. Well-funded groups can spread disinformation and hatred, and they are influencing a growing number of Canadians through well-organized disinformation campaigns.

I don't want to suggest that it's solely up to Elections Canada to deal with this issue. I don't believe that, and I don't think anyone here would imply that. I just think that Elections Canada does have a role to play in combatting this, certainly around elections. We don't want to see it rise to a point that it erodes the public trust in our democratic institutions, which are so foundational.

Could you update the committee on the progress being made at Elections Canada to combat this type of behaviour during election campaigns? Have you asked for additional funds that would help you address this?

• (1245)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Thank you.

Madam Chair, I have not asked for additional funds. We do have a capacity. We've built a team over the years. We do rely to a certain degree on our statutory authority. It's an example of how useful it is to ramp up our capacity to monitor disinformation during election time.

I will be coming back to the whole issue of communications in my recommendations report. Our regime of communications under the Elections Act has been focusing primarily on advertising, because when the act was first enacted many years ago, that was the main means of communication during the campaign—apart, of course, from door-to-door knocking. Now there are many other ways to communicate during an election. I think the rules need to be adjusted to reflect that reality.

I will have some recommendations in that regard, particularly to increase the transparency of electoral campaign communications, not just by candidates and parties but by third parties as well. There will be recommendations regarding the funding of third parties.

This is one aspect, as you indicated, of a much broader issue.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you.

Mr. Perrault—through you, Madam Chair—the last time you were here, I asked you about the issue of hate groups and the potential for them to register as political parties in order to get privileged access to important legitimate tools for political parties, such as tax rebates and the list of electors, which is deeply concerning.

In response, you had said that there may be mechanisms that we can put forward that would at least allow us some safeguards against hate groups getting access to those privileges. Could you just update us on any progress that has been made on that front?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Madam Chair, as I indicated then, and it still is true, I do have a recommendation in the report to speak to the issue of registration of hate groups and deregistration of hate groups. It's not so much to regulate hate speech, which is not my business, but to make sure that hate groups are not subsidized by receiving the benefit of a platform under the Elections Act.

I'll be happy to speak more to that when I make my recommendations.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you.

The Chair: Excellent.

Just because of the time, I think for us to maximize our time with our guests we'll go around and do one question, because I do notice the answers are a little bit longer than the questions. I feel like that would then bring us to time.

I think answers need to be thorough and I understand that, but I think it would get us to one o'clock to maybe tie up any loose ends.

With that, we go to the Conservatives.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and I'll take the opportunity to ask one last question.

I'm looking at the main estimates and looking at the statutory appropriations and the line in regard to electoral expenditures. For the year 2021-22, it is marked at \$109,150,110. Is that correct?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I don't have the number in front of me; my colleague does.

Keep in mind that for 2021-22, these were the numbers in the main estimates. This did not take into account, because it was not a fixed electoral calendar, the costs related to the delivery of the election, though we had planned readiness costs, so we have costs for preparation in this series of main estimates, but not costs for the delivery. When we report back on our activities and our spending for the year, those numbers will be increased, of course.

Mrs. Kelly Block: I'm looking at the main estimates for this year, 2022-23, and I'm trying to understand the numbers as presented, based on the explanation you've just given. Does that increased number of \$133 million take into account the costs of executing the election in 2020-2022?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: In 20...?

Mrs. Kelly Block: I mean 2020-2021.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: There are some costs that remain to be paid regarding that election that will materialize in this fiscal year. Specifically, \$28 million of that amount that is related to the previous general election.

• (1250)

Mrs. Kelly Block: Okay, thank you very much, and I have one really quick follow-up question.

I imagine that Elections Canada, when we are in a cycle with a minority Parliament, has the pressure of trying to do a report on the previous election while trying to be election-ready, and so are there other costs contemplated in the main estimates here in ramping up for the next election.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: There are. We have \$44 million planned in this year in relation to the ramping up. That number may fluctuate depending on the political environment, so one of my roles, Madam Chair, is to monitor that environment and not overspend, but also to be ready. I have to gauge that carefully, and so we have \$44 million planned for this year.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Thank you.

The Chair: Perfect. Thank you.

That was about two and a half minutes, so I will pass that same time to the Liberals, Mr. Fergus.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Greg Fergus (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

It's always nice to have you here, Mr. Perrault.

During the last Parliament, you advised the government to change election day from a Monday to a polling period of Saturday and Sunday.

Do you still think that's a good idea? I'd like to give you an opportunity to explain why. I think I may know, but it's important to make the point once again.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I want to make an important distinction. The recommendation was to hold the election on a Saturday or Sunday, instead of a Monday, not in addition to a Monday. That was discussed in relation to Bill C-19. It would give voters some flexibility and make it possible for those who work on elections, or would like to work on elections, to do so even if they have a job or go to school. That would make it easier for us to recruit workers.

It would also make schools more available to us. In 2019, a total of 46% of electors cast their ballots in schools. I don't have the figure for the last election, but it was a fairly minor percentage. We lost much of that access to schools. If Monday were added to the two weekend days, some places would not be available all three days.

Giving people more opportunities to vote is a good thing, but my preference would be to hold election day on the weekend, rather than over three days.

Hon. Greg Fergus: I have another question for Mr. Perrault.

Many countries hold their elections on the weekend. Can you name a few?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I'm going to approach the question from the other end. I have the information somewhere, but I would say a minority of OECD countries go to the polls on a Monday. Most of them hold their elections on the weekend. European countries, for instance, traditionally hold their elections on the weekend, not during the week.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fergus.

Go ahead, Ms. Gaudreau.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I will be brief, Madam Chair, seeing what time it is. Thank you, by the way, for giving me the opportunity to ask questions.

We have asked the witnesses numerous questions, and we will have more once the report comes out.

Nevertheless, I am very concerned about the fact that Elections Canada does not have all the documentation within the appropriate time frame. We just talked about how Canada compares with other countries. I'm referring to the filing of returns. A report is coming out in May 2022. A few days ago, my official agent, who is quite old and could have had health problems, was still sending Elections Canada documents. He pointed out that he was volunteering and that the work should have been done already.

No doubt, there's a reason for the delay. As I understand it, ensuring everything is ready before the election is important, but once the election is over, things should move quickly as far as next steps are concerned.

Can you explain why the time frame is what it is?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: That is indeed an important issue, and I am glad to have the opportunity to comment.

To begin with, we shortened the time frame for the audit from 18 months to 12 months. However, half the candidates request an extension and submit their returns after the statutory deadline, and that has consequences. The way we reduced the audit time frame was by carrying out risk analyses and examining the trends and outliers, but we can't do it properly until we have all the data. We proceeded on the basis of data from the past, but we do data entry. The delay in our analysis is the result of the fact that half of the candidates do not submit their returns by the deadline. It is possible to receive an extension, and half of the candidates request one. That is a challenge. Nonetheless, we have managed to reduce the time frame from 18 months to 12 months.

We've also made two changes to the process. First, we don't ask for a detailed invoice for every single thing, as was the case before we switched to a risk analysis-based method. Second, we introduced an expedited process for preliminary expense reimbursement. In a minority Parliament, especially, expenses need to be reimbursed as quickly as possible.

All that to say, the improvement process is ongoing.

• (1255)

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Some effort is needed on that front, clearly. Those 50% of candidates need to file their returns on time. Subsequently, adjustments can be made.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gaudreau.

[*English*]

Go ahead, Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to ask a question about rural ridings and voting on election day in rural ridings like the one I represent, which is the size of Poland.

I want to start by sharing a story about a neighbour of mine. A couple of days before election day in this most recent election, she was in a horrible car accident. She texted me from her hospital bed and said, “Taylor, I’ve never not voted. I’ve always voted. I’m in the hospital and I’m wondering what my voting opportunities are.” We called Elections Canada, and I think at the time we were told there might be a mobile poll that would go around bed to bed in the local hospital, so we told her that. The next text that I got from her said that because of COVID and the local hospital’s capacity, she was being shipped to a neighbouring community three hours away, so she texted me from that hospital and said, “Now what are my options?” We called Elections Canada. We pulled out all the stops. We explained this tragic and extenuating situation and were told that there was no opportunity for this woman to vote.

Now granted, this is a very unique situation, but there’s a larger question, especially in rural ridings, of voting away from your home poll on election day within your riding. I understand that if you’re in a different province or a different city in a different riding on election day, that makes it difficult because of the reporting requirements and the timeline for reporting the results. Nonetheless, is there not some way to do this? I ask because we get dozens of stories of people who are in the riding but aren’t close to the voting place where they’re supposed to vote.

Is there not some way on election day that people can vote within the riding, but at a different poll from the one they’ve been assigned? I think that’s a way we could increase voter turnout and ensure that people aren’t unfairly excluded from voting in the way that my friend from Smithers was.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Madam Chair, I think there are two separate issues here that are related, certainly in their solution.

The first issue is that until day six in every election, people in hospitals can be visited, because in a hospital setting you will have people from different electoral districts being visited and served by a mobile poll using special ballots. The special ballots stop on what we call “day six”, which is six days before the election, because we need to mark the lists that are used on polling day to make sure that people do not vote twice.

If we introduce electronic lists and thereby have the ability to strike an elector electronically, we can reduce that time to almost nothing—to a few days at worst—and allow people in hospitals who are hurt or injured just days before the election to vote, and then strike their names electronically. We would still need some time to produce the lists, but we could reduce the risk therein and reduce the number of days.

In terms of voting anywhere in the electoral district, Madam Chair, again this is something that in the longer term could be done through electronic lists. It is done in some jurisdictions. I’m not aware of its impact on increased participation, but it’s certainly convenient for many electors.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you.

The Chair: Excellent.

Thank you so much to you all for coming to our PROC committee meeting today and answering these questions.

Mr. Limoges, you never spoke. Did you want to say anything?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Limoges (Chief Financial Officer, Elections Canada): I have nothing to add, Madam Chair.

I didn’t say much during the meeting, but I’d like to thank the committee members for having us.

• (1300)

[*English*]

The Chair: Perfect.

We’re going to let the witnesses go.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Madam Chair, Mr. Perrault did a fine job answering Mr. Bachrach’s question, but I’d like a bit of clarification on advance voting and voting by mail. It’s up to you, Madam Chair, to decide whether he can have the floor, but I imagine that, given the chance, he would appreciate the opportunity to provide a few details. Nevertheless, I may be wrong.

[*English*]

The Chair: That’s awkward.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Madam Chair, voters who are not available on election day can certainly cast their ballots by mail, but they have to plan ahead and obtain a ballot. They cannot request a mail-in ballot after day six. In the exceptional circumstance that someone injures themselves a few hours or a few days before the election—which is the case with every election—voting by mail is unfortunately not an option.

[*English*]

The Chair: Excellent.

Thank you again for coming. Obviously, we could talk to you for days when it comes to elections. We appreciate the work you do and your being available to members. I hope you keep well and safe, and keep up the good work.

PROC committee members, I will just remind us that we will be meeting on Tuesday, May 10, in camera. The draft report on the inclusion of indigenous languages on federal election ballots was sent to everyone on Friday, so you will have had it for about a week and a half. On Tuesday we will start going through the draft report, and I look forward to that conversation.

With that, keep well and safe. We will see you soon.

The meeting is adjourned.

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