



CANADA

House of Commons Debates

VOLUME 139 • NUMBER 042 • 3rd SESSION • 37th PARLIAMENT

OFFICIAL REPORT
(HANSARD)

Tuesday, April 27, 2004

—

Speaker: The Honourable Peter Milliken

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Tuesday, April 27, 2004

The House met at 10 a.m.

Prayers

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

• (1000)

[English]

NATIONAL SECURITY

Hon. Anne McLellan (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, Lib.): Madam Speaker, it is a pleasure for me to table in the House, in both official languages, a document entitled “Securing an Open Society: Canada’s National Security Policy”.

• (1005)

Since the tragic events of 9/11, the Government of Canada has implemented positive and progressive measures to improve Canada’s national security environment.

We have invested more than \$8 billion in additional security measures.

We have strengthened our legislative base.

On December 12, the Prime Minister created the portfolio of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness to further close security gaps and ensure that our national interests and our people are protected.

Clearly we have demonstrated the leadership Canadians expect of their government, but we also know that more needs to be done.

Today, we are taking another important step forward with the tabling of Canada’s first comprehensive national security policy.

“Securing an Open Society: Canada’s National Security Policy” articulates, with specifics, our national security interests, identifies the current threats facing Canadians, and provides a blueprint for action to address these threats. This new system will be capable of responding not only to the obvious threat of a terrorist attack but also to other incidents of national significance that can undermine Canadians’ health and our economic stability, including natural disasters, health pandemics and the activities of organized crime.

The government’s national security vision reflects some fundamental principles.

First, it must be balanced, ensuring that civil liberties and individual rights are not unnecessarily compromised in the pursuit of improved domestic security. In other words, it must reflect Canadian values.

Second, to be effective, our national security policy must be integrated across the Government of Canada and with key partners, ranging from first responders to provincial and territorial governments and our allies abroad.

Third, the policy must be flexible so that it can continue to evolve as we learn from past experiences and adjust to emerging threats. The government will invest more than \$690 million over five years from the security contingency reserve to implement key measures outlined in this framework.

The tabling of this policy fulfills a commitment in the Speech from the Throne. More important, it directly addresses the core responsibility of any government, which is to ensure the safety and security of its citizens.

The government needs the help of all Canadians to make its approach to security effective. It also needs the support of the House.

I would ask hon. members to carefully review this policy document. I invite them to share their views and those of their constituents with us.

• (1010)

Mr. Kevin Sorenson (Crowfoot, CPC): Madam Speaker, on behalf of the official opposition, I welcome this opportunity to respond to the announcement by the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness regarding the government’s national security policy.

Unfortunately, I have not yet had an opportunity to read the document, “Securing an Open Society: Canada’s National Security Policy”, and therefore cannot comment on the specifics of the government’s proposed blueprint.

However, as I stated last month in the House, the flurry of security announcements in the wake of the Prime Minister’s announcement of a visit to Washington cannot deflect the Auditor General’s most recent criticism. It cannot hide the fact that for over a decade the government has failed. It has failed in its most fundamental role: the protection of its citizens.

On top of Ms. Fraser’s revelation that there are significant gaps and errors in our national security, former presidential adviser Richard Clarke said yesterday:

Routine Proceedings

For the last many years, Canada has not been making much of a contribution at all [on the military]...most people in the national security business in Washington think Canada is getting a free ride in terms of military contribution.

This extends, as noted by Mr. Clarke, beyond the military into our policing agencies, the RCMP, and also into the intelligence agency CSIS.

To summarize what was said by this former counterterrorism adviser to the United States, both for President Bush and for his predecessor, Bill Clinton, Canada is not pulling its weight in the war against terrorism. I would therefore once again conclude that the minister's announcement today is too little too late.

As the minister so rightly pointed out, the core responsibility of any government is to ensure the safety and security of its citizens. For over 10 years, this government has neglected its military, this government has neglected our security, and this government has neglected our intelligence forces, tearing them down to such unprecedented levels that it will take years to rebuild. For over a decade, this government has failed in its most fundamental role: the safety and security of Canadians.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvan Loubier (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, BQ): Madam Speaker, the government's new security policy raises some questions. The first one relates to civil liberties. The minister said that we must ensure, and I quote, "that civil liberties and individual rights are not unnecessarily compromised in the pursuit of improved domestic security". Does this mean that if, ultimately, this must be done, the government will do it?

Second, the new security policy includes a rather extraordinary number of agencies, committees and groups. However, let us not forget that, in her criticisms, the Auditor General alluded primarily to the exchange of information. Will this proliferation of agencies, committees and groups of all kinds ensure that the exchange of information is more efficient?

Third, I hope it is not just to please the United States that, this morning, the government is making this statement on a new security policy. Earlier this week, when the Minister of Finance met his American counterpart, John Snow, and presented this security policy to him, before presenting it to Parliament and to Canadians, Mr. Snow said that he was satisfied and that the United States would be satisfied, because the policy looks very similar to what the Americans themselves are doing regarding national security.

This new security policy is being tabled—and this is my fourth point—in haste without any consultation with Parliament or the public. And they talk about partnership.

Some partnership. This is my fifth point. The policy states that the partners will have to apply measures that are decided here. That is an odd partnership for starting this new security policy. It is quite disconcerting to see in this new policy statement on security, the Canadian government again considering the possibility of participating in the U.S. ballistic missile defence system when we are against it. The majority of Quebecers and Canadians are against it, but the government is saying that it will continue to consider a policy that no one wants.

Allow me—and this is my last point—to question the cost estimate for these new security and public health initiatives: some \$690.4 million. We know that the cost of gun control alone was estimated at \$2 million and has now reached \$2 billion. We have reason to doubt that for something as broad as security, \$690.4 million—which does not include money for health—will be enough.

We have some questions. We asked those in charge of security whether some of the costs involved in marine security, for instance, could be assumed by users. We have been burned in the past by this government in having to share ice-breaking costs in particular.

In conclusion, allow me to say that we will closely scrutinize all bills pertaining to this new public security policy to ensure above all that fundamental freedoms are respected.

• (1015)

[*English*]

Hon. Lorne Nystrom (Regina—Qu'Appelle, NDP): Madam Speaker, I want to endorse some of the things said by my friend from the Bloc Québécois in terms of being concerned that we do not step on individual freedoms, that we have a national security policy and the like.

I want to say from the outset that what I see in the paper from the briefing this morning is that it looks good on paper. It is a matter of how it is implemented and how much money is committed to it to make sure that we have a security policy that will protect the safety of Canadian people. That is paramount.

We need money, for example, for community policing around the country. We need enough money for emergency response. The SARs issue is a good example of that. That is very key in terms of how this policy is actually implemented.

We already have the new Department of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness. Now there will be a government operations centre, a national security council and then a parliamentary committee that will be advising on national security. I hope all these things come together and they provide a top-notch security system.

I also want to make the point that I do think in general our security in the country is on par with anywhere in the world. I really wonder sometimes when I hear Conservatives who quote their friends in the United States talking about how superior the security system is in the United States. I am not sure there is any evidence of that except for the odd quote from the odd person in the United States of America.

I want to make one or two other points that I think are important. I have long believed that the best defence against terrorism is peace and dialogue. When we have war, strife and conflict, I think that is when terrorism really thrives.

The Dalai Lama was just here talking about some of the issues and about dialogue. We have to do as a nation whatever we can to promote peace and dialogue in the world and try to bring people together.

I have tried to take a balanced view, for example, of the Middle East in bringing people together in that very complex part of the world. I would say to the minister that we should maintain an independent foreign policy and independent security policy. Yes, we should cooperate with the United States but it is extremely important that we maintain our independence and our sovereignty. I get the message loudly and clearly as I travel across the country.

I am sure the minister is aware of this from any polls she has read that there is a great deal of skepticism in our country about George Bush's administration in terms of its foreign policy. George Bush was wrong in Iraq. He lied to congress, to the American people and to the world about weapons of mass destruction. When there is this kind of unilateral foreign policy by the American president without the consent of the United Nations, it invites and provokes more terrorism around the world.

I think what George Bush has done has been very dangerous for world peace and security. One thing that we did correctly in this country was to stay out of Iraq.

* * *

•(1020)

COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

PROCEDURE AND HOUSE AFFAIRS

Hon. Roger Galloway (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I have the honour to present the 24th report of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs concerning Mr. Bernard Shapiro, the nominee for the position of Ethics Commissioner.

As well, I have the honour to present the 25th report of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs which contains a proposed conflict of interest code for members of Parliament.

[*Translation*]

ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Hon. Serge Marcil (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment, Lib.): Madam Speaker, on behalf of the chair of the Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development, I have the honour to table, in both official languages, the first report of the Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development.

Pursuant to the order of reference of Monday, April 19, 2004, the committee has considered Bill C-28, an Act to amend the Canada National Parks Act, and agreed on Monday, April 26, 2004, to report it without amendment.

Routine Proceedings

[*English*]

PETITIONS

CANADIAN FORCES HOUSING

Mr. Jay Hill (Prince George—Peace River, CPC): Madam Speaker, it is a pleasure to present three petitions in the House of Commons.

The first petition deals with the housing for our Canadian Forces families. This petition, signed by people from Montreal, Laval, LaSalle, Verdun and St. Laurent in Quebec, and from Vancouver, British Columbia, notes that housing accommodation does provide military families with a sense of community. It notes that many of the houses on our bases are substandard living conditions. It also notes that soldiers living in accommodations provided by the Canadian Forces Housing Agency have seen dramatic increases in their rent.

Therefore the petitioners call upon Parliament to immediately suspend any future rent increases for accommodation provided by the Canadian Forces Housing Agency until such time as the Government of Canada makes substantive improvements to the living conditions of housing provided for military families in our nation.

I will have a number of those petitions, which are coming from all across Canada, to present in the coming days.

FIREARMS REGISTRY

Mr. Jay Hill (Prince George—Peace River, CPC): Madam Speaker, the other two petitions deal with the now infamous Liberal gun registry.

The petitioners note that the federal firearms registry has cost Canadian taxpayers well in excess of \$1 billion and that six of Canada's provinces have refused to prosecute federal firearms registration laws.

Therefore the petitioners call upon Parliament to pass legislation to wind up the federal firearms registry and reallocate the spending to frontline policing and effective controls against illegal weapons at our borders, airports and our ports.

[*Translation*]

MARRIAGE

Hon. Serge Marcil (Beauharnois—Salaberry, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I have the pleasure of presenting a petition signed by 210 residents of my riding and other areas who are against the government bill amending the definition of marriage.

They argue that marriage as perceived as the stable union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others pre-exists the state. Because it pre-exists the state and because it is a fundamental element of any society, the institution of marriage should not be tampered with by the charter of rights, the state or any court.

To broaden and amend the definition of marriage to include same sex partners would be discriminatory to families and marriage, which will then be denied the social and legislative recognition as the unique and irreplaceable foundation of our society.

Supply

• (1025)
[English]

FAMILY REUNIFICATION

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis (Winnipeg North Centre, NDP): Madam Speaker, I am very pleased to present two petitions this morning. The first petition pertains to Bill C-436, the once in a lifetime legislation, which is again before the House today for debate.

The petitioners call upon Parliament to take this proposal seriously and to ensure that family reunification is again an important part of the government's immigration policy.

The petitioners acknowledge that nothing is more important than the family when it comes to the health and well-being of our society. They deeply regret that the government has failed to move on a more modern definition of family that allows for aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers and sisters to be joined together in one place and to support one another.

LABELLING OF ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis (Winnipeg North Centre, NDP): Madam Speaker, the other petition deals with the matter of labels on alcohol beverage containers.

The petitioners point out that it has now been three years and three days since Parliament passed, almost unanimously, my private member's bill to ensure that warning labels about fetal alcohol syndrome were placed on all alcohol beverage containers.

They call upon the government to finally enact that legislation to ensure that the will of Parliament is respected. They are very concerned about the way in which the government has disregarded democracy and point out the hypocrisy of a government that talks about democratic deficit but fails to implement the will of Parliament and the wishes of Canadian citizens.

MARRIAGE

Mr. John Maloney (Erie—Lincoln, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I have the honour to present two petitions from my region of Niagara pursuant to Standing Order 36.

Both petitions call upon the Government of Canada to uphold the legal definition of marriage understood as the lasting union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others.

The petitioners point out that to enlarge and thereby alter the definition of marriage in order to include same sex partners discriminates against heterosexual marriage and the family which are thus deprived of their social and legal recognition as the fundamental and irreplaceable basis of society.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Mr. Gurmant Grewal (Surrey Central, CPC): Madam Speaker, I am pleased to rise today on behalf of the constituents of Surrey Central to present six petitions on Bill C-250. The petitioners believe that the addition of sexual orientation as a protected category under sections 318 and 319 of the Criminal Code threatens the ability of individuals to exercise their religious freedoms and to express their moral and religious doctrines without fear of criminal prosecution.

The petitioners call upon Parliament to protect the rights of Canadians to be free and to share their religious beliefs without fear of prosecution.

MARRIAGE

Mr. Gurmant Grewal (Surrey Central, CPC): Madam Speaker, I also have three petitions signed by hundreds of people from across Canada.

The petitioners call upon Parliament to immediately hold a new debate on the definition of marriage and to reaffirm, as it did in 1999 in response to the motion from the official opposition, its commitment to take all necessary steps to preserve marriage as the union of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others.

Finally, on the same topic, I have two petitions in which the petitioners call upon Parliament to pass legislation to recognize the institution of marriage in federal law as being a lifelong union of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others.

* * *

QUESTIONS ON THE ORDER PAPER

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

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Hinton): Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Hinton): I wish to inform the House that because of the ministerial statement, government orders will be extended by 13 minutes.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

• (1030)
[English]

SUPPLY

ALLOTTED DAY—GENERAL ELECTIONS

Mr. John Reynolds (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast, CPC) moved:

That, in the opinion of this House, there being a serious democratic deficit in Canada, particularly in the domination of the executive over the House of Commons by providing to the Prime Minister the sole political prerogative to determine when Parliament should be dissolved for the purposes of a general election;

That, unless the Government loses the confidence of the House, general elections should be held on fixed dates; and

That the Government should bring in measures to establish fixed election dates to be held on the third Monday of the month that is four years after the month in which the polling day for the most recently held general election fell.

He said: Madam Speaker, I will be sharing my time with our deputy leader, the hon. member for Pictou—Antigonish—Guysborough.

I would also like to congratulate you, Madam Speaker. It is the first time I have had an opportunity in a speech to congratulate you on your election to the great post as one of our Speakers in the House of Commons. I know all our citizens of British Columbia are very proud that you serve in that position.

The last time I personally introduced a motion addressing the democratic deficit was a motion to establish secret ballot elections in committees. The House adopted it on November 5, 2002. Its adoption was a hard fought battle.

Before we began secret ballot elections in committees, every chairman and vice-chairman position on standing committees was controlled by the Prime Minister through his whip. This control was possible because the voting method was open. The method of open voting was very intimidating because the Liberal Party whip would attend each meeting to elect the chairman and vice-chairman and used all kinds of methods of coercion to influence the vote.

The methods used were similar to the methods used in the 19th century to influence votes at the ballot box during general elections. In the 19th century, employers threatened to reduce the wages or even fire those who did not vote for the right candidate. Back in the 19th century, it was common for parish priests to threaten their parishioners with the fires of hell in order to influence the outcome of an election.

The tactics used by the Liberal whip during the election of chairmen and vice-chairmen of committees were not that different. Instead of the fires of hell, the whip threatened members with the fires of the Prime Minister's Office.

While we have put out the fires of strong arm methods to include selections in committees during the Chrétien administration, there are many anti-democratic fires still burning in the Prime Minister's Office today. For example, in my Province of British Columbia, the Prime Minister is making a mockery of democracy within his own party by appointing candidates that he has personally selected. How does that square with his complaint about decisions being made based on "Who you know in the PMO"? The Prime Minister has taken the democratic process from his own party members. His own party is accusing him of being anti-democratic and racist.

We saw how the Prime Minister's heavy, anti-democratic hand brought a candidate in Burnaby—Douglas to tears on national television. In fact, I was watching that and thought it was quite interesting. My party is the only party that has a candidate in Burnaby—Douglas who has not cried on national television.

The Liberal Party has become so undemocratic under the current Prime Minister that many other Liberal candidates, Liberal members and Liberal supporters are saying that they do not even recognize their party any more. In his Winnipeg speech in March, the Prime Minister boasted about the democratic reforms that have been taken by his government. He said:

Upon taking office, December 12th last, we wasted no time in fulfilling that promise. Members of Parliament now matter in a way they haven't mattered for decades. Free votes in the House of Commons are now a matter of course.

What free votes? The Prime Minister would not let his members vote freely on funding the gun registry. His staff swarms the public accounts committee, influencing every word. At one meeting,

Supply

despite the initial wishes of the committee to report the conduct of a Liberal member of the House for leaking information from an in camera meeting, the committee made an about face and voted not to proceed with the matter.

This decision came days after Liberal members were making charges of contempt in the House for the publication of leaked information from the Ontario caucus. When it is embarrassing for the government, the Prime Minister orders his members to cry contempt, but when it suits the Prime Minister's election planning, he orders the matter swept under the carpet with the rest of his democratic dust bunnies.

It could be said that the anti-democratic actions of the Prime Minister are worse than his predecessor, and that is saying something. Jean Chrétien waited a year and a half before he moved his first closure motion as Prime Minister and managed to last five months before he rammed his first piece of legislation through the House using time allocation. The current Prime Minister waited six days to use closure and followed up with time allocation just about immediately in the Senate.

On February 8, 2001, the opposition leader moved a motion that would have the House adopt a policy from the Liberal red book, one that called for a truly independent ethics counsellor. The Prime Minister voted against it. He rejected his own policy. That was a parliamentary reform action promise. He is back to his old tricks, making election promises with no intention of following them through.

● (1035)

In the *Edmonton Journal* on April 6, 2004, the Prime Minister's senior Alberta minister, the Deputy Prime Minister, said:

My own view is that it's unsustainable to have an unelected upper house of whatever kind at the beginning of this century. I would like to think that the government of Canada might take the initiative to come up with a bold Senate reform proposal and then put that in play, offer it to the premiers.

It was a popular thing for her to say in Alberta; however, her statements directly contradict those of her own boss, the Prime Minister. The *Calgary Herald* reported the Prime Minister saying on May 2:

I don't think the timing is right for a huge constitutional discussion. I just don't think that piecemeal reform is the way to go.

That was a little different from what he said during his campaign for leadership.

During the battle to establish secret ballot elections in committees and also the battle to reform private members' business, the Chrétien government used the exact same excuse with the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs and during debates in the House of Commons. This is a standard Liberal excuse to do nothing.

While the government argues that piecemeal reform is not the way to go, it introduced a stand-alone reform. The first reform that was brought in after the last election was to restrict the ability of members to move amendments at report stage, a decision that still hampers members today by impeding their ability to represent their constituents.

Supply

The reform that we are introducing today is one of many that we have introduced in the past. For a party in opposition, we have more success with the adoption of parliamentary reform than the government itself.

I mentioned earlier, secret ballot elections in committee. The new rule that addresses late answers from the government to Order Paper questions was taken from a reform package drafted by the official opposition. It has significantly reduced late answers from the government. The government adopted one out of three time allocation proposals from that same package.

The House has established a half hour question and answer period following the moving of the closure or time allocation motion. Questions are directed toward the minister who is sponsoring the bill under debate, or in exceptional circumstances, an acting minister.

The office of the Clerk of the House of Commons is central to the functioning of the chamber. Before the House adopted its new procedure, the government, through an order in council, made the appointment of the Clerk. While the recent incumbents have been exceptionally qualified individuals and above reproach, the principle that the House of Commons be involved in the appointment process was important because the Clerk serves the entire House of Commons and all its members, and must have the confidence of this House. This can now be demonstrated by a vote in the House regarding his or her appointment.

The House created an estimates committee to monitor and review the estimates and supply process on an ongoing basis. This was an idea that was developed by a study that was initiated by the opposition. While the creation of the estimates committee made up only a small part of the recommendations from that study, it was a small step in the right direction.

The fact that more committees are televised is a direct result of initiatives and pressure from the official opposition. The idea of a committee review for the appointments of officers of Parliament came about because of pressure put on the government by the member for Langley—Abbotsford when he was the House leader of the official opposition.

The reforms to private members' business making all items votable came about because of the member for Yorkton—Melville. He had two supply motions on the subject and finally, after 10 years, the measures were adopted, although only on an interim basis.

One minor reform that I am particularly relieved is in place today is the change that prevents the government from amending opposition motions. I say this because of the current mood of the Prime Minister, demonstrated by his meddling in certain ridings and his treatment of Liberal members non grata. I would not want my motion subjected to an amendment from the Prime Minister by deleting certain words and changing the outcome of my motion from the establishment of fixed election dates to the establishment of fixed elections.

The former Prime Minister was criticized for not respecting the wishes of the House. The wishes of the House with respect to the definition of marriage and the terms under which the Kyoto protocol would be signed were a few examples—

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Hinton): On a point of order, the hon. member for Scarborough—Rouge River.

Mr. Derek Lee: Madam Speaker, I enjoy listening and engaging in debate here, but the subject of the debate today is clearly stated in the motion before the House. The member has not yet touched upon the issue of fixed four year election dates and he has been speaking for about 10 minutes. He has been on a partisan political rant. Could we please get to—

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Hinton): That is not a point of order. Resuming debate, the hon. member for West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast.

Mr. John Reynolds: Madam Speaker, I have only spoken for five minutes, not ten, and I will get to my point when I want to get to it. I remind that member that his government is not only corrupt, but it has not done the things in the House with regard to the democratic deficit. It should have been doing this all along, and there will be lots of time to make this point.

We have the same disrespect of the current Prime Minister as we did with the previous one. Recently the House adopted a motion regarding the Armenian genocide. Immediately after the vote, the Minister of Foreign Affairs said that it was too bad and who cared. This Prime Minister like the last prime minister will not be influenced by the wishes of the House.

Fixed elections is another area with which the Prime Minister needs to get on board. Once again the Prime Minister is following in the footsteps of his predecessor. The current Prime Minister is abusing his prerogative to call an election as Jean Chrétien abused his in the past.

Other than a loss of confidence in the House of Commons, there is little public interest in calling an election earlier than four years after the last election. The interest of calling an early election is always to the benefit of the prime minister and the governing party. When we compete for office, the playing field must be even. All parties must be prepared not just one, otherwise we will not end up with a democratic process.

Legislation should be introduced to establish fixed elections to be held every four years. In the event a government loses the confidence of the House in between the fixed dates, our time honoured parliamentary traditions would be preserved and the option to have another party form a government or have Parliament dissolved in that instance would continue. In the interest of free votes and to preserve the integrity of this change, the government cannot determine just any loss of a vote as a loss of confidence. A loss of confidence must be spelled out.

We are quick to judge the election process in emerging democracies around the world, yet here in Parliament we continue to struggle with a flawed election process.

If this Prime Minister does not bring in fixed election dates, the first item of business after the next election, when the leader of my party becomes prime minister, will be to set a fixed election date for all Canadians.

Supply

• (1040)

Mr. Jay Hill (Prince George—Peace River, CPC): Madam Speaker, I very much enjoyed my colleague's presentation about the need for fixed election dates. It was my pleasure and my privilege to second the opposition motion before the House today.

I have been here almost 11 years now. When I was first elected back in 1993, and in subsequent elections in 1997 and 2000, one of the big issues in my riding was the need for democratic reform. That was one of the reasons why I was sent here.

My colleague touched upon the need for an elected Senate, free votes in the House of Commons and fixed election dates. I do not think he mentioned the increased use of referenda and citizens' initiatives, that type of involvement of the electorate in the democratic process. These issues have been planks of our party for many years.

Has he had the same continuous input from his constituents about the need for this type of reform that I have had and about which I still hear? Over the last two weekend, I had the opportunity to work at a Conservative Party of Canada trade fair booth in two cities in my riding, and I heard the same thing. This issue will not go away. Canadians are demanding to be allowed into the democratic process in their country. Has he been hearing the same things?

Also, would he like to remark a bit more about the fact that Jean Chrétien called two successive elections with only a little over three years in between them?

Mr. John Reynolds: Madam Speaker, my colleague's question is very important. I was at a home fair in Sechelt this weekend, which thousand of people attended. I spoke with hundreds of people and a lot of them brought up the subject of fixed election dates. They see time being wasted in the House. Yesterday, there were hardly any ministers in the House at all.

As most members of the House know, there are fixed election dates at the municipal level now, and it works well. Everyone knows exactly when the election will be held, and they prepare for it. The province of British Columbia now has fixed election dates. The new Liberal Premier of Ontario has talked about bringing in fixed election dates in that province. Other premiers across Canada are doing the same.

It is time we modernized this institution. The Prime Minister has talked about the democratic deficit. This is one way. We, like most Canadians, would like to see fixed election dates. It has worked well in British Columbia. The Premier of British Columbia not only said that he would bring in fixed election dates, but he promised electoral reform. He won 77 out of 79 seats on those issues. Right now a commission in British Columbia is looking at electoral reform. People want that and they will see it.

These are the kinds of things we need to modernize our Parliament to get people back voting again. The voting level has gone down. We have to change things so people will vote and will not be frustrated with the system. This is a good start. We hope all parties will vote for this motion.

• (1045)

Mr. Derek Lee (Scarborough—Rouge River, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I was delighted to see the hon. member reach the subject of

debate in the last minute of his speech. The issue is really why would one opt for fixed election dates. It is a question where there are probably reasons for and against.

The royal commission on electoral reform looked at this issue about 10 years ago and found several cogent reasons why we should not have fixed election dates. One was that once we went for a fixed election date, it would decrease the ability to make the government in power accountable because the government could be defeated on a vote in the House. We would then go for a general election. However, to put in place a fixed election date would remove that mechanism of accountability.

There are other reasons for and against, but simply on that one issue, would the hon. member tell us how the fixed election date would increase accountability here in the House?

Mr. John Reynolds: Madam Speaker, one thing it would do, and the Liberals do not understand, is give the people of Canada what they want. The overwhelming majority would like to see fixed election dates in this country.

If we also tie in fixed election dates with absolute free votes in the House of Commons, where a government could only be defeated on the throne speech, the budget and a motion of non-confidence, we would then start to get legislation in the House that all Canadians would like because it would be supported or voted against by all members of the House, without any threat from the PMO. That is done in the British Columbia legislature right now and it works very well, even though they have a massive majority. A number of their own members vote against legislation and they get better legislation because of that.

The House should be all about that. When it comes to voting in the House, every member of the House should be equal to every other member and not put under pressure by the PMO and a small number in his cabinet.

Mr. Peter MacKay (Pictou—Antigonish—Guysborough, CPC): Madam Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to share time with my colleague from West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast, the mover of the motion and someone who has worked very hard for the Conservative cause and for Canadians. I know he believes very passionately in this issue.

The irony of much of the discussion around democratic deficit clearly, and this is an issue of democratic deficit, is that the Prime Minister, who has embodied this phrase, is actually the person who perhaps more than any other has contributed to the democratic deficit in the country through his words and actions. Much of what he and his administration have done has created a democratic gulf that he is now trying to somehow lessen.

Supply

A lot of this is really lip service. It will take substantive change. It will take a change in our electoral system, a change in process and a change in procedure within the House of Commons to actually and factually address a democratic deficit. That will come soon under a Conservative government, led by the leader of the official opposition.

As the mover of the motion from Vancouver suggested, this is aimed specifically at setting an election date so there is continuity and the ability for the nation to plan for a coming election, not this limbo, this state of unease, unrest and flux that we are currently experiencing as a result of the prerogative of the Prime Minister, the Prime Minister alone and perhaps his wife, to decide that date. This is about bringing some continuity to our system.

As my friend quite aptly pointed out, the participation of young people in particular is plummeting. This is one small step on the road to recovery of bringing about relevance in our election system. I remain firm in my conviction that this is a positive step. Bringing about a fixed election date would restore some of the confidence that has been lacking in the process itself.

Over the years I have been on record in supporting this initiative. Going to the polls every four years allows Canadians, political parties and all those who function within the system to plan ahead, which clearly, in and of itself, is of benefit. If one knows a certain fixed date is arriving, just like Christmas, one can prepare.

In the past colleagues opposite and some in the opposition as well have suggested that to follow this American model of having fixed dates would somehow lead to, as my colleague opposite seemed to allude to, governments becoming stagnant. Governments would somehow then not bring forward the types of initiatives based on the fact that an election was coming. I would argue quite the opposite.

I would argue that when a government knows that time will be running out and that time is short, it will have to take a long, hard look at what it has accomplished or, in the case of the government today, not accomplished in its time in office. That again would raise the bar of accountability. It would allow Canadians to assess in a very real way whether they were getting value from their government, just as I suppose many are contemplating today whether they were getting value for the sponsorship program that was perpetrated on the country in such a crass and partisan way. Nothing could be further from the truth. To suggest somehow that fixed election dates would have a negative impact on accountability is completely wrong, in my view.

I would also be quick to add that the system in the United States is quite different in that its constitution, party constraints and restraints as a result of its congressional system is quite different from the Canadian British parliamentary system.

The government that we have seen currently is operating in such a fashion that it is trying to maximize the advantage of holding secret when the election date will come. I would say the big losers here, plain and simple, are the Canadian people.

We have seen in the past number of months, the last 100 plus days of this administration, no new initiatives, no new legislation, nothing that would inspire Canadians to think the Prime Minister has a vision, a plan or a focus as to where he wants to take the country.

Again change is coming. Those winds of change are blowing under a new Conservative government in waiting, and we look forward to the opportunity to lay out that plan in specific terms in the days ahead.

• (1050)

We have watched and Canadians have watched with great dismay what has taken place over the last decade under the Liberal government. The Liberals have continually made election promises only to arrive in office and completely change the plan, breaking promise after promise. We all recall those famous red book reversals on GST, free trade and military spending. The list goes on and on.

If we want to have true accountability, there is going to have to be a lot of change within the chamber and the way we operate. Fixed election dates are a very good step in that direction.

Much of the arrogance and confidence demonstrated by this government stems from the fact that it can pull that plug at the most advantageous time. Again, a lot of the concentration of power in the PMO is the root cause of the so-called democratic deficit. There has been much written about this of late.

A centrepiece of the Prime Minister's appeal in this upcoming election seems to be his package of reforms and his discussion of what he has deemed the democratic deficit. In his speech in which he launched this, during the time in which he was undermining his predecessor, he stated:

In effect, the command-and-control systems of central authority in Ottawa have pushed the views of citizens and communities to the side.

I know I cannot use the word hypocrisy here, but when one looks at his record versus his words, it is clear that there is quite a gulf. No less an icon of Liberal Party ideology than Tom Kent stated in an article in the *The Globe and Mail* on January 29:

Conquering the democratic deficit is going to make [the current Prime Minister's] successful struggle against the financial deficit seem like child's play. He himself is now the command-and-control centre. To start democratic reform, to give new weight to the views of citizens and communities, he has only to forgo some of the prime minister's power.

So therein lies the secret. It is going to involve a devolution of power from the PMO itself, and that seems to be, for all leaders, one of the most difficult things to do: to give away some of this power, this power that has been concentrated, this all powerful feeling that one controls everything that goes on in one's purview.

Part of giving away that power, I suggest, would include having fixed election dates, just as it would include having more independent officers of Parliament who report directly to Parliament, and just as it would include giving the Auditor General the ability to go into crown corporations so we could avoid this spectacle of arm's length crown corporations not being accountable for their spending practices to the people of Canada through Parliament.

There is much that can be done. We have seen, over the past number of months in particular, a government that is adrift and without an agenda. Again, it can get away with that because it can wait and call that election when those polls hit that pivotal moment, that moment when the Liberals feel it is most to their advantage.

Supply

It is not unlike, I would suggest, the current situation with the election finance bill, which really should be called the incumbent's protection bill. Most Canadians do not understand that the Liberal government, the sitting government, receives a huge, disproportionate advantage in election financing as a result of the bill that it changed to its own advantage. We are not starting at the same point. It is as if we are running in a three-legged race and the Liberal government will be running free under this new legislation.

Without the benefit of fixed election dates, Canadians are in essence at the gunpoint of the Prime Minister, who has the sole authority to set an election date, just as he currently has the sole authority to appoint judges, which is another shortcoming in our system.

If anything, the media have shown us this political jockeying that has gone on between the current Prime Minister and his own cabinet and caucus. Even the most skilled horseman would be in awe at what an advantage there is in being able to jockey up to the starting line and then decide when the starting bell rings. Then, and only then, are they off, and the Liberals are the only ones at the line who know when it starts, so they can take a nice rolling start, as they used to say.

The Prime Minister has railed on and on about the democratic deficit. He has talked about it and he has promised to change things. Yet he has had over 10 years to act on some of these very same initiatives and we have seen nothing. This is a bit like a deathbed repentance. Now that he is going to be held accountable by the people, he is saying, "My goodness, I am going to do all these things. Honest, this time you should trust me".

In conclusion, I very much support the initiative. I support this motion brought forward by the official opposition and my colleague from Vancouver.

I would ask that I be permitted to move an amendment at this time, seconded by my colleague from Saint John. I move:

That the motion be amended by replacing the last two paragraphs with:

"That, unless the Government loses the confidence of the House, general elections should be held on fixed dates every four years."

That is to avoid any such conflict that the election would not be called if a government were to lose the confidence of the House. Again, it would add to the stability of this particular initiative.

• (1055)

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Hinton): I have the amendment. Does the member have the consent of the mover of the motion?

Mr. Peter MacKay: Yes, Madam Speaker. The consent is there.

Hon. Roger Gallaway (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I listened with great interest to the speech given by my friend from across the way. In many respects it resembled a trip to the dollar store. It laid out a vast array of sparkling items, but in the end we are in a dollar store and nothing in it is worth more than a loonie.

I am quite intrigued by certain points that were raised. The member made the statement that it is difficult for leaders to give

away their authority. Having regard to that, I would invite my friend to comment on his leader's authority. Let us remember the member for Regina—Lumsden—Lake Centre, who was elected to the House by the people in that riding and who made a statement that his leader did not like. His leader ignored the democratic process and removed the member from their party.

How does this enormous power of his leader to remove people from that caucus, when in fact that person was elected to the House under the banner of that party, reconcile with his stated position about leaders giving away their authority?

• (1100)

Mr. Peter MacKay: Madam Speaker, I am overjoyed to address that question, because in fact what our leader did, contrary to the Prime Minister's actions with regard to members of his party, was put the issue to a vote in our caucus.

What possibly could be more democratic than that? The member from Saskatchewan to whom he is referring was not expelled from the House. He is still a sitting member of the House. His constituents were not deprived of anything by the actions of the party itself as a whole.

The words that were spoken, without reciting that issue, were found to be offensive to many. There was very much a democratic decision and process followed, unlike, of course, what happened in the issue where nominated candidates were told by the Prime Minister they could not even run for office. They were denied the opportunity to even put their names forward and present themselves to the people of that constituency. That is a completely different situation than what we are talking about here today.

An hon. member: Big tears in Burnaby.

Mr. Peter MacKay: We have seen all kinds of examples, and yes, tears were not enough to express how that individual from Burnaby was feeling.

I would suggest that there is quite a startling difference between the way his leader has been acting and the way our leader has acted, which has been in a very consultative way, engaging the caucus in the ability to make such an important decision.

Mr. Myron Thompson (Wild Rose, CPC): Madam Speaker, I really appreciate this member's speech. I am going to ask him a question about something that was not in the talk he gave, as I always respect his opinion. It is something that I want to mention in regard to the number of people in my riding and other places who certainly support the idea of fixed election dates.

Along with that, I quite often hear the comment that once a prime minister has been in office for two of those four year terms, it should be enough and he should not be allowed to continue. It is after many years of being in that position—and they refer to Mr. Trudeau more than anyone—that the arrogance sets in and negative changes happen.

What is his opinion on fixed terms for the prime minister, not only fixed election dates?

Supply

Mr. Peter MacKay: As usual, Madam Speaker, we hear wise words from the member for Wild Rose. He brings to this House a straightforward, plain-talking, common sense approach that is respected not only by his constituents but certainly by members in this party and by Canadians generally.

I am very much of the same view that a leader, a prime minister, should not serve more than two terms in office. This is in fact the case in other countries. I believe very strongly that such a period of time, be it 8 years or 10 years, is sufficient in that role because it does start to stagnate. There is a “best before” date.

I would suggest that the current Prime Minister should take a long, hard look in the mirror in determining whether he will stay past his next term when he is sitting on the opposition side.

Hon. Roger Gallaway (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I am pleased to speak from this side of the House to the official opposition motion calling for measures to establish a fixed election date. The main motion calls for the fixed date to be the third Monday of the month, that is four years after the month on which the most recently held general election day fell.

Let me start by saying that in my opinion this is a totally facile motion. It is an anti-parliamentary motion as it offends every principle of parliamentary law and convention. It is a motion that, if fully enacted, would reach in and disembowel the very constitutional framework of responsible parliamentary government.

Conversely, by this very motion, members of the official opposition have revealed to us and to Canadians their constitutional ignorance of several hundred years of Parliament. They further reveal to us and to all Canadians their desire to turn Parliament into the congress of Canada.

Last weekend a former prime minister, the right hon. Brian Mulroney, in endorsing the hon. Leader of the Opposition, called upon him to re-establish the principles of the party of Sir John A. Macdonald. Whatever one thinks of Sir John A. in terms of his political actions, he was a parliamentarian who upheld the constitutional law of Parliament. His party successor, Sir John Thompson, the man from Halifax, in his brief two years as prime minister, was a brilliant tactician in the House.

We have before us today a motion that is diametrically opposed to everything for which Sir John A. stood. He was the virtual founder of that party, the person who former Prime Minister Mulroney said they should emulate, who said in a speech:

To boast of nationality in one breath, and to cry for protection in another, is at once impertinent and unmanly; and resembles nothing so much as a hale young man of twenty-one under the guardianship of a dry nurse.

With that cry of nationality, he was a Canadian. Members of the party of Sir John A. Macdonald have said that they do not like one aspect of several hundred years of this House, of Parliament, parliamentary law, parliamentary convention and therefore they want to change it. They in fact would prefer an American style fixed election date.

The party of Sir John A. is here today crying for protection from a system that has existed for several hundred years. Members opposite suddenly have discovered that if they do not like it and it does not

serve their interests, they will be, in the words of Sir John A., impertinent enough to say that the government should outlaw it, that it should banish it or that it should change it simply because they do not like it.

It was Benjamin Disraeli, a very close friend of their founder, Sir John A., also a Conservative prime minister, who said in 1872:

I look upon Parliamentary Government as the noblest government in the world.

Let us remember that the official opposition, with this motion because they do not like it, would eliminate confidence as the cornerstone of our system and in its place replace it with confidence of the House, which I would submit is a most simplistic view of parliamentary government; enacting and emboldening the balance between the legislature and executive branch, which is exactly what confidence is.

• (1105)

The motion refers to a political prerogative that is allegedly possessed by the Prime Minister, a prerogative the official opposition asserts is “to determine when Parliament should be dissolved for the purposes of a general election”. Those are not my words, those are the words from the motion put forward by members opposite.

That is, quite simply, preposterous. It is a remarkable but, above all, false interpretation of parliamentary government. What is being said is that the Crown, the sovereign, whose reserve powers are exercised by the Governor General, has no choice; that is, there can never be a situation when and where the Crown can refuse a dissolution and an election call.

According to our friends opposite, the Crown in this country, as represented by the Governor General, is irrelevant, that it has no reserve power. They are purporting to remove the personal power of the Crown and make this country a republic, in fact.

If members of the official opposition are calling for the abolition of the Crown or, as was tried unsuccessfully in Australia a few years ago, the removal of the Governor General and turning it into a republic, then why do they not say so? If they are opposed to the Crown, to the Governor General's very existence, why do they not say so?

The last great authority on parliamentary democracy was Eugene Forsey who, in his latter days, was a senator here and who died in the 1990s. He wrote extensively on our parliamentary system. He was, from all sides of the House and in all quarters, an acknowledged constitutional expert and an acknowledged expert on Parliament and its constituent parts. I would suggest it is fortunate that he is not here to witness how low the party of Sir John A. Macdonald has descended into a political abyss.

In his work, co-authored with his researcher, Grant Eglington, entitled “The Question of Confidence in Responsible Government”, a publication readily available from the Library of Parliament, which in fact published it, he wrote on page 1:

We also wish to make plain our opinion that it is extremely difficult to borrow particular features of the United States constitutional and political system without all the others, and without importing grave difficulties for ourselves.

On page 2, they wrote:

Even admirers of the American system of government must, if honest, admit that the American system is different from ours and that it is not possible to borrow from it certain of its distinguishing features unless we are prepared to adopt the others.

On the same page it reads:

The two systems of governance are incompatible precisely because we have responsible government and they [the Americans] do not;

Lastly, they note:

—the President of the United States need not and often does not find his policies supported by one or both Houses of the Congress. From this essential incompatibility all other differences flow. Change along American lines must mean constitutional revolution.

We have heard all this constitutional revolution talk from across the way. We have heard the desire of at least two members opposite who talked about their version and imposing on our Parliament a 22nd amendment of fixed terms, limited terms. It is a remarkable admission of their republican tendencies that they wish to take this place and turn it into an American style government. It confirms in my mind what many people are saying, that this is not the party of Sir John A. Macdonald. This is the Reform Party under a different name.

● (1110)

Our constitutional basis for confidence, that being the law and custom of Parliament, is based on Westminster precedent, which of course refers to the precedents and practices in the United Kingdom as well as other parts of the Commonwealth. According to the motion, the official opposition is now saying:

That, unless the Government loses the confidence of the House, general elections should be held on fixed dates;

What does the party opposite mean when it states “confidence”? Is it a vote on the Speech from the Throne, on the budget, on a budget implementation bill or on a line item on the estimates? Are they not concerned about a motion, as an example, to send troops to Iraq or some other part of the world? What would occur if the House defeated such a motion authorizing the cabinet's decision to send troops? That decision is truly a prerogative of the Crown as exercised by the cabinet.

Let us imagine what would have happened a year ago if we had followed the stated and avowed position of the official opposition to send troops to Iraq. Let us imagine the House, by simple resolution, saying that it did not approve. Such a vote of disapproval might have been a confidence vote because of the clear sense of the public mind on the issue. What is certain is that confidence is much more complex, more nuanced and more subtle than a defeat on a simple monetary matter.

The reserve prerogative of the Crown to dissolve Parliament and to issue an election writ is in fact the primary and fundamental role of the Crown. Ultimately it is the sovereign right or, in Canada, the Governor General exercising the sovereign rights, who will make the decisions based upon the law and precedent of Parliament.

In the late 1930s, in the parliament of South Africa, the prime minister, Jan Smuts, lost a vote in that country's House of Commons concerning South Africa declaring itself neutral on the eve of World War II. The prime minister went to the governor general and asked for a dissolution. The governor general said no. He refused because there was an alternative leader to form a government. So much for

Supply

the myth perpetrated across the way that this is a political prerogative.

Let us look at Canada in 1926 and the so called King-Byng affair, a clash over a denied request for dissolution notwithstanding a defeat on what many believed to be non-confidence against the King government. The governor general at that time asked a Conservative, Arthur Meighen, to form a government.

There are many views on this, but what is agreed upon out of all of that is that the governor general, exercising the sovereign's Crown reserve power, had the exclusive right and authority to gauge whether the House would be dissolved and we would go to an election, but no, our republican friends across the way here, our Reform friends, our Alliance friends, our new Conservative republicans would decide that they would strip those powers and they would be the ones who would decide. In fact, they would eliminate confidence.

This motion of the official opposition is, I would submit, void because it is uncertain. It has no meaning. It fails to acknowledge that elections following dissolution are within the exclusive purview of the Crown. It would strip the Crown of any powers. It attacks, most important, several hundred years of Parliamentary government and of representative government.

● (1115)

The official opposition by this motion fails to mention that this issue has already been rejected overwhelmingly by a majority of parliaments. Instead it points to this nascent idea which is emerging in British Columbia. It fails to recognize that the vast majority, the overwhelming majority, in fact a majority minus one, has said that such a concept is unacceptable, that such a concept is, quite frankly, unparliamentary. Members opposite would point to one example and say, “This is the rule. This is the way we must all go”.

In 1992 the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform, the Lortie commission, rejected it. Members opposite might also want to read the works of Alpheus Todd. Alpheus Todd was the chief librarian of the Parliament of Canada. He was the acknowledged parliamentary constitutional expert. They might, I hope, in reading, learn something of our institution called the House of Commons and our institution called Parliament. I would recommend they examine the enacting clause of every bill before the House, that is to say:

Her Majesty, by and with the consent of the Senate and the House of Commons, enacts as follows:

I would ask them to examine their position regarding the role of the Crown. Opposition members should look to the role and relationship of Parliament to the Crown and acknowledge that under our Constitution there is a constitutional design. It is about the distribution and the sharing of powers among this House, the other place and at the top of it, the Crown. But no, they say that the Crown has no powers. They are the new age republicans.

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Again I will say, if the Conservative Party members wish to change Canada into a republic, then let them say it. If the official opposition wishes to constrain or eliminate the Crown, or the most fundamental reserve powers of the Crown, the last powers it possesses, then let the Conservatives put it into their party platform rather than hiding behind a motion in the House, or worse yet, a private member's bill from their leader.

When the opposition members do not like something they hear, they like to heckle. One thing we can all agree upon is that the party opposite is clearly not the party of Sir John A. Macdonald. Despite former Prime Minister Mulroney's entreaty last week for it to be a moderate party, to embrace the principles of Sir John A. Macdonald, it is in fact embracing American principles.

Let the Conservative members reveal in their party platform what they are really about. Are they asking us to embrace a fixed election date as if we were a republic? Are they asking us even further to embrace a 22nd amendment to limit terms? Why do they not come out and say it?

I am certain that people will recognize this as a most unparliamentary motion and that it is new age jingoism. It will be rejected by the House because it is an attack upon the House.

• (1120)

Mrs. Elsie Wayne (Saint John, CPC): Madam Speaker, the hon. member should have looked at the *Globe and Mail* on January 29 of this year when an icon Liberal Party gentleman, Tom Kent, stated:

The fount of authority is the prime minister's power to dissolve Parliament when he chooses—a fearsome discipline over his own party. The even greater offence to democracy is that other parties are put at a serious disadvantage, as they cannot be sure when and on what issue or pretext an election will be called. Will [the Prime Minister] free Parliament from arbitrary dissolution? That would indeed shift the balance of power away from the “command-and-control systems of central authority” and toward a representative democracy that better reflects “the views of citizens and communities”.

That was from an icon Liberal. Tom Kent is well known. The hon. member should recognize that Tom Kent is also saying that it is time for change.

When the hon. member talks about our Queen, the head of state, let me say that the hon. member forgets that I got up and had words with the previous prime minister. The deputy leader at that time wanted to break all ties from the Liberal Party from Canada with our Queen. I was able to say them and I do not want to hear that from him any more. Apparently he does not listen to anything.

Hon. Roger Gallaway: Madam Speaker, I quite enjoy the bluster from the member opposite. She once again will rely on one person, Mr. Tom Kent, who was a Liberal. In fact I met with him in early February at Queen's University. She would hang her hat, figuratively speaking, on one person's written comments in the *Globe and Mail* on the date cited. She would say that the opinion of one Liberal would in fact be the opinion of the Liberal Party. I am not even certain that Mr. Kent is a Liberal today. I have no way of knowing.

She would turn her back on 300 years of this place. She would care to heckle instead of listening to the response. She is nattering on. The fact of the matter is that the 300 years of precedents in this place make clear that fixed election dates are impossible. Instead, she reverts to a column in a newspaper and says that is good enough for

her. I am singing a duet with her because she will not allow me to answer.

In terms of the Crown, the member opposite swears her allegiance, but in fact I am certain that we in the House have already heard her speak of her support for this motion. If she would care to think about it and read it, this motion is a direct attack on the Crown, an office to which she has just said she is extremely loyal. I find it quite a remarkable position. The member opposite, in asking that question, has revealed she can assume two positions at the same time. It is quite remarkable. It is a form of mental gymnastics which I think most people would find irreconcilable and I am ashamed to say she has assumed that.

• (1125)

Hon. Lorne Nystrom (Regina—Qu'Appelle, NDP): Madam Speaker, I do not know if I heard correctly, but I think my friend across the way said that the member for Saint John was launching a direct attack on the Crown. I remember the days when we used to be crusaders for radical change in this country. I hope he has not changed his mind on replacing the other place with something that is a bit more contemporary. I hope he does not also see that as an attack on the Crown.

On February 11 of this year I introduced a motion in the House of Commons for a fixed election date. The Conservatives, always being slow, copied my idea when the leader of the party introduced a motion on April 1, 2004. It is on the Order Paper, Madam Speaker, and I can see from your wide smile that you have read the Order Paper and you know that has happened.

I want to say to the member across the way that we do have a precedent on fixed election dates. That is not an attack on the Crown. His good friend, the premier of British Columbia, has fixed an election date. He fixed it a couple of years ago for four years hence.

I see a big smile on the member for Souris—Moose Mountain, my good Conservative friend. In our province one of our political icons, Tommy Douglas, had a fixed election date. He was elected in June 1944, June 1948, June 1952, June 1956 and June 1960. That date was set not by statute, but was announced publicly by the premier in 1944 that there would be elections every four years in the month of June. Tommy told me shortly before he passed away that the only regret he had was that he should have put it in a statute to make it mandatory because after he left as the premier of Saskatchewan, the election dates bounced all over the place.

I do not think it is an attack on the Crown. It is just good common sense to take power away from the premiers and the Prime Minister's Office and put it in the hands of the people by setting a fixed date, unless in a motion of confidence the government falls. We have always talked about that being the only exception.

I would like the member to respond to the common sense idea of Tommy Douglas and his good friend in British Columbia. I want him to explain how it is an attack on the Crown.

Hon. Roger Gallaway: Madam Speaker, I always enjoy the questions from my friend opposite.

Supply

With respect to his comments on crusading, something I remember with great pleasure and relish, my friend knows that Parliament is comprised of three parts: the Crown, the House of Commons, and the Senate. Any comments about the Senate have nothing to do with the Crown.

My colleague asked about my so-called attack on the Crown. It is very clear that if we are going to purport to legislate, codify, put into a statute, a law that would remove the last vestige, the most important power of the Crown, which is the right to dissolve Parliament and call an election at any time, putting it in a statute would be an attack upon the reserve powers of the sovereign.

Despite all the gibberish coming from members opposite who do not like to hear something, this is a direct attempt to remove any role of the Crown in this place. They can laugh all they want because they have not read a book about it. They have not considered it. They just follow along blindly. It is indeed an attack upon the very basis of responsible government, of representative government, and of parliamentary government. The official opposition would prefer to import American-style governance.

The member raised the example of what occurred 40 or 50 years ago in Saskatchewan. That was a decision taken by the premier, which was his right. He did not make the mistake of putting it into a statute. He understood that he could decide.

The member mentioned British Columbia where Mr. Campbell apparently enacted a law. Those members say that one law in one province out of about 100 parliamentary democracies is a wave, that it is the rule we should follow. One out of 100, one per cent is good enough for them. It is good enough for them because they do not like the present system and they want to undo it.

• (1130)

Mr. Roy Bailey (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): Madam Speaker, I hope all Canadians are listening to the analogy coming from the opposite side. Members opposite are trying to say that we cannot have fixed election dates and have a sovereign Governor General and Queen. That is nonsense. I hope people heard that.

In the member's province of Ontario, there are five million people in the greater Toronto area and they must have an election on a set date. In Prince Edward Island, which has a population less than that of a small city, elections can be held at any time. Fixed election dates make sense today. There is nothing wrong with them.

Hon. Roger Gallaway: Madam Speaker, I am a lover of fiction and that is why I enjoyed the question from the member opposite.

What the member does not understand is that municipalities are creations of the provinces. What the member opposite is revealing is a complete disdain and lack of knowledge of the constitutional design. He said that a city has a constitutional position in this country and that it changes nothing. That is a very sad and pathetic comment.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvan Loubier (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, BQ): Madam Speaker, I thank the members from the Conservative Party, as do my Bloc and NDP colleagues, for the opportunity they have provided this morning to discuss this issue.

I was stunned and upset to hear the remarks by my Liberal colleague when he talked about an attack on the Crown. First, we may wonder if the hon. member for LaSalle—Émard was installed only as leader of the Liberal Party of Canada or if he was crowned monarch of Canada. That is the question; what are his powers as Prime Minister? This is about one single member, the member for LaSalle—Émard, not elected as Prime Minister, holding everyone hostage with regard to the election date. Is that Canadian democracy?

It is deplorable. He is acting like a monarch, we will admit. The current Prime Minister is seen as a monarch and it is said that his prerogatives are under attack. Of course, the very essence of the motion is precisely to remove the arbitrary nature of partisan decisions from the hands of the Prime Minister. Let us not forget that. For nearly a year, everyone has been on edge waiting for the next election, the Liberals in particular.

The Prime Minister is not often in the House. He is travelling here and there. He goes to visit day care centres where there are little children, so that he can show he is a good prime minister with a good heart, while in fact he has made savage cuts in social programs. We will come back to that later. He goes to hospitals to say he is full of compassion for the patients, although once again, he has made savage cuts in health expenditures. He just does it to polish his image. He also goes to meet students although he has made savage cuts in the education budget.

He does it to polish his image and polish up the polls. With the influence he has, touring Quebec and Canada—and not being in Parliament, where he has not been contributing much for nearly a year—he wants to make himself look good in order to be able to choose the most favourable moment to call the election.

Is it normal that essentially the bills passed since he became leader of the Liberal Party are old bills from the Chrétien years? Where is the current Prime Minister's parliamentary agenda? Where is the comprehensive legislative agenda? For the past two and a half years or so, since the Liberal leadership race began, he had been saying that he was ready. True, we heard the same thing in Quebec City last year from Mr. Charest. He said, "We are ready". The results are clear. Governance in Quebec is a huge fiasco.

But, the Prime Minister said he was ready. So, we thought he had a legislative agenda and reforms to propose, and that he would quickly move forward with his vision of the country. But what is his vision? Up to now, his vision is extremely partisan. Given how the current Prime Minister is hesitating, we see that he has difficulty making decisions. He has this proverbial difficulty. We know him. I, especially, know him, because he has been sitting across from me for nine years. We know him especially well. He is someone who has difficulty making decisions.

Will the entire population of 30 million and an entire Parliament wait with bated breath until the Prime Minister says, "Yes, we are calling an election"? What nonsense. Can one man, one member, who has not even been elected Prime Minister, get away with holding an entire Parliament, opposition parties and supporters of all parties, including his own, hostage for an entire year because he cannot make up his mind? It is disgraceful.

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If it is traditional for the Prime Minister to pick the election date, perhaps it is time to change that tradition. This is not an attack on the Crown, it is about ensuring that democracy functions as it should. It is not normal for one man to hold everyone hostage this way. This is called a democratic deficit.

Things are changing. A poll was conducted when the steering committee on the reform of democratic institutions in Quebec held its annual conference last year. There was a poll on how people perceived the Prime Minister's prerogative to be the only person able to decide when to hold an election. According to the poll, 82% of Quebecers perceived this as a strategic weapon that prime ministers use for purely partisan political purposes.

• (1135)

The public is already beginning to realize that a system such as this makes no sense.

To paraphrase the words of my Conservative colleague and my NDP colleague, British Columbia already made the decision in 2001 to adopt a set date for their elections. Even the steering committee on the reform of democratic institutions in Quebec, to which I have referred, has made a proposal on this. The municipal elections are held on a set date. Why would anyone reject such a proposal of electoral reform out of hand?

I think there is only one reason to adopt this system of elections on a set date every four years as the Conservative Party of Canada proposes: to allow democracy to speak. We must not continue a system where the government side can try to influence public opinion through all manner of strategies and stratagems. The Prime Minister is all over the map these days, in schools, daycare centres, posing eating poutine, anything to try to influence public opinion in favour of the Liberal Party.

It seems to me that we could prepare for the election at the appropriate time. At least that way Parliament would function properly for four years. That way we would not be keeping the supporters of the Bloc Québécois, the Liberal Party, the Conservative Party and the NDP on tenterhooks for a whole year. With a set date, we would know what was going to happen, it would be predictable. The government would simply have to toe the line in the meantime by presenting legislative measures that made some sense.

I think that the Liberals are getting cold feet about the possibility of having to face the voters of Quebec and Canada after all that they have done over the nearly 11 years they have been in power. The current Prime Minister, when he was finance minister, pillaged social programs, and the transfer payments for health care, education, and welfare. Now the Liberals are quaking in their boots at the prospect of having to face Quebecers and Canadians.

They are afraid because what they have done over the years in terms of employment insurance reform is beginning to haunt them. One cannot exclude about 60% of the unemployed and treat them like cheaters in the first place because they made an administrative error while filling out their forms. The government cannot expect to get people's trust at the next election after making them poorer.

The Liberals are afraid to face the unemployed. They are afraid to face the sick and the students who are anxious to show them what they think of their government. They are also afraid to face seniors.

The Liberals did not tell seniors about the guaranteed income supplement for years. Seniors were robbed of \$3 billion. This money was taken from the poorest in our society, from our seniors. They too cannot wait to tell the Liberals what they think of them.

I am anxiously waiting for the election call. If we had a fixed election date, we would know when we would face Liberal candidates. Federal Liberals from Quebec did not lift a finger to protect Quebec, to protect the poorest people in our society, including seniors. They did not lift a finger to protect students and sick people. I cannot wait to see the Liberals facing these people.

I too am looking forward to facing Liberal candidates. Quebecers are unanimous on the issue of fiscal imbalance. Whether it is the Parti Québécois or the Quebec Liberal Party, they are all unanimous. Quebecers want the federal government to settle the fiscal imbalance, because it does not make any sense. All the money is in Ottawa, but all the needs are in essential services such as health and education. Again, I am anxious to face the Liberals and tell them that they did not lift a finger to protect Quebec, to correct the fiscal imbalance, on which there is unanimity.

That is why they are afraid to call the election. That is why the Prime Minister is eating hot dogs everywhere, and is going to visit children in day care; there may be a spot of Pablum on his suit.

I am eager because the sponsorship scandal happened while the Prime Minister was finance minister and vice-president of the Treasury Board. Chuck Guité, who testified last week, said that the office of the finance minister at the time was definitely involved in sponsorships. All the Liberals, in the end, are involved right up to their necks in the sponsorship scandal. I am eager to get out and meet them on their territory, so I can toss it up in their faces.

• (1140)

That is why they are afraid to call the election. They are not really aware that for nearly a year we have been at the ready, waiting to find out if one day the current prime minister will make up his mind. Perhaps it will be one of the first significant political decisions he makes in his life, because he has not made many of them. He has let his officials in the finance department call the shots, or watched things happen and pretended he did not see them, especially in the sponsorship scandal.

For example, I am eager to see what the member for Beauharnois—Salaberry will say during the next election about the highway extension he promised during the 2000 election campaign. His colleagues came to his riding and said, "You will see; the government will do it". He got elected on that issue. He also got elected on the question of job preservation. He has lost nearly 100 of them because the Governor of the Bank of Canada has decided to buy paper for \$100 bills from Germany. That is a big symbol of Canadian nationalism—Canadian currency.

We talked about using the U.S. dollar out of pragmatism because it would be easier and would avoid the speculation we experienced a few years ago when the money market in Southeast Asia collapsed. The shock wave reverberated here with unbelievable fluctuations in the Canadian dollar. Our position was pragmatic.

We were told it was a matter of Canadian nationalism. The Canadian dollar supposedly symbolizes the difference between Canada and the U.S. in social programs and such. Now this symbol is imported from Germany because the hon. member did not even lift a finger to save a hundred or so jobs at Spexel.

It is quite simply appalling. I cannot wait to see how he will face voters in the next election. I look forward to going to Beauharnois—Salaberry and to other Quebec federal Liberal ridings as well. I can hardly wait. I will stay in my riding, of course, roughly half the time and the other half I will spend taking them to task. They have not addressed any of the issues that have become important to Quebec over the years such as parental leave, the fiscal imbalance or the environment. The St. Lawrence will not be dredged according to them. Of course not. The federal Liberals from Quebec say this will not happen. No, but if complacency prevails then it will happen. There needs to be protest and pressure placed on their government. Instead, they just say it will not happen.

Nothing will be done about Spexel either. Six years ago, the Bank of Canada wanted to use German paper. The Bloc Québécois put pressure on the bank. I even met with the Governor of the Bank of Canada to prevent them from doing that. My colleague, the hon. member for Joliette, recently did the same thing. The Liberal member for Beauharnois—Salaberry is the only one who did not lift a finger to prevent the bank from making this decision, even though we, Bloc Québécois members, were able to do so for several years.

During the next election campaign—assuming it will take place and assuming the Prime Minister will make up his mind—we will pay them a few visits. They will have to do some explaining, particularly to the unemployed. They will have a lot of explaining to do, because the unemployed are probably those who have suffered the most. In addition to losing their jobs and their dignity, and being treated like cheaters, they have had to deal with federal Liberal members who, again, did not lift a finger to help them. People, and that includes yours truly, are just fed up with this.

So, if the next election could be called and if there was a fixed election date, members would know when they would be up against the Liberal candidates. When the election is called, my colleagues from Rosemont—Petite-Patrie, Joliette and Trois-Rivières, and all my Bloc Québécois colleagues will tour Quebec and, each of us according to our field of expertise—my colleague from Rosemont—Petite-Patrie on the environment, my colleague from Joliette on public finance and the fiscal imbalance—will remind everyone what those people do when elected.

An hon. member: And what they do not do.

Mr. Yvan Loubier: And also what they do not do. As a result, people will realize that the best investment they can make is to support political activists such as the Bloc candidates who, since 1993, have proven that they are the only ones defending Quebeckers and the only ones defending the dignity of seniors, from whom this

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government has literally stolen under the Minister of Finance, who masterminded the cuts for nine years. We will tell the public that we are the only ones—and they know this—able to defend the interests of the most vulnerable members of our society, as well as students and environmentalists.

• (1145)

I think that we will succeed in showing them too that we are an honest party. We are not up to our necks in the sponsorship scandal or the mismanagement of the firearms registry, which was initially supposed to cost \$2 million and is now costing \$2 billion.

I really think that, this time, Quebeckers will understand that it is in their interest to vote for the Bloc Québécois, for true activists who defend their interests in Ottawa. We are not only spokespeople, but passionate and forceful defenders of their interests. We will get rid of that gang of federal Liberals from Quebec who have not bothered to lift a finger to defend jobs and ensure the accountability of the health care system and education, and simply the proper management of public funds.

• (1150)

Hon. Serge Marcell (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment, Lib.): Madam Speaker, it pains me to hear speeches like this. When the people waste time on a motion that goes against our very own parliamentary framework, as they are doing today, it clearly demonstrates that the opposition does not have much to say about major national and international issues.

If these people were serious about this, they would have brought forward a motion to amend the Canadian Constitution in order to change the Canadian parliamentary framework.

The Canadian Constitution currently provides for a five year mandate. So, we cannot go over that five year limit. At a fixed date, at the end of the five-year mandate, there is automatically an election. No government, no party elected to run the country can go over the five-year limit. That is in the Constitution. Now, should we change the mandate to four years, three years, five and a half years or four and a half years, that is another matter.

We too are anxious to see an election so that we may debate these issues, most certainly. I would invite everyone to come to the riding of Beauharnois—Salaberry during the next election campaign. We will make sure the truth comes out. We will clearly demonstrate that the Bloc Québécois is now fighting to defeat the Government of Quebec, as well as the Government of Canada. In fact, this is a party that has no other purpose but to defeat governments. It claims to want to defend the interests of Quebec in Ottawa, but it is working in fact against the Government of Quebec in Quebec.

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What is more, these people have a disgusting propensity to tell lies by the dozen. Take their candidate in Beauharnois—Salaberry for example, who has announced to me, and this from the Bloc Quebecois itself, that I voted against one of their motions. As you are clearly aware, the record of the division indicates that I voted in favour of that motion, which concerned seasonal workers. So they are specialists in disinformation.

It is more or less the same thing here. The opposition wants to introduce a motion just to waste time, to drag things out. If they really want to change the parliamentary framework, let them introduce a motion to amend the Canadian Constitution. Constitutional amendments require unanimous consent by the provinces. So what purpose is there to debating a motion that in fact is pointless? Let them introduce a motion to amend the Canadian Constitution.

I am not opposed to having a fixed date, mandates set at five years, four years or whatever. But the parliamentary system we have allows the executive to go before the population at what it deems to be the right time. For example, a debate on free trade became an election issue for the Conservatives at one time. Today, the Conservative Alliance has replaced them.

So this is a tool, a system that allows a government to consult the population at the appropriate time, with a view to making progress, holding a national debate on an important cause. The government can do that. But, if there were a fixed mandate, doing so would be rather difficult.

Mr. Yvan Loubier: Madam Speaker, we will not ask for a change in the Constitution; we have not even accepted the Constitution of 1982. This is basic political history, which the member should have mastered. Still, if one is not in the habit of defending the interests of Quebec, one is not going to know one's history. I cannot expect too much of him.

When he says that the true nature of the Bloc Quebecois will be revealed in an election campaign; well, hurry up and call the election. We are ready to compare our record to yours. We are so ready that it should be easy for people to make a choice between the party of the sponsorship scandal and the party of integrity and honesty—the Bloc Quebecois. It will be very easy.

It will also be easy to see who the people were who asked the government the questions that put them up against the wall for the scandals such as employment insurance. There were also the Prime Minister's ships, with headquarters in Barbados so as to profit from a \$100 million tax saving, thanks to a bill the finance minister himself introduced here in 1998. The people know what is going on.

I, too, am eager for the election call. We in the Bloc Quebecois will be able to say that we were the only defenders of the people of Quebec in the issue of employment insurance, and we will walk with our heads held high. I can speak for Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, because I am the member for that riding. Unemployed people who have problems in the riding of Shefford, for example, are not going to see their member. The hon. member for Shefford was once the parliamentary secretary to the former minister of human resources development. In fact, when they go to see her, what are they told? They are told that if the officials in the department have said that they cheated and were not entitled to employment insurance, well then, they are not entitled.

They come over to Saint-Hyacinthe. I do not know how many men and women who have had problems with EI in Granby have come to Saint-Hyacinthe to get them solved—and we have been able to do it. The former parliamentary secretary to the former minister of human resources development closed the door of her office saying, “Do not bother me with that. The department said it was that way; so that is the way it is”. People remember.

The ridings are not cut off from each other. People also remember that when it comes to seniors, it was our colleague from Champlain who pulled the rabbit out of the hat. The Bloc Quebecois toured with our colleague from Champlain to meet representatives from associations that look after destitute seniors. We told them that there were some people—some of the poorest people in society—who were entitled to the guaranteed income supplement up to \$6,000 a year. That can be the difference between poverty and relative wealth.

We did this. Out of 68,000 seniors in Quebec who did not receive the guaranteed income supplement, we managed to help nearly 20,000. We will not stop there. During the election and throughout our mandate, we will continue to look for these people. It took six months of our initiatives before the federal Liberals from Quebec started to say that it would be a good idea to include a few words on the guaranteed income supplement in the pamphlets they send out to homes. It is unbelievable. It is politicking like we have never seen.

People are not naive. They know that only the Bloc Quebecois is there to stand up for them. The good thing about the Bloc Quebecois is that it defends the social, moral and economic interests of Quebecers. Since they were elected, that is not what the federal Liberals from Quebec, let alone the member for Beauharnois—Salaberry, have set out to do. He did not lift a finger for the workers at Spexel. They will certainly remember.

• (1155)

Hon. Lorne Nystrom (Regina—Qu'Appelle, NDP): Madam Speaker, I have a question for my friend from the Bloc Quebecois. Currently, British Columbia is the only Canadian province where they have fixed election dates. In Saskatchewan, a long time ago, during the days of Tommy Douglas, there was nothing in the statutes, but there was a fixed date in June, by convention. Mr. Douglas was elected in 1944. During the election campaign, he announced that, from then on, an election would be held every four years. In Saskatchewan, elections were held in June of 1948, 1952, 1956 and 1960. But there were many other New Democrat premiers who did not follow the example set by Mr. Douglas. It is the same thing with every other party in Canada.

Here is my question. Under Mr. Lévesque and other Quebec premiers, namely Daniel Johnson, Jacques Parizeau, Lucien Bouchard and Bernard Landry, why did the Parti Quebecois reject the idea of a fixed election date at the provincial level? This is not at all meant to be a criticism of the Parti Quebecois. In fact, we are all in the same boat, except Mr. Campbell in British Columbia now, and Tommy Douglas in Saskatchewan, a long time ago.

Mr. Yvan Loubier: Madam Speaker, I thank my New Democratic colleague from Regina—Qu'Appelle for his question. As he said, there were Parti Québécois governments, but also Liberal ones, during the past 30 years in Quebec's National Assembly.

Recently, the Parti Québécois government struck a committee, called an estates general on democratic governance, to study the reform of its democratic institutions. It invited Quebeckers to take part in a broad debate on the future of such institutions and on how we vote. One of the committee's recommendations is to have fixed election dates.

I talked earlier about a poll of Quebeckers. It found that 82% of respondents viewed the fact that there are not fixed election dates and that it is entirely up to the Prime Minister to decide to hold an election on a specific date as a partisan exercise forming part of an election strategy, and so forth. People no longer want this.

So, the time is ripe for change. I am pleased to hear the member say that, in Saskatchewan, this has been the case for quite some time. There were visionaries and forerunners there. In my opinion, this is the point we are at, and the public is with us on this.

• (1200)

[English]

Hon. Lorne Nystrom (Regina—Qu'Appelle, NDP): Madam Speaker, I will be splitting my time with the member for Windsor—St. Clair.

I welcome the debate before the House today and welcome the Conservative Party for catching up on one of my ideas. I tabled a motion in the House on February 11, 2004, calling for a fixed election date. Then, on the Order Paper on April 1, 2004, on April Fool's Day, the Leader of the Opposition, the leader of the Conservative Party tabled a motion regarding a fixed election date. I am very glad that the Conservative Party is doing the same thing that we in the New Democratic Party initiated before.

Our party passed a resolution at our convention, which happened to have been held in Ottawa in 1999, calling for a fixed election and fixed budget dates. I also wrote an article in the *National Post* calling for a fixed election date and I think the date of that was November 12, 2000.

Our party has been on record now for quite awhile, including having had the first motion in the House on a fixed election date in support of the idea. I welcome the Conservatives onboard the train and therefore we will be supporting the motion before the House today.

The idea behind a fixed date is to take the power away from the Prime Minister, or indeed the premiers at the provincial level, to establish a date that is best to his or her liking in terms of the chances of being re-elected. In other words, we are trying to democratize the system to make it more fair, to create a level playing field, and to ensure things are more in balance for every point of view in the country.

Now we have a Prime Minister who talks about the democratic deficit. One way of alleviating part of that democratic deficit is by ensuring we have a fixed election date so the power of setting the date is out of the hands of the Liberal Party pollsters and the Liberal

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Prime Minister's advisers, and the Prime Minister himself. It would be put in statute so that we would all be on a level playing field and we would all have a fair chance at the date, whenever it is.

Currently, a prime minister or premier can set the date. If the government knows there is a financial crisis coming, there could be an election ahead of time. If there is a sponsorship scandal or some other scandal, one could delay the election from what was being planned, May 10. I do not think that is a closely guarded secret. The government could delay the election to what the Prime Minister's inclination is now, which is to announce the election a week Sunday for June 14. Some of his advisers are saying that maybe we should wait about a year and have it in May or June 2005.

These are all the games that are being played. These are also played at every provincial level as premiers and prime ministers set the date to find a window when they can win their respective election campaigns.

If we were serious about democratic reform, the democratic deficit in the country, we could start with a fixed election date so that no matter what happened, the date would occur every, say third Monday in June or October, or whatever date we fixed, unless the government fell in a confidence vote.

I think our party and the Alliance Party, now the Conservative Party, had made that very clear. I think the Bloc Québécois said the same thing. If the government were to fall in a confidence vote then of course an election would take place. But, without that, there should be a fixed date. Many countries have fixed dates around the world and they work very well.

We have had the first steps toward a fixed date in our country. Premier Campbell of British Columbia, a couple of years ago, brought in a law and set the election date in B.C. four years hence. Everybody knows when the election in British Columbia will take place. I think it is sometime in 2005. I fully endorse the idea. It is put in statute so that the Premier of British Columbia, if he has a very major problem, cannot delay it or if he has a sudden jump in the polls cannot pull the election out of the hat six or seven months ahead of time. I think that is a wonderful idea.

I also want to place on the record something that is not very well known because it happened quite a few years ago in Saskatchewan. I know that the Conservative Party member for Brandon—Souris is fully aware of this. Tommy Douglas, who was the premier of Saskatchewan from 1944 until 1961, was elected in June 1944.

• (1205)

At the time he was elected there were a few conservative minded people, because it was the first democratic socialist government anywhere in North America that said there might not be any more elections. What Tommy Douglas said as premier was that there would be elections held every four years in the month of June. Therefore, we had elections in June 1944 when he was elected, June 1948, June 1952, June 1956 and June 1960. In 1961 he became leader of the federal New Democratic Party and his successor broke that pattern with an election in April 1964. After that elections have been held all over the map.

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One of the things Tommy told me a few months before he died was that his one regret was that he did not put in statute that there had to be an election every four years in the month of June in Saskatchewan. As soon as he left, the convention he created disappeared with the premiers of our party, the Conservative Party and the Liberal Party. Elections were then announced whenever the premier thought it was best for him in terms of electoral prospects.

That is why we support the motion before the House today. It is a move toward democratic reform. It is a move toward taking power away from the executive and the Prime Minister, and putting it into the hands of the people so that all parties and all competing points of view have an equal chance of an equal start in terms of a general election campaign.

I cannot imagine that happening in a sporting event. I see the member for Wild Rose here, who was a great baseball catcher years ago, if I am not mistaken. He knows that in sport everybody has to have an equal start and a fair chance, and play by the same rules. If one is in a foot race, everyone starts at the same place when the starter gun goes off and everyone hears the starter pistol. However, in this country and in every province, except British Columbia, the starter pistol is the hand of the premier or the hand of the prime minister. I think that is wrong.

I appeal to the Prime Minister if he is serious about democratic reform and democratic deficit. He should be announcing in Parliament, as soon as possible, that the next election date will be June 14, June 21, October, November or whatever. Every four years thereafter there would be an election campaign. If he were serious about democratic reform that is what he would do.

If he wants to do politics differently, that is what the Prime Minister should do. He should tell us the date ahead of time. All the law requires now is that there be a minimum notice. I believe it is 36 days. He could announce the election campaign 37 days ahead, or 47 days ahead, or a year ahead. The Premier of British Columbia announced it four years ahead. If the Prime Minister were a true reformer in terms of democratic deficit, that is what he would do.

What I have seen this new Prime Minister do has not been very democratic in many cases. He has actually appointed candidates to run in certain ridings in British Columbia. That is not democratic at all. I saw a Canadian citizen from Burnaby—Douglas, from the Liberal Party, crying on television because he campaigned for a nomination for months and sold hundreds of memberships for months, and now he is being denied an opportunity to run because the Prime Minister is going to appoint a friend, who is the president of the British Columbia Liberal Party, as the candidate in Burnaby—Douglas. The Prime Minister has already done that in two or three other British Columbia ridings.

There is an old saying that we should be careful when we criticize others too because it is not only the Liberal Party where these types of anti-democratic activities occur. There is probably no other Canadian politician I disagree with more than the former Conservative Premier of Saskatchewan, Grant Devine, who ran our province into huge debt and saw 16 members of his government convicted criminally.

I have a lot of criticism of him. He wanted to run for the new Conservative Party in the riding of Souris—Moose Mountain. He went out and campaigned for a nomination and sold memberships for nominations and the Conservative Party in Ottawa, from on high, denied him the right to seek the nomination. That is not right either. Every Canadian citizen, when they buy a party membership should have the right to seek a nomination: my party, the Bloc, the Conservatives, the Liberals, the Green Party and every party in this country.

● (1210)

The party that has abused that the most has been the Liberal Party of Canada and former Prime Minister Chrétien. The current Prime Minister is following the policy of Jean Chrétien by appointing people to run in various ridings. If members cannot meet the test of membership in their own riding, then they should not deserve to have the nomination for that riding.

I encourage all members to support the motion before the House.

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I do not think that the House or Canadians would have a big problem with fixing dates. Certainly, there are some arguments that could be made that it may cause longer election periods because people, knowing when an election date was, would have a longer period in which to start gearing up and may extend that. It may be more costly, but that may be a minor point.

I want to ask the member with regard to the situation we are in currently. It has to do with the situation where the prime minister of the day stepped down and was replaced, and all of a sudden there was a new prime minister who was then in a situation where he was governing on the basis of a platform and subsequent throne speeches which another government had adopted.

Does the hon. member feel this would somehow interfere with the opportunity and maybe the requirement of a new leader to go to the people for a mandate so that the government is not encumbered, as it were, by a previous mandate and that it could get a mandate to govern on possibly new ideas and new directions from the prior government?

Hon. Lorne Nystrom: Like always, Madam Speaker, the member across the way makes a very valid point. Sometimes there is a situation like today where there is a new prime minister in the same or governing party. Should the government have the right to seek a mandate? That is something we should look at as a parliamentary committee.

Sometimes it is close to the end of the term where I do not think it is that important that a new mandate be sought. If there was a four year term and this happens well into the third year, the government should go the full four years. However, often it happens in the middle of the term. The member makes a strong argument that we should look at an exception where there should be an election campaign to seek a mandate.

I can think of a number of cases and I recall when Lucien Bouchard went back to be Premier of Quebec. He went back after about a year or so into Premier Parizeau's term. Maybe there should have been an election campaign there where he had to seek a fresh mandate.

This is why there should be a parliamentary committee looking into the fixed date idea. When should the election be? What exceptions might there be? A motion of confidence is certainly one of those exceptions. If the government were to fall on a motion of confidence, under an allotted day, there would not necessarily have to be an election, as the member knows. However, the Governor General could decide to call in someone else to be the prime minister and form a brand new government. That power now exists with the Crown. In all likelihood if the government were to fall, there would be an election, but these are things we should look at.

We should have a fixed election date every four years and parties could even plan their leadership conventions a bit more in accordance with the four year term. The former Prime Minister, Jean Chrétien, did want to stay much longer. He was pushed out of office and even after he was pushed out of office, he wanted to stay until February of this year, but there were people in the current Prime Minister's entourage who were salivating, wanting the Prime Minister to take over before Christmas. Now they might be wishing he had not because of the sponsorship scandal. But they pushed Jean Chrétien out of office anyways. Jean Chrétien had a mandate and if the Liberal Party would have planned in accordance with that mandate, we would not have to be considering a special election because of a new leader of the Liberal Party.

Some of this is common sense and proper planning. I do not want to speculate on the member's feelings about the current Prime Minister and the former one, but I think his advice to the Liberal Party would have been to have a leadership convention toward the end of its mandate and have a new prime minister within months of the new election campaign. Now, of course, that did not happen and I assume the Liberal Party did not take his advice because I am sure that is the advice he would have given to his party if he were to tell us publicly what he actually did say.

• (1215)

Mr. Joe Comartin (Windsor—St. Clair, NDP): Madam Speaker, like my colleague from Regina—Qu'Appelle, I appreciate the opportunity to speak to the motion and the issues that surround it. It is one that we have been considering for quite some time and, as the member for Regina—Qu'Appelle indicated, is one that we have placed before the House on previous occasions.

I believe there is a mood in the country that wants us to address these types of issues. We tout ourselves as a democracy, and we have every right to do so. However, to say that we are a perfect democracy would in fact be a fallacy, and we should not do that. Nor should we ever be satisfied that our democracy, whatever stage it is at, could not use improvement. I believe that is the stage we are at with regard to this issue, and probably have been for some period of time. I believe the Canadian citizenry accepts that.

We have had a great deal of debate over the last number of years about democratic reform. We know we need to reform the rules of the House in a large number of ways. We have had that need for quite some time.

From experiences we have had under the previous prime minister and the one before him, we know that further limits should be placed on the Prime Minister's Office. From opinion polls and other soundings we have taken from the electorate, we know proportional

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representation is an idea that is badly in need of implementation in Canada. We saw that by the independent law reform commission report just a few weeks ago.

Similarly, we are in a situation where the idea of fixed dates for elections at both the federal and provincial levels is one that the Canadian electorate wants to see implemented. We heard from our colleague from Quebec about the poll the province took, and the sense it has of the electorate. As much as 82% of the population in Quebec is saying that it should have fixed dates. I believe that is a fairly accurate reflection of the electorate across the country.

We have heard all the talk of an upcoming election in the last few months. I am constantly asked what the date is. When I say that I do not know, that it is up to the Prime Minister or his advisers, the universal response is that it is just not a good system, and it is not the way the system should work in a real democracy.

I think it speaks to Canadians from coast to coast who feel very strongly that democracy should function with rules that are fair, fair to all parties, to all candidates and to the electorate. There is a strong feeling in the country that not having fixed dates is not fair. I hear this when I canvass door to door or in public meetings.

The Canadian electorate has identified that it is not fair. The Prime Minister, as have many prime ministers before him, has tried to manipulate the situation in the country by the use of opinion polls and by sometimes spending large sums of money. We have seen the Prime Minister in these last months running around the country giving away \$1 billion to \$2 billion that supposedly we did not have. He has tried to manipulate the circumstances of the election, setting the groundwork that is most favourable for the party that is in power currently and using public finances to make that route more appealing. There is this sense in the country that it is not right and it is time that we changed it.

• (1220)

I believe we are at a stage where the government could set an example. It is an opportunity for the government to provide some leadership to the provinces. We have heard that British Columbia has already moved on this. It is time for the rest of the provinces to do it. One way to ensure that they do it would be for the federal government to take that step first.

I have listened to some of the debate put forward by my colleague from Sarnia. He said that was not the way it was done elsewhere. That has never been an excuse for us not doing what is right. We just cannot say that everyone else does it that way so we should also. There are times when democracy needs to advance and this is one of those occasions. If other countries in the world are not prepared to do that, then why should we not do it and provide some leadership.

In fact my friend from Sarnia was wrong. There are some other parliamentary democracies that have fixed election dates. We should pressing along with the theme that this is a new democratic development and is one that we should pursue. Then we would be a leader. We have the opportunity to do that.

Supply

The provinces have an opportunity to be a world leader to other parliamentary democracies. It may not work exactly the way we want it to work. We may have to experiment a little with it. However, ultimately as a society and as a vibrant democracy we will work this out and it will be step forward for democracy.

I wish to make one other point and it is one that I do not often hear come up in this discussion. It is the question of costs. Obviously, when we have something as fundamental as free elections, costs cannot be the controlling factor. I am not going to suggest that. However, it is an issue that we need to address.

When we look at the government and its history, the Liberals have called three elections. All three elections have been after periods shorter than four years, which seems to be the accepted timeframe for elections in our democracy. We have an extra cost there. If we figure it out and follow that kind of agenda, we have an extra election every decade or 12 years. The country would save money if we had fixed election dates every four years. Therefore, in every dozen years we would only have three elections as opposed to four.

It is difficult to give an exact figure, but the last figure I saw was that elections cost the country somewhere between \$40 million and \$60 million. When everything is taken into account, I have heard estimates as much as \$100 million. We are not talking peanuts. Cost is a factor that we have to take into account.

The other cost is the cost to the political parties, the candidates and the electorate. I saw this recently in the 2003 Ontario provincial election. Because of statements from the governing party, there was great expectation that the election would be in the spring. People opened up their offices, hired staff, put in telephones, all those mundane expenses that add up to a lot of money. Then the election was postponed into the fall. People had expenses for six months of what would normally be a six week period to two months. These are added expenses that we would not never have to incur if we had fixed dates.

There are strong reasons for having fixed election dates. It is a question of democratic development moving ahead.

There is a cynicism about politics and we all know that. We see that with the number of people who do not vote, among our youth in particular but across all age groups. This is one of those steps forward. We could be saying to people that democracy is vibrant, that it is worth voting and participating. If we had a fixed election date, it would be one of those reforms that would say to people that they could stop being cynical about politics, that they could feel good, that we had fair rules, rules that would show the vibrancy of our democracy.

● (1225)

Mr. Myron Thompson (Wild Rose, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the member for Saint John.

I am pleased to speak to a motion that represents a small step toward democratic reform, which is violently needed in this place. The motion deals with setting a fixed election date, and this is not a new idea. I have been here since 1993 and this issue has been discussed by various groups from time to time. I am really keen that at least we are starting now with some debate on real democratic reform.

The present Prime Minister promised that this would be a big issue with his party. However, I am having a difficult time trying to understand what those members are going to do and how they are going to do it. In my view no action whatsoever has taken place. Instead, a lot of the opposite has happened. The Prime Minister has selected and appointed candidates to run in specific ridings. No nomination procedure has been allowed. I find that to be totally undemocratic and shameful.

I also believe the Liberal fellow from Sarnia—Lambton, who spoke this morning, is a bit outdated. He is not interested in changing with the times. Evidently he likes the status quo. He talked about what the Liberals were doing in relationship to the Crown, et cetera. Canada celebrates July 1 as Canada Day. We are no longer a colony of the Crown. Maybe we need to discuss this matter from that point of view. Do we do things differently on that basis?

No worthwhile discussions have taken place until today with regard to any democratic reform, and fixed election days is certainly one of them.

A huge number of people in my riding desire fixed election dates. They also believe there should be fixed terms for prime ministers when they are elected, and I concur with that. That would add a great deal to the desire of the people to see more accountability. I think it will put the onus on the government for fixed dates, term limits and accountability to the people of this land.

The government is being watched more closely. It is difficult for people to judge a government on the basis of it suddenly calling an election at any time it feels like it. When there is a fixed election date, people can evaluate what the government has done with its mandate and go from there.

People in my riding are quite interested in seeing some changes along this line because they have felt for quite some time that the west has been neglected for a number of reasons. One reason is the fact that westerners do not have strong representation in the Senate because the senators are not elected. People in the west desire to see an elected Senate in a strong way.

A lot of members from other parties would like to see the Senate abolished. Personally, I believe there is a good reason to have a Senate and that reason is regional representation. We have been lacking regional representation in the west for a number of years. Through a democratic process of change, that would make some difference and would please a number of people.

The present Prime Minister said that he would address the difficulty the Liberals have had in the west for some time. He also said that he would do it before the next election so westerners could have more confidence in them. We have seen absolutely nothing.

Not too long ago, nearly 700,000 Albertans elected two gentlemen, Bert Brown and Ted Morton, who they wanted to see appointed to the Upper Chamber. We have been waiting ever since for those appointments to take place.

Supply

●(1230)

If the present Prime Minister or Jean Chrétien had been serious about paying more attention to the desires of the west, these gentlemen would have been appointed quite some time ago, and certainly the present Prime Minister could have done it immediately as a gesture of goodwill towards the west.

This is obviously not going to happen. It only adds fuel to the fire on the need for a more democratic process in this place. Let us start with fixed election dates. That is why we have the motion today.

I listened to the speaker from Sarnia—Lambton who talked about how if the Conservatives were in power we would have our fighting troops in Iraq. That is not necessarily so. The point is that what we had here was a prime minister who waltzed down the aisle, stood in his place across the way and boldly announced to Parliament that there would be no participation in Iraq.

Some, who were happy with that decision, cheered. Others, including me, were rather stunned, because we had not even debated it in this place. We never had any input at all. No decision was ever arrived at in the House of Commons. No open and honest dialogue ever took place. The former prime minister simply walked in and said that was what we were going to do. That was not very democratic. I think decisions should be made in a democratic process, particularly when they are of that nature.

A number of people from Canmore in my riding met with me and explained to me very thoroughly and very efficiently why they felt there should be no participation in Iraq. I would have liked to have had the opportunity to express their views in the House of Commons, along with views of others to the contrary, but I never had that opportunity. I am an elected representative of a riding of over 100,000 people, and I never had a chance in this place to express the views of the people of my riding.

Please tell me, Mr. Speaker, what is democratic about that. I am sure that you, Sir, would like to be able to express the views of your people whenever you are given a chance, but if you are not given a chance, then there is something wrong and we need to fix it.

I know that Canadians are getting awfully tired of hearing about things like a \$2 million gun registry and going along with that idea to some extent and later learning that it is going to be nearly \$2 billion. They get very disappointed.

Canadians get very disappointed when they hear announcements that a certain shipping company only benefited to the tune of about \$37,000 in contracts but it turned out to be \$161 million.

They get really upset when they hear about a \$40 million secret slush fund that was used for a certain purpose and that turned out to be really \$80 million.

The Canadian people have felt constantly out of the loop in this country in regard to these undemocratic things that take place. Let us fix it. Let us start today with getting fixed election dates. People in my riding support this. I know that people in a lot of ridings across this country support this, a huge majority of them. Let us grant them their heart's desire and look favourably upon this motion.

●(1235)

Mrs. Elsie Wayne (Saint John, CPC): Mr. Speaker, earlier today one of our colleagues from the government side referred to the fact that here on our side of the House we more or less want to break ties with the monarchy because we want fixed election dates.

I represent Canada's first city to be incorporated by royal charter. I represent the Queen here in this House probably more than anyone else, because of the position that I held in that city, and I am in favour of fixed term elections. And I am sure that if we were to agree to this, Her Majesty would have no problem with it whatsoever. I really think she is in favour of it also.

I have to say that when I look at the situation as it is today, I know that half of my colleagues on the government side are wondering if we are going to have an election in June or an election this summer or an election late in the fall. That is what they are wondering about: when we are going to have an election. And that should not be what one person can decide.

Earlier this morning, I asked a question because of the statement that was made by Tom Kent, the icon of the Liberal Party, who, in the *The Globe and Mail* on January 29, came out very strongly in favour of the motion that we have put forth with regard to fixed term elections.

He has worked for a number of the prime ministers. He is saying that it is time for this. He is saying that this is the democratic way. He is saying that not just one person who sits in the seat over there rules everybody in this House. We were elected by the people across this nation. The people across this nation want us to represent them.

So in preparing to speak today, I was reminded of the old saying that there is nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has come. The time has come for us to take a look at this. For far too long, we have given an awesome power to the Office of the Prime Minister. For far too long, we have put our fate in those hands. Never before has that been more obvious than in the past decade and in recent weeks.

At the local level across this nation, every municipality—and I was mayor for four terms in Saint John, New Brunswick—has elections. When I was mayor, they were held every three years. The province changed that and has extended it to four years now, but elections will be held every four years.

People ask me, “Elsie, how do you feel about being in Parliament up in Ottawa?” I always say, after having been here since 1993, that local government is the government of the people, because I feel very strongly that the government, the parties, are at the other two levels. I think it is time we changed that around. We should have our local people representing us, no matter whether it is federally, provincially or locally. Right now it is locally, and I have to say that it has to be turned around, and that is because one person's office controls everything.

Supply

I remember a time when there were just two of us from our party here. Someone called me and asked, "Elsie, did you know that the government is going to break their ties with the monarchy?" I said, "They're what?" They said, "They're breaking their ties with the monarchy". I stood in the House of Commons to ask the prime minister of the day why he wanted to break his ties with the monarchy. Then the deputy prime minister, who was seated beside him, she started screaming at the prime minister. I had never seen it happen before in all the time the prime minister was here in his lengthy service as prime minister, but he sat down, and then he stood and said, "Mr. Speaker, could the hon. member for Saint John repeat her question? I could not hear it". Then he looked at the deputy prime minister.

• (1240)

I repeated my question. I asked why we were breaking our ties with the monarchy. He said, "We are not going to break our ties with the monarchy. We send a secretary over every three years to work with the Queen and I would like to know if the hon. member for Saint John would like to go. I will fly her out tomorrow".

Our ties to the monarchy are very strong. We want to keep our ties. I think everyone in the House wants to keep our ties. Nevertheless, that does not change the fact that we should have an election date and we should have fixed term elections. I think everyone in the House knows that. I do not think that the majority of those on the government side want to have another election right now and go through that. Let us look at the costs.

Let us look at the cost of having an election whenever the Prime Minister feels he is up in the polls. I can tell hon. members right now, that being the case, we will not have an election for another year, for heaven's sake, because he is not up in the polls right now, he certainly is not.

However, polls should not determine when we have an election. It should be a fixed date. It should be an election on what we are doing, whether it is right or wrong, and the people of Canada will determine it, as they do at the local level.

The Constitution of this country was not written for the benefit of one party alone. The Constitution gives the power to the Governor General, God love her, but she only gets that power when the Prime Minister goes to her and says he will have an election and she will call it. That is not the way it should be either.

Our system has evolved to the point where the Governor General only uses that power when directed, as I have stated, by the Prime Minister. The Constitution provided this power so the government could go to the people when its time had passed or to seek their judgment on an issue of great importance. Sadly, it has now become just another card up the government's sleeve.

There are some people who oppose these measures, but the majority of people want a fixed time, like they have at the local level, as I have stated. I have to say that when we do this at the local level, the people do not elect or reject a candidate based on whether or not he or she has done something in a sponsorship program or whatever. The people look at the four years and ask what the candidate has done to build their municipality, to make it grow.

That is exactly what should be done in Canada: What has the government done that is right for the people of Canada? We do not have to worry if it is two years or three years. It is a fixed date. If the government is doing what is right, it does not have to worry about being here for that length of time.

Really and truly, I have to say that I will not get into what the government side has or has not done. I know that people in Canada are getting fed up with politicians who do not listen and who only care about the people they feel will vote for them. That is not the way it should be.

Here is what we should be doing. When I look at these young people we have here today and I look at our country, I ask what can we do for them, because they are the foundation, they are the future, and they are the ones who will probably be sitting in the House some day. I would like them to have a fixed date whereby they can get elected and be here for four years and then be elected again.

I would like to see the whole system change. I am in my eleventh year here. I have to say that when I go home and listen to my people—and believe me, they still come to me to get their roads paved and for the provincial problems they have, and I am honoured by that, I truly am—it makes me feel good because I feel that I am representing my people.

On behalf of all of these young people here today and on behalf of those who are not here today, I have to say that it is time for us to have fixed term elections and it is time for us to vote on what is right for this country. It is not a matter of party. It is not a matter of opposition taking on the government. What it is about is what is right for this country. It is right for us to have fixed election dates and get some stability here.

Hon. Roger Gallaway (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I listened with great interest to my friend opposite and tried to follow the line of reasoning she laid out.

On the one hand she talked about what, in her opinion, the vast majority of people want. We have something called a Constitution, which is about the sharing and distribution of power in the country, and constitutions often are unfair. The Constitution is unfair in the opinion of, I would suggest, the vast majority of people because it states that Prince Edward Island, with a population of 130,000 people, will have four members in the House of Commons and will have four senators. That is an incredible unfairness, if one follows the line of logic opposite. However that in fact is the Constitution.

I would ask the member opposition a rhetorical question. On the basis of her perception of equality, fairness and her reading of what she thinks the public wants, would she be willing to smash that?

There are a number of treaties between the Government of Canada and first nations which a lot of people believe to be unfair. Those are, in fact, constitutional documents. Perhaps in a vote a majority might want to undo that. Is she in favour of undoing the Constitution because she believes that a majority is in favour?

Supply

• (1245)

Mrs. Elsie Wayne: Mr. Speaker, I am not quite sure what the member was asking. His questions had absolutely nothing to do with the statement I made or with what we are debating today, which is a fixed-term election.

I know the number of members that different provinces have has been mentioned in the House before. Ontario, the western provinces, Quebec and others have a lot more than we have back east. However that has nothing to do with us having a fixed date for elections. As well, the treaties have absolutely nothing to do with it.

We are talking about whether we should have a fixed election date every four years. If the hon. member were not afraid of losing his seat he would be very much in favour of this. If he is doing what is right for all Canadians then he does not have a thing to worry about in terms of being re-elected. It is when one is not doing what is right for the people of Canada that there is something to worry about.

The member spoke today on the subject of Her Majesty. He has no idea. Some day when he visits Saint John, New Brunswick, he will be visiting Canada's first incorporated city.

An hon. member: He'd get a history lesson.

Mrs. Elsie Wayne: Yes, he certainly will have a history lesson.

Hon. John Harvard (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Trade, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I found it interesting to listen to the hon. member from New Brunswick but after listening to her I began to wonder whether she had the requisite confidence in her fellow parliamentarians.

We have a Parliament in the country. We have responsible government which means that the government is responsible and accountable to Parliament. By having a fixed date election, basically she is saying that she would rather have a set rule and not leave this matter, of when an election should be called, to parliamentarians. That to me suggests that she does not have the kind of confidence that perhaps she should have in her fellow parliamentarians.

I want to remind her that in the 1970s in the United States there was something called Watergate. Because of its constitution, it had to go through a lot of legalistic manoeuvres to get rid of President Nixon who finally resigned.

She and I are old enough to remember that if Watergate had happened in Canada, Richard Nixon would have been gone in a matter of weeks because it would have been left to the politicians of the day. I think our system works quite well.

• (1250)

Mrs. Elsie Wayne: Mr. Speaker, Watergate was a scandal but I do not think that has anything to do with our fixed election dates here in Canada.

As far as I am concerned, I have no worries whatsoever. If I were running again for a four year term I would put my name up and take my chances. Members do that in every election, whether it is three years when an election is called or whether it is four years. What we are saying is that we need stability here. We need to work together and we need to find a way in which we can operate.

We do not have to do this just for the sake of the Prime Minister when he feels he is up in the polls. When he is down in the polls he does not want to have an election, and everybody knows that. Everybody on the government side knows that is exactly what is happening.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Jacques Saada (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister responsible for Democratic Reform, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today we have a motion before us, the substance of which is that we should have elections in Canada on a fixed date.

I would like to address this question in two ways, the first a matter of substance and the second purely political.

Regarding the first, and of course these arguments can be developed further as the day goes on, I would like point out a few elements that strike me as producing a direct contradiction between this motion and our British parliamentary system. Why do I see the two as not readily reconcilable, if not totally irreconcilable? I will give a few examples.

As hon. members are aware, in Canada the Prime Minister is the person who has been elected leader of a political party and he or she becomes Prime Minister when that party obtains the most seats in Parliament. As a result, in the course of a mandate party leaders can change, and this is a regular occurrence. Once new party leaders become Prime Minister, they may well feel inclined to seek the approval of the population, obtain general support for the decision taken by their party.

With set election dates, a leader could not take advantage of this mechanism of seeking the support of the public. In other words, by taking away a new PM's opportunity to seek public support, we would be preventing the public from expressing its opinion of the new Prime Minister. In other words, proposing elections on a set date is not a reform that enhances democracy, but rather one that diminishes it.

We have, of course, seen recent examples of party leaders who have sought that endorsement and not found it.

If, for example, the government is facing some extremely important and fundamental problem, a really important issue such as a war or threat of war, and the decision is made to seek a mandate from the population in order to steer the country in the right direction, this is impossible if there is no possibility of calling an election.

Taking away this power, and having elections on a set date, is in fact taking away an important instrument from the government as far as public consultation is concerned. Is this more democratic, or less so? In my opinion, it is the latter.

There are of course other negative impacts. I think one of my colleagues alluded to them. We saw that, here, the issue of confidence in the government is not dealt with in the same fashion as it is in the United States, for example. The result is that a crisis in that country took a very long time to be settled, whereas here, because the government must have the confidence of Parliament, it would be settled much more quickly.

Supply

In other words, what is at stake here is the principle of accountability. This principle cannot be strengthened if we are subjected to a date that has nothing to do with the time when we really want to hold the government accountable.

Moreover, a reform of this nature would probably require a constitutional reform. Would it really be a good thing, at this point, to undertake a constitutional reform on an issue that would split us, with one group strongly in favour of an objective date and the other firmly opposed to it? Such a reform could not work alone because, in any case, the Governor General would maintain the power to dissolve Parliament. Confidence and non-confidence votes must be maintained. If we were to vote against the budget, would this mean the fall of the government? If not, then there would be no accountability anymore.

So, we would have to maintain some controls between these fixed dates, with the result that it would basically be impossible to deal with the issue of accountability with fixed election dates.

This is the purely technical issue. There is another issue that seems much more important to me under the circumstances.

•(1255)

I would like to really go to the bottom of things. I would like to know why present such a motion and why present it today.

[*English*]

Why do we have to face such a motion today? It is quite clear that when we tabled our action plan on democratic reform on February 4, we invited all parties to join us in a non-partisan way in the implementation of the reform, which was not aimed at helping the Liberals, the Conservatives, the NDP, or the Bloc, but which was aimed at making Parliament more responsible before the population. They refused; the authors of the motion we are debating today refused.

In our action plan, we took some points that that party's own backbenchers had written in two reports, but because we were proposing the action plan, politics prevailed in their minds and they refused to adhere to it. Now they are trying to address democratic deficit on a piecemeal basis. How can one have a vision when a party is playing politics with one piece of a very complex puzzle, and is not even able to assess the consequences of changing one piece on the entire democratic system we are living in? It is totally irresponsible.

We tabled the action plan on democratic reform with the following things in mind. We said that if a member of Parliament is not responsible before his or her population, then something is wrong somewhere. Of course others are saying that if we do not change the way by which people are sent here, maybe that is wrong also.

What we said is simply the following. A number of studies were conducted by many members of Parliament and all kinds of legislators and all parties which paved the way to the need for parliamentary reform. We have started to implement that reform. The other parties have always refused to come onside with us on this issue.

One example is three line voting. We said if a member could stand and vote in the House, not because he or she is whipped but because

he or she decided to vote, when that member went back to the riding he or she would be in a position to answer the population as to the reasons that decision was made and, therefore, would be more accountable to the people. They have refused to do that.

Of all the votes that took place in the House since we reconvened, 63%, almost two-thirds, took place on the basis of a free vote for the Liberals. The Liberals have never endorsed hypocrisy, never. Now the Conservatives want to talk about democratic reform. Let me go further and give a series of examples.

Following a decision by the Supreme Court which had to do with the definition of political parties, I personally sent a request to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

[*Translation*]

I asked specifically for this committee to study this decision for a maximum of one year, and to come back to me with a proposal for legislation, that is, a draft bill. I asked parliamentarians to draft a draft bill for one of the fundamental elements of our democracy, the definition of a political party. They have the opportunity to deal with the issue of voting at a fixed date, and so on, during this study, but they do not want to do that. It is too honest a process.

Asking the parliamentary committee to produce a draft bill that would be coherent and in which each person could take some responsibility does not work. What they prefer is to play politics by taking a little piece of a big jigsaw puzzle and pretending they are in favour of a reform they do not even support.

One topic in the action plan is ethics. We have passed a bill on ethics. I shall let you consider their previous position in this matter, in particular the Conservatives who are behind today's motion.

Yesterday, in the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, there was a debate on a code of conduct. They finally agreed to support the adoption of the code of conduct, but they spoke out against it. By what right can they rise to tell us that they are interested in democratic reform and the integrity of this Parliament? They are talking out of both sides of their mouths, hoping that everyone will be confused. I do not know if anyone is confused, in any case we are not and neither is the Canadian public.

In the action plan, we have proposed the creation of a national security committee. In doing so, one must think of the most intelligent way it can be done. I invited them to participate. I should say that the Bloc Quebecois has already submitted the name of someone to sit on this committee, and I thank the Bloc.

As for them, I am still here waiting for their recommendation. They are just pretending. The Conservatives are pretending.

As for appointments, the House knows as well as I do that many parliamentary reports have pointed out the need for parliamentarians to intervene and state their opinions when there are important appointments, for example, a president of a crown corporation or important positions that really affect the public life of the country.

Supply

The Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs was asked what the best process would be in order to avoid defamation of the candidates' character, attacks on their integrity, and disclosure of their identity, while at the same time ensuring parliamentarians a role in these appointments. This is important. Parliamentarians are elected to represent the public. They have the right to intervene in the appointment process that concerns the public. I am still waiting for an answer, but they have never endorsed this process.

If I still have time I would like to talk about the ethics commissioner. We used to have an ethics counsellor who reported to the Prime Minister. We passed Bill C-4, which provides for the appointment of an independent ethics commissioner. What does that mean?

It means that the ethics commissioner no longer reports to a Prime Minister or a government, but reports to the House and all parliamentarians at the same time. He is accountable to all parliamentarians at once. Not only that, but we took this one step further in the bill. We said that in order for the person filling the important position of ethics commissioner to be recognized and for his integrity to be above reproach, we wish to have his appointment sanctioned by a vote in the House.

This process has begun. The bill was passed. The Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs considered these requests. Leaders were consulted and soon we will have—on Thursday morning if I remember correctly—a vote on this appointment.

Note that that party abstained. It abstained from the process.

●(1300)

How can we take these people seriously? They introduce a motion on fixed election dates. Either they are completely ignorant of the consequences of making piecemeal changes to the democratic system or they are doing this on purpose for reasons that have nothing to do with the substance of the motion, but that have everything to do with petty politics, which I condemn in the harshest possible terms.

There are many other examples. When we adopted our action plan for democratic reform, we said, so members would not feel tied by a vote in principle on a bill before it goes to committee—in other words, before indepth consideration—that it was preferable to send bills to committees before second reading. For laypersons, second reading consists of debating a bill, voting on the bill's principle and then sending it to committee. In other words, it goes to committee for indepth consideration only after it is debated in the House.

We said that this was not consistent because that means that people vote first on the principle before they know if they even agree with the principle.

As a result of the change we introduced in our action plan, an increasing number of bills are sent to committee before second reading. In short, we are asking parliamentarians from all parties on these standing committees to consider a bill and make recommendations before we vote on the principle, in order to give them all the flexibility they need to make the necessary amendments.

We told ministers and parliamentary secretaries that more work would have to be done. We cannot take it for granted that everything will be adopted because a whip says so. It will be essential to work with parliamentarians to convince them and build consensus, so that the bills are the best they can be. Bills serve neither a government nor one political party over another, they serve the public. So, the better they are, the better the public is served.

I have asked for their approval on this issue, and I am still waiting.

They are absolutely not serious. They are focussed merely on narrow petty politics. What I deplore, and what they seem not to realize, is that by taking this approach they are discrediting all politicians. This is a serious matter.

For political, partisan, and extremely short-sighted reasons, they are challenging a fundamental system of democracy that has proven itself everywhere. No system is perfect, there is no such thing. There is no perfect government, no perfect opposition, there is no such thing. But at least, with good faith and good intentions, I feel we can always manage to do better. Doing better requires some higher mindedness and perspective on the consequences of one's actions.

I feel this motion is totally irresponsible. Not that having a set date for elections is a good thing or a bad thing, but rather that this cannot be decided in isolation from all the rest of the democratic pyramid of our system. Moving such a thing today is not, therefore, motivated by any concern to enhance democracy, but rather by a lowly desire to win votes. This is deplorable and I will vote against the motion this evening.

●(1305)

Mr. Stockwell Day (Okanagan—Coquihalla, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my friend used the word “today.” Today, the federal debt is higher than in 1993 when the Prime Minister was finance minister. Today, the democratic deficit is higher than in 1993.

Six months ago, the Prime Minister promised free votes for his MPs. Nevertheless, 48 hours after the Speech from the Throne, he broke his promise. Six months ago, the Prime Minister promised to give all members an opportunity to meet the nominees for positions such as Supreme Court justice. Several days after the throne speech, he broke his promise.

Today in the Senate, there is a vacant seat for Alberta. The Prime Minister refuses to recognize the choice of the people of Canada. Today, the Prime Minister refuses to give his support for fixed dates.

Most countries in the world and the UN accept the idea of fixed election dates, as do communist states and dictatorships. Why does the Prime Minister refuse to accept the idea of fixed election dates? Is it because he is a bigger dictator than the ones who rule in dictatorships?

Supply

•(1310)

Hon. Jacques Saada: Mr. Speaker, I cannot believe what I am hearing. This is the party that had put us in debt, to the tune of \$42 billion annually, when we took office in 1993. We are the ones who corrected the situation. This is the party that put us in debt. By contrast, we have produced seven surplus budgets in a row. These people are not in a position to give advice on government management.

The issue of free votes was raised. Let me point out that, so far, two thirds of the votes were held as free votes for our party. How many such votes did they have? Zero, and they are the ones talking about free votes.

As regards the Senate, the Prime Minister has said—and I am serious about this—that the Senate is an issue that concerns some provinces, particularly Alberta. It has an important symbolic value. The Prime Minister made a statement in which he invited the provinces to arrive at an agreement and to get back to him regarding this issue.

I have one last point. As regards fixed election dates, the Lortie commission, which—I should point out—was not a Liberal commission, wrote a report in 1992 in which it said that having fixed elections dates in Canada was not desirable.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bélair): I do not know if hon. members agree, but I think we are getting off the topic. Therefore, I would ask hon. members to get back to the relevant issue.

The hon. member for Fraser Valley.

[*English*]

Mr. Chuck Strahl (Fraser Valley, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is interesting that the government House leader spoke for approximately 20 minutes, but he did not say much on the motion today. He mostly went off on grand rhetoric. Even the parts that he addressed in today's motion are incorrect.

It does not take a constitutional amendment or change to have a fixed election date. Ask the Premier of British Columbia. The day after the last election in British Columbia, he said that the next election would be four years from that date. That is no secret.

What do they do in Australia or New Zealand? Those countries have the same system of accountable, responsible government as we have. They have a fixed election date. There is no crisis. There is no problem. The government only has to stand up and agree to do it. It is the same as free votes. It is not a constitutional amendment. It is something the Prime Minister could do with the consent of the House. It is easily done. In fact, once he declares a fixed election date four years hence, nothing will change it. It would be political suicide to change it. It becomes de facto four years after the fact.

I remind the House leader that he says that we cannot change this because this is a piecemeal approach to changing the democratic deficit. I have heard both sides of the argument right from the chair in which he is sitting. Sometimes the Liberals say that we cannot change it piecemeal because we have to do it holistically. Then the next time they say that we cannot do it all at once, that it is too big a job and that we should do it piecemeal.

The ethics commissioner is one piece of legislation. This is one idea. It is a good idea. It should be supported on the basis of the one idea. It is not enough just to say that everything is wrong with it and that we have to do it all together.

I will remind him of this in closing. He talked about free votes. Last week we had free votes, again, on this side of the House on the Westbank Indian land claim, on the Armenian-Turkish issue that—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bélair): Order, please. The Leader of the Government in the House of Commons.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Jacques Saada: Mr. Speaker, I find what was just said to be incredibly inconsistent. I will explain why.

When we talk about appointing an ethics commissioner we are talking about something fundamental to democratic reform. We are talking about something fundamental with respect to the relevance of the House of Commons, something quite significant. Ethics is rooted in the fact that the public must have confidence in elected members from all parties. This is not insignificant. That is one factor.

The other factor involves the electoral process and parliamentary reform. I am sorry, but no matter how you slice it, a fixed election date is only a small part of a much bigger picture based on the very principle of the Westminster constitutions, which are aimed specifically at accountability.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh.

Mr. Jacques Saada: I am trying to answer the question, or pseudo-question I was asked, but they are not listening to my response. I suppose that is what they call respect for parliamentary life.

•(1315)

[*English*]

Mr. Roy Bailey (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have two comments that I think Canadians deserve to hear.

First, when listening to the members opposite, they are saying that we have less democracy when we have fixed elections. I heard that over and over this morning. Second, a fixed election demands constitutional change.

Those two points are dead wrong. Canadians from coast to coast know their government is dead wrong. Could the minister explain why many countries have fixed election dates and because of that they have no democracy?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Jacques Saada: Mr. Speaker, I explained this earlier, but I will happily explain it again. I think that my message was not understood, and I will not attach any meaning to this.

When a new prime minister takes office, for example at the wish of members of a party with a majority in the House, the arrival of that new prime minister is therefore motivated by a decision made by a political party and not by the public. So, sometimes that prime minister decides to ask the people for the mandate to govern. Preventing him from making that decision means preventing the public from being consulted about the new responsibility he has just been given. A system that does not allow this is, in my opinion, less democratic than one that does allow it.

As for the second point, I gave other examples, including a serious crisis. Can the public not be consulted on this? If we cannot consult the public because it is not election time, we are being denied the right to consult the public. If there are fewer public consultations, things may perhaps be less democratic.

I also mentioned a final element that was extremely simple. From the moment we want to maintain the confidence of the House—I can use the budget as an example—if the majority of members in the House vote against the budget, it becomes a vote of non-confidence and the government is defeated. The Governor General dissolves the House, and an election is automatically called.

This can no longer be possible if election dates are fixed; or else, there is a fixed election date, plus an election call when a new prime minister wants to consult the public or when there is a vote of non-confidence. There is no more fixed date, so that is a myth.

I maintain that our current system gives many more tools with which to consult the public and that, in my opinion, is the best way to preserve democracy.

[*English*]

Mr. Chuck Strahl (Fraser Valley, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will be dividing my time with the member for Calgary East.

Following that presentation from the government House leader, I fear for the future of this Parliament. Maybe we better have a quick election. His understanding of this issue is incredibly weak. If he is truly giving us the best of his knowledge, then ignorance is bliss and he must be one of the happiest guys in the House of Commons.

What he has come up with as an excuse list is preposterous. It is like he has never read the private member's bill brought forward by the leader of our party. It explicitly states that an election should be held four years after the last one unless a motion of non-confidence passes in the House at which time the Governor General would dissolve the House and call an election. It is constitutional. It is in that private member's bill. It is consistent with what is done in other countries that have the same Westminster style of government. The government House leader either has not read the bill, or does not understand it, which is probable, or he just does not want to discuss it seriously. All three of the above may be true.

I hardly know where to start because I am still upset by all the nonsense spewed during that tirade.

The government House leader mentioned some nonsense about the ethics commissioner. I was at the meeting yesterday with regard to the ethics commissioner. I asked the ethics counsellor if he thought the legislation was good. I asked him what he would be administering since no actual code of ethics had been passed. It is

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not attached to the bill. It has never been passed by the House. He said that was a real problem. He will not have any ethical code in front of him and will sit in his office waiting for the phone to ring. That is preposterous. I have to get off this subject because it is so much nonsense. I can hardly stand it.

Let me talk to the motion before us today and why I believe it is a good idea.

Having a fixed election date would allow the government to govern properly for four full years. This will be my fourth election coming up. Every time an election is called, it is at a time when the government thinks it is most fortuitous. The writ is dropped and off we go. This is done a little over three years into the cycle.

A four year cycle would allow people to plan their lives. It would allow provinces, ministers, governments and prime ministers to put together a legislative package and metre it out for the course of their four years. It would allow them to get something done.

What have we done here in the last six months, since the current Prime Minister has taken over? We have spun our wheels. Where is the new legislation? There is none because the Prime Minister is not sure when he will call the election.

The Prime Minister said a while ago that the Liberal's number one priority was to govern. That is what the House leader has said. The government has to govern unless it has to go to the people for a mandate, or unless the polls look bad, or unless the crystal ball does not look right. None of that is a legitimate excuse for calling an election. An election should be called every four years. That would allow the government to govern for four full years. There would be no ifs, ands or buts.

There should be a democratic reform package in front of the House right now. The House leader talked about that. That should be decided before next October when the election should be held. We could have it all done.

I am on the committee that is reviewing the Prime Minister's democratic package, and nobody is doing a darn thing on it. Everybody on that committee has said that we could start this, but what the heck, an election will probably be called—

An hon. member: Maybe.

Mr. Chuck Strahl: Maybe. Instead of getting at the meat of the issue on democratic reform, we send letters to the House leader saying that we love the idea of a more democratic Parliament, but there is no time to do it. It is just a farce. We should be working on that. If we had a four year cycle, this charade would not be going on.

Supply

Last night we debated an important bill on aboriginal accountability. Members on our side of the House spoke our peace and sat down. Members on that side of the House started ragging the puck. Everybody over there started to talk. They finished the day. They dragged it out for as long as they could so we could not vote on the bill. Why? They do not have any other legislation because there is no fixed election date. If that bill had been passed, they would have had to talk about something else, but they have nothing else to talk about. The Liberals started to talk about something that we on this side of the House had finished talking about and were ready to vote on it.

●(1320)

The government does not have a four year fixed election date. It is governing poorly right now. The House is not working well. That is why we should do it. It allows the government to do its job. It should do it for four full years and then get on with it instead of this farce where we are wasting months and months of time when we should be doing proper and good things for Canadians.

Although it binds the government to a four year cycle and it does tie the hands of the Prime Minister, what is democratic reform unless it takes some of the power away from the Prime Minister? The Prime Minister decried when he was in his wilderness time that it is who you know in the PMO. That is the trouble around here. There is too much power concentrated in the Prime Minister's Office, but as soon as he has to give up some of that power, the brakes come on.

Democratic reform and democratic deficits are only addressed if the Prime Minister says, "I have this power right now but I am going to give it up willingly", in this case to a set election date, or in the case of a committee, to allow it actually to deal with something. For example, let the committees deal with the estimates and give us a good budgetary recommendation.

Instead, the very first thing I asked the House leader who was before a committee was whether there would be free votes now and could we have a free vote on the budgetary allotment for the gun control legislation. He said, "Actually, no you cannot. That is a three line whip," or whatever it is called where members have to do as they are told, because he had decided that is what it would be. In other words, he has not given up any control. He has maintained the control in the Prime Minister's Office and the whip and the House leader, and is not allowing his backbenchers to vote as they really wish.

It does take away some of the power from the Prime Minister. Just as Premier Gordon Campbell has given up some of his power by saying there will be a fixed election date. People in B.C. think it is a good thing. There are no ifs, ands or buts. People who come forward as candidates know when they are going to be running. They do not have to put their lives on hold for a couple of years while they figure out whether the Prime Minister has seen the light, gone for a walk in the snow, taken a shower, or whatever it is he does to decide these things. It is done properly. It is done decently. Candidates, parties, provinces and business people all plan accordingly. There is no problem whatsoever. It is easy to do.

To address the suggestion one more time and knock it in the head, that it takes a constitutional change to have a fixed election date is

nonsense. It is the same argument that his predecessor used when I suggested free votes in the House when I was a House leader. What came back to me was that we could not do that as it would contravene the Constitution, the government would fall, it would be a travesty of constitutional law, and other stuff that he dreamed up, none of which is true. It is all false. It is a dragon, an imaginary fearsome beast they put out, that somehow this would contravene some long held constitutional provision or it would require the unanimous consent of the 10 provinces. It is just nonsense.

I wish he would deal with the issue. The issue is he just does not like the idea, which is fair enough, but he talks in such circles.

The other argument the Liberals are using is that they need the freedom to go to the people because the Prime Minister they have right now has only been elected by the party, not by the actual people out there. An illegitimate Prime Minister is apparently what we have.

That will be the argument if we have to go to an election this spring, but if we hold them off until the fall, the argument will be that he has to govern to show his stuff. If we wait for another year, the argument will be it is a necessity for the good of the nation and the legislative package. In other words, whatever. Today his feelings may be that we need to go to an election because he needs a mandate. If he waits six months, he did not really need a mandate after all, he just needed permission. If he waits a year and a half, his argument will be that he had a full legislative package and could not go, it would not have been right.

The arguments against this motion are nonsense. The private member's bill drafted by the leader of the Conservative Party says there should be a fixed election date. He promises upon forming government that the first thing he will announce is the date of the next election. He has followed that up by a legislative bill that actually describes how it would be done. He has furthermore said that the confidence measure convention will not be contravened. It is well thought through. It is precise. It is in legislative form.

●(1325)

I encourage the Liberals to look at it, to adopt it and put it forward. It is something I think Canadians would welcome as a positive change in addressing, at least in part, the democratic deficit.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai (Calgary East, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my colleague is serving his fourth mandate in the House. He knows very well about the functioning of the House and he has seen the democratic deficit that has been happening. He has worked diligently to point out that we need to change the democratic deficit that has been identified by the Prime Minister time after time.

The government House leader talked about the whole package. As my friend correctly pointed out, the Liberals twist and change it whenever it suits them to answer this question for not doing anything. If we look at the history, it is the party that has benefited most from this so-called democratic deficit.

Supply

I would like to ask my colleague, as a member for the last four Parliaments, what has he noticed that the Liberal Party is willing to do even to change the democratic deficit or give up the power?

Mr. Chuck Strahl: Mr. Speaker, I know the member for Calgary East is somewhat prophetic but I have actually only been here for three terms. The fourth may be coming; we are not sure of those things at this stage.

I would address it this way. When I was House leader, I put forward a complete package of democratic reforms in a document called, "Building Trust". I was talking about building trust, rebuilding trust between this place and the electorate that sent us here, because there is an awful lot of disillusionment out there. There is an awful lot of concern about the democratic deficit, if we want to call it that, and the fact that it remains unchanged after all this time.

In that package I put forward things such as free votes in the House, a better selection process for officers of Parliament where we would actually have a vote. We are going to have a vote on the ethics commissioner. That was our proposal. The vote on that is fine. The package included how the Clerk is selected, for example, and how estimates are dealt with. There was a whole package, a holistic package. I am sure the House leader would have liked it.

The response from the government House leader of the day was, "This cannot be done because it is just too big, it is too broad, it is too holistic. We have to do it piecemeal". When that House leader got turfed and others came in, we found that working piecemeal on these things actually worked pretty fairly.

We changed the way the ethics commissioner was chosen, which everyone knew was a joke. We eventually had a motion in the House. We pushed it forward as an idea. We talked about it endlessly. The ethics commissioner eventually, as one part of it, starts to get adopted. It is still not right, but we are on our way.

How the Clerk is approved, the Speaker, the Deputy Speaker, we have plans on all that. We have a huge package of ideas.

I find that the House leader of the day over there always says it cannot be done. It is only when the House leader is swept aside and the backbench takes over, when the opposition pressures, when they see an election coming that things happen. Does anybody believe that the ethics commissioner approval on Thursday is anything but a pre-election move?

We should be devising things. A fixed election date is not something we dreamed up last week. It has been the policy of this party for 15 years. We have been pushing it. It was in my report called, "Building Trust". It was in the party documents. It was in our campaign literature. I campaigned on it in the last election. We have been consistently asking for this. To say that today it is somehow pre-election timing, it deals with an election sure enough, but I do not know how many speeches I have given on this. I get tired of saying the same things. It is not new. It is not revolutionary. I am just convinced that it will take a new government to actually make it happen.

That is why if there is an election coming up, this would be a great election issue. I would love to be on the stump somewhere sitting beside a Liberal, an NDP, or whatever, but certainly sitting beside a Liberal candidate who says that fixed election dates are a bad idea. In

my riding I would suggest he sit with his eyes wide open and with his back to an open door because the people in my riding will say, "That is an excellent idea and if you do not agree with it, you will never get my vote", as it should be, because this is a great idea. It should be endorsed not only by the House but I hope by the Canadian people.

• (1330)

Mr. Deepak Obhrai (Calgary East, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to speak to the supply day motion put forward by my party regarding fixed election dates.

I have been in Parliament for the last two terms, six years. I am one of those members who originally came here with good ideas and with all kinds of energy. My constituents were looking at me to bring initiatives to the floor of Parliament and talk about what concerns them. I thought that I had finally come to a place where we could debate, where we could talk, where we could put forward issues, where we could do many things, but lo and behold, like everyone else, I hit the wall, what everyone now calls the democratic deficit. Over a period of time it has taken away the power of this Parliament and slowly has put it into the PMO.

The PMO has become a bigger entity than the Parliament of Canada. That erosion has been going on and on for many years. The Liberals call themselves the natural governing party of Canada. Why do we have a democratic deficit? Because those members started the erosion of parliamentary privileges.

When members go back to their ridings, people ask, "Why are you not doing something? Why can there not be effective change?" We tell them what is happening. We see time after time when Canadians vote that they are becoming cynical. They are asking why they should vote when there is going to be no change, when their members of Parliament do not have the right or the authority to bring issues forward that are important to them.

The tragedy of the whole situation in Parliament is that it not only affects the opposition party, it affects the government backbenchers. What do we see now? We see a little change here; some of the backbenchers have moved to the front and some of the other guys have moved to the back.

Supply

The motion put forward today is to improve one of the major democratic deficits. The motion suggests that there be fixed election dates. When I returned after the 2000 election and we were at the Governor General's ball on the evening of the opening of Parliament, the former prime minister looked at me and said, "We pulled the rug out from under your feet". I said, "No, you did not pull the rug out from under our feet. You manipulated the system to your advantage. You called an election after three and a half years. You felt that things were in your favour, so you manipulated the system to win an election. You did not pull the rug out from under our feet".

If we have fixed elections dates, then Canadians will make the real choice, not the Prime Minister. That is the difference. Canadians will make the real choice. They will then see that they are connected to this House which sets the rules under which they are governed.

Look at the spectacle that has been going on. Since coming back, what have we seen in the last two or three weeks? Every day we read in the newspapers that there is going to be an election or there is not going to be an election. There was a dinner yesterday at 24 Sussex Drive where they talked about whether we are going to have an election or not going to have an election. They look at the polls and decide whether we are going to have an election or not going to have an election.

What nonsense. The Liberals are supposed to be governing the country, not spending their time talking about whether or not we are going to have an election. That is all they do. In the last three weeks, nothing has happened in Parliament, as my colleague pointed out.

• (1335)

There is only one question, will we or will we not have an election? Nothing else. In the meantime, the country is drifting. The vision from the throne speech has gone out the window. The vision is still hanging in the air because the question is, will we or will we not have an election? That is all.

It is becoming pretty obvious that time, energy and everything this country has spent are being wasted on this one little question, will we or will we not have an election? If we were to have a fixed date, then we would know when elections would be held. The government would be able to plan its agenda. Everybody could plan. Everybody would know what is out there. The bureaucrats would know. Right now, I am sure most bureaucrats and most government agencies are now in limbo waiting for the answer to the question, will we or will we not have an election?

Look at the cost to the country of this ridiculous notion that the only person who can call the election is the Prime Minister and he will only call it when it suits him. We have to give the power back to the people. By having a fixed election date, we would be giving the power back to the people. We would be telling them, this is how it will be and they would decide, not us.

This motion that we have brought forward today on the eve of this same question, will we or will we not have an election, is pointing out to Canadians that it is time for them to take back the power and decide. The only way we can do this is if there is a fixed election date.

When I was campaigning on this question, as my friend from Fraser Valley rightly pointed out, the Reform Party put this out as a

campaign issue and everybody on the street said yes, they wanted fixed election dates.

I have been here now for two terms. I will be going into my third election in seven years. It costs a huge amount of money to have an election. Sure, money is not the only criteria. The voice of the people is the criteria and that is why we have elections, to let the people decide.

The House leader on the other side raised some questions. I am sure when he was a backbencher, he was totally in agreement with what we were doing. Now that he is the government House leader, of course, why should the government give up its power?

The point is that Canadians need to know. We need to engage Canadians. We need to have them go back to the polls to vote. We do not need them to sit at home and say they will not vote because they feel they have no say in our political institutions. The reason the serious democratic deficit exists is because we do not give the Canadian on the street the opportunity to speak. Where did the democratic deficit come from? It came from the so-called natural governing party. It has taken the power away from this institution.

I am the international development critic and I see what is going on around the world. We tell other nations that they must have democracy, they must have elections, and that we will help them with elections. Elections Canada is a highly respected institution. However, when we go out to preach to somebody else, we need to look back at ourselves and ask, is our house in order before we preach to other people?

Right now, even the Prime Minister is acknowledging that there is a serious democratic deficit. Let us not even talk about the other place that is over there to show how serious is the democratic deficit.

• (1340)

The motion that this party is putting forward is again highlighting the point that Canadians want a fixed election date. Any other argument that the government puts forth is not valid.

Mr. Chuck Strahl (Fraser Valley, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I could not help but smile when the member for Calgary East talked about having an election or not having an election because it is the only question that is being puzzled over. All the weighty thought happening on the government side seems to be on that one subject. There are other subjects that Canadians would have us bear down on.

We can just see the machinations. There is all the damage done by the public accounts committee and the Auditor General's report, but then again this fall we are going to have the public inquiry. That could be bad, too. Maybe the election could be held at this time and justified, but if the Prime Minister waits it might get worse. Should there be an election?

I will bring up one other point on which I would like to have the member's opinion. When Jean Chrétien was the Prime Minister and things started to get a little unruly on that side over there, he actually threatened his own party members with an election if they did not do as they were told. That is why free votes are intricately tied to this subject.

Instead of saying the election would be held in October 2004 when he could resign, and it is kind of irrelevant here because barring a non-confidence motion the House would continue. He actually threatened his own people, and Canadians generally, by telling them to either vote for the bill and do as they were told or there would be an election over it, and that he would not sign their papers, perhaps. That is another bad issue.

The idea that the Prime Minister, in a snit or fit of some kind of fury, can tell members to do as they are told or he could call an election just shows us how bad it is and why we do need fixed election dates. Would the hon. member care to comment on that?

• (1345)

Mr. Deepak Ohrai: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the member for Fraser Valley for raising that point. He is absolutely right.

We were sitting here when the Prime Minister used the threat of an election to keep the backbenchers in line so that his bill could go through. Forget about all the other business. That is why we need to give this power back to the people, away from the PMO and the Prime Minister. That can only happen if there are fixed election dates. Then the people of Canada will be able to take back the power to where it belongs, to the people of Canada.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Duplain (Portneuf, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have this opportunity to speak to the opposition motion calling upon the government to take steps to hold elections on a fixed date.

I will, however, make no secret of the fact that I have some serious reservations about the wisdom and appropriateness of such a change. I would add, and I will return to this point later, that the opposition's sudden desire to make such a change with no further ado does raise some questions.

First of all, I would like to raise the point that it is important to make sure that changes to our electoral system are not made lightly and without sufficient thought. This is particularly the case when it comes to the ability to call an election, since this is at the very core of our Westminster-style parliamentary system.

There have been past studies of this issue, including the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, better known as the Lortie commission, which recommended in 1991 against the introduction of a fixed date for elections. The Conservative party of the day had what I consider the wisdom to follow that recommendation. As hon. members are aware, the government has initiated a consultation process in order to advance its program of democratic reform.

Today's motion calls upon the government to turn its back on that process and move ahead without even consulting Canadians or taking the time to weigh the pros and cons of the proposed change. A question arises as a result. Reference has just been made to giving Canadians the opportunity to express their opinion, yet if a fixed date for elections is decided upon, as the motion today suggests, Canadians are not being given that opportunity. We must find out what they think.

What is more, if I remember correctly, the policy of what was until just recently the Canadian Alliance was not to move immediately to

Supply

put in place a system for elections at a set date, but rather to consider the question after consulting Canadians in a national referendum.

That approach at least had the merit of acknowledging the importance of such a change, which ought not to be made lightly and even less so without seeking Canadians' point of view.

The motion before us today throws all caution aside and seems more motivated by a desire to avoid an election and to back the government into a corner than by any real desire for constructive public debate.

I do not mean that the question of fixed dates for elections is frivolous or unimportant, or that it should not be publicly debated; quite the contrary.

However, I think it is important to remember that changes to our electoral system, particularly serious changes that may have a significant impact on our system of governance, should not be made in a hurry, on the eve of an expected election, or for reasons of election strategy.

We must ask ourselves what effect a system of fixed election dates would have on ministerial accountability. Some people claim that fixed election dates would bring greater accountability. But it was precisely the fear of a lessening of government accountability that led the B.C. Civil Liberties Association to object to fixed election dates. In November 2000, its opinion appeared in the *National Post*, and I quote:

[English]

Legislation requiring fixed terms would either permit the house or legislature to call early elections or it would not. If it did, the result would differ little from our current system. If it did not, such legislation could hardly be said to increase government accountability.

Fixed election dates have some advantages. The primary one is that they make it easier for governments to govern...But such advantages are similar to the advantages of a blank cheque, and thus typically come at great cost.

For anyone who favours reform that increases, rather than decreases, government accountability, the idea of fixed electoral terms will not be an attractive one.

• (1350)

[Translation]

Today's motion recognizes the need to maintain the principle of responsible government, thus allowing elections to be held when the government loses the confidence of the House.

Without a doubt, this is an essential element, but one which to my way of thinking fails to address all the concerns I have just listed.

Even if an exception were specifically provided recognizing the principle of responsible government, I am not sure that in practice the introduction of a fixed election cycle would not diminish the accountability of the executive and the ability of the opposition to force the dissolution of the House.

This is not just a change in the electoral and parliamentary machinery. This is a change that would affect the political culture and conventions of our system by introducing a foreign element.

This type of hybrid system was also rejected, as I said before, by the Lortie Commission.

Supply

According to the commission, even if there were agreement on the constitutional amendments needed to introduce fixed election dates, it is far from clear that the results would be satisfactory and would lead to greater government accountability; quite the contrary.

Aside from the principle of responsible government and the related constitutional issues, the commission was concerned about the consequences of a system with fixed election dates on the duration and cost of elections.

Taking the U.S. experience as an example, the commission found that fixed election dates might contribute to prolonging the campaign process and compromise the effectiveness of election spending limits on parties and candidates.

Adopting a fixed election cycle would deny Canadians major democratic advantages related to the flexibility that our current system allows.

It is not unusual for a new prime minister to be appointed following a change in the governing party's leadership. In this context, it is not uncommon for a new prime minister to call an election and thus obtain a popular mandate.

Similarly, a government wanting to present a new platform or an important initiative may feel the need to obtain a clear mandate from the electorate beforehand.

These are perfectly legitimate choices in terms of democracy and would be impossible in a fixed election date system.

The motion before us today for fixed election dates may seem appealing at first glance. However, I fear that it is merely an illusion of progress.

We must resist adopting an easy solution that would create more problems than it would solve. Above all we must avoid hastily making changes to our electoral system that would have profound consequences and possibly adverse effects.

Even if I thought introducing a fixed election cycle were a good idea, which I do not, and putting aside any constitutional difficulty this might create, I would nonetheless be opposed to this motion for procedural reasons.

The spirit of democratic reform demands that we first consult the public on major changes to be made to our electoral system. Wisdom demands that we make reforms in a reasoned manner.

The motion before us does not satisfy either of these two criteria. That is why I intend to vote against it.

• (1355)

[English]

Mr. Deepak Obhrai (Calgary East, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I was actually amazed to hear the member's reasons for opposing fixed election dates. His reasons of procedural matters were just amazing. When we talk about fixed election dates we are talking about giving people the choice of fixed election dates, not his party the choice.

Does the member not remember that his own prime minister used the threat of an election to make backbenchers do what he wanted them to do to have his bill passed? How does that serve the Canadian

people? Has he forgotten that his own prime minister threatened an election to keep the backbenchers in line?

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Duplain: Mr. Speaker, obviously, the party representing the current government is able to make decisions. Perhaps, for the opposition, is it because, in their minds, they are unable to make decisions and so they will no longer have to make any if there are fixed election dates? Perhaps is it because they have no confidence in their leader's ability to make decisions about when to call an election?

If we want to let the public decide, the Prime Minister must be able to make decisions himself, particularly about when he needs a mandate from the people. There may be questions of principle, with regard to which he wants a mandate from the people. He must be able to do this.

[English]

Mrs. Lynne Yelich (Blackstrap, CPC): Mr. Speaker, does the hon. member not think that this would be costly, not only for us but, I am thinking, for the people who have to set up the offices, the returning officers, and the people who run the elections?

What kind of a position does that put them in when they are renting space? Do they hold on to the space? Do they put downpayments on it? How long will this be? Will it be one year from now? Do they get their officers trained? These would be all the costs for an election that may or may not happen.

Could the member tell me what kind of pressures this has put on returning officers across Canada in a year when all the boundaries and names are being changed? The returning officers do not know what name they are running under sometimes. There are all sorts of difficulties that they themselves have.

Rules are being made and I would like to know whether the member thinks that is such a smart idea.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Duplain: Mr. Speaker, we thought of all that. Perhaps the member cannot take the pressure. Of course, if, some years, there are changes to the electoral map, there is additional pressure on those who have to answer for their actions and make decisions. We are capable of doing this.

If we start to debate whether elections should be held on fixed dates or called by a Prime Minister, we should hold this debate with Canadians so they can decide. In a democratic system, that is the most important thing.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bélair): The hon. member for Portneuf will have six minutes remaining during questions and comments, after oral question period.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

[English]

COPERNICUS LODGE

Ms. Sarmite Bulte (Parkdale—High Park, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, on April 18, I participated in the opening ceremony of phase III of the long term care project at Copernicus Lodge.

Copernicus Lodge is recognized as a leading facility of senior citizens care in Ontario. Not only does it provide high standard health care but also it is an exemplary case of integrating senior citizens in the heart of a vibrant community.

This phase adds 228 new beds providing full nursing care for the senior citizens in my riding and throughout the Polish community in Toronto.

On that occasion I took the opportunity to congratulate the board of directors, the staff and the numerous volunteers whose continued support and involvement made this project happen. His Excellency, Cardinal Ambrozic, gave his blessings and announced that the Copernicus Lodge will be renamed the Pope John Paul II Care Centre of Copernicus Lodge.

We were glad to play a small part in supporting this project through CMHC.

* * *

● (1400)

ENERGY SECTOR

Mr. David Chatters (Athabasca, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the energy sector is one of the most important industries in the Canadian economy. It accounts for 45% of our trade balance and is the single largest private investor in Canada. In public policy discourse, though, its significance remains under-appreciated. There is neither a parliamentary committee nor minister solely devoted to energy, nor is there much public debate about the federal government's role in this industry.

The federal government has the responsibility to provide energy security and reliability across Canada. Research and development money should go toward developing cost-competitive technologies in new non-renewable resources in the medium to long term.

Our energy policy should seek to encourage a diversity of energy supply choices and focus on a long term view that builds a sustainable energy framework for Canada.

The federal government must also help facilitate future investments. The federal government must institute an environmental assessment program that balances environmental and industry concerns.

* * *

[Translation]

SEMAINE MINIÈRE DU QUÉBEC

Mr. Gérard Binet (Frontenac—Mégantic, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Quebec mining week 2004 was kicked off yesterday in Chibougamau.

S. O. 31

In Quebec, in both the regions and urban centres, tens of thousands of jobs depend directly and indirectly on the success of the mining industry.

Quebec is duly recognized as a centre for mining excellence. More than ever, there must be encouragement for this economic sector, which has to keep up with the dizzying pace of scientific developments and the evolution of specialized technologies.

Whether it is finding innovative ways to reforest tailing sites or developing a better asphalt by adding chrysotile fibres, those working in the mining industry show creativity and innovation.

I ask my colleagues to join me in celebrating the mining industry's important place in Canadian society.

* * *

[English]

STRITE INDUSTRIES

Mr. Janko Perić (Cambridge, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Strite Industries, a pioneer in the machining of ultra precision components for the aerospace, automotive, computer, medical and scientific industries, recently celebrated its 40th anniversary.

Founded by Joseph D. Strite in 1964 with eight employees, today this world-class company located in my riding of Cambridge has a highly skilled workforce of 230 dedicated individuals.

With its can-do attitude, innovative training methods and engineering excellence, Strite Industries has diversified and gained a global reputation.

The company represents the first Canadian survey for the best manufacturing practices program, and is an amazing economic success story.

For 40 years Strite Industries has been a leader in innovation and the adoption of best practices. I join all colleagues in the House in congratulating the entire team at Strite for their tremendous success.

* * *

[Translation]

CHILDREN

Hon. Eleni Bakopanos (Ahuntsic, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, young children who get a good start in life are prepared to learn when they start school and then go on to become healthy and productive adults.

In my riding of Ahuntsic, the Association de gardiennage d'Ahuntsic, La Rose éclore and the Institut de formation et d'aide communautaire à l'enfance et à la famille are just three of the numerous community organizations working in early childhood education and family services. I was there to honour them last week during volunteer week.

S. O. 31

[*English*]

The Liberal government supports healthy child development through: providing funds for the Canadian Prenatal Nutritional Program, the Community Action Program for Children and the Aboriginal Head Start Program; investing \$500 million annually to help Canadian families access prenatal programs, early childhood education, child care and parent resource centres; and providing an estimated \$520 million a year in tax relief to parents for child care.

Our Liberal government believes that giving children a good start in life is one of the most important investments we can make. We are proud to help at such an important time, at the beginning of one's life.

* * *

BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC

Mr. Rick Casson (Lethbridge, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise in the House today to honour and pay respect to brave Canadians who must never be forgotten: the valiant men and women from the Royal Canadian Navy, the Canadian Merchant Navy and the Royal Canadian Air Force, who fought with their lives in the Battle of the Atlantic.

The Battle of the Atlantic is commemorated annually on the first Sunday in May. I rise today to take this opportunity to express my personal thanks to the many Canadians who came before me who fought for the freedom I enjoy in this great country.

The Battle of the Atlantic is considered the longest campaign of the second world war. For five and a half years, allied forces protected vital shipping lanes against German U-boats. Everything manufactured in North America for the war effort needed to cross the Atlantic. It was shipped and protected by brave men and women who stood shoulder to shoulder to see that cargo reach Britain.

This courageous effort in the North Atlantic directly contributed to turning the tide for allied success in Europe. Let us never forget our Canadian heroes.

* * *

• (1405)

[*Translation*]

2004 ALLAN CUP

Hon. Claude Drouin (Beauce, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like all members of Canada's Parliament to join me and the people of the Beauce region in congratulating the Garaga hockey team from Saint-Georges, and its organization, for winning the Canadian championship for the second time in three years, in the 2004 Allan Cup tournament.

The tournament was held in the city of Saint-Georges, in the Beauce region, from April 19 to 25. Six teams representing various regions of the country fought for the Allan Cup, the trophy emblematic of the senior amateur hockey championship of Canada.

I take this opportunity to thank all these teams who showed us their passion, their determination and their will to win.

I offer my sincere congratulations to the event's organizers who made it possible to hold a top-notch tournament and, once again, my

most sincere congratulations to the Saint-Georges Garaga hockey team and its entire organization.

* * *

HIGHWAY INFRASTRUCTURE

Mr. Paul Crête (Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup—Témiscouata—Les Basques, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the people of the lower St. Lawrence and northern New Brunswick are completely fed up with seeing their friends and relatives dying on highway 185.

In September 2002, the Prime Minister, then campaigning for the leadership, made a stop in Rivière-du-Loup and promised to bring about the widening of the entire length of highway 185.

I am bringing a petition started by Adeline and Lise L'Italien, who have lost family members on this road. More than 5,600 petitioners and 7,000 students in schools between Rivière-du-Loup and Edmunston have reminded the Prime Minister of his promise and of the urgent need to work on this killer highway where 100 people have died in 10 years.

This issue must be settled before the election is called. I cannot imagine that people's lives would be made into a campaign issue.

* * *

[*English*]

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Ms. Anita Neville (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as we know, the Liberal government is committed to working with aboriginal communities to build healthier and stronger communities. Each year, more than \$7.5 billion in federal money provides basic services for first nations on reserve, services such as education, health care and infrastructure.

Aboriginal communities face many challenges both on and off reserve. Budget 2004 doubles funding for the urban aboriginal strategy to \$50 million, which is most important for my city of Winnipeg and other western cities.

Community programs receiving federal funding include the Canadian prenatal nutrition program, the community action program for children, and the aboriginal head start program.

The government also supports the first nations and Inuit child care initiative, which contains strategies for dealing with fetal alcohol syndrome.

In cooperation with the provinces, the government is further spearheading an initiative dealing with domestic violence specific to aboriginal communities.

These initiatives are only part of the government's commitment to helping aboriginal men and women acquire the tools they need to improve their quality of life.

* * *

MORDEN, MANITOBA

Mr. Brian Pallister (Portage—Lisgar, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the town of Morden, Manitoba in my riding is featured in this month's edition of *Harrowsmith Country Life* magazine.

Founded in 1882, Morden is home to 6,500 fine people and is a great place to raise a family. As the magazine states, "It's like a scene out of *Leave it to Beaver*", with a historic downtown and old houses "whose verandahs and Victorian charm are still intact":

Remarkably well preserved, the town's Victorian character has not been forgotten. Its grain elevators still stand beside the CPR and the old post office... has been converted into an art gallery.

Being featured in this magazine is a well-deserved honour for this fine community. Visitors can enjoy the sights and smells of the Morden roses; the Morden and District Museum, which houses the largest collection of marine reptile fossils in Canada; lakes and beaches; and the top ranked, member owned golf course in Manitoba. Each summer, our Corn and Apple Festival is enjoyed by tens of thousands of people.

In the words of *Harrowsmith Country Life* magazine, Morden, Manitoba is the "Prairie town that could...and still does".

* * *

[Translation]

DESCHAMBAULT ALUMINUM SMELTER

Mr. Claude Duplain (Portneuf, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to extend my congratulations today to Alcoa Canada Primary Metals, and in particular its Deschambault smelter, a major economic engine in the riding of Portneuf.

This evening, the Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment will award the Pollution Prevention Award in the large company category to Alcoa Deschambault. It will join the illustrious ranks of former winners such as Novapharm and IBM Canada.

The Deschambault team of 570 employees contributes, along with Quebec's other aluminum smelters, to the economic spin-offs of over one billion dollars annually in Quebec.

I would like to pay particular tribute to the initiative of the workers of this company for recognizing the importance of taking care of the environment and for taking an active role in a project to reduce fluoride emissions. They are with us in the House today to hear my congratulations.

This evening's award is just confirmation of this company's long-standing commitment to the environment.

* * *

•(1410)

[English]

STATUS OF WOMEN

Ms. Judy Wasylcia-Leis (Winnipeg North Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister has been out on the election trail singing Liberal praises across the country. To Canadian listeners it sounds like an old, worn-out record, a broken record that no one wants to hear again.

Nowhere are the sour notes of the Liberal failure more pronounced than in gender equity.

A recent study by the Canadian Association of Social Workers takes stock of the Liberal decade: women's pre-tax income is still

62% of men's; 42% of unattached women aged 18 to 64 live in poverty; women's poverty has deepened; and lone-parent families headed by women remain on the bottom of the economic rung.

The study called for stronger transfers directed to women's needs, gender sensitive pension reform, progressive integration of tax and program spending, and flexible income benefits that foster equality.

Was any of this in the budget? Not a single note. When it came to women's equality, the silence was deafening. For women, Liberal budget day was indeed the day the music died.

* * *

[Translation]

HEALTH

Mr. Réal Ménard (Hochelaga—Maisonneuve, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the federal Minister of Health has made an active commitment to promote new health partnerships. He made that the core theme of his speech in Toronto on April 20.

The minister has clearly expressed his vision of the future of health care. The provinces would deliver the care, and Ottawa would guarantee its accessibility. In fact, for the Liberal government, health is becoming the matrix for the Canadian nation building it plans to carry out in the coming years.

Let us get serious. If the federal government wants to do something useful as far as health is concerned, it needs to improve aboriginal health, improve drug licensing processes, keep a better eye on the surgical equipment coming onto the market, and above all do what all stakeholders are unanimously calling for: raising its contribution through transfer payments to at least 25%.

It must also respect the jurisdictions of Quebec and the provinces over health. These are the conditions that must be in place for there to be a new health partnership.

* * *

[English]

SOUTH AFRICA

Mrs. Karen Redman (Kitchener Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to offer Canada's sincere congratulations to South Africa on its third democratic national elections and to President Mbeki's African National Congress, re-elected in a landslide victory.

Canada congratulates the people of South Africa as they mark the 10th anniversary of freedom and democracy's triumph over apartheid rule. This is a historic opportunity to celebrate the end of apartheid and to reflect on the last 10 years.

South Africa faces huge challenges ahead, including poverty and unemployment, high levels of violent crime, and an HIV-AIDS epidemic. However, the ANC has vowed to bring all South Africans a share in the nation's wealth.

Oral Questions

Ten years ago many people predicted bloody ethnic violence or autocratic rule in South Africa, but Nelson Mandela's "rainbow nation" has emerged as Africa's most powerful economy and one of its most stable democracies. I express congratulations on behalf of the people of Canada.

* * *

GENERAL ELECTIONS

Mr. John Reynolds (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this is a day when the Prime Minister should practise what he has been preaching since usurping the throne. He could do something no prime minister of Canada has ever done, and that is to begin eliminating the democratic deficit.

The majority of Canadians support the concept of setting a specific date for all future general elections. That is why we on this side and all supporters of the Conservative Party of Canada want this simple but democratic reform.

It is not democracy in action when a prime minister can call an election any time on any day that gives him political advantage. Even Tom Kent, the Liberal guru and former adviser to the Prime Minister's father, says we must have fixed election dates.

There was a rumour that the Prime Minister was prepared to support the motion for fixed election dates. That was until he heard Earncliffe found out we were talking about fixing the election dates, not the results. He should ignore Earncliffe, do the right thing and support this motion today.

* * *

HEALTH

Mr. Larry Spencer (Regina—Lumsden—Lake Centre, Ind.): Mr. Speaker, a Montreal organization called HIV-AIDS Alert has calculated that costs related to AIDS will add \$37 billion to our health care costs by 2014. This calculation was based on a study of Health Canada statistics.

Our health care system is on the verge of collapse due to rising costs. In Saskatchewan, health care expenditures represent 40% of total government spending.

A recent *Globe and Mail* article outlined how the Immigration and Refugee Board processes applicants with AIDS and HIV. An immigration lawyer suggests that of gay applicants those who are HIV positive tend to have a higher rate of acceptance.

Why is the board giving people with infectious diseases priority and preference? The role of the board is to protect Canadians and screen applicants who pose a danger. SARS demonstrated the importance of screening everyone coming to this country who may pose a danger of spreading disease.

Considering this purported preferential treatment for HIV positive applicants, I know that the impact on Canadian health care will test negative.

●(1415)

CHILDREN

Hon. Maria Minna (Beaches—East York, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, during the last 10 years I have worked hard to alleviate poverty for mothers and children in this country. Today the Liberal government's commitment to Canada's children is more than \$13 billion a year.

That commitment includes: assistance for over three million families through the Canada child tax benefit; the early childhood development agreement to help improve and expand early childhood development programs and services; maternity and parental benefits through employment insurance; the child care expense deduction for parents who work or study; and the new child disability benefit for low income and modest income families.

Children who grow up in poverty are at great risk of not being able to fulfill their potential. We must do everything in our power to ensure that Canadian children have every chance for a healthy, secure and happy life.

ORAL QUESTION PERIOD

[English]

GOVERNMENT CONTRACTS

Mr. Stephen Harper (Leader of the Opposition, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I hear the Prime Minister continuing to beat his election drum, but the Liberal *Gong Show* is also continuing.

In the decade that the Prime Minister has been at the helm, he has gutted health care and national defence, and yet is now spending \$6.5 billion per year on consulting contracts for firms like Earncliffe. That is the equivalent of the taxes from all the taxpayers of New Brunswick.

Why does the Prime Minister value funding consultants ahead of funding things like health care and national defence?

Right Hon. Paul Martin (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member might want to take a look at some of the speeches he made in the House and some of the policies that he endorsed in the Reform Party, in terms of the drastic scorched earth policies he recommended in health care and scorched earth policies in our transfers to the provinces. If it were up to that member, we would have withdrawn from the entire Canada health policy. That is what he is doing.

In terms of his question, this is one of the areas at which the President of the Treasury Board is looking. We are on top of the situation.

* * *

ETHICS

Mr. Stephen Harper (Leader of the Opposition, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canadians will understand that the Prime Minister attacks me because he cannot defend his own record.

Oral Questions

We have a government mired in scandal and corruption, yet still unable to follow even the most basic ethical guidelines. Cabinet ministers and parliamentary secretaries had 120 days after being appointed to file asset declarations, yet six ministers and nine parliamentary secretaries failed to comply with conflict of interest guidelines.

Why is the Prime Minister unable to enforce even his most minimum ethical standards on his own cabinet?

Right Hon. Paul Martin (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I can assure the hon. member that every member of our cabinet and every parliamentary secretary is very conscious of the need to follow the highest ethical standards.

The reason that I attack the hon. member's record is because he is desperately trying to hide it. The fact is it is a matter of public record. It is in *Hansard*. Canadians will certainly know about it if they do not know about it now.

* * *

PUBLIC SERVICE

Mr. Stephen Harper (Leader of the Opposition, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canadians will also be looking for those asset declarations conforming with conflict of interest guidelines, if they actually exist, for this cabinet.

We have a government notable for widespread mismanagement and incompetence, yet nothing changes. The President of the Treasury Board said last year, "My God, if 96% of executives are getting merit pay to reward superior performance, then obviously something is wrong". Yet this year the government rewarded 93% of executives with bonuses. Nothing has changed.

Does the Prime Minister really think this is the way to clean up his mess?

Hon. Denis Coderre (President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada, Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, Minister responsible for la Francophonie and Minister responsible for the Office of Indian Residential Schools Resolution, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, now it is bureaucrat bashing. They are doing a tremendous job. We have one of the toughest, and we should be proud of our bureaucrats.

* * *

● (1420)

GOVERNMENT CONTRACTS

Mr. Peter MacKay (Pictou—Antigonish—Guysborough, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that is a far cry from the rogue bureaucrat label the Prime Minister thrust upon us.

The Prime Minister can make all kinds of wild allegations about what people said when they were in opposition. This Prime Minister has been there for a decade. During that time as finance minister, he hammered health care, he cut defence, he opposed student debt initiatives and waffled on parliamentary reform, all the while his government had consulting contracts that hit a whopping \$6.5 billion.

Does this not show that the Prime Minister's real priorities are to funnel money to Liberal friendly firms, not to meet the needs of average Canadians?

Hon. Reg Alcock (President of the Treasury Board and Minister responsible for the Canadian Wheat Board, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the question. The reality is that this side of the House does not make accusations or decisions absence evidence. Ever since my assuming the role of President of the Treasury Board, we have been examining each one of these. We have announced a series of reviews in the budget, looking at each one of these elements. We will come forward with evidence upon which we will make responsible policy choices.

Mr. Peter MacKay (Pictou—Antigonish—Guysborough, CPC): Allegations, Mr. Speaker, this coming from the minister who made something up on national television. It is a virtual black hole on that side of the House when it comes to fiscal management.

At the end of the week, Canadians are going to have to file their income tax—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh.

The Speaker: Order, please. I am sure the hon. member for Pictou—Antigonish—Guysborough appreciates all the help with his question, but we do have to be able to hear what he has to say. He has the floor.

Mr. Peter MacKay: Mr. Speaker, at the end of this week, Canadians are going to have to file their income tax, and at the same time they can watch members live at the public accounts committee trying to explain how over \$100 million of their hard-earned tax money has gone missing.

The government is consulting firms at the rate of \$6.5 billion a year. The government is looking for a fourth mandate. Why all the waste?

Hon. Reg Alcock (President of the Treasury Board and Minister responsible for the Canadian Wheat Board, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as I said, if the member for incomplete documents would have examined those consulting contracts, he would have found things like the service contracts for doctors who serve children in the north. He would have found contracts with engineers who look at rebuilding infrastructure across the country. He would have found contracts for information technology. These are good solid service contracts going to Canadians to provide services to Canadians.

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[Translation]

NATIONAL UNITY FUND

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, thanks to the media but no thanks to the government's bad faith, the amounts granted and the events funded by the national unity fund since 2000, to the tune of \$300 million, are now public knowledge. Unfortunately, we still do not know how much money was spent between 1992 and 2000, including during the referendum period.

Oral Questions

Since all the information after 2000 is contained on a single sheet of paper, what is the Prime Minister waiting for to make the other pages public, if transparency truly is his goal?

Right Hon. Paul Martin (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the government has already said that it is certainly prepared to make public all this information as soon as the list is complete. We simply do not want to give information bit by bit. We want the information to be complete. When it is, it will be made public.

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, it is complete, the figures for six years are on a single page, and the same goes for the rest of it too. That is why the Bloc did not take any chances when told that this information was going to be made public within 48 hours. We applied for access to information on March 25, and were told by the Privy Council yesterday that further consultations needed to be held for another month before documents that already exist could be made public.

Instead of inventing reasons to delay, could the government at least be honest enough to admit that its true intention is to disclose nothing at all? That is the truth.

Hon. Pierre Pettigrew (Minister of Health, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs and Minister responsible for Official Languages, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister was very clear. This information will be provided as soon as it has been compiled. We do not want to provide information bit by bit. We want to provide a complete list that includes all the projects.

It would be useful for the Bloc members to explain their objections to the use of these emergency funds. Do they have something against the Games of La Francophonie or the world track and field championships? Do they have something against national parks and historic sites? Do they have something against the Year of La Francophonie in Canada?

Mr. Michel Gauthier (Roberval, BQ): Mr. Speaker, like everyone else, I am very interested in knowing that the Minister of Health does have the list. That is what we want. Let him table that list. If one wants to be transparent, then one provides information. He does have it, so let him produce it.

With my question, he will know what we object to. We would like to know whether the \$4.8 million for Option Canada, money which has to all intents and purposes disappeared, came from the \$85 million spent in a certain year. The Auditor General tells us that neither its source nor its destination was known. What we want to know is whether it came from that budget.

• (1425)

Hon. Pierre Pettigrew (Minister of Health, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs and Minister responsible for Official Languages, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, like everyone else in this House, I have access to this very clear information on projects funded from that contingency reserve. When the compilation is complete, it will be made public.

In the meantime, the Bloc Quebecois has access to partial information, as do we. I find it most interesting that the Bloc Quebecois would be opposed to supporting francophone minorities, to the summer second language bursary program, to the Katimavik program, to promoting human rights—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Roberval.

Mr. Michel Gauthier (Roberval, BQ): Really, Mr. Speaker, this is a pitiful show. The Minister of Health is a pitiful sight.

I will give him an example. As far as the vanished \$4.8 million is concerned, all the Prime Minister has to do is pick up the phone and call his buddy Claude Dauphin in Quebec City, who was his right hand man and the head of Option Canada, and ask him the source of the \$4.8 million, and particularly what was done with it, since this is taxpayers' money. That is what we want to know, and he must be capable of doing that.

Hon. Pierre Pettigrew (Minister of Health, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs and Minister responsible for Official Languages, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as soon as the compilation is complete, the House will be informed of it, of course.

What I can say is this. When we fund organizations like Katimavik, we are doing a service for a very large number of young Canadians, including many young Quebecers, who have benefited from this opportunity for magnificent experiences all over the world. We have helped make a very large number of solid investments in our communities throughout the country.

So, rather than discredit all Canadian government contributions, they ought to note the help that has been given to a very large number of Canadians.

* * *

[English]

GENERAL ELECTION

Hon. Bill Blaikie (Winnipeg—Transcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the right hon. Prime Minister. Does the Prime Minister not find it unseemly and contrary to his obvious concern about the democratic deficit to keep the country and Parliament dangling as to when the election will be called?

Does the Prime Minister not think he owes it to the country to tell us either when the election will be or agree to the motion to have fixed dates for elections so this kind of charade never ever happens again?

Right Hon. Paul Martin (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the government's main concentration, objective, at the present time is the good governance of Canada. It is within that context that I want to congratulate the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness for the very important national security document she submitted today.

That is what governing is all about. It is about facing up to the fundamental challenges which the country faces. It is about coming up with a policy that is thorough and comprehensive, which is actually what the Deputy Prime Minister did today.

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NATIONAL DEFENCE

Hon. Bill Blaikie (Winnipeg—Transcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I do not know whether that means the Prime Minister has made up his mind between governing and campaigning because he has not really seemed to have been able to do that lately.

*Oral Questions***GOVERNMENT CONTRACTS**

However, he referred to the document released today. In that document it just so happens that Canada's "longstanding opposition to the weaponization of space" is reaffirmed.

When the Prime Minister meets with President Bush in a very short period of time from now, will he be reiterating Canada's opposition to the weaponization of space and therefore our opposition to the national missile defence system proposed by the United States?

Right Hon. Paul Martin (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Canada's position is unequivocal, and I will repeat it wherever I happen to be. Canada is opposed to the weaponization of space.

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PUBLIC SERVICE

Mr. Paul Forseth (New Westminster—Coquitlam—Burnaby, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the President of the Treasury Board. Before he was minister, he was very critical of the performance pay scheme. He previously said that doling out the so-called bonuses to nearly everyone just perpetuated mediocrity.

What happened since he became minister? Why has there been no change to the system?

• (1430)

Hon. Reg Alcock (President of the Treasury Board and Minister responsible for the Canadian Wheat Board, Lib.): Well, Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the question because the member has been deeply interested in the machinery of government. However, I can assure him that, once I became President of the Treasury Board, we launched nine studies of the operations of government, the most comprehensive review of the operations of government, I think, maybe in the history of the government.

Compensation is one of these. We are looking at all aspects of it. We will come forward, including coming forward to the committee of which he is a member, with some facts. On those facts, we can make sound policy choices.

Mr. Paul Forseth (New Westminster—Coquitlam—Burnaby, CPC): Mr. Speaker, performance bonuses should be a reward for improved management. The present system has deteriorated into things like ad scam, HRDC, public works and so on.

Could the minister promise that he will put real evaluation in place so that the results show that pay is truly earned instead of granted, and where we have real incentives instead of just expected reward?

Hon. Denis Coderre (President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada, Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, Minister responsible for la Francophonie and Minister responsible for the Office of Indian Residential Schools Resolution, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we have to clear here. First, if we look, the government implemented the performance management program for executives as a management best practice, on the advice of an independent advisory group.

When we look at what is going on in the private sector, this is exactly the same thing. It is 93.4% in the public service and it is 93% in the private sector. Therefore, we have to be very careful. We are proud of our bureaucrats. They are doing a tremendous job, and it is based on an independent advisory group.

Mr. Jason Kenney (Calgary Southeast, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the *Toronto Star* today reveals that the government is spending \$6.5 billion on outside consultants.

We know there is a revolving door between the PMO and the consulting and lobbying world. Indeed, the Prime Minister's staff is groaning under the weight of so many lobbyists and consultants.

Will the Prime Minister explain to Canadians just how much of the \$6.5 billion being spent by his government on consultants is ending up in the deep pockets of his good friends over at the Earncliffe lobby group?

Hon. Stephen Owen (Minister of Public Works and Government Services, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as the Prime Minister said last week, all the contracts that have been awarded to Earncliffe or any company providing services to the government are either already in the public domain or accessible for review.

I would suggest that the hon. member check with www.contractsCanada.gc.ca, type in Earncliffe and he will have all the information for which he is looking.

Mr. Jason Kenney (Calgary Southeast, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that is what the Prime Minister said about the handouts to his shipping empire and he fudged the numbers on that. That is what the President of the Treasury Board said about the unity fund. He said that it was in the public accounts but he still has not been able to furnish the numbers. In fact, the minister made up a \$13 million accounting study that did not exist.

Instead of hiding behind the government accounts, why does the government not come clean with Canadians about how many of the 6.5 billion tax dollars being wasted on consultants are going to Liberal friends at the Prime Minister's firm?

Hon. Stephen Owen (Minister of Public Works and Government Services, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, if the hon. member has a specific accusation to make, let him make it. If he is just going on a fishing expedition, I would suggest he go to Contracts Canada's website at www.contractsCanada.gc.ca and the information will be there. If then he has a specific question to ask, we would be happy to answer it.

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[Translation]

NATIONAL DEFENCE

Ms. Francine Lalonde (Mercier, BQ): Mr. Speaker, we have learned that there will be no discussion of the missile defence shield when the Prime Minister meets President Bush, because, apparently, it is an embarrassing topic.

Can the Prime Minister confirm whether it is true that this important issue will not be discussed during this meeting?

Oral Questions

Hon. Bill Graham (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is clear to the House that we are discussing the concept of the missile defence shield with the Americans in order to provide security for all of North America. This security would be in the best interest of Canada and all Canadians. We will not sign any treaties that do not ensure Canada's safety and are not in Canada's interest.

Ms. Francine Lalonde (Mercier, BQ): Mr. Speaker, when one is prime minister and has important problems like the missile defence shield, the St. Lawrence Seaway, softwood lumber and mad cow, and when one lets it be understood that during a visit to the very important President of the United States we should not expect to see any of these issues settled, one ought not to be surprised that the people are asking just what the Prime Minister is going to Washington for. Is it to have his picture taken with President Bush?

• (1435)

Right Hon. Paul Martin (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, there is no doubt that the issues of mad cow disease and softwood lumber are two subjects we will discuss in depth and, of course, we will go as far as we can with these topics. At the same time, we will talk about other subjects such as energy and the environment. We will also talk about Canada's role in the war on terrorism and about the very important document tabled by the Deputy Prime Minister.

And I should at least thank the hon. member for having raised the question of—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Rosemont—Petite-Patrie.

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ST. LAWRENCE SEAWAY

Mr. Bernard Bigras (Rosemont—Petite-Patrie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, Liberal candidates have said that the Bloc Québécois is over-reacting when we voice our concerns about the possible expansion of the St. Lawrence Seaway. Yet, a study by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers identifies five possible options.

How can the Prime Minister and his team say that we are being alarmist when three of the five options propose dredging the St. Lawrence Seaway to allow Panamax ships to pass through?

[*English*]

Hon. Tony Valeri (Minister of Transport, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as I have said in the past, it is certainly clear that the seaway is aging and the costs of infrastructure are rising. It is important that the seaway remain economically viable. The joint study will assess the ongoing maintenance needs to sustain the existing seaway infrastructure. This study will not, and I emphasize will not, consider major infrastructure modifications such as the expansion of the seaway.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bernard Bigras (Rosemont—Petite-Patrie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, if dredging the St. Lawrence is not part of the Prime Minister's plans, will he pledge in this House to so inform President Bush and to tell him that there is no question of the Canadian government approving a plan to dredge the St. Lawrence to allow large Panamax ships to pass through?

[*English*]

Hon. Tony Valeri (Minister of Transport, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, this joint study essentially deals with the maintenance issues that are

required to ensure that the seaway remains economically viable, which is what we need to ensure an effective seaway. It is important economically to this country. It is important to marine trade. It is important to ensure that we can meet our trade obligations on a north-south basis, and that is what this study is about.

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SOFTWOOD LUMBER

Mr. Charlie Penson (Peace River, CPC): Mr. Speaker, when the Prime Minister travels to Washington, Canadians working in the softwood lumber industry will be looking for strong leadership in this longstanding dispute.

The Prime Minister knows that both NAFTA and the World Trade Organization have clear rules in place to settle disputes such as softwood lumber.

Would the Prime Minister pledge to the House that he will not agree to any softwood lumber deal that would make the U.S. Department of Commerce judge and jury over our forest management policy in Canada?

Hon. Jim Peterson (Minister of International Trade, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the question from the hon. member. He asked the same question last week.

What we are doing is working with all the stakeholders here in Canada to get a prevailing view as to what type of counter offer we should make to the United States, including the method of determining changed circumstances in terms of forest practices. At the same time we will pursue our litigious route.

Mr. Charlie Penson (Peace River, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the minister tells us again today what he told us last Friday, that there is no prevailing view in Canada as to what type of negotiated settlement would be acceptable.

Surely the Prime Minister understands that there are basic sovereign rights that cannot be put on the table in this discussion with the United States.

Why can the Prime Minister not stand today and state clearly that giving the Americans veto power over Canadian resource policy is unacceptable and not negotiable?

Hon. Jim Peterson (Minister of International Trade, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, how could a negotiated settlement, agreed to by the prevailing industry view here in Canada and by the provinces, cede our sovereignty? It is an agreement.

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AGRICULTURE

Mr. Gerry Ritz (Battlefords—Lloydminster, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Agriculture returned empty-handed from his last sojourn to Washington. We know he is talking with Secretary Veneman but aside from some proposed changes in regulation, we see literally no movement on the big issue, getting that border open.

Will the minister assure Canadian livestock producers that he will not come back from Washington without a firm date on when that border will be open to live trade?

•(1440)

Hon. Bob Speller (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as the hon. member said, the Government of Canada is deeply committed to getting the border open. Officials from my department and from the Canadian Food Inspection Agency have worked closely and tirelessly with their American counterparts to develop a North American approach to this issue.

I will be meeting with Secretary Veneman again. In fact I just got off the phone with her 10 minutes ago. I am continuing to work with her to ensure the border is opened as soon as possible.

Mr. Gerry Ritz (Battlefords—Lloydminster, CPC): Mr. Speaker, livestock producers need to see some sort of a plan to see an end to this trade dispute. We are not sending the minister down there to hold the towels while the big boys use the executive washroom.

In light of a recent federal judge's decision in Montana to hold up Canadian beef again, how can the minister think he is making any real progress on convincing the Americans that we have a continental beef industry?

Hon. Bob Speller (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member should know that was a legal decision made in the United States by a U.S. judge. We are looking now at the options that we have. What that shows to us is the importance of getting the border open and getting it opened as soon as possible.

I can assure all hon. members that the government will not give up on the farmers and farm families across the country who depend on that border being open.

* * *

[Translation]

HEALTH

Hon. Don Boudria (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, many Canadians are concerned about the export of drugs to the United States over the Internet. A large delegation of health representatives went to Washington to talk about this a few days ago.

When will the Minister of Health put an end to this practice, which could create a drug shortage in Canada, not to mention endanger the health of Americans?

Hon. Pierre Pettigrew (Minister of Health, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs and Minister responsible for Official Languages, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, to date, virtual pharmacies have not prevented any Canadians from having access to drugs. We continue to make sure that all Canadian pharmacies, even virtual pharmacies, are complying with the Food and Drug Act and all its regulations.

Health Canada will continue to work together with the provinces and territories to better understand the possible impact of cross-border trade in prescription drugs.

Oral Questions

[English]

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Mr. Pat Martin (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, on June 9, 2003, the former minister of Indian affairs told the House that he was within days of signing a final land agreement with the Lubicon Lake Indian Nation.

A lot of days have passed since then and still the impoverished Lubicon Cree are waiting for justice and fairness.

Will the Prime Minister assure the House that finally he will fulfill his government's promise and conclude the Lubicon land agreement in good faith and with no further delays from his government?

Hon. Andy Mitchell (Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, during the last five years there have been intense negotiations with the Lubicon trying to reach an agreement.

Good progress has been made but, unfortunately, there are still some unresolved issues. We intend to re-engage the Lubicon after its band election at the end of the month. We will work hard to resolve those issues and reach an agreement.

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FISHERIES AND OCEANS

Ms. Alexa McDonough (Halifax, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans.

Sable Island is a treasured part of my Halifax riding and is well-known as a safe haven for wild horses, whales, seals and birds, and is a base for fishery, coast guard and industry vessels.

Less well-known are the concerns about the future of Sable based research projects on the impact of pollution, atmospheric conditions, global warming and oil and gas development.

On Friday, together with the NDP fisheries critic, I will visit Sable Island. I want to know whether the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans will join us on that Sable Island visit.

Hon. Geoff Regan (Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for her interest in Sable Island and its importance, which I share. I appreciate the fact that she is aware of the important research being done there.

In fact, I tried to go Sable Island earlier this year but the weather would not allow it. I hope to go sometime, although Friday is not possible for me. However I appreciate the invitation.

*Oral Questions***PUBLIC SAFETY**

Mr. Kevin Sorenson (Crowfoot, CPC): Mr. Speaker, CSIS does not have the ability or the capacity to collect intelligence abroad. According to many security and intelligence experts, including a former PCO deputy clerk and coordinator for security and intelligence, this needs to be changed.

Furthermore, a federal study concluded that Canada needs overseas units to intercept criminals.

Why is the Minister of Public Safety refusing to expand the mandate of CSIS to operate abroad?

• (1445)

Hon. Anne McLellan (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is important to clarify for Canadians that CSIS does collect and always has collected information abroad.

I think the question that we as Canadians and parliamentarians need to address is whether we are, in this world that has changed radically since September 11, collecting enough intelligence and the right kind of intelligence. Those are the kinds of questions that I hope parliamentarians will address.

We tabled a national security policy today, the first ever integrated security policy. I think these are exactly the kind of questions we—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Crowfoot.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson (Crowfoot, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in the wake of 9/11, both a former RCMP commissioner and a former deputy director of CSIS recommended that the CSIS Act be revamped. Both these security experts claim that CSIS does not have the legal capacity to collect foreign intelligence.

Again, why is the Minister of Public Safety refusing to listen to these experts and why is she refusing to give CSIS the power to operate abroad?

Hon. Anne McLellan (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as I said, CSIS does operate abroad. It has the ability to operate abroad and collect intelligence in relation to any threat to Canadian security.

The Prime Minister has raised the question of whether we need to collect more foreign intelligence. The Minister of National Defence, in his former capacity, raised that question.

In the national security policy released today we talk about the fact that some of the questions we need to address as we move forward are the amount of intelligence, the kind of intelligence and whether we need to look at new mechanisms by which to collect foreign intelligence.

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PORT SECURITY

Mr. Norman Doyle (St. John's East, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canada, the U.S. and other marine countries have to comply with a new international ship and port facility security code by July 1.

The U.S. government has given port operators nearly \$700 million to improve security measures.

To the best of our knowledge, this government has not provided any money to maritime industry stakeholders to protect Canada's ports. Could the minister tell us why?

Hon. Tony Valeri (Minister of Transport, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased with the new integrated approach to national security that was announced today by the Deputy Prime Minister.

The Government of Canada is strengthening our ability for surveillance, for co-ordinated on-water response. The ISP code, which we will meet on July 1, complements the strategy that has been laid out here. The code that we will put in place will meet and in fact exceed the international marine standard. We will have a North American standard. We will be there to assist our ports and our port facilities.

Mr. Norman Doyle (St. John's East, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the RCMP have been assigned to police only the three ports of Montreal, Halifax and Vancouver. There is no new money being allocated for additional port security. The RCMP will patrol only these three ports but the rest of Canada will be protected by commissionaires.

Why are Canadians being left unprotected?

Hon. Tony Valeri (Minister of Transport, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Canadians are not being left unprotected. In fact, I would dispute that 100%.

The security of marine facilities is an important component of the national security policy. I will certainly be in a position to provide further details in the days to come. It continues to be a key priority in the overall transportation security.

I am committed to working together with our stakeholders in all modes to identify areas where improvements are needed and improvements are necessary. We will be there for our port facilities in the days and weeks to come.

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[Translation]

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Mr. Jean-Yves Roy (Matapédia—Matane, BQ): Mr. Speaker, yesterday, in reply to my question, the Minister of Natural Resources said, and I quote: "The truth is that the unemployment rate has dropped in the region. It is about 8%...". The fact is that the unemployment rate in the Lower St. Lawrence is 11.8%; in the North Shore region it is 15.9%; and in the Gaspé it stands at 18.3%. This is far from the 8% figure provided by the minister.

How can the Minister of Natural Resources and Skills Development arrive at realistic solutions that address the real issues when he is demonstrating, through his answers, his incompetence and his ignorance?

Hon. Joseph Volpe (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as I said yesterday, I am in the process of examining the recommendations of Liberal colleagues who have formed a task force to review the conditions affecting the unemployed in the regions.

I will make the appropriate decisions once I have reviewed these recommendations.

•(1450)

Mr. Jean-Yves Roy (Matapédia—Matane, BQ): Mr. Speaker, instead of showing his ignorance, what is the minister waiting for to implement the unanimous recommendations made by the Standing Committee on Human Resources Development in its May 2001 report on employment insurance?

We do not need another committee; we already have the answers. We have been waiting for three years.

Hon. Joseph Volpe (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is not Bloc Québécois members who determine the government's agenda. They are unable to make positive recommendations.

Therefore, I will listen to my colleagues from the Liberal task force, who will make appropriate recommendations.

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[English]

SUPREME COURT OF CANADA

Mrs. Diane Ablonczy (Calgary—Nose Hill, CPC): Mr. Speaker, for all his huffing and puffing about the democratic deficit, the Prime Minister's words have turned out to be completely empty. He said in a 2002 Osgoode Hall speech:

—we must establish a process that ensures broad and open consideration of proposed candidates.

That is just hot air because today we learn he will not even let Canadians know the background of candidates for the Supreme Court.

Why does the Prime Minister continually break his promises?

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister has fulfilled his promise to have a parliamentary review and that process is underway. That process does not yet allow for the exposure of private confidences which still remain protected. If a recommendation is made otherwise out of that parliamentary review process, we will respond to it.

Mrs. Diane Ablonczy (Calgary—Nose Hill, CPC): Mr. Speaker, how open is it when Canadians cannot even know about the candidates for the Supreme Court? The background is hidden and the minister refuses to give it out in public.

The Prime Minister clings to this same old secretive process that has always been in place. He has had years to come up with a broad and open process. How does the Prime Minister explain his complete failure to keep his commitment?

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in my capacity as Minister of Justice I appeared before the justice and human rights committee and shared with that committee the protocol with respect to the appointments process. For the first time we revealed how comprehensive is the nature of consultations. We look forward to the report of the committee as to any further recommendations it may wish to make.

Oral Questions

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Mr. Bryon Wilfert (Oak Ridges, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

The Chinese national people's congress standing committee has stated universal suffrage will not apply for 2007 for the Hong Kong special administrative region. In 1997 Beijing promised autonomy: one country, two systems. This decision goes against that pledge.

Since Canada has championed and supported this approach, what representations will Canada make to ensure that China fulfills its obligations?

Hon. Bill Graham (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for Oak Ridges for his question and his interest on this important subject.

We have always made it very clear that we believe that the people of Hong Kong should determine the political structure which is most suited to their needs in accordance with the democratic objectives which are laid down in the basic law.

We urge the Chinese authorities to ensure that the power to interpret the basic law will not be used to prevent political evolution in Hong Kong in accordance with the wishes and democratic aspirations of the people of Hong Kong. We will convey that message to all Chinese authorities at the appropriate meetings.

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WHISTLEBLOWER LEGISLATION

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Carleton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today Ralph Heintzman, the government's top official on the whistleblower file, is reported as saying that Bill C-25 is not a whistleblower protection act at all. He says it is actually an internal disclosure bill designed to impose penalties on whistleblowers in order to prevent departmental reputations from being publicly tarnished. Moreover, Mr. Heintzman feels, as Martha Stewart would put it, that "that's a good thing".

My question is does the President of the Privy Council agree, and can he explain how the act of reporting confidentially to the public sector Integrity Commissioner could publicly tarnish any reputations?

[Translation]

Hon. Denis Coderre (President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada, Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, Minister responsible for la Francophonie and Minister responsible for the Office of Indian Residential Schools Resolution, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, first, I want clarify what Ralph Heintzman simply wanted to say, which is that the system that we want to put in place will be used to deal with the situation internally. He never said that it was something else.

This is an act to protect whistleblowers. We want to ensure that it is an inclusive measure that strikes a balance between the importance of protecting whistleblowers and the need to be able to prevent frivolous actions. I am confident that we can move forward very quickly with this legislation.

Oral Questions

● (1455)

[English]

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Carleton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, prominent whistleblower advocate Ken Rubin said yesterday that the whistleblower legislation, Bill C-25, was a cruel and contemptuous hoax that would accelerate distrust and intimidation, and would end up hurting public employees turned whistleblowers who were doing their jobs.

One reason the bill is so bad is that clause 15 says that “No person shall take any reprisal against a public servant”; however, the bill imposes no penalties whatsoever for violations of this provision.

Will the minister commit today to imposing penalties for the violation of those rights?

Hon. Denis Coderre (President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada, Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, Minister responsible for la Francophonie and Minister responsible for the Office of Indian Residential Schools Resolution, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, first of all, instead of reading all those papers, the member should read the bill. I think it is more important to take a look at the clause itself. He should take a look at clause 9.

Second, what I promoted since the beginning is to ensure that not only he reads the bill, but participates fully in the standing committee because this is a great piece of work. We believe that we can be flexible. If there are good amendments, I would be more than pleased to listen to them.

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*[Translation]***TAXATION**

Mr. Pierre Paquette (Joliette, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the Léonard report released yesterday shows that between 1994-95 and 2002-03, the federal government's revenues increased by 45% and its operating expenses by 39%. During the same period, the federal government's transfers to Quebec—to fund health and education—decreased by 7.6%.

Faced with such shocking figures, can the Prime Minister deny that all those years when he was finance minister, he was the prime architect of the fiscal imbalance with which Quebec and the provinces must deal now?

[English]

Hon. John McKay (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in the last fiscal year for which figures are available, 2003, the Government of Canada generated revenues of \$177 billion and the provinces received \$166 billion including tax points.

Once the transfers are done, the provinces have just over \$200 billion and the federal government is down to \$140-odd billion. The federal government, however, is still left with 22¢ on every dollar for debt reduction where the provinces have 11¢ on every dollar.

Therefore, if there is a fiscal imbalance, it is the other way.

IMMIGRATION

Mr. Sarkis Assadourian (Brampton Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration.

In light of the Prime Minister's visit to the United States, will the minister report to the House on the progress of discussions with U.S. authorities in regard to creation of a safe third country agreement with the U.S. regarding refugees coming from the U.S.A.?

Hon. Judy Sgro (Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Citizenship and Immigration Canada and the U.S. have both published the draft regulations. We are awaiting comment back and we are looking forward to implementation before the end of the year. It is a very important piece of legislation that is going to improve the safety of both the U.S. and Canada.

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*[Translation]***CANADA LABOUR CODE**

Ms. Monique Guay (Laurentides, BQ): Mr. Speaker, pregnant and nursing women who work under Quebec legislation and stop working for preventive reasons, are paid 90% of their salary, while women who work under federal legislation receive only 55% through employment insurance, if they are eligible, which is not the case for two thirds of them. The Liberal way of doing things simply creates two classes of workers in Quebec and endangers the health of women and their children.

Why does the Minister of Labour insist on encouraging such an injustice against pregnant and nursing women in Quebec?

Hon. Joseph Volpe (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in reality, 84% to 88% of workers who are eligible can receive the necessary benefits, but, unfortunately, only if they lose their jobs. There are successful situations too. One has to realize that many more women are working today than before. This is something quite positive that perhaps the Bloc cannot—

● (1500)

The Speaker: The hon. member for Windsor—St. Clair.

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*[English]***THE ENVIRONMENT**

Mr. Joe Comartin (Windsor—St. Clair, NDP): Mr. Speaker, last week the Ontario College of Family Physicians released a report on pesticides. The report found that exposure to pesticides caused acute health risks to adults and children, as well as potentially deadly impacts on fetal development. According to Health Canada, pesticides cannot be registered if they have the potential to cause birth defects. We now know that is clearly the case.

Given this evidence, will the government move immediately to ban pesticides and implement a specific ban on their cosmetic use?

Supply

Hon. Pierre Pettigrew (Minister of Health, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs and Minister responsible for Official Languages, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, before a pesticide is registered in Canada, detailed studies must be conducted to assess potential long term adverse effects on all systems, as well as potential, acute and short term effects.

The agency carries out a rigorous scientific assessment of these studies to ensure that pesticides, when used according to the label, do not pose a health or environmental risk for Canadians. No pesticide is allowed to be used or sold in Canada when it is determined to pose unacceptable risks to human health or the environment.

The Speaker: We have now concluded the list, therefore question period is over for today.

The hon. member for New Westminster—Coquitlam—Burnaby on a point of order.

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POINTS OF ORDER

HON. MEMBER FOR NEW WESTMINSTER—COQUITLAM—BURNABY

Mr. Paul Forseth (New Westminster—Coquitlam—Burnaby, CPC): Mr. Speaker, further to a matter that came up yesterday and to a conversation that I had with you in chambers, I wish first of all to apologize for expanding the envelope of the rules of this House and going against them.

Second, I would like to say I will make a commitment about cooperation with our rules. As parliamentarians we make those rules and then we elect you to enforce those rules, Mr. Speaker, so there should be cooperation and not any appearance of unilateralism to change those rules.

Third, I had some images on a digital camera and I wish to assure the House that I have erased those images.

In summary, I would say there is an apology, there is a commitment to cooperation, and I have described the subsequent action.

The Speaker: I thank the hon. member for New Westminster—Coquitlam—Burnaby for his compliance with the practices of the House. I believe that will therefore conclude this matter.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[English]

SUPPLY

ALLOTTED DAY—GENERAL ELECTIONS

The House resumed consideration of the motion and of the amendment.

Mr. Jim Abbott (Kootenay—Columbia, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will be splitting my time with the member for Athabasca.

I have listened to the debate today and it has been quite informative to watch the Liberals hoist with their own petard. They have been saying that this would totally revolutionize this place, that somehow we would come under the spell of George Bush and his

terrible hordes from the United States, that truly the marines would come.

I can advise the federal Liberals that it has not happened to Gordon Campbell. Gordon Campbell, the premier of British Columbia, decided to do what was in the best interests of the people of British Columbia. He took the initiative for the people of British Columbia that we have been proposing for the people of Canada. He actually set a fixed election date. The sky did not fall. The troops did not come in from Port Angeles. No, indeed, nobody particularly paid any attention.

To suggest that what the Conservative Party motion is recommending, setting a fixed election date in Canada, would somehow be totally revolutionary, that it would end our British parliamentary system and all of the affects of our British parliamentary system, is specious on the part of the Liberals.

We do recognize, at least I recognize, that there would be some substantial changes. A couple of the changes would lie in the area of a change in the cycle of how politics is done in Canada. By going to a fixed election date means that effectively, the province of British Columbia is in the process of getting ready for and campaigning for the entire legislative cycle of the British Columbia government. It is focused on the fact that it will be going to the people on May 17, 2005.

I also point out that the opposition party in the province of Manitoba, the Progressive Conservative Party, is also proposing a fixed election date.

It is very important to note that as a result of a fixed election date basically what would happen is there would be a loss of advantage to the premier in the case of the provinces, and to the prime minister in the case of Canada. Of course, in the case of a loss of advantage to the Prime Minister, he needs every advantage that he can possibly get.

I should also note that we have a model of success for what is set out in the motion by the official opposition. It did not bring the end of the British parliamentary tradition or system in Australia in the state of New South Wales nor in the state of Victoria.

As a matter of fact, I can report that in Australia, the New South Wales parliament has a fixed four year term. This is going to be earth shattering for my federal Liberal friends on the other side, but the next election will be on Saturday, March 24, 2007. Believe it or not, that has not brought the British parliamentary system to its knees in Australia.

Further, the state of Victoria, with the passage of historic parliamentary and electoral reforms in March 2003, now has four year fixed terms for both houses. The next election will be held on Saturday, November 26, 2006. This is really quite amazing. I do not think its government has fallen, nor has it seen the U.S. marines on its shores.

It is just a little bit facetious, particularly for some of the members on the other side of the House, to try to indicate that this House would fall, that somehow the British parliamentary system under which we work would be severely damaged and somehow democracy simply would not work.

Supply

In fact, we could listen to another Liberal, a person who has been referred to a couple times in the debate today, our friend Mr. Tom Kent. I will repeat what he said in January of this year.

● (1505)

He said:

The fount of authority is the prime minister's power to dissolve Parliament when he chooses—a fearsome discipline over his own party. The even greater offence to democracy is that other parties are put at a serious disadvantage, as they cannot be sure when and on what issue or pretext an election will be called. Will [the Prime Minister] free Parliament from arbitrary dissolution? That would indeed shift the balance of power, away from the “command-and-control systems of central authority” and toward a democracy that better reflects “the views of citizens and communities”.

That is what Tom Kent said and it is what we say. I submit that is what a majority of Canadians, who are sick and tired of being held hostage by the Prime Minister in setting the election date, would also say.

There are certain efficiencies that would occur, recognizing that there are certain costs and indeed other consequences that would flow from setting a fixed election date.

As I alluded to a couple of minutes ago, when we go through a life of a Parliament there is a phase when the government basically does all the housecleaning, does all the bad things that need to happen in the first year.

In the second year, the government tinkers around and makes sure things get repaired, that they are in better repair. The government is still working at correcting the situation.

Normally in the third year the government starts the process of putting things back together so it appears to be a lot better to the electorate.

In the fourth year, as in the case of the present federal Liberal government, it has been doling out about \$1 billion in lollies to constituencies it is concerned about possibly losing.

That is the normal cycle. Unfortunately it is a cynical description of the cycle, but that is the normal cycle of events.

The difference with the present government, with the party that will be going for its fourth term at some time we know not when, in the first three incarnations, in 1993 then prime minister Jean Chrétien came to office with all sorts of ideas about how he would correct things and how things would be far more responsive.

We then arrived at a point when in his best judgment it was in the interests of himself and of the federal Liberals to not wait until the fourth year. Instead he got on with doling out all the lolly and then he went to the people in 1997 for absolutely no good reason. In 2000, after only three years in office, the government went back to the people of Canada for another mandate.

Then there was the Liberal leadership shemozzle. From that we have the incarnation of the new Prime Minister who now says, “Gee, maybe I will have an election, or maybe I will not have an election”.

What that is all about is the federal Liberal Party has had its hand caught in the cookie jar over the ad scam scandal. As a consequence, the Prime Minister is now choosing to delay and effectively hold the

people of Canada ransom while he takes a look at all the opinion polls. This is a shameful way for any new prime minister who continues to lead the tired, old federal Liberals to treat the people of Canada.

Let us look at what this means in the actual election cycle. I am going to run again to hopefully succeed myself in the riding of Kootenay—Columbia.

Kootenay—Columbia is a very large riding. I am fortunate to have 1,200 members in my constituency organization, most of whom are very dedicated, hardworking people. They are completely committed to keeping the representation in this Chamber from that constituency in the hands of a party and a party representative who will take the information from the constituency and bring it to this place. They are prepared to work.

● (1510)

But we do not know if or when there is going to be an election. As a consequence, what do we do about headquarters as far as having a campaign office is concerned? What do we do about installing telephones? What do we do about acquiring printing and signs? There are all sorts of things involved in the election process.

This is true not only for me. Amazingly, it is also true for the federal Liberals who have been selected by their party and will be running. Their members are in exactly the same bind of trying to figure out whether or not to take summer holidays or whether they should have a coffee party or a barbecue.

What kind of efficiency does this create for people in Canada who are very interested in the democratic process but who do not get involved? This kind of shilly-shallying and sidestepping by the current Prime Minister effectively means that Canadians who would normally be interested in becoming involved in the electoral process are not getting involved. They are saying, “I don't know what's going to happen and I don't know when it's going to happen”, and it leads to the level of cynicism that only this kind of game-playing by the Prime Minister and by the federal Liberals can actually generate—

The Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. member for Kootenay—Columbia, but his time has expired. He is splitting his time and I am afraid he has run out of time, but there may be salvation yet. There is time now for questions and comments.

● (1515)

Hon. Roger Gallaway (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have an observation and I have a question. First, I have now heard references to Mr. Tom Kent and an article he wrote on January 29 in *The Globe and Mail*. I would say that on this side we are a big tent and we accept those comments, unlike our friends in the official opposition who, for example, when they hear a statement like that made by the member for Calgary Centre, call him a traitor. We have not done that on this side.

My question revolves around references to New South Wales, Australia. I would ask my friend opposite whether he could confirm that New South Wales is indeed truly a state. Or is it one of the territories of Australia and does it in fact have a constituent assembly which does not have the legislative powers of either a provincial assembly in Canada or the Parliament of Canada?

Supply

Mr. Jim Abbott: Mr. Speaker, I am rather perplexed with this question from the point of view that I do not have a clue what in the world it has to do with anything. This is ridiculous.

What we are talking about here is the representation of the people of New South Wales or Victoria or Manitoba or British Columbia, or the representation of the people of Canada. We are talking about a democratic process that has been hijacked by the Prime Minister.

I should point out that the upcoming election, it is estimated, is going to cost—and let us count it—\$265 million. Apparently this is an increase over the cost of the last two unnecessary elections, elections that were totally unnecessary in terms of their timing.

The federal Liberals went from 1993 to 1997 and unnecessarily called that election and then to 2000 and unnecessarily called that election. Now, because of the Liberal game-playing over the leadership issue for this new Prime Minister of the Liberals, the “all new federal Liberal Party”, I must say, we are into another three year cycle. We have had at least \$250 million spent on unnecessary elections in the cycle of the federal Liberal Party, to which I say shame on them.

Hon. John Harvard (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Trade, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have been listening to my good friend from Kootenay and really wonder whether his remarks carry with them a shred of credibility.

Let me put it this way. I am quite sure that my hon. colleague from Kootenay probably has a rather high regard for someone by the name of Ralph Klein in Alberta, the premier, a political soulmate, if I can put it that way. How long has he been premier? Almost 10 years? Has he brought in fixed election dates in Alberta? Not yet, but he has had 10 years. How about that great premier in Ontario by the name of Mike Harris? He was not in as long as 10 years, but he was there about 6 years. Did he bring in fixed election dates at Queen's Park? No.

I really wonder about these Conservatives. Especially when it comes to election time, they start talking about fixed election dates. They suddenly get warmed up to certain things, but then when they are in power, as they were in Ontario and as they were in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta, they do nothing.

I really wonder about your credibility.

Mr. Jim Abbott: To quote you, Mr. Speaker, I am sure it was not your credibility that he was wondering about.

In taking a look at that question, again I really do not understand what this has to do with anything. The fact of the matter is that it is this government that has created a situation of spending a quarter of a billion dollars unnecessarily during this cycle of its tenure on the government side of the House. It is this Prime Minister who is holding the country up for ransom and it is he who must be held accountable by the official opposition in this chamber. That is where the debate lies.

Mr. David Chatters (Athabasca, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am glad to join in this very timely debate that is going on, and a very interesting debate it is.

Certainly I very much support the concept of fixed election dates. It was a fundamental plank of the platform of the Reform Party,

which I helped found so many years ago, and it remains a position of this Conservative Party today, I am glad to say.

It has become increasingly obvious over the last number of months that there is a real, genuine need in this country for governments and government members to do what is in the national interest rather than their own interest or that of a political party. Certainly that has become more and more obvious with this whole ad scam.

It has become particularly obvious as we see this endless dithering of the current Prime Minister on when he is going to the polls. It certainly in every way makes the argument for us and for our supply day motion today that we must provide fixed election dates in Canada. I really cannot understand this bugaboo about destroying the British parliamentary tradition and all the rest of it. If we want to talk about credibility, I do not think that has any credibility.

Certainly in Canada, as we have heard a number of times, British Columbia has gone to fixed election dates and the Queen has not taken any action against the Government of British Columbia in terms of abandoning the sovereignty of the Crown. I do not think that is an argument. As a matter of fact, the Government of Ontario, the Liberal government, on April 7, 2004, passed first reading of Bill C-51, a bill proposing fixed election dates in Ontario. So the Ontario Liberals do not think it is a bad idea and the British Columbia Liberals do not think it is a bad idea. Certainly in response to the question from my colleague from across the floor, if Ralph Klein were in the habit of asking any of us for advice, we would give him the advice to implement fixed election dates in Alberta. It only makes sense.

From a personal perspective, I have been in this place for 10 years now, having successfully campaigned in and won three elections during that time. Each one of those three elections gave the Liberal government a five year mandate to govern this country. In other words, it had a mandate to govern for 15 years and we have only been here for 10. Given the cost of each election, that is a complete election cycle that could have been added onto its mandate. In my view, perhaps it should have been, because in the last three elections there has been no pressing need to go to an early election, yet the Prime Minister chose to do that three times simply because the polls favoured his government. There was really no other reason in the world.

The suggestion that our idea is less democratic than the present system does not make any sense either, simply because it takes power away from the Prime Minister and disallows the Prime Minister from playing the games that are now being played in Canada. Quite frankly, it empowers the people of Canada and brings in more democracy, not less. Certainly before this Prime Minister became the prime minister, he talked about distributing some of that power from the PMO. He talked about how that would bring in more democracy and create perhaps more interest in the democratic process in this country, so that maybe more than 40% of the people in this country would participate in the process.

Supply

• (1520)

Of all of the democratic reforms that the current Prime Minister has talked about for so long, this particular one would seem to me to be the easiest and quickest and would have the most impact of any of the proposed democratic reforms. However, this one, like so many of the other democratic reforms about restructuring the House of Commons and committees and empowering backbench MPs and all of those things, seems to be very quickly falling by the wayside and is becoming less of a priority than it was leading into the Liberal leadership.

This is a shame, because I think that this particular motion and this particular action we are urging the government to adopt would do more to enhance the credibility of the Prime Minister on the democratic deficit than any of the other things that he could do and certainly should do.

A fixed date general election is also the best thing for the country in terms of the cost of this system and the uncertainty involved in an election. Just last weekend, I called my local Elections Canada returning officer to get the number for the Elections Canada office in my riding should we need to contact the office for information during the election. He informed me that he does not have a telephone number yet and has not booked an office space yet, simply because he does not know when the election is going to be.

So there we are, with the entire machinery of Elections Canada in the riding on hold, waiting for the Prime Minister to make up his mind. There has to be a cost there, and there is certainly an uncertainty there, not to mention, as some of my colleagues said, those of us who are running in the election and who have to rent space, sign contracts and make arrangements for the campaign. We are unable to do so simply because only the Prime Minister knows and he is not sharing that with all of us.

Certainly the media themselves are becoming very impatient with the Prime Minister on the issue of when the election will be. That is not like the media in relation to this Liberal government. In my view, the media have been very patient on all kinds of issues, but even they are becoming less patient, simply because they as well have a huge stake in this. They have to assign individuals to the various campaigns. They have to make arrangements to replace those people in their current positions and they have to provide for the costs of these media people who are following the campaign. As well, of course, the national networks have an obligation to provide free election time to the parties involved. They have a scheduling issue in regard to being able to do that and they as well have no idea of when the election might be.

Overwhelming numbers of arguments can be made in support of fixed election dates. I have not heard a valid one, at least in this morning's debate and to this point, against fixed election dates. The idea that we would need a constitutional amendment is rubbish. The idea that it would somehow destroy years and years of British parliamentary tradition in Canada is also rubbish. Other Commonwealth countries have adopted this system and that has not been the case. They continue to respect and hold the British monarch as their monarch, much as we do. They continue to have a parliamentary system in the British tradition, just as we do.

In my opinion and from every perspective, having fixed election dates is a good idea. If the government would listen to its experts at Elections Canada, I think it would hear that they themselves would favour such a system.

• (1525)

The only argument to be made against it is that it takes power from the Prime Minister and that is not acceptable to the government. I do not think that is a valid reason.

• (1530)

Mr. Ken Epp (Elk Island, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to take just a few seconds to make a comment on the motion and ask my colleague to respond to it.

I remember the first time I was elected. I became a candidate in 1992. The election was not called until October, about 16 or 17 months later. During that time I had a job teaching students. I do not know whether members are aware of this, but students fare better if they do not have changes of instructors. From semester to semester, I did not know whether I should take a leave of absence without pay in order to run for election or whether I should keep my job. It caused a whole deal of anxiety to both our administration of the place and myself personally. It was just totally impossible to plan.

One reason I wanted to run for the Reform Party was because even away back then this was one of its policies. It is a very good one. It allows every candidate for every party across the country, which is at least 1,200 or 1,300 candidates, to plan. It allows their workers to plan. It allows all of them to get a handle on where their life is going in the immediate future.

I would like to have my colleague comment on his experiences in this regard and again to confirm and underline the importance of passing this motion today.

Mr. David Chatters: Mr. Speaker, I well remember the 1993 campaign. We are facing that same kind of uncertainty with this election, whether it will turn out to be as long as the uncertainty was then.

In the 1993 campaign, as in this campaign, I remember the uncertainty and the requirement for people to make that kind of commitment to stand and put their name forward as candidates. In more than one case it actually prevented good individuals, strong and well-intended individuals who wanted to run to represent their constituencies, from doing that. The uncertainty made it impossible for them to do that because of job obligations.

If that happens in our party, I am sure it also happens in the Liberal Party, and that is to Canada's loss. That is not a positive thing. We in Canada have a big job to do in rebuilding the credibility of the political process and getting Canadians to participate in it in a major kind of way. This kind of gerrymandering of the system will do nothing to enhance the credibility in the eyes of Canadians.

Hon. John Harvard (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Trade, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I just want to pick up on what the hon. member for Elk Island said. I would agree with him to this extent, that yes, there are some uncertainties under the current system that provides for no fixed election dates.

However, I think he would have to agree that if we have a fixed election date, then we run the risk of much longer campaigns. We can be almost sure that if, say, the country knows an election will be held in the month of June, all kinds of campaigns will be fired up perhaps in January or perhaps the fall before. If we think that does not make sense, all we have to do is look at the experience in the United States where there are fixed election dates every four years. Now, particularly in presidential election years, we are looking at campaigns that run nigh on two years. There is no fun in that and it is very expensive.

Mr. David Chatters: Mr. Speaker, on behalf of my colleague from Elk Island, responding through you to the member, I do not think it is possible that an election campaign could get longer or more expensive to Canadians than this one. The Prime Minister has been on a tax paid campaign for months. I do not think that is a valid argument or a credible argument.

• (1535)

Hon. John Harvard (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Trade, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak to this opposition day motion that calls for general elections to be held on fixed dates, unless the government loses the confidence of the House of Commons. I do not support the motion, for a number of reasons, and I would encourage all members to vote against it.

There are a number of good reasons why our present system serves us well, and has done so since Confederation.

Part of the reason why fixed election dates are not a good idea for Canada becomes clear when we compare our present system with non-parliamentary systems.

First, it is worth noting that most parliamentary systems based on the Westminster system do not prescribe fixed election dates, except insofar that they usually have maximum terms. In the Canadian case, the duration of the House of Commons is set out in section 50 of the Constitution Act, 1867, which states:

Every House of Commons shall continue for Five Years from the Day of the Return of the Writs for choosing the House (subject to be sooner dissolved by the Governor General), and no longer.

This is further reflected in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which states:

No House of Commons and no legislative assembly shall continue for longer than five years from the date fixed for the return of the writs of a general election of its members.

Of course an election may be called by the Governor General earlier than the maximum term on the recommendation of the Prime Minister. Alternatively, based on constitutional convention, a defeat in the House on a motion of non-confidence usually results in an election being called.

In contrast to most parliamentary systems, legislatures in a number of non-parliamentary systems hold elections at fixed intervals. For example, the United States has fixed election dates. As a rule, these non-parliamentary systems are characterized by a separation of powers. The executive is not chosen by the legislature and cannot be removed by a vote of its members.

Supply

I bring forward this comparison because sometimes, in our zeal to copy from other systems, we lose sight of the fact that we have our own unique system of government, for good reason, and it is not always easy or advisable to apply parts of other systems to our own.

In Canada we must assess the idea of fixed election dates through the lens of our system of responsible government. Our system is based on the principle that the Prime Minister and the ministers are responsible to the members of the House of Commons and, through them, to the Canadian electorate. In order to maintain power, the governing party must maintain the confidence of the House or risk being defeated.

An important element that must be considered in this debate is the role of the Governor General of Canada, who has the constitutional prerogative to dissolve Parliament and to sign the formal proclamation that announces the election. This power is an integral part of our parliamentary system and cannot simply be ignored.

In discussing this issue further, it is worth looking back at the work of the 1991 Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing. That royal commission, popularly known as the Lortie commission, studied the issue of fixed election dates in the context of its broader review of the election period and administration of the vote.

The commission concluded that fixed election terms would create several major problems.

First, the commission noted that fixed election terms would raise important constitutional considerations. In this regard it is interesting to note that the commission specifically looked at the model suggested by the motion that we are debating today: a combination of fixed election dates, unless the government loses the confidence of the House.

• (1540)

Specifically the commission had this to say about this proposal. It stated:

It might be possible to adopt fixed dates for federal elections and retain the constitutional principle that defeat on a motion of non-confidence leads to a government's resignation, but the result could well be an unsatisfactory hybrid. If a government fell, an election would have to be held earlier than the fixed date...In addition, a government could take steps to engineer its own defeat in the House of Commons if it judged that the timing of an election would serve its interests.

I would like to repeat what the Lortie commission said "a government could take steps to engineer its own defeat in the House of Commons if it judged that the timing of an election would serve its interests". It is very important to keep that in mind. It serves to illustrate the dangers of trying to impose an electoral constraint on our present system without thought for the reasons why our system functions the way it currently does, and indeed the advantages of our present system.

More important, the commission concluded the following about the constitutional constraints:

To implement a system of fixed terms with no exceptions, a constitutional restructuring of our federal legislative and executive institutions would be required. Even if agreement on the necessary amendments could be achieved, it is not at all certain that this would lead to more responsive government.

The commission was bang-on with regard to its overall assessment of fixed election dates.

Supply

What at first glance may seem like an innocuous measure which is very easy to implement, in fact it could have far reaching consequences for our Constitution and our system of government without even addressing the question of whether it makes sense.

Another difficulty mentioned by the Lortie commission relates to the issue of the length and nature of election campaigns. In the United States, for example, because the date of the next election is always known, campaigns effectively last much longer than in Canada. I mentioned that earlier and I think it is worth repeating.

The commission noted that presidential campaigns are often launched 18 months or more before election day and that many members of the House of Representatives never really stop campaigning. We have heard stories that some members of the House of Representatives in the United States, where they face elections every two years, spend half their time campaigning, perhaps even more, and half their time raising money for their campaigns. If the voters were asked, one really wonders whether the voters really want their representatives campaigning and raising money for their campaigns or whether they would like to have their representatives working for them, the voters.

The Lortie commission postulated that a similar scenario could well appear in Canada if fixed election dates were adopted, which could lead to the undermining of objectives of spending limits if candidates began to campaign and spend prior to the election period. Lortie has noted that the longer and more expensive election campaigns that could be created by fixed election dates are anathema to the desire of Canadians. Needless to say, in the end the Lortie commission did not recommend that we change our system to adopt fixed election dates.

Again, we have heard about some of the horrendous costs involved in the campaigns in the United States leading up to fixed elections. For example, in the year 2000, in the Senate race in the state of New York, the republican and democratic candidates allegedly spent about \$100 million. Imagine, two candidates in one Senate election spending \$100 million.

So far I have attempted to show that there are many disadvantages to changing our system by adopting fixed election dates. No less of an authority than the Lortie commission made it quite clear that such a change would not be easy, nor would it be necessarily effective.

Beyond this, what are the benefits of our current system? In one word, I can sum them up: flexibility. Flexibility is the beauty of our system. For example, from time to time an issue of such tremendous national importance arises that it is advisable for the Prime Minister to have the power to call an election in a timely fashion.

• (1545)

In those kinds of scenarios we would not want to restrict the Prime Minister from taking action that would ultimately be in the best interests of all Canadians. Fixing election dates would handcuff the Prime Minister as he would have to wait for a particular date.

Under another scenario, our present system allows a new prime minister to seek a new mandate from the electorate when there has been a change of leader for the governing party. If it appears that seeking a new mandate is warranted, again it would be wrong to restrict the prime minister's ability to do so.

The ongoing examination of our institutions of government is an important priority that the government takes very seriously. We have demonstrated our commitment to renewal through our actions, in particular, with the democratic reform action plan.

On the issue before us today, however, I do not believe a convincing argument has been made that fixed election dates are a good idea. The merits of the motion have not been demonstrated and there are many good reasons to oppose it. I would therefore encourage all members of the House to vote against the motion.

Mr. Ken Epp (Elk Island, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I guess it is becoming evident that the Liberals have been given instructions to speak against the motion, because every one of them has nothing but reasons against the motion and very few are conceding anything that is positive about it. The message is that they will be voting against it.

I really wonder about the correction of the democratic deficit on the other side when even in this debate we are not able to have an open debate, looking at all of the factors involved.

I compare this election call thing given to the Prime Minister as being a hockey tournament where the coach of one team has the right to drop the puck whenever the game is to start. He will wait to drop the puck until the other team members, who, after waiting for 12 or 13 hours for the game to start, go to the dressing room or go down and have a steak while they are waiting.

This is all about giving the Prime Minister and the government in power the edge on starting the contest. They wait until they have the best winning conditions. That is not democracy. That is just simply saying that the government in power will do everything it can to win. Next time it will be us. I hope that we have it changed by then so that people know there is true accountability on the side of the government.

I would sure like to hear the member's comment on the fact that this is very unfair, based on the fact that only one side gets to know when the election will be called while the other side does not.

Hon. John Harvard: Mr. Speaker, I think my good friend from Elk Island is crying crocodile tears. He would like us to believe that those people over there know nothing about politics, that they do not know how the system is played, that they do not know how the game is played, that they cannot read political signs and that they cannot judge what the governing party might do, whether it is a week from now or a month from now. I will give them more credit than that.

I did not come down the river on a bale of hay and I do not think that the hon. member for Elk Island did either. If the election is in June, in October or, say, in September, will it really make much difference to his political fortunes? Will he come back to me and say "Gee Whiz, if you had just had the election in June, I would have won. You held it off until September and you defeated me".

Can anyone imagine the hon. member for Elk Island going to his voters after he has lost the election and saying "Do you know what, members of my constituency, the only reason I lost is that the election should have been held three months earlier?" I do not think that would hold much water.

Supply

Mr. Roy Bailey (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): Mr. Speaker, now that we are drawing analogies, I would like to draw one for the hon. member. In this particular case, the goal tender is indeed the Prime Minister. I refereed hockey long enough to know that one does not give the whistle to the goal tender which is exactly what the government is. It has the whistle and it can stop the shots but only it can blow the whistle.

• (1550)

Hon. John Harvard: Mr. Speaker, I did not grow up with the Prime Minister but I sure wish I could have seen him play hockey. I am sure he would have been a good hockey player and, if had been playing goal, I think he would have been a very good goaltender with our without any whistle.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich (Blackstrap, CPC): Mr. Speaker, does the member not think that it is a bit costly to have big billboards across western Canada of our ministers? I think the taxpayers would rather have an election than have big billboards. I am pricing them out myself right now and they cost \$1,400 a month. I would think that is fairly expensive when we do not know when there will be an election. I would like to ask the member whether he thinks that is perhaps costly when he says that campaigning ahead of time is very costly but not for this—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bélair): Please try to keep the debate relevant to what we are debating today.

The hon. parliamentary secretary.

Hon. John Harvard: Mr. Speaker, I do not know how relevant that comment is but what I will say is that ministers or anyone can erect signs before an election, before a writ is dropped. Presumably the money used was raised legally according to the rules of the land. The rules that we have pertain to the Conservative Party as much as they pertain to the Liberal Party and the New Democratic Party. Therefore I would think that everything is quite in order.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bélair): So much for relevance again.

Other questions or comments? The hon. member for Elk Island.

Mr. Ken Epp: Mr. Speaker, I love math and I always have. I did a little calculation here. The average time between elections under the Liberal regime is about 1,293 days. If the Prime Minister calls the election for June 7, which is a possibility, it will be 1,288 days, so he is a little under the average.

The four year cycle is 1,463 days, which means that if we were to budget that on a daily basis, an election under the Liberals would cost \$193,349 per day, whereas if we were to have one every four years it would be \$170,882 per day, a difference of some \$23,000 a day. In my view, calling an election every three and a half years is just another way of the Liberals showing contempt for the taxpayer dollars.

Hon. John Harvard: Mr. Speaker, I would say, with all humility, that the gentleman from Elk Island has left one very important matter out of that equation, and that is the opinion of the voters.

In those three elections to which he alluded, the Liberals won all three elections with majorities, thank you very much. Yes, they perhaps were shorter in duration than the terms of Parliament that he would like, but obviously Canadians did not see it his way.

I would remind him of one other thing. The last time we had a Conservative government headed by one Brian Mulroney, that particular government ran almost five years, and what did the Canadian voters say? Nix.

Mr. Gurmant Grewal (Surrey Central, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member who spoke before me stated that the previous government was turfed. I think the Liberal government will face the same fate as soon as the election is called.

I am pleased to rise on behalf of the constituents of Surrey Central to participate in today's debate on the Conservative supply day motion calling upon the government to establish fixed dates for federal general elections. The motions reads:

That, in the opinion of this House, there being a serious democratic deficit in Canada, particularly in the domination of the executive over the House of Commons by providing to the Prime Minister the sole political prerogative to determine when Parliament should be dissolved for the purpose of a general election;

That, unless the government loses the confidence of the House, general elections should be held on fixed dates; and

That the government should bring in measures to establish fixed election dates to be held on the third Monday of the month that is four years after the month in which the polling day for the most recently held general election fell.

That is the motion we are debating today and the status quo has gone on for far too long. In the last few months, constituents have been asking me when the election will take place. I have been telling them that my guess is as good as theirs. No one in this country knows.

Before I move further, I would like to say that I will be sharing my time with the hon. member for Blackstrap. She has significant issues to contribute to this campaign and we would like to listen to her as well.

The Liberals have been calling the election depending on their chances of winning that election. The status quo as to when to call the election is very opportunistic politically at present.

The discretion to call an election, however, remains a powerful weapon in the armoury of the Prime Minister to use for partisan advantage, as shown by the last leader of the Liberal Party. Jean Chrétien fuelled a lot of cynicism about the electoral process during his 10 years in office by calling elections whenever it suited his political agenda or when the polls indicated it was appropriate for him to call an election, gauging his political opportunities.

Despite comfortable majorities in the House and no burning issues requiring a mandate, Mr. Chrétien went to the Canadian public twice in seven years. As my colleague has indicated from a mathematical aspect, we know that elections are called simply because the government knows that the voters will return it to office irrespective of the cost to the taxpayers.

Our current Prime Minister appears anxious to follow in his predecessor's footsteps by calling an election just three and a half years into a mandate, and this despite the promise he made to do things differently and address the democratic deficit.

The way the ruling party can control election dates makes up a huge portion of the democratic deficit that has destroyed the faith of many Canadians in their own government.

Supply

With careful polling and strategic spending and policies designed to win over key segments of voters, the ruling party gains a huge advantage. On the other hand, the whole country is left in limbo. One just has to imagine 308 candidates multiplied by at least four parties, plus independent candidates. This is compounded by various campaign managers and campaign teams of all the candidates.

One just has to look at the Elections Canada staff. How much staff is in limbo? What about all the other organizations and individuals associated with the election, such as the sign companies, the telephone companies, the people who print the brochures and other literature, the leasing companies for vehicles and other items, even the office equipment, office supplies and office space?

This is contributing to uncertainty. The candidates cannot make any long term commitments to any events or anything of that sort because they do not know when the election will be called

• (1555)

Look at the inefficiency this whole mechanism has created in terms of dollars, time, commitment and so on. We cannot have an agenda in the House of Commons. I have a private member's bill ready to be introduced, but I cannot introduce it because I do not know how long we are going to sit here. If I were to introduce it, then I would have to come back again and reintroduce it, if I am re-elected. It depends on so many things.

So much inefficiency is created by this uncertain and opportunistic process by the government. No wonder voter apathy is mounting against the government and no wonder we have a low turnout in elections from time to time. We cannot be innovative in reforming the electoral process in general because of all these uncertainties surrounding this issue.

How about proportional representation? What a wonderful idea and concept, but it cannot be introduced because so many things have to be done within electoral reform.

Despite the promise, Canadians are still saddled with an elected dictatorship in the country. The power is concentrated in the PMO and the companies supporting the Prime Minister at this time. The Prime Minister is using his control over his members of Parliament in his caucus, whether it is voting in the House, driving the agenda, and so on.

Now that the Prime Minister has all the power, he is just as reluctant as his predecessor to let go of any of it. The Prime Minister's record shows clearly that he has no interest in addressing any democratic deficit issues and they have been mounting ever since.

I am proud to stand up and say to the House that this party, the official opposition of Canada, has been lobbying for the elimination of the democratic deficit for many years.

Further, the Liberals failed to appoint an independent ethics commissioner and still continue to have the lapdog of the Prime Minister. It is despite the fact that it was promised in the red book in 1993 that an independent ethics commissioner would be appointed who would report to Parliament. However, it did not happen that way.

Similarly, it has been promised, and the Prime Minister said he would address the issue of free votes in the House of Commons. We still see the caucus members of the Liberal Party clapping like trained seals.

It is similar with Senate reform. The Liberal cronies, the defeated candidates, are appointed to the Senate, whereas the democratically elected candidates are not appointed to the Senate. The representation in the Senate from Canada's western provinces, where I come from, remains unaddressed.

Our electoral system allows less than 40% of the vote to translate into a majority government in this country. The Liberal government abdicates Parliament's responsibility as the law-making body of Canada to the courts. How big is the democratic deficit there? The definition of marriage is to be decided by the courts.

All these issues concerning citizen initiatives and that all MPs should be treated equally in the House did not happen. Another factor within electoral reform is the nomination process. For 14 years, non-Canadian instant members have been pre-selecting candidates to be finally selected by the general Canadian population to be elected and sent as their representative to Parliament. Discretion is okay, but there is a big flaw in the process. All these issues need to be addressed.

• (1600)

If the Prime Minister were serious about amending the democratic deficit, he would have to agree with established fixed election dates. If he opposes this motion, it will reveal that he is not serious about dealing with the democratic deficit, but is simply engaged in typical window dressing and half-baked measures.

Hon. Roger Gallaway (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have listened to my friend's speech and I have gained some insights into half-baked myself.

What I heard was that the official opposition has awakened to discover that what it believes is an unfair advantage is a system which has existed for at least 300 years. I would like to ask, when did the official opposition discover that this 300 year old practice was an unfair advantage?

I would also like to ask, in terms of efficiencies and costs, would the opposition also advocate abolition of the Governor General's office because, of course, the Governor General costs us money? There are many parts that cost us money and that would be one example. Would it support the abolition of the Crown's presence here as represented by the Governor General?

• (1605)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bélair): I think the second part of the hon. member's comments was irrelevant. If the hon. member for Surrey Central wishes to answer the first part, he may do so.

Mr. Gurmant Grewal: Mr. Speaker, I was going to ignore the second part, but you have made my job much easier.

In British Columbia, for instance, we have fixed dates for elections. Similarly, the Liberal government in Ontario is considering that and promised it in its election platform. The United States has fixed dates for elections. Many countries in the western world—

Supply

Mr. Roy Bailey: Most of them. All except one.

Mr. Gurmant Grewal: Most of them have fixed dates for elections.

Even so, some third world countries are more democratic than Canada that is supposed to demonstrate how democratic we are. We are much less democratic in our electoral system as far as practical democracy is concerned compared to many third world countries. Even Vietnam is probably much more efficient in its voting system. Many other parliamentary systems operate much more efficiently. I was in Malaysia and saw how efficient it was as far as voting was concerned.

In a nutshell, it is about time. It does not matter how long this system has been followed. This is a modern world, and we must adopt modern and efficient practices. We must restore democracy to the extent that it becomes a practical democratic country. Canadians do not want an elected dictatorship in this country at all.

Mr. Ken Epp (Elk Island, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the irrelevant part of the member's statement across the way had to do with the Governor General. As a matter of fact, it is the Governor General who has the only legal power to dissolve Parliament for the purpose of an election. That is the way our Constitution reads right now.

I suppose it begs the question, but the real issue here is that the Prime Minister is the one who gives the Governor General the signal. That has become the convention. Under the pattern of responsible government, it is still up to the Prime Minister on the governing side to make the decision. The Governor General has not, I think in error, refused the dissolution of Parliament on the last two occasions because in each instance the government had a clear majority. The government has a clear majority now. There is no reason for an election. Legally, the Governor General could stop it, but the Prime Minister alone has the prerogative. That is wrong.

Mr. Gurmant Grewal: Mr. Speaker, in Canada there is only one man in the country who can call an election. We know that when one man has the power to call an election, is it an elected dictatorship or a democracy?

However, with due respect, the Governor General only rubber stamps the decision made by that single person in the whole country. That is very undemocratic.

•(1610)

Mrs. Lynne Yelich (Blackstrap, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak to our motion this afternoon. It states:

That, in the opinion of this House, there being a serious democratic deficit in Canada, particularly in the domination of the executive over the House of Commons by providing to the Prime Minister the sole political prerogative to determine when Parliament should be dissolved for the purposes of a general election;

That, unless the Government loses the confidence of the House, general elections should be held on fixed dates; and

That the Government should bring in measures to establish fixed election dates to be held on the third Monday of the month that is four years after the month in which the polling day for the most recently held general election fell.

This is truly a timely motion. Canadians have been held in an electoral limbo for several months, and thanks to the government they have been without real leadership for more than a year.

Under the Constitution an election must be held every five years. Traditionally, general elections take place every four years or so. In

the hands of a democratically minded government, this system of calling an election works reasonably well and in the interests of Canadians. In the hands of the Liberal government, however, the issue of when to call a federal election has become an exercise in political and public manipulation.

We saw that clearly during the reign of our former Prime Minister, Jean Chrétien, as he used the threat of a snap election to control his caucus on crucial legislative decisions. It was the same shifting date scenario when it came to his pending retirement and the election of a new party leader.

The current Prime Minister is fond of attacking the democratic deficit and of telling Canadians how he will eliminate this blight on the relationship between the government and its subjects. Eliminating the Prime Minister's ability to call an election whenever he chooses by setting fixed election dates would be an excellent first step in addressing this democratic deficit. Yet, the Prime Minister continues to paralyze Canadians and Parliament, while he waits for the most opportune time for his party to survive an election.

Elections should not be called on the personal whim of a prime minister, depend on favourable political polls, or whatever else the prime minister is worried about. In an era where voter turnout is low, where young people are disenchanted and disinterested in how our country is governed, and where there is great concern about how our tax dollars are spent, such self-serving behaviour is an insult to all Canadians.

Fixed election dates would remove much of the uncertainty we now face. Canadians would not be wondering each day whether the Prime Minister has made a decision.

Barring a situation of non-confidence, Canadians would know with certainty when to expect the next federal election. Parliament would not be at a standstill, with MPs and senators working with largely recycled legislation. There would be new bills, with appropriate time for debate, committee study and revisions.

Electoral candidates and organizers would not be wondering when they should invest resources in their campaigns and preparatory efforts. Again, consistent time frames could be established. Knowing exactly when the next election would be held would also add some transparency to a system of government that badly needs it.

Pre-election spending sprees would be more identifiable for what they truly are, as would premature campaign visits disguised as government business. There are some who would criticize fixed election dates as too American in style or in nature, that such a system would be inconsistent with the confidence convention that demands a government retain the confidence of a majority of the House of Commons or resign.

That concern is addressed by this motion. It states:

That, unless the Government loses the confidence of the House, general elections should be held on fixed dates;

Supply

The integrity of our parliamentary system, based on the older, more established British parliamentary system, would remain intact. The bottom line is that this motion just makes good common sense. Having fixed election dates makes good common sense. Making government and participation in the democratic system more palatable to Canadians makes good common sense.

• (1615)

During his next election campaign, commencement date unknown, the Prime Minister will try to sell Canadians on his package of electoral reforms to address the democratic deficit.

He has stated:

In effect, the command-and-control systems of central authority in Ottawa have pushed the views of citizens and communities to the side.

We agree.

Now, today, we have an opportunity to eliminate some of that centralized control. I encourage the Prime Minister and his colleagues to take this step and show that they really are serious about dealing with the democratic deficit and about re-engaging Canadians.

Elections are about more than choosing a Prime Minister and elected representatives. Those choices reflect Canadians' interests, views, values and policy objectives. Elections determine the people who will help implement those interests for the next half decade.

The electoral process must be as fair as possible, with all parties and individual candidates being as prepared as possible. Unfortunately, that cannot be the case when only one party knows when the election will be held. Everyone else is put in a situation of extreme disadvantage, and that is not in the best interests of Canadians or of a truly democratic process.

I would like to conclude with some personal thoughts. I was elected in 2000. That was another election that was called on a whim. I remember that the prime minister at the time even said it was because our leader of the day challenged him. I saw how disrespectful that prime minister was of his power, power that only he had. Then I watched him as he did the same thing with his resignation. Now our current Prime Minister is doing the same. It seems they have no faith or respect for the electorate. I remember that the campaign in 2000 was all about how we were going to kill health care and pensions, ridiculous notions.

Are you signalling that I am out of time, Mr. Speaker?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bélair): No, it is not a question of time. There are still three minutes left. It is a question of relevance.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: Again, Mr. Speaker? We are having a hard time keeping this debate relevant.

We are talking about democratic deficit and the government still insists on perpetuating fallacies. When will the Liberal government realize that we are serving an intelligent electorate that wants to make an informed vote? It should stop trying to fool the electorate with misinformation and get to the real business of governing.

Let us take away the distraction of when an election will be held so that the real issues and legislation get the attention they deserve. That is relevant.

Mr. Gurmant Grewal (Surrey Central, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I enjoyed the comments by the member.

In the democratic deficit, there are many black holes that have never been plugged. One of the big holes is that 80% of the laws we have in this country are by way of regulation and 20% by way of legislation. That 80% component has been completely ignored by Parliament for a very long time.

In fact, Parliament delegates authority to make regulations or statutory instruments to various crown corporations and various agencies and boards. Parliament was delegating that authority, but Parliament did not have the authority to review those regulations. They went without parliamentary scrutiny. I took the initiative and introduced a private member's bill that passed and became law, so that one hole is plugged. I did my part.

I would like to ask the hon. member a question about a fixed election date. I anticipate that for the way the government does spending, the way the government handles its budget, and the way the government handles its legislative agenda, all of them move around one axis, one famous point, that is, the election timing.

Does the member think that accountability would be restored to a great extent, that there would be transparency in the system, and that there would be some fairness in the system if there were a fixed election date, particularly with respect to spending, budget and legislative agenda?

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for the question, and yes, I do think it would make a little bit of difference, because we could be working on what we are here for, and that is to represent the people. We would not be wondering whether there is any use in presenting legislation, putting private members' bills on the order paper, or in doing any of the work that we are elected to do.

I find it very discouraging to come here not knowing from day to day if we are going to have an election this weekend, or whether I should do some work or investigating. I have some legislation that I personally want to look into and spend some time on, but will I have to just stop everything, put down my work and get back and campaign?

Right now in my own riding there are other parties out there just doing whatever they can to make sure that they are going to run a really rigorous campaign against me, and I have to work here, representing the people. Therefore, I think that a fixed election date would bring some accountability because I would be able to put my time, my resources, my energy and my focus on my work here, as I was elected to do.

• (1620)

Mr. Brian Masse (Windsor West, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to ask a question about this very important subject. One of the things that concerns me about the anomaly of a wandering date, which is what we currently have, is the impact it has on doing business in this country.

I know that the not for profit sector is required by law to turn in annual reports. I know that businesses always have an annual date for reporting to ensure that they have accountability.

Supply

My concern is that the government rolls out a series of programs and services that often affect the finances of the nation and also our prosperity. The government also introduces potential items that might be affected if there is or is not an election because those things may or may not be carried out post-election day.

I would like to ask for the hon. member's opinion about the fact that there is no fixed date and how that affects the ability of businesses to perform and to be effective, especially given the anomaly of a wandering date as opposed to having a specific date, which is what I support.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: Mr. Speaker, the member brings up a valid concern, one of the difficulties I brought up earlier today.

For example, in January our returning officers started getting trained and were starting to book and to lease. Also, we have been going to different businesses, getting ready for the election. This puts all of these businesses in some sort of abeyance. They do not know what to do. It is either yes or no. Are we going to need them or should they just put everything on hold?

The last couple of weeks have been difficult, in that we are trying to decide from day to day. It reminds me of back when I would ask my two year old daughter if she wanted breakfast and she would say maybe yes and maybe no.

This is how this possible election campaign call has been for us, so let us imagine what it is like for the businesses we are dealing with and also for our returning officers in regard to their training. Will their training be up to date by the time the election is called if the Prime Minister decides to wait one more year?

This could all be set. It would be very accountable. It would be transparent. It would be affordable and acceptable and intelligent.

Mr. Alan Tonks (York South—Weston, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise to discuss in the House the motion for fixed elections. I do appreciate, too, that it is the desire of the opposition, in embracing a fixed election date, to stimulate a debate on what will make our Parliament more effective and responsive to the critical issues of our times. I think both sides of the House share that objective, and in fact a great deal of the discussion with respect to the democratic deficit has generated the kind of debate that we are involved in here.

I would suggest that there are some fallacies with respect to the motion put forward, and some false premises, I might add, that may not have been considered. I would like to put them out for the House to consider from my particular perspective.

First, may I say that the motion for fixed elections purports to introduce more democracy and accountability in the same manner as the motion for proportional representation. We remember that one being put forward.

The premise here is that fixed election dates would reinforce the concept of democracy, the ability for Parliament to remain vigilant and reactive in a dynamic way. If I may just digress for a moment, proportional representation was put forward in the same manner. I would suggest that if we look at proportional representation, we will see that it too was flawed in terms of the premise. I will attempt to trace that through to the fixed election date argument.

We heard that proportional representation would actually weaken traditional parliamentary institutions. Generally what would happen is that proportional representation would disaggregate public opinion. Instead of having a coming together of a consensus on a particular issue, we would probably have many more perspectives put forward. That would lead, in my opinion—and this was not part of the debate at the time—to the creation of special interest parties that would reflect special interest groups. Finally, that in fact would lead to the breaking down of the cohesiveness of Canadian society that in fact is reflected in the party system, through the party system, and is represented in the parliamentary tradition.

I would contend that this motion for fixed election dates, while it is well intended, is an attempt to replicate the presidential system without considering the impact on the parliamentary system. It is doing so by challenging under the rubric, let us say, of challenging executive authority as vested in the Prime Minister.

However, we should reflect for a moment on the differences between a presidential system and the parliamentary system, because if we think that south of the border the system is working so well with fixed election dates, we should keep a few things in mind. First, while there is a fixed term for the president, there are staggered terms of two years for the rest of congress. While they have a fixed election date, there are checks and balances within the presidential system in that the continuity and the responsiveness of congress provide for a dynamic institutional response to issues of the times with a balance of corporate memory in the congress.

• (1625)

While the president is in a fixed term, the congress is in an alternating mode. Therefore, the congress is in fact representing, to some extent, the response to the major economic questions of the time. There is a continuity of issues that have evolved through the term of that president and that congress. With a fixed term, after the term is up of the president, the whole congress and the president could be shifted out the door. There is that check and balance in terms of that responsiveness.

If we think of just that for a moment, if we wanted to achieve the same thing with fixed elections in the parliamentary tradition, would we then say that it would be very important that there be that corporate memory and that there be the stability that would come from the presence in the House of parliamentarians who would be elected on the issues and the vision of how to respond to our times? Would it not then be in keeping, with attempting to trace the comparison with the presidential system, to talk about a staggered term for members of Parliament? Think about that. Would this not be confusing for the electorate? Who do they want within the fixed term of Parliament? Who do they want to support? We would have some parliamentarians across the country who would be elected at different times.

It is important to remember that the prime minister, unlike the president of the United States, is the leader of the party that is in power. That is his or her rather limited executive authority. He or she as prime minister would not enjoy the opportunities for veto. The mechanism that the prime minister has to keep in mind is that he or she has to maintain the confidence of the House, not to the same extent the president obviously would in a presidential system.

Supply

I would contend that at any given time it would be difficult under a system with a fixed election date to replicate that kind of authority, the same dynamics and ability, to hold the government to account. If there were that kind of ongoing rotation within the Parliament to try and keep that kind of consistency, people would not really know who the government was. I think that there are problems there.

The other point I would make is about the checks and balances which we wish to maintain through the parliamentary system, rather than weakening the system and making it less responsive. I would contend that it is more responsive to have a term set out, but within that term there are mechanisms whereby the government could be called into account by Parliament for various reasons. Of course the one that we have as our tradition in the Westminster system, the convention, is the vote of non-confidence through the budget or through money allocations.

If we think of this in the changing context of our times, the nature of the issues that have been facing Parliament have made it absolutely necessary for the parliamentary institutions to be more vigilant because more information is in the hands of our pluralistic society, through our interest groups.

• (1630)

I need not refer at great length to the issue that is affecting this Parliament at this very time. It is sparking the whole issue of whether there be an election. It is the sponsorship issue and the challenging with respect to the stewardship of tax moneys.

I would like to rest the case not on those who are totally opposed to reform. I would like to make that clear. Through the action plan that has been outlined in the House, there are members on both sides who wish to see reform. However, I think it is wrong-headed to pursue it from the perspective of a fixed election date alone, as if that would be the grand panacea.

The facts would lead us to the conclusion that within the context of a term, with the nature of financial and taxation issues which are of great question to Canadians, the government has to be vigilant. The government has to put forward its agenda and be prepared to defend it. The stewardship of tax moneys has to be transparent.

In fact there was a time when the auditor general reported once a year, and that was it. There was this huge, voluminous report that was thrown down. There was no role with respect to the committees. There was no role in how to deal with the estimates to the extent that the oversight provisions of committee should be raised. Those issues were not the substance on the agenda of other parliaments.

Here we are talking about those very issues in a more non-partisan way. If we are absolutely determined, as we should be, to be the stewards of the public interest, financial, social, environmental and so on, the issue does not have as much to do with how long we are here. It is how we make the institutions of the parliamentary system work more effectively while we are here.

That is why it would be my humble opinion that the issues related to proportional representation, how we get there and the terms of a fixed election date, comparing perhaps the presidential system or even systems in developing countries or whatever, are really to deflect what the essential issue is, as has been put forward by the Prime Minister and by the opposition side. That is how we can be

more effective as parliamentarians, through the institutions of government in the parliamentary system. We can focus primarily on the committee system and from that look at the relationship to the oversight structures, such as the secretariat of Treasury Board, Treasury Board, the office of the Comptroller General, the role of the Auditor General, the role of committees in terms of project and program review and how the system becomes more stimulated and accountable.

Those are the essential issues. I would suggest, as I have said before, that the issue is simply not one of arriving at a fixed date with respect to how long this Parliament will sit.

I put those forward as very quickly responses to the points raised by some of the members who have a sincere desire to make Parliament more accountable. However, a fixed date for elections I just do not think will cut it.

• (1635)

Mr. Brian Masse (Windsor West, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I listened with great interest to the discussion about fixed election dates. In Ontario it is not a foreign concept to have a fixed date. I have sincere reservations about the government's intentions on this. We have four levels of government in Ontario and two of them already have fixed election dates: the first related to school boards and trustees; and the second related to municipalities.

Municipalities have fixed election dates and that has been in operation for a number of years. We have to be very clear about what we are asking. We are not talking about changing the representation in Parliament and rotating people. We are talking about a specific fixed election date for the federal institution. If it is not good for this body here, then should municipalities move to a wandering date of three to five years?

Mr. Alan Tonks: Mr. Speaker, that is a good question. I have had 25 years of working and serving at the municipal level. Right off the top of my head, I will try and give what I think is an accurate description of the municipal culture.

Municipal culture is close to the people. It is instant. Neighbours talk to their councillors at the supermarket about issues that affect them the most. They are issues on the street and issues related to their neighbourhoods. More and more they are larger issues with respect to transportation, sustainable development, growth strategies, availability of housing, homelessness and so on.

My contention would be that rather than a fixed date that is less, the fixed date should be longer.

There is no party system with respect to the local level of government. I tried to compare it to the presidential system in the U.S. Individuals come with their best intent. They lay out their value system with respect to what they think is best for their city or their township or whatever, and that is the basis upon which decisions are made.

I can only ask the member to compare that to the kind of issues that we deal with, the need for a consensus with respect to our party structure and the role of our committee system that deals with a bureaucracy that shadows and pales beside the bureaucracy that exists at local levels.

I would submit most humbly that this is like comparing apples and oranges. The public understands very well how their local government works. I do not think there is any need to attempt to apply the same fixed date culture concept there. That is far different from what we do in this place.

• (1640)

Mr. Ken Epp (Elk Island, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I remember when I was teaching, I would occasionally give students zero because they did not correctly answer the question that had been asked. For example, I may have asked them how long it would take to get from A to B and they would say the distance was 200 meters. That was the right answer for the distance, but it was not the right answer for the question I asked, so they received zero.

That member and almost all the Liberal members who spoke today have been giving arguments that do not address the question. They talk about everything other than the fact that we simply want to have a system whereby, at every regular interval, there will be a federal election, barring a vote of non-confidence which would change things. I have not heard from that member or any other Liberal member any single valid reason to vote against the motion today. They have talked about everything else.

That member talked about staggering and how that would confuse the electorate. I do not think so. People in the United States are not confused about staggered elections. That is not the issue today.

He talked about ad scam and accountability. It is ironic that one of the reasons we have this big uncertainty now about the election is because of ad scam. The government does not want to be accountable so it is contemplating putting the election off until the fall or even next year. That is opposite to the argument that member was making. He can respond if he wants.

Mr. Alan Tonks: Mr. Speaker, it might surprise the member to know that I do wish to respond, not as a parliamentarian. It is more as a fellow teacher. I am used to having students in the classroom just like the member who asked the question. I know in pedagogical terms one attempts to draw the right answer out of students and a good teacher does that.

I would like to draw out a question from my colleague on that side. Would what is being proposed be better for the country? In our parliamentary tradition, would it inculcate in our citizens a sense that we would be more accountable with a fixed term of say five years, when some people might tell us that they would rather have us accountable throughout the five years, as we are now?

Mr. Brian Masse: Mr. Speaker, I would just like to follow up on the previous comments I made and the remarks back from the hon. member.

I hesitate to suggest it, but the party system is very much influenced in many municipalities. I know there are affiliations in my municipality. In Toronto, from where the member comes, there are strong affiliations with the party system. That does not really take away the value of whether the specific three to five year term should be applied.

I have a specific question. Why is it good for one system of government but not good for another? I find that hard to reconcile. There could be other municipal reforms. The fact of the matter is that

Supply

Toronto has party affiliations with many of its members. Despite that, it still does not answer the question of why a fixed election date is okay for two levels of government, being the school boards and municipalities to have fixed election dates, whereas the provincial and federal governments, which we could change, do not?

Mr. Alan Tonks: Mr. Speaker, I do not want to digress but since the member raised the matter of party, that there is a de facto sense of people belonging to parties, I would submit that any time a person in Toronto, although it may be the same in other jurisdictions, has stood on a party basis and run on a party program it has been with relatively little success. It is an indication to me that the people in Toronto at least still have more comfort with respect to their members, at least at local government and trustees in education and so on, being unfettered by party ideology.

The other question, in terms of it being good at the local level or, vice versa, being good for Parliament for a fixed term, why would we not do it, I thought I replied to that. There are a number of reasons but the one that is important is that the party system introduces a counter check on a Parliament of scale, a representation of scale. I would submit that at the local level it is that scale that people are comfortable with. I think they are comfortable with three years. I do not think they would be comfortable if that term were interrupted by a device that would have a recall quality to it as they do in California or other places. I also do not think they would be comfortable extending it beyond three years.

However, as far as this Parliament is concerned, the five year term and the nature of issues and the quality of Parliament, I think the general public is comfortable with that but we have to be on our toes. We have to be aware of the issues and we have to be aware that we can be called to account.

• (1645)

Mr. Ken Epp: Mr. Speaker, in responding to my questions the member asked me a question so now I can answer. The member often spoke about fixed elections, which is the last thing we want in this country. We are debating fixed date elections here today.

He wanted to know how we would be better off if we were to have fixed date elections. I could give the member many answers but because of limited time I will give him only one serious example. I believe we would have many more good candidates running for the various parties if they could plan ahead, plan their vacation time at the time of the next coming election so that they could use that time for campaigning instead of taking time off, which many people cannot afford to do. I was one of those cases. I had to borrow money in order to replace my salary when I took a leave of absence without pay to run for election.

That is only one reason of many. All he has to do tomorrow is to read *Hansard* and all of the excellent speeches from this side of the House that were in support of the motion today.

Mr. Alan Tonks: Mr. Speaker, I have to rest my case. It is obvious from the presentation my colleague just made that he is equally as good a student as he is a teacher.

Supply

Mr. Paul Forseth (New Westminster—Coquitlam—Burnaby, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the motion before us today reads:

That, in the opinion of this House, there being a serious democratic deficit in Canada, particularly in the domination of the executive over the House of Commons by providing to the Prime Minister the sole political prerogative to determine when Parliament should be dissolved for the purposes of a general election;

That, unless the Government loses the confidence of the House, general elections should be held on fixed dates; and

That the Government should bring in measures to establish fixed election dates to be held on the third Monday of the month that is four years after the month in which the polling day for the most recently held general election fell.

The motion was then amended.

A fixed election date modification to the Canadian parliamentary system is a good step to take. It is simple to implement and has no high cost implications. It certainly would help everyone, including the private sector, to plan our national activities, and help bring respect to the process of Canadian governance. The present unseemly guessing game is unworthy of our great country.

For the third time in less than seven years, Canadians are facing the prospect of another federal election, just because the Prime Minister has mused about it. The Liberals say that the people are entitled to vote because the party has changed leaders. My Conservative Party of Canada, which recently elected our leader by a national democratic vote rather than by a process of insider takeover, Liberal style, prefers a vote in the fall for a more professional approach. My preferred date for voting is perhaps we could say the third Monday in June every four years.

We have been harsh in our criticisms of the prospect of an election less than four years into the Liberals' mandate as a cynical ploy to win another election. It is unacceptable for the Prime Minister to play with the country in this fashion for his personal advantage. This is not the kingly reign of his majesty Martin the first.

Voters rightly question why we continue to have a system that allows, what are clearly political considerations, to dictate the setting of the date of federal elections.

The Prime Minister may prefer a new mandate but under our system of government he does not need one. Canadians voted in November 2000 for a political party, not for a particular prime minister.

The Constitution requires that no House of Commons or legislature continue for longer than five years after the return of the writ from the previous election.

The Prime Minister may even genuinely believe that Canadians want an election, although this seems unlikely given that most people head to the polls with real enthusiasm only when they are on a mission to throw the bums out.

The only real push for an election comes from the Liberals who want an opportunity to continue their choke hold on government for another term. Now that the polls have changed, the whole business of the country in Liberal eyes may change, and this should not be so.

In the past, other government have seized on the same discretion on when to call an election to stay in power, long after they have worn out their welcome with the voters.

I say, enough. Certainly we can demand better and expect a higher standard of democracy for Canada.

There is no good reason why political parties should not be able to plan their affairs around a pre-determined calendar. The macro-economy would also benefit from the ability to plan around government budgets and fiscal predictability.

Over the past elections there has been a steady decline in the voter turnout in Canada. Setting a fixed election date would be a simple start to the important process of reforming our electoral system so more Canadians can feel there is a reason to vote.

Nevertheless, the Prime Minister's preference for the status quo is hardly surprising. Any incumbent leader would be loath to give up his right to call an election at a time that best suits the party. Any head of government would be reluctant to part with one of the longstanding perks of power, and we know the Liberals will do anything for power. Nevertheless, for the sake of the nation, a change would be a good thing to do.

If Canada were on a four year election cycle, the Prime Minister would not be dithering over whether to drop the writ this spring. His government would not be marking time, with no significant legislation before the House of Commons. His ministers would not be testing the political winds, recycling old spending announcements and making tentative, short term plans. MPs would not be making their tearful farewell speeches in the House.

He should not be parachuting candidates, like he plans in my riding, for that is an insult to party members and the democratic process.

• (1650)

It should have been clear when the Prime Minister was sworn in last December that he had a short set limit of months to govern before seeking a new mandate. He could have set his agenda accordingly and the nation could have developed a better mindset about the future vision for the country.

Mr. Speaker, I will be splitting my time.

The Liberals would still be on a pre-election footing of course. They would still be nervously watching the polls. They would still be struggling to extricate themselves from the ad scam scandal but they would also have the pressure to chalk up a few solid accomplishments before facing the voters and Canadians would have a better record upon which to judge.

Defenders of the British parliamentary tradition insist that flexible terms up to five years give a government the latitude it needs to cope with changing circumstances. It allows a government to consult the electorate at any time and it ensures that a government that loses the confidence of the legislature does not remain in power. However critics of the old Westminster model argue that it reduces public accountability by letting a government choose when to answer to the voters. It concentrates too much power in the hands of the Prime Minister. It bestows an unfair advantage to the governing party and it breeds national cynicism.

Supply

Until Reformers came to Parliament in strength in 1993, the traditionalists were unmoved. They could always count on prime ministers and premiers to follow election rules that worked in their favour. They could assume that the opposition would have trouble mustering sufficient interest in modernization.

However Reformers began to argue for improvements and it is now a change whose time has come. In British Columbia one of the first reforms brought in by Premier Gordon Campbell's government was the establishment of fixed provincial election dates every four years. To his credit, he willingly gave away the political advantage that comes with incumbency, the ability to manipulate the date of an election, in favour of the greater good of the people. The Prime Minister should do the same but he likely will not as he is inadequate.

The country must understand that it needs to elect a Conservative government to achieve this electoral improvement.

Dalton McGuinty may be next. The Ontario Liberal leader has promised to strip the premier of his divine right to set election dates. He said "It's time to put the silly guessing game behind us once and for all".

Should our party become government, one of the first items of business would be to bring in a bill setting fixed election dates.

The NDP leader, Jack Layton, has publicly endorsed a private member's bill on the very same topic.

At first glance, the Prime Minister would seem to have little to gain by standardizing the election calendar, but it is just as possible that he dislikes playing the election date roulette as much as Canadians dislike watching it. It certainly seems that he has not been very good at it. He cannot seem to gather himself on this one, let alone if he ever had to make a decision on a more serious national crisis. This simple slam-dunk of an issue reveals just how inadequate he is for the job.

I also could surmise that the Liberal campaign team would be helped more than it would be hurt by a clear timetable. There would be no more costly false starts, no more guesswork and no more pressure to be ready at any moment. All parties could prepare in an orderly manner.

The Prime Minister would win some respect from voters for levelling the electoral playing field. If he is serious about narrowing Canada's democratic deficit, this is an easy first step to do it.

No politician in recent memory has been more full of the arcane game of picking election dates than Jean Chrétien. The former prime minister was wily and fiercely partisan. The nation does not fondly remember him for that particular point. The present Prime Minister is unlikely to beat his predecessor at that old style of politics but he could outclass him at fair play if he just could find himself and do the right thing.

Today he should announce that he would bring in more democracy to the House by perhaps just telling us that voting day will be June 21, 2004, and every four years thereafter on the third Monday in June, come what may. Canada would be forever better for it.

● (1655)

Mr. Roy Bailey (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my colleague gave an excellent speech with a lot in it.

What I have heard today is that the baseball season is on and three strikes have come my way. Strike one, that if we were to have a fixed election date we would have left democracy. Strike two, that it would need a constitutional change, which is nonsense. And strike three, that it would create a republic, which is also wrong.

My hon. colleague who just spoke did not miss anything. He hit a home run with every statement.

Mr. Paul Forseth: Madam Speaker, I have advocated in the House some version of three strikes and you are out, but that is related to criminal offences. However, it is nice to know that someone thinks we hit a home run.

We must be very serious about looking at the academic literature. We must seriously consider an issue that is deceptively simple, yet has broad support and really is within the temper of the times, that a fixed election date within our Canadian Parliament is the right thing to do. We are very concerned about our economy and the rapid pace of the turnover of plans and the stock market. If anything, beyond the variances of this House, the stability that it could provide to the Canadian economy would be immeasurable. It would be a tremendous benefit.

We know that tax policy and policy around not having a deficit budget, what surpluses are and all the rules and regulations around corporate taxation are all related to the electoral cycle and the mandate of the government. The welfare of individual Canadians in their pocketbook is directly tied and can be seen as a ripple effect on having fixed election dates in our country.

There is a very real direct economic consideration for every Canadian. It is not just an academic exercise for the House to consider on its own. The economic consequences are tremendous. That is why among many other reasons, I am recommending and our party is fundamentally committed to imposing fixed election dates.

● (1700)

Mr. Ken Epp (Elk Island, CPC): Madam Speaker, I also would like to commend my colleague on his speech. He hit on a number of very good points.

I would like him to consider commenting further on some of the criticism that we presumably have heard from the Liberals here today in their specious arguments against the motion. They talked about the fact that it would somehow diminish the right of either Parliament or the citizens if we had fixed election dates. The argument has been put forward along the lines that somehow they then would not have the right to vote when there was an issue before us. That is not the case now, because if there is a real issue of accountability before the people of Canada, if the Liberal government, the way it is right now, feels it cannot win the next election, it just will not call one.

Supply

In actual fact there is, in my view, less democracy because of the fact that the government cannot be held accountable when the issue is there. At least if there were fixed election dates, if there was an issue on the table at the time the election came around, the government would get hammered, as I expect it will be in any case in the next election, whether it is this spring, in the fall, or next year.

Mr. Paul Forseth: Madam Speaker, we know the axiom that change begins with the recognition that a problem exists. The fundamental problem with the Liberal government is it is in denial. That is why it resists change and it resists modernization unless it is dragged there. That is why in concert we have heard all these specious arguments today.

Within our fixed election proposal, it is still possible for the Prime Minister and the government on their own initiative to consult the people and call an election because of a national controversy where perhaps they need a mandate, for example, to change the Constitution or deal with a separating province, and they are looking for a national resolve on a particular problem. The government on its own can decide to call an election on an issue, or the opposite, it may lose the confidence of the House and may be defeated.

That still would not interfere with our proposal for fixed election dates. The clock simply would be reset and by resolution of the House we could again come up with a predetermined date through consultation of the parties.

It is very important to provide continuity, sameness and predictability in this process. It is not just for parliamentarians to deal among themselves. The fundamental point that I have made is it sends a very strong signal to the economy upon which everything else runs.

Mr. Rob Merrifield (Yellowhead, CPC): Madam Speaker, it is a pleasure to debate the motion. I do it on behalf of the people of Yellowhead and I make that reference to make sure the people understand that I do it on their behalf. That is because it goes right to the root problem of what is going on with the country and with the House with regard to how Parliament runs and how a nation that calls itself democratic actually looks after itself.

Before we get into debate on why we should have fixed election dates, I make reference to the very first line in the motion which says that there is a serious democratic deficit in Canada. That is true and I believe it is. It is the first thing I recognized when I walked into the House a little over three years ago as the representative for Yellowhead. That is when I recognized just how dysfunctional this place actually is and why it was that we just had an election where 40% of the electorate decided not to even worry about going to the polls. They just checked out of the electoral process.

When we understand the problem with the dynamics in this country and the slide of interest in the democratic process, we have to ask what is the problem. Why is that actually taking place? Over the last three years I have examined a number of reasons why I think that could be happening. I have examined it first hand in this place as I have diligently worked on committees where I have seen them decide one thing one week, then the minister cracked the whip and all of a sudden they do 180 degrees reversal on their position the next week. I have seen situations where we have a Senate that is

appointed, that is not really reflecting sober second thought on pieces of legislation coming from the House. I have seen now, as we have examined what is going on at the present time with the sponsorship scandal, that without a fixed election date the electorate in Canada and members of Parliament from all sides of the House are being victimized because of not knowing exactly the date of an election call.

When we look at these three things, the easiest one to change would be the fixed election date. It is so simple and it would send such a strong message. An ordinary Canadian looking at the electoral process would say "Why would we not fix a time when we know exactly when we would go to the polls to elect our representatives again?"

I have listened very carefully to members of the House and I have yet to come up with a real good answer as to why anyone in this place would say no to that as a rational move in parliamentary reform. We have to understand that our Parliament is born from the British parliamentary system. There are all kinds of different models of that parliamentary form around the world. We can look at New Zealand, Australia and a number of others that came from the British parliamentary system and they have all evolved somewhat and they are all somewhat different. I would say Canada is a very young nation in the scope of things and we are at a pivotal time where perhaps the vote today could actually change the course of the history of our evolution of a democratic process.

It is very important we do that, because when we get into the free voting in the House we see the votes are absolutely whipped by the government. We have seen that time and time again over the last three years that I have been here. In fact the most recent one was the most embarrassing for the government when just last week almost the entire House voted against the cabinet. The Prime Minister whipped them, but he was not even here to vote himself and would not engage in it. A person should be here to vote on those issues.

Nonetheless, when we really listen to what the Prime Minister says and compare it with what he does, it tells us a lot about what will actually happen in the future. At the present time the Prime Minister talks a lot about the democratic deficit and how he really wants to change things so that it will engage the population of Canada and engage the House in true debate as we move forward into the 21st century. It is amazing to me when I hear all this rhetoric. I have to take him at his word. If he said it, that is what he wants to do. Yet when we look at the history over the last 10 years he has been the finance minister, he invoked closure or time allocation at least 13 times on his own legislation in the House.

● (1705)

We think, well okay, maybe he had no choice; maybe he was just part of cabinet and had no opportunity to change that. He certainly had that opportunity when he became Prime Minister. We thought when it came to time allocation and closure he would certainly change that, because that is what all the talk was about. However, the second week that he was in the House as the Prime Minister, he invoked closure on a piece of legislation.

Not only that, but he denied a free vote when it came to the firearms registry legislation. That piece of legislation certainly was not a money bill. It was a bill that dealt with firearms registration. It certainly should have had a free vote. It was a golden opportunity to send a new message to the people of Canada on how Parliament would run in the 21st century, and we were right back to the exact pattern of the last 10 years that we have seen from that individual.

What resonates in my mind is what the Prime Minister said in the *Winnipeg Free Press* back in November. I mention this in health care quite a bit because health care is my portfolio. What he said was that if we want to know what he is going to do in the future, just look at what he has done in the past. That does not say very much for health care and it says even less when it comes to democratic reform and dealing with the democratic deficit in this country.

It is unfortunate that we hear lots of rhetoric but we see very little performance when it comes to dealing with important issues. A perfect example is Senate reform and the idea of how the senators are actually put in place. They are appointed by the Prime Minister of the land. I do not believe that senators really should have a party position. The whole idea behind the Senate is that the senators be above the political process. Things can become a little chaotic in this place and with pieces of legislation there is the possibility of making some mistakes. True, sober second thought in the Senate would be an appropriate thing to do.

When it comes to how the senators are appointed, there are some vacancies for Alberta, my home province, where the people of Alberta went to the polls and actually elected two representatives to sit as their representatives in the Senate. However, the Prime Minister refuses to appoint these individuals as the representatives of the people of Alberta. I cannot imagine that anyone could talk about the democratic deficit without actually doing something to deal with this shortcoming.

When we look at today's debate which is on fixed election dates, we have to ask ourselves why that is not happening. I asked the question earlier of why anyone would say no to that.

There are other examples but I will use the example of Australia, which comes out of the British parliamentary system. Lots of things that Australia does in its British parliamentary system are quite a bit different from what we do. It is somewhat refreshing when we examine how they do it. A perfect example is that our percentage of voter turnout at the last election was a little over 60%, but in Australia it is somewhere around 95% to 98%. How does Australia achieve that? It does it by taxing individuals \$25 if their names are not crossed off the electoral list. Therefore, the people vote. It does more than that. Election day is a stat holiday so that when the people go to the polls, everybody in the country takes that day off and celebrates the liberties and the democracy that they live under. They do not take it for granted.

Perhaps there is something we can learn by recognizing just how important it is to make this place functional, to make democracy truly reign. We must understand as members of Parliament that being a representative is all about serving and not about political opportunism. The motion before the House truly could move the yardstick a little further along and show that we are above the political process, that we have the best interests of Canadians in

Supply

mind. If we are going to do that, we would have no hesitation whatsoever in making sure that we vote in favour of this motion to have fixed election dates. That would remove the whole idea of political opportunism in this area. It is very frustrating to me when I see that happen.

Some of the provinces have already started this. British Columbia now has fixed election dates. Ontario is talking about it and others may be looking at it. Why is that the case? Why should leadership on how democracy should be run in this country not start in this House? We should set the pace and lead. It should be the other way around. Instead of the provinces doing it, we should be setting the example in this House of how democracy should be run in a democratic country, especially in the 21st century as technology and information flows freely.

● (1710)

It is frustrating to me to hear the lack of arguments on the other side of the House with regard to this motion. I would encourage people from all sides of this House to really consider the opportunity before us today to vote for something that is in the best interests of the people they represent.

Hon. Roger Gallaway (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I listened with great interest to what was said. One of the words that jumped out of the speech was "simplicity", and I certainly got some insight into simplicity by listening to it.

I have a couple of questions. I have asked this question of others opposite and never received an answer. After 300 years of our constitutional system, of our system of selection of an election day, I would like to know when, on what day, did members opposite wake up and discover that somehow they could pick a section of it they did not like and say "let us outlaw, let us change it"? When did they discover that this process, which has existed for 300 years, was not to their liking, in their opinion?

Second, in Great Britain, whose system is most identical to ours, the percentage of those who vote is lower than it is here. Why is the simplistic proposal being put forward from our friends opposite not even on the radar screen there? It is not even being talked about in that country. Are they somehow not as intelligent, perhaps, or perhaps not as simplistic as some are here?

Finally, on the one hand, I heard my friend opposite talk about coercion, which he believes exists within the Prime Minister's Office, yet he would embrace a law that would coerce people to vote. How could he reconcile that Australian model where people are on force of a fine, on pain of a fine? That would be okay with him, but somehow he sees unfair practices out of the Prime Minister's Office toward members on this side.

● (1715)

Mr. Rob Merrifield: Madam Speaker, I guess dullness reigns in this place. I would like to answer the question of the individual. He had a few comments, but I do not know if there really was much of a question.

Supply

On the idea of Australia, Australia is one of the parliaments born out of the British parliamentary system, very similar to ours. They have a hybrid of it. We have a hybrid of it. Actually, to be honest, over the period of time—and he talks about the history of democratic reforms in the British parliamentary system—it took them 400 years before they figured out that the frontbench outvoted the backbench in the British parliamentary system. So there is a hybrid out of their own system. It is an evolution of democracies as we move forward in the history of the world and as democracies go.

We are in this process at the present time. We have a golden opportunity to move the yardsticks just a little bit with a fixed election date.

There were a lot of comments made by my hon. colleague, but none of them answered the question of why he would say no to this. This is all about giving the electorate, the people he represents, or says he represents, the opportunity to know when they are going to the polls. That would get it above the gamesmanship of political process and into truly representing the people of Canada.

That is really the root of the problem. I have a very difficult time when an individual in this House who has been here as long as he has does not understand that. I guess I should not be that surprised, because I saw individuals in this House forget all about representing their people within the first couple of months of being in this place. An individual can be here too long. He often forgets who he represents and who the real bosses in this country really are.

Mr. James Rajotte (Edmonton Southwest, CPC): Madam Speaker, I want to remind my hon. friend on the other side that the Constitution is an evolving document. In fact, if we look at the role political parties play and the role of the Prime Minister, we will actually not find the phrase “the Prime Minister” within our Constitution very often. It is very much an evolving role. There are actually systems we have put in place in addition to the Constitution. I do not think we should be constrained by that.

I want to ask my hon. friend a simple question. He is our health critic and has done an awful lot of work in that area. We all get more partisan as we approach an election, particularly when there is so much uncertainty over an election date. I think members on both sides would agree that we actually get a lot more work done when there is a less partisan atmosphere. I have certainly found that in my own experience at the industry committee.

I think that if we had a fixed election date, the Canadian people would actually be guaranteed three or three and a half years of knowing that their members of Parliament would be in a more constructive, less partisan atmosphere, because they would not be consistently worried about an election date over which they would have no control. This, I think, is such a simple, effective way to actually increase the effectiveness of this place that it just amazes me that members of all parties are not standing up endorsing this.

Mr. Rob Merrifield: Madam Speaker, that is absolutely true. All the work of committees has been put on hold because of speculation on whether there is going to be an election at the present time.

I can speak from what my experience has been on the health committee in the last two or three months. The committee is dysfunctional, no question about it. We are not sure whether we should start a study or stop a study or how far we should go.

Tremendous numbers of dollars are being spent and actually wasted because we are not able to finish reports that we engaged in initially, just purely based on election speculation.

This election could be another year and a half away. We do not really know. It is really frustrating when the parliamentary process and committee work are stalemated. My hon. colleague is exactly right. It does not lend itself to the efficiency of the House. It lends itself to dysfunction in the sense that people become more partisan and less productive.

That is what we are trying to say. Why play the game? Why not be clean and clear with Canadians, represent them as effectively as we possibly can in the House, let them decide, and stop this nonsense about guessing when an election will be?

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Hinton): Resuming debate, with my apologies to the next speaker. I will be calling time at 5:28 p.m.

• (1720)

[Translation]

Hon. Mauril Bélanger (Deputy Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Madam Speaker, if I understood correctly, I have approximately eight minutes. So, I will do my best to summarize what I have to say.

First, I question somewhat the premise of today's motion by the opposition party that, in the opinion of this House, there is a serious democratic deficit, particularly in the domination of the executive over the House of Commons.

I think this is an affirmation that can still be contested. There is a fundamental concept underlying our parliamentary system, which is that the government is accountable to the House. To govern, the government must have the confidence of the House. It is a responsible government. At school, I was taught that this is what the word means. Our government is in fact responsible. This means that it answers to the House: it must at all times have the confidence of the House in order to continue to govern.

This motion proposes taking away the House's confidence. So I fear that one of the initial consequences would be contrary to what the opposition is trying to do, and give even more power to the executive, which would be even less accountable to the House, since there would be fixed election dates.

In fact, if I understood correctly, the motion recognizes that the government could be defeated, for example, on a budgetary motion, and this could lead to an election being called. In my opinion, limiting the confidence of the House and accountability to the House is contrary to good faith and good governance.

A government must answer to the House on much more than just the budget. There are fundamental issues of principle, for example, that could be questions of confidence. There is this entire issue of confidence and the way the public has confidence in the government through its members.

We must tread very carefully. For example, if we head toward fixed election dates, this would mean, in my view, “presidentializing” our system, if I can use that word. At that point, we would have to consider the other consequences, because by presidentializing our Parliament, perhaps other measures would need to be adopted, including ones that, I am convinced, the opposition would not want passed.

In presidential systems, for example, the government, that is the president and his ministers, does not come before the assembly daily to account for its actions. Oral Question Period is something we have here in Canada, which requires a government to be accountable to the elected representatives of the people for its actions every day the House is in session. This is something we value a great deal.

If we were to “presidentialize”, to move toward another system, would this practice be at risk? I do not think this is something we should do. Difficult as question period may be sometimes for a government, it is essential to have such a tool in place so that the opposition can indeed obtain accountability from the government. We therefore need to proceed very cautiously.

I have heard what certain colleagues have been saying about committee work possibly being affected by the lack of a set date. It is true that some committees may be hampered, but the opposite is also true. I have been noticing recently, because of the possibility of a spring election, that some committees have worked faster, and have finished their deliberations more quickly and more energetically than they would have otherwise. They felt there was the likelihood of an election. If, on the other hand, they had known that the election was on a fixed date, there might not have been that sudden interest in finishing up. In certain cases, this tenfold increase in the energy level of certain committees has resulted in some very positive outcomes.

There are always two sides to everything, and some would say three: yours, mine, and the truth. If we are to head toward a set date for elections, I think broad consultation is needed first. In fact, the very system under which a government operates cannot be called into question with a motion such as this one, with a single day's debate, without broad public consultations.

To me it is a very simple matter; I will certainly vote against this motion for the reasons I have given, and for others as well.

It has been stated that our proceedings might be less partisan if there were fixed election dates.

• (1725)

Based on the information I have about systems with fixed election dates, I hold the opposite opinion. Their deliberations are fraught with constant partisanship; immediately after an election they already know the date of the next and they begin taking positions with a view to their campaign strategy, rather than accomplishing less partisan work for at least a year or two, as is the case in our parliaments.

It is clear that, in the first year and a half or two years of most mandates we have seen in majority governments, this period is inevitably less partisan. The opposite is not necessarily true of systems with fixed election dates.

Supply

We really must keep things in perspective. Instead of making a statement without truly knowing the consequences or all the facets of the issue, and there are several, we must be very prudent. If people want to study them, let them go ahead. That is perfectly legitimate. It is our duty as parliamentarians to be open, to examine the suggestions that are made to us, to use the necessary resources and time to examine them seriously and completely, which is not what is happening today.

At that point, perhaps, we should think of doing this in a somewhat more serious way than today. This idea definitely has some merit in the eyes of the public, but to do it today, by ourselves, without any consultation, is in direct opposition to what the author of the motion has proposed, and to what the Leader of the Official Opposition was calling for in his bill.

That said, I could probably find other arguments; for example, that the ability to call an election whenever it wants to gives the government an undue advantage. That is not quite true: there are risks. If elections are called too early or too late, there is a public outcry. As in all things, it is a question of balance, good will and transparency.

If we had fixed election dates and a government wanted to call an election anyway, it could arrange some clever trick to lose a vote. Instead of playing such tricks, I would prefer that we live with the situation we actually know, as it exists in our parliamentary system. It is an approach that has certainly served our country very well so far.

[*English*]

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Hinton): It being 5:28 p.m. it is my duty to interrupt these proceedings and put forthwith every question necessary to dispose of the business of supply.

Is the House ready for the question?

Some hon. members: Question.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Hinton): The question is on the amendment. Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the amendment?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Hinton): All those in favour of the amendment will please say yea.

Some hon. members: Yea.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Hinton): All those opposed will please say nay.

Some hon. members: Nay.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Hinton): In my opinion the nays have it.

And more than five members having risen:

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Hinton): Call in the members.

Supply

● (1800)

[Translation]

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

*(Division No. 53)***YEAS**

Members

Abbott	Ablonczy
Anders	Bachand (Saint-Jean)
Bailey	Barnes (Gander—Grand Falls)
Bergeron	Bigras
Blaikie	Borotsik
Burton	Cadman
Cardin	Casey
Casson	Chatters
Comartin	Crête
Cummins	Dalphond-Guiral
Davies	Day
Desrochers	Doyle
Duceppe	Duncan
Epp	Forseth
Gagnon (Québec)	Gagnon (Lac-Saint-Jean—Saguenay)
Gagnon (Champlain)	Gallant
Gaudet	Gauthier
Godin	Goldring
Grewal	Guay
Guimond	Harper
Hearn	Hill (Prince George—Peace River)
Hill (Macleod)	Hinton
Jaffer	Johnston
Keddy (South Shore)	Kenney (Calgary Southeast)
Laframboise	Lalonde
Lunney (Nanaimo—Alberni)	MacKay (Pictou—Antigonish—Guysborough)
Marceau	Martin (Winnipeg Centre)
Masse	Mayfield
Ménard	Merrifield
Nystrom	Obhrai
Pallister	Paquette
Penson	Perron
Plamondon	Proctor
Rajotte	Reid (Lanark—Carleton)
Ritz	Rocheleau
Roy	Sauvageau
Schellenberger	Schmidt
Solberg	Sorenson
Spencer	St-Hilaire
Stinson	Strahl
Thompson (Wild Rose)	Toews
Tremblay	Wasylcyia-Leis
Wayne	White (North Vancouver)
Williams	Yelich— 88

NAYS

Members

Alcock	Allard
Anderson (Victoria)	Assadourian
Augustine	Bagnell
Bakopanos	Barnes (London West)
Barrette	Bélangier
Bellemare	Bennett
Bertrand	Bevilacqua
Binet	Blondin-Andrew
Bonin	Bonwick
Boudria	Bradshaw
Brison	Brown
Bulte	Calder
Cannis	Caplan
Carroll	Catterall
Chamberlain	Charbonneau
Coderre	Collenette
Comuzzi	Cotler
DeVillers	Dion
Discepolo	Dromisky
Drouin	Duplain
Easter	Efford
Eggleton	Eyking

Farrah	Finlay
Fontana	Frulla
Fry	Galloway
Godfrey	Graham
Guarnieri	Harvard
Harvey	Herron
Hubbard	Ianno
Jackson	Jennings
Jobin	Jordan
Karetak-Lindell	Karygiannis
Keyes	Kilger (Stormont—Dundas—Charlottenburgh)
Kilgour (Edmonton Southeast)	Knutson
Kraft Sloan	Laliberte
Lastewka	Lee
Lincoln	Longfield
Macklin	Malhi
Maloney	Marcil
Marleau	Martin (LaSalle—Émard)
Matthews	McCallum
McCormick	McKay (Scarborough East)
McLellan	McTeague
Mills (Toronto—Danforth)	Minna
Mitchell	Murphy
Myers	Neville
O'Brien (London—Fanshawe)	O'Reilly
Owen	Pacetti
Pagtakhan	Paradis
Parrish	Patry
Peric	Peterson
Pettigrew	Pickard (Chatham—Kent Essex)
Pillitteri	Pratt
Price	Proulx
Provenzano	Redman
Reed (Halton)	Regan
Robillard	Saada
Savoy	Scherrer
Scott	Sgro
Shepherd	Simard
Speller	St-Jacques
St. Denis	Steckle
Stewart	Szabo
Telegdi	Thibault (West Nova)
Thibeault (Saint-Lambert)	Tirabassi
Tonks	Torsney
Ur	Valeri
Vanclicf	Volpe
Wappel	Whelan
Wilfert	Wood— 140

PAIRED

Members

Asselin	Bourgeois
Castonguay	Cullen
Cuzner	Fournier
Goodale	Loubier
Phinney	Picard (Drummond)— 10

The Speaker: I declare the amendment lost.

The next question is on the main motion.

[English]

Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

[Translation]

Hon. Mauril Bélangier: Mr. Speaker, if you were to seek it, I think you would find unanimous consent that members who voted on the previous motion be recorded as voting on the motion now before the House, with Liberals members voting against, except for those Liberal members who wish to be recorded as voting otherwise.

[English]

The Speaker: Is there unanimous consent to proceed in this way?

Some hon. members: Agreed

Mr. Dale Johnston: Mr. Speaker, Conservative members in the House tonight will be voting yes to the motion.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Michel Guimond: Mr. Speaker, the members of the Bloc Québécois vote against this motion.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Speaker, the members of the New Democratic Party vote yes on this motion.

[*English*]

Mr. Larry Spencer: Mr. Speaker, I will be voting yes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. John Herron: Mr. Speaker, I shall vote against this motion.

[*English*]

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

(*Division No. 54*)

YEAS

Members

Abbott	Ablonczy
Anders	Bailey
Barnes (Gander—Grand Falls)	Blaikie
Borotsik	Burton
Cadman	Casey
Casson	Chatters
Comartin	Cummins
Davies	Day
Doyle	Duncan
Epp	Forseth
Gallant	Godin
Goldring	Grewal
Harper	Hearn
Hill (Macleod)	Hill (Prince George—Peace River)
Hinton	Jaffer
Johnston	Keddy (South Shore)
Kenney (Calgary Southeast)	Lunney (Nanaimo—Alberni)
MacKay (Pictou—Antigonish—Guysborough)	Martin (Winnipeg Centre)
Masse	Mayfield
Merrifield	Nystrom
Obhrai	Pallister
Penson	Proctor
Rajotte	Reid (Lanark—Carleton)
Ritz	Schellenberger
Schmidt	Solberg
Sorenson	Spencer
Stinson	Strahl
Thompson (Wild Rose)	Toews
Wasylcia-Leis	Wayne
White (North Vancouver)	Williams
Yelich— 61	

NAYS

Members

Alcock	Allard
Anderson (Victoria)	Assadourian
Augustine	Bachand (Saint-Jean)
Bagnell	Bakopanos
Barnes (London West)	Barrette
Bélangier	Bellemare
Bennett	Bergeron
Bertrand	Bevilacqua
Bigras	Binet
Blondin-Andrew	Bonin
Bonwick	Boudria
Bradshaw	Brisson
Brown	Bulte
Calder	Cannis
Caplan	Cardin

Carroll	Catterall
Chamberlain	Charbonneau
Coderre	Collette
Comuzzi	Cotler
Crête	Dalphond-Guiral
Desrochers	DeVillers
Dion	Discepola
Dromisky	Drouin
Duceppe	Duplain
Easter	Efford
Eggleton	Eyking
Farrah	Finlay
Fontana	Frulla
Fry	Gagnon (Québec)
Gagnon (Champlain)	Gagnon (Lac-Saint-Jean—Saguenay)
Galloway	Gaudet
Gauthier	Godfrey
Graham	Guarnieri
Guay	Guimond
Harvard	Harvey
Herron	Hubbard
Ianno	Jackson
Jennings	Jobin
Jordan	Karetak-Lindell
Karygiannis	Keyes
Kilger (Stormont—Dundas—Charlottenburgh)	Kilgour (Edmonton Southeast)
Knutson	Kraft Sloan
Laframboise	Laliberte
Lalonde	Lastewka
Lee	Lincoln
Longfield	Macklin
Malhi	Maloney
Marceau	Marcil
Marleau	Martin (LaSalle—Émard)
Matthews	McCallum
McCormick	McKay (Scarborough East)
McLellan	McTeague
Ménard	Mills (Toronto—Danforth)
Minna	Mitchell
Murphy	Myers
Neville	O'Brien (London—Fanshawe)
O'Reilly	Owen
Pacetti	Pagtakhan
Paquette	Paradis
Parrish	Patry
Peric	Perron
Peterson	Pettigrew
Pickard (Chatham—Kent Essex)	Pillitteri
Plamondon	Pratt
Price	Proulx
Provenzano	Redman
Reed (Halton)	Regan
Robillard	Rocheleau
Roy	Saada
Sauvageau	Savoy
Scherrer	Scott
Sgro	Shepherd
Simard	Speller
St-Hilaire	St-Jacques
St. Denis	Steckle
Stewart	Szabo
Telegdi	Thibault (West Nova)
Thibeault (Saint-Lambert)	Tirabassi
Tonks	Torsney
Tremblay	Ur
Valeri	Vanclief
Volpe	Wappel
Whelan	Wilfert
Wood— 167	

Supply

PAIRED

Members

Asselin	Bourgeois
Castonguay	Cullen
Cuzner	Fournier
Goodale	Loubier
Phinney	Picard (Drummond)— 10

The Speaker: I declare the motion lost.

Supply

[Translation]

WESTBANK FIRST NATION SELF-GOVERNMENT ACT

The House resumed from April 22, 2004, consideration of the motion that Bill C-11, an act to give effect to the Westbank First Nation Self-Government Agreement, be read the third time and passed.

The Speaker: The House will now proceed to a deferred recorded division on the motion at third reading of Bill C-11.

• (1810)

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

(Division No. 55)

YEAS

Members

Abbott	Ablonczy
Alcock	Allard
Anderson (Victoria)	Assadourian
Augustine	Bachand (Saint-Jean)
Bagnell	Bakopanos
Barnes (London West)	Barnes (Gander—Grand Falls)
Barrette	Bélangier
Bellemare	Bennett
Bergeron	Bertrand
Bevilacqua	Bigras
Binet	Blaikie
Blondin-Andrew	Bonin
Bonwick	Borotsik
Boudria	Bradshaw
Brisson	Brown
Bryden	Bulte
Cadman	Calder
Cannis	Caplan
Cardin	Carroll
Casey	Casson
Catterall	Chamberlain
Charbonneau	Chatters
Coderre	Collenette
Comartin	Comuzzi
Cotler	Crête
Dalphond-Guiral	Davies
Day	Desrochers
DeVillers	Dion
Discepola	Doyle
Dromisky	Drouin
Duceppe	Duncan
Duplain	Easter
Efford	Eggleton
Epp	Eyking
Farrah	Finlay
Fontana	Forseth
Frulla	Fry
Gagnon (Québec)	Gagnon (Lac-Saint-Jean—Saguenay)
Gagnon (Champlain)	Gallant
Galloway	Gaudet
Gauthier	Godfrey
Godin	Goldring
Graham	Grewal
Guarnieri	Guay
Guimond	Harper
Harvard	Harvey
Hearn	Herron
Hill (MacLeod)	Hill (Prince George—Peace River)
Hinton	Hubbard
Ianno	Jackson
Jaffer	Jennings
Jobin	Johnston
Jordan	Karetak-Lindell
Karygiannis	Keddy (South Shore)
Kenney (Calgary Southeast)	Keys
Kilgour (Edmonton Southeast)	Knutson
Kraft Sloan	Laframboise
Laliberte	Lalonde
Lastewka	Lee

Lincoln	Longfield
Lunney (Nanaimo—Alberni)	MacKay (Pictou—Antigonish—Guysborough)
Macklin	Malhi
Maloney	Marceau
Marcil	Marleau
Martin (LaSalle—Émard)	Martin (Winnipeg Centre)
Masse	Matthews
McCallum	McCormick
McKay (Scarborough East)	McLellan
McTeague	Ménard
Merrifield	Mills (Toronto—Danforth)
Minna	Mitchell
Murphy	Myers
Nault	Neville
Nystrom	O'Brien (London—Fanshawe)
O'Reilly	Obhrai
Owen	Pacetti
Pagtakhan	Pallister
Paquette	Paradis
Parrish	Patry
Penson	Peric
Perron	Peterson
Pettigrew	Pickard (Chatham—Kent Essex)
Pillitteri	Plamondon
Pratt	Price
Proctor	Proulx
Provenzano	Rajotte
Redman	Reed (Halton)
Regan	Reid (Lanark—Carleton)
Ritz	Robillard
Rocheleau	Roy
Saada	Sauvageau
Savoy	Schellenberger
Scherrer	Scott
Sgro	Shepherd
Simard	Solberg
Sorenson	Speller
Spencer	St-Hilaire
St-Jacques	St. Denis
Steckle	Stewart
Strahl	Szabo
Telegdi	Thibault (West Nova)
Thibeault (Saint-Lambert)	Tirabassi
Toews	Tonks
Torsney	Tremblay
Ur	Valeri
Vanclief	Volpe
Wappel	Wasylycia-Leis
Wayne	Whelan
Wilfert	Williams
Wood — 219	

NAYS

Members

Cummins
Schmidt
White (North Vancouver) — 6

PAIRED

Members

Asselin	Bourgeois
Castonguay	Cullen
Cuzner	Fournier
Goodale	Loubier
Phinney	Picard (Drummond) — 10

The Speaker: I declare the motion carried.

(Motion agreed to, bill read the third time and passed)

* * *

[English]

CRIMINAL CODE

The House resumed from April 23 consideration of the motion that Bill C-12, an act to amend the Criminal Code (protection of children and other vulnerable persons) and the Canada Evidence Act, be read the third time and passed, and of the amendment and of the amendment to the amendment.

The Speaker: The House will now proceed to the taking of the deferred recorded division on the amendment of the member for Battlefords—Lloydminster to the amendment to the motion at third reading stage of Bill C-12.

The question is on the amendment to the amendment.

[Translation]

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Mr. Speaker, if you were to seek it, I think you would find unanimous consent that the members who voted on the previous motion be recorded as having voted on the motion now before the House, with the Liberal members voting nay, except those who indicate otherwise.

[English]

The Speaker: Is there unanimous consent to proceed in this fashion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Mr. Dale Johnston: Mr. Speaker, Conservative members in the House tonight will be voting yes to the motion.

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Guimond: Mr. Speaker, the members of the Bloc Québécois will vote against this motion.

[English]

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Speaker, the NDP is voting yes to the motion.

Mr. Larry Spencer: Mr. Speaker, I vote yes.

[Translation]

Mr. John Herron: Mr. Speaker, I would like to vote in favour of this motion.

[English]

Mr. Myron Thompson: Mr. Speaker, I would like to have my vote recorded as supporting the Conservative Party on the motion.

[Translation]

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

(Division No. 56)

YEAS

Members

Abbott
Barnes (Gander—Grand Falls)
Borotsik
Burton
Casey

Ablonczy
Blaikie
Bryden
Cadman
Casson

Chatters
Cummins
Day
Duncan
Forseth
Godin
Grewal
Hearn
Hill (Macleod)
Hinton
Johnston
Kenney (Calgary Southeast)
MacKay (Pictou—Antigonish—Guysborough)
Masse
Merrifield
Obhrai
Penson
Rajotte
Ritz
Schmidt
Sorenson
Stinson
Thompson (Wild Rose)
Wasylycia-Leis
White (North Vancouver)

Alcock
Anderson (Victoria)
Augustine
Bagnell
Barnes (London West)
Bélanger
Bennett
Bertrand
Bigras
Blondin-Andrew
Bonwick
Bradshaw
Brown
Calder
Caplan
Carroll
Chamberlain
Coderre
Comuzzi
Crête
Desrochers
Dion
Dromisky
Duceppe
Easter
Eggleton
Farrah
Fontana
Fry
Gagnon (Champlain)
Galloway
Gauthier
Graham
Guay
Harvard
Hubbard
Jackson
Jobin
Karetak-Lindell
Keys
Knutson
Laframboise
Lalonde
Lee
Longfield
Malhi
Marceau
Marleau
Matthews
McCormick
McLellan
Ménard
Minna
Murphy

Supply

Comartin
Davies
Doyle
Epp
Gallant
Goldring
Harper
Herron
Hill (Prince George—Peace River)
Jaffer
Keddy (South Shore)
Lunney (Nanaimo—Alberni)
Martin (Winnipeg Centre)
Mayfield
Nystrom
Pallister
Proctor
Reid (Lanark—Carleton)
Schellenberger
Solberg
Spencer
Strahl
Toews
Wayne
Williams— 60

NAYS

Members

Allard
Assadourian
Bachand (Saint-Jean)
Bakopanos
Barrette
Bellemare
Bergeron
Bevilacqua
Binet
Bonin
Boudria
Brisson
Bulte
Cannis
Cardin
Catterall
Charbonneau
Collenette
Cotler
Dalphond-Guiral
DeVillers
Discepola
Drouin
Duplain
Efford
Eyking
Finlay
Frulla
Gagnon (Québec)
Gagnon (Lac-Saint-Jean—Saguenay)
Gaudet
Godfrey
Guarnieri
Guimond
Harvey
Ianno
Jennings
Jordan
Karygiannis
Kilgour (Edmonton Southeast)
Kraft Sloan
Laliberte
Lastewka
Lincoln
Macklin
Maloney
Marcil
Martin (LaSalle—Émard)
McCallum
McKay (Scarborough East)
McTeague
Mills (Toronto—Danforth)
Mitchell
Myers

Supply

Nault	Neville
O'Brien (London—Fanshawe)	O'Reilly
Owen	Pacetti
Pagtakhan	Paquette
Paradis	Parrish
Patry	Peric
Perron	Peterson
Pettigrew	Pickard (Chatham—Kent Essex)
Pillitteri	Plamondon
Pratt	Price
Proulx	Provenzano
Redman	Reed (Halton)
Regan	Robillard
Rocheleau	Roy
Saada	Sauvageau
Savoy	Scherrer
Scott	Sgro
Shepherd	Simard
Speller	St-Hilaire
St-Jacques	St. Denis
Steckle	Stewart
Szabo	Telegdi
Thibault (West Nova)	Thibeault (Saint-Lambert)
Tirabassi	Tonks
Torsney	Tremblay
Ur	Valeri
Vanclief	Volpe
Wappel	Whelan
Wilfert	Wood— 166

PAIRED

Members

Asselin	Bourgeois
Castonguay	Cullen
Cuzner	Fournier
Goodale	Loubier
Phinney	Picard (Drummond)— 10

The Speaker: I declare the amendment to the amendment lost.

* * *

[*English*]

INTERNATIONAL TRANSFER OF OFFENDERS ACT

The House resumed from April 26 consideration of the motion that Bill C-15, an act to implement treaties and administrative arrangements on the international transfer of persons found guilty of criminal offences, be read the third time and passed.

The Speaker: The House will now proceed to the taking of the deferred recorded division on the motion at the third reading stage of Bill C-15.

• (1815)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mauril Bélanger: Mr. Speaker, if you were to seek it, I believe you would find unanimous consent that members who have voted on the previous motion be recorded as having voted on the motion now before the House, with Liberal members voting yes, except those who indicate otherwise.

The Speaker: Is there unanimous consent of the House to proceed in this fashion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

[*English*]

Mr. Dale Johnston: Mr. Speaker, Conservative members tonight will be voting no to the motion.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Michel Guimond: Mr. Speaker, the members of the Bloc Québécois will vote against this motion.

[*English*]

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Speaker, the NDP is voting yes to the motion.

Mr. Larry Spencer: Mr. Speaker, I will be voting no.

Mr. John Herron: Mr. Speaker, I will be supporting the motion.

Mr. Rob Anders: Mr. Speaker, I just want to make sure that I am included on this particular motion as voting in favour of it.

[*Translation*]

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

(*Division No. 57*)

YEAS

Members

Alcock	Allard
Anders	Anderson (Victoria)
Assadourian	Augustine
Bagnell	Bakopanos
Barnes (London West)	Barrette
Bélanger	Bellemare
Bennett	Bertrand
Bevilacqua	Binet
Blaikie	Blondin-Andrew
Bonin	Bonwick
Boudria	Bradshaw
Brisson	Brown
Bulte	Calder
Cannis	Caplan
Carroll	Catterall
Chamberlain	Charbonneau
Coderre	Collenette
Comartin	Comuzzi
Cotler	Davies
DeVillers	Dion
Discepolo	Dromisky
Drouin	Duplain
Easter	Efford
Eggleton	Eyking
Farrah	Finlay
Fontana	Frulla
Fry	Galloway
Godfrey	Godin
Graham	Guamieri
Harvard	Harvey
Herron	Hubbard
Ianno	Jackson
Jennings	Jobin
Jordan	Karetak-Lindell
Karygiannis	Keyes
Kilgour (Edmonton Southeast)	Knutson
Kraft Sloan	Laliberte
Lastewka	Lee
Lincoln	Longfield
Macklin	Malhi
Maloney	Marcil
Marleau	Martin (LaSalle—Émard)
Martin (Winnipeg Centre)	Masse
Matthews	McCallum
McCormick	McKay (Scarborough East)
McLellan	McTeague
Mills (Toronto—Danforth)	Minna
Mitchell	Murphy
Myers	Nault
Neville	Nystrom
O'Brien (London—Fanshawe)	O'Reilly
Owen	Pacetti
Pagtakhan	Paradis
Parrish	Patry
Peric	Peterson

*Private Members' Business***PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS**

● (1820)

[English]

IMMIGRATION AND REFUGEE PROTECTION ACT

The House resumed from February 12, consideration of the motion that Bill C-436, an act to amend the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (sponsorship of relative), be read the second time and referred to a committee.

Mr. John Bryden (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Aldershot, CPC): Madam Speaker, I know my riding of Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Aldershot is a bit of a mouthful but I have to say that I am the fault of that because I was the one who originally named the riding. I suspect, however, that it will be renamed very shortly to a somewhat shorter name.

I rise to speak to Bill C-436. It is an act that would amend the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act pertaining to the sponsorship of relatives.

What the act does or what it purports to do is it would give all citizens and permanent residents of Canada a once in a lifetime opportunity to sponsor a relative of their choice. What it does is it gets around the limitations that currently exist in legislation that restricts the sponsorship of relatives to direct relatives, like parents and grandparents, or to nieces and cousins who are in particular situations, like being orphaned or things like that, but it does not allow for the sponsorship broadly of distant cousins, uncles and other relatives.

The bill before the House, however, would get around that limitation that now exists in the Citizenship and Immigration Act and allow this one time sponsorship of any relative.

One can appreciate why the member for Vancouver East would bring forward a bill of this nature, because she comes from a riding that has a very large number of new Canadians and landed immigrants. Of course anyone who has come to this country from another land would naturally want to bring in as many relatives as possible.

I was on the citizenship and immigration committee when we dealt with this problem in the early 1990s and the difficulty was that the sponsorship program, as inherited from the Mulroney regime, was so broad that we were getting so many newcomers to Canada who could not be expected to contribute significantly to the nation, and it was felt that the sponsorship program should be limited in the way that we see in the legislation now.

There are some major difficulties with what is proposed by the member for Vancouver East. What she is saying is that every person in Canada ought to have the right to sponsor a relative. Well, there are 30 million people in Canada, so what the bill would do in effect is invite every Canadian and every permanent resident to sponsor a relative. I would suggest that basically would make it very difficult for Canada to control the type of newcomers who would like to come into the country, because every nation in the world has the right, and indeed it is a privilege, to want to have some say in who comes into the country to become a part of the nation's society.

Pettigrew
Pillitteri
Price
Proulx
Redman
Regan
Saada
Scherrer
Sgro
Simard
St-Jacques
Steckle
Szabo
Thibault (West Nova)
Tirabassi
Torsney
Valeri
Volpe
Wasylcia-Leis
Wilfert

Pickard (Chatham—Kent Essex)
Pratt
Proctor
Provenzano
Reed (Halton)
Robillard
Savoy
Scott
Shepherd
Speller
St. Denis
Stewart
Telegdi
Thibeault (Saint-Lambert)
Tonks
Ur
Vanclief
Wappel
Whelan
Wood— 150

NAYS

Members

Abbott
Bachand (Saint-Jean)
Bergeron
Borotsik
Burton
Cardin
Casson
Crête
Dalphond-Guiral
Desrochers
Duceppe
Épp
Gagnon (Québec)
Gagnon (Lac-Saint-Jean—Saguenay)
Gaudet
Goldring
Guay
Harper
Hill (Macleod)
Hinton
Johnston
Kenney (Calgary Southeast)
Lalonde
MacKay (Pictou—Antigonish—Guysborough)
Mayfield
Merrifield
Pallister
Penson
Plamondon
Reid (Lanark—Carleton)
Rocheleau
Sauvageau
Schmidt
Sorenson
St-Hilaire
Strahl
Toews
Wayne
Williams— 77

Ablonczy
Barnes (Gander—Grand Falls)
Bigras
Bryden
Cadman
Casey
Chatters
Cummins
Day
Doyle
Duncan
Forseth
Gagnon (Champlain)
Gallant
Gauthier
Grewal
Guimond
Hearn
Hill (Prince George—Peace River)
Jaffer
Keddy (South Shore)
Laframboise
Lunney (Nanaimo—Alberni)
Marceau
Ménard
Obhrai
Paquette
Perron
Rajotte
Ritz
Roy
Schellenberger
Solberg
Spencer
Stinson
Thompson (Wild Rose)
Tremblay
White (North Vancouver)

PAIRED

Members

Asselin
Castonguay
Cuzner
Goodale
Phinney

Bourgeois
Cullen
Fournier
Loubier
Picard (Drummond)— 10

The Speaker: I declare the motion carried.

(Bill read the third time and passed)

[English]

The Speaker: It being 6:17 p.m. the House will now proceed to the consideration of private members' business as listed on today's Order Paper.

Private Members' Business

There is another problem that is even more difficult and that is the problem that the bill would extend this privilege of sponsoring a relative once in a lifetime, not only to Canadian citizens but to permanent residents. Now the difficulty is that out of the 30 million people who are part of Canadian society, 1.5 million of them are not Canadians.

Indeed, we saw what happened late last year when the government introduced a program whereby people who did not have Canadian citizenship but were permanent residents were required to take a permanent residency card. There was a lot of conflict in our constituency offices over that. What was amazing was to discover in my own constituency office that many of those people who were captured by this requirement to have a permanent residents card had been in the country for 5, 10, 15, 20, 25 years. These people had come to the country many years ago, and many of them actually from the traditional countries that sent people to Canada, the United States and particularly Britain and Western Europe, but these people had come to Canada and they could not be bothered to take out citizenship and they could not be bothered to acquire the right to vote, even though they had been in Canada for many years. Often we had a situation where they raised their children under the citizenship of another nation.

• (1825)

What the bill would do is allow this type of person, who is not sufficiently attached to Canada, to acquire citizenship, to bring in relatives to become part of the country, to acquire the wealth and benefit of the country, to follow the same pattern and not bother about having a real attachment to Canada. I think this would be very unfortunate because Canada is a fine country and I think it is respected worldwide.

At the very least, we should try to attract people who want to be here because Canada is a fine country and who want to become part of Canadian society because they want to share in our values, our values that have to do with freedom of opportunity, freedom of speech, the respect for the rule of law and democracy and the respect for basic human rights. We do that when we become Canadian or when we at least hold it out as an option.

However to say to people who have chosen not to be Canadian, who have chosen only to take advantage of the material benefits of Canada, that they should have the right to bring in their relatives, just the absolute right to bring in their relatives to take advantage of the material benefits of Canada again, just like them, is quite unacceptable.

I would suggest that while I appreciate that the member for Vancouver East has proposed the legislation because she genuinely sees in her riding and among her constituency a desire for family reunification, which is very understandable, the legislation, unfortunately, as written, particularly because it includes permanent residents and provides for no criterion of adherence to the values of Canada, I regret to say it is legislation that I do not think the House should support.

I commend the member for Vancouver East for bringing it forward because I think the intent of the legislation is fine and we do want to be a country that welcomes people. However every nation ought to

have the opportunity to screen people for their potential desire to come to this land to adhere to our values.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Madeleine Dalphond-Guiral (Laval Centre, BQ): Madam Speaker, I am pleased once again to have the privilege to speak to an issue that appeals to our judgment and requires careful reflection.

The purpose of Bill C-436, tabled by the member for Vancouver East, is to amend the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act. The proposed amendment states, and I quote:

(1.1) Subject to the regulations, a Canadian citizen or permanent resident may, once in their lifetime, sponsor one foreign national who is a relative but is not a member of the family class.

This proposal reflects the humanitarianism of the member for Vancouver East and her great generosity. Although we agree with the principle of her bill, the current wording leaves us rather perplexed for the following reasons: the lack of clarity of the proposed amendments; the consequences of Bill C-436 on immigration priorities, namely with respect to Canada's role in protecting refugees; and finally the budgetary constraints and the resulting choices for the allocation of resources.

However, we are open to discussing this well-intentioned bill at greater length in the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration.

When we say that the proposal by the hon. member of the New Democratic Party lacks clarity, we are referring to a certain vagueness. For example, what does our colleague mean by "a foreign national who is a relative but is not a member of the family class"? What are the acceptable limits for the definition of a relative? Is she targeting a specific category of people who would currently be excluded from the family class? Does the notion of relative refer essentially to a genetic relative?

We easily see that there is a great deal of room for arbitrary decisions. If the hon. member wishes to broaden the family class to include other specific family members, she should state that in her bill, because without that, it is too vague and does not make it possible to determine which cases are admissible and which are not.

Not to mention the impact this could have on the time it takes to process claims since it is the officers who will have to determine which cases are admissible and which are not. The arbitrary nature of such decisions could provoke strong reactions from asylum seekers who are turned down.

The current list of persons admissible in the family class is already well defined. How could we justify an amendment this far-reaching without including some limits?

Another question arises. How many people would be affected by this new measure? For now, we can only presume that this kind of proposal would have allowed 229,091 additional sponsorship applications in 2002. The next question is obvious. Would this measure be accessible to all immigrants currently in Canada, no matter when they arrived?

Private Members' Business

In order to assess this plan and its possible repercussions, we must consider the current use of resources. So, 60% of immigrants selected are economic immigrants, meaning business people, and self-employed and skilled workers. The remaining 40% are family class immigrants, asylum seekers and so forth.

Of this group, 75% are family class immigrants, 25% are refugees, and a small percentage are other. If the number of individuals who qualify for family class is significantly increased, without an increase in the available resources, which has been the case for several years now, who will pay? Someone will have to pay the price of these new measures.

Since the total is split 60-40, there is a good chance that asylum seekers will pay the price of these new measures. Those who think the government might reducing the 60% should remember that, before family members of a permanent resident or Canadian citizen can be brought over, the primary applicant must qualify to enter Canada as part of the 60% in the economic class. So, this proposal, which would reduce that percentage, does little to improve the situation.

• (1830)

With respect to the 40%, the headlines show deportation cases for asylum seekers being dismissed almost every week. We need only think of the highly publicized cases of Mohamed Sherfi and the three Palestinians who have taken refuge in a Montreal church. There are numerous conflict situations and civil wars in the world, and the number of countries involved is on the rise: Columbia, Algeria, the Palestine-Israel conflict, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Afghanistan. All these realities oblige democratic countries to be more humane and more attentive to refugee claimants.

Every year, Canada turns away thousands of refugee claimants whose lives are in danger in their country of origin because of inadequate budgets. By refusing to increase budgets, Canada is deliberately choosing to decrease its obligations as a signatory of the Geneva convention on the protection of refugees.

Allowing more immigrants to sponsor distant relatives means making use of resources that could instead be saving lives by accepting more asylum seekers. Public policy must follow the same rules as everyday life, not be an exception to the rule; responsible choices must be made after examination of the various constraints. Which is wiser: allowing a distant relative to be brought to Canada, or offering asylum to Palestinians who are going to be deported to refugee camps in Lebanon? Unlike the present government, we must show some administrative rigour, some intelligent management.

The hon. NDP member's humanitarian objective is praiseworthy, particularly since her bill makes us re-examine the budgetary choices of Citizenship and Immigration Canada.

Canada's ultimate objective as far as immigration is concerned is to attain a level equivalent to 1% of the Canadian population. That is 310,000 immigrants annually. There are two main goals here: to compensate for the demographic decrease and to fill skilled worker positions, particularly with economic class immigrants

In 2002, Canada admitted 229,091 immigrants, compared to the 2001 figure of 250,484. The drop was in part a result of the department's inability to process any more because of budget

restraints and the costs related to settlement and integration. It is not enough just to admit people into the country; it is also important to ensure that they receive proper services for a smooth integration into the host society.

The quality of services to newcomers is as important as, if not more important than the number of newcomers. Currently, the small budgets given to Citizenship and Immigration Canada do not allow us to meet the numerous challenges related to the integration of newcomers. Why promote family reunification if we cannot provide adequate services to ensure the integration and settlement of these people?

This lack of resources is the major problem affecting immigration. This inadequacy in the immigration program and the humanitarian spirit reflected by Bill C-436 are the reasons why we support this legislation. Indeed, if the bill passes second reading, it will force a debate in committee and we will be able to show that the Department of Citizenship and Immigration is unable to fulfill its responsibilities because of insufficient financial resources. Moreover, the review in committee will allow us to identify some essential points to be incorporated into the bill proposed by the hon. member for Vancouver East.

I will conclude by expressing to this House my profound disappointment in the current government. In its last budget, the word "immigration" was not even mentioned once. Despite persistent problems in the processing of immigration and refugee claims, despite the numerous months and even years of waiting for a simple sponsorship application—we are now talking about some 35 months—the government does not even deign to allocate a few dollars to correct this unacceptable situation. And Canada claims to be a land that welcomes immigrants. Imagine if this were not the case.

• (1835)

[English]

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis (Winnipeg North Centre, NDP): Madam Speaker, I am pleased to participate in this debate on Bill C-436 which was introduced by my colleague from Vancouver East. It is a constructive proposal before the House to deal with a serious shortcoming in our immigration policy and legislation. At the same time, it provides the House with a pilot project.

It does not lock the government into any particular entrenched position. It offers a solution for the government to do something that Canadians have called for, for a long time. It is founded on and grounded in the notion of compassion and caring.

We are in the final hour of debate and I want to do everything in my power to persuade members of Parliament to support the bill and to join the efforts of my colleague from Vancouver East in making this a reality. Many people across the country are counting on us to do the right thing, to ensure that we in this Parliament find a way to recognize the importance of families and the ties that bind.

Private Members' Business

We heard from previous speakers who suggested this would open the floodgates, that the bill would attract people who do not have an attachment to the country, and that we would not have the resources to settle additional family members.

Those positions are not based on fact. The fact of the matter is that we are talking about residents in the country who would dearly love to bring in other family members not now eligible under the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act.

We are not talking about ineligible immigrants. We are not talking about immigrants who do not meet the normal standards in terms of security checks and health provisions. We are talking about aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, cousins, nieces and nephews, and not some undefined notion of family. We are talking about blood relatives.

The present law presents us with a very narrow definition of family based on the nuclear family. It does not recognize the fact that for many cultures there are different notions of what constitutes a family. The bill says to the government that here is one way to deal with that concern on a trial basis. Try it out. It is a once in a lifetime proposition. It does not lock the government to a change in policy over the long term. It offers the government a choice to try it out and see what the benefits are.

I would dare say that at the end of this pilot project we would see enormous benefits to our country. We would see enormous cost savings because the family that brings together other relatives from around the world has supports built in to that unit. It has a way to deal with loneliness and isolation that can otherwise present costly challenges for our society.

This is about family reunification which is the bedrock notion of our society. I want to reference the debate that we had in committee on the bill dealing with immigration and refugees.

The valuable role that the presence of family members can play in setting down new roots has also been undervalued.

We are attempting to change that today. Wanting to have family members close at hand to share in our lives is common to immigrants and non-immigrants alike. It contributes to our sense of community. As well, family members can provide familiar and trusted support, especially during a period of adjustment.

Expanding the family class definition to include more extended family members would ease some of the strain on immigration. Speeding up the family reunification process that sometimes can drag on for years would also reduce the stress of prolonged separation.

● (1840)

Members will know that currently under the present administration, there are enormous backlogs and problems in terms of family reunification, as it now stands. We can point to, for example, a country like the Philippines where people can expect to wait a year to 18 months for a spouse and up to three years for parents. There is already a lack of recognition on the part of the government to address what is a vital component of any reasonable immigration policy that makes us competitive on the international scene.

Our challenge to the government is to deal with those current administrative problems, those backlogs that prevent families from getting together as well as to apply a modern notion, a realistic concept of family that captures the meaning of all cultures around the world. Let us do it as soon as possible so we can deal with the loneliness, isolation and lack of supports in which many new Canadians feel and experience.

I was hopeful that we could convince the government to accept this bill until we saw today that the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration put out a note to her colleagues saying that she would vote no to the bill. I am afraid once again we are in a situation where cabinet is putting down the law and expecting members to fall in line with this dictate. I hope that is not the case, but I am afraid we are confronted with a similar pattern on the part of the Liberals.

I was hopeful until I started raising this issue in the House with a member in my own community, the member for Winnipeg North—St. Paul, the Minister of Western Economic Diversification. He did not seem to grasp the importance of the bill. In fact he said that this would be blanket bill that would allow once in a lifetime a non-eligible immigrant to come to Canada. That is wrong. We are not talking about a blanket bill. We are talking about a once in a lifetime project and about relatives who would be eligible under any other circumstance, except for the fact that we apply a very narrow definition in our legislation.

I hope the member for Winnipeg North—St. Paul gets a better grasp of this issue and realizes the importance of the bill from the point of view of the numerous ethnocultural groups in our community of Winnipeg today.

In fact I want to point out that in short order I received over 2,000 signatures on petitions in support of the bill. It is the tip of the iceberg in terms of indicating the support for the bill across the country. It is a policy that makes sense from the point of view of just plain human compassion. It is a policy that makes sense from the point of view of a cost effective approach to immigration. It is a policy that would help us address a fundamental problem with our immigration policy today, which is we are not competitive internationally for immigrants.

Our targets are never met. The government continues to fall short of our target by at least 50,000 a year. We cannot even get up to 1% of population as a target for this country. We have been unable to compete with other countries because we do not address the fact that people make a decision based on ties, based on feelings about a country and based on a sense of community.

What can be more important in that construct than opening up our notion of family and allowing just once in a lifetime aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews and cousins to come to Canada and join other family members, where they have the supports they need, are not a burden on society and in fact nourish and nurture the whole community?

Private Members' Business

I would urge all members in the House to look at the bill as a very positive suggestion for an otherwise difficult situation, and that is the need for the country to attract immigrants. Seven years from now the only growth in our labour force will be a result of immigrants. If we are concerned about preserving our population, or being able to support the baby boomer generation and or being able to fund programs for people in retirement, then we must seriously approach this proposition and support it wholeheartedly.

• (1845)

Ms. Sarmite Bulte (Parkdale—High Park, Lib.): Madam Speaker, it is a pleasure to rise today to speak to Bill C-436 which has been put forward by the member for Vancouver East.

The House should know that the member for Vancouver East has become quite a celebrity in my riding these days because she has been using her franking stamp to promote her leader throughout my riding. So it is wonderful now to not support this bill.

I am here, not as a current member of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, but I did serve as a member on that committee last session.

I am pleased to talk about some of the ways the government is making it easier for Canadians to sponsor their loved ones from overseas. It is important that we set the record straight and not be misled, as I feel we have been by the previous speaker.

All of us understand the importance of strengthening families and the family reunification provisions that are found in the current Immigration and Refugee Protection Act. Families have been a cornerstone of Canadian immigration for many years and the government is committed to ensuring they represent a growing and vibrant component of our immigration program for the decades ahead.

I too am a first generation Canadian, as my parents immigrated to this country. Today, Canadian citizens and permanent residents living in Canada, who are 18 years of age or older, can sponsor close relatives or family members who want to become permanent residents. The list of those who can be sponsored from abroad is quite extensive. It was this government that increased the list of members. It includes: opposite or same sex partners; parents; grandparents; dependent children, including those who are adopted; as well as brothers; sisters; nephews; nieces; or grandchildren who are orphaned.

Canada's immigration and refugee protection regulations also allow Canadians and permanent residents to sponsor foreign nationals who are not members of the family class provided they have no family residing in Canada or who could otherwise be sponsored from abroad. The act also has a way for individuals to apply to sponsor a non-family class relative on humanitarian or compassionate grounds.

There are several avenues of sponsorship available to cover different individual circumstances or family arrangements. Many were introduced after extensive consultations with stakeholders across Canada as well as Canadians from every walk of life. All upheld the principles of fairness, integrity and balance.

Canadians have told us what they want. They want an immigration program that strikes an appropriate balance between economic and non-economic immigrants. They want a program that will help to spread the benefits of immigration across Canada. Most of all, they want a program that ensures that immigration will benefit the community where newcomers choose to settle as well as the immigrants themselves. This private member's bill under debate today deviates from all of these objectives, and therefore is not supportable.

The government is aiming to achieve its long term goal of reaching immigration levels equal to 1% of Canada's population. In order to do this we must have a balanced, sustainable and well managed plan. As immigration levels increase, so too will family class levels.

However, we have a duty and a responsibility to ensure this is done in a responsible manner after consulting with stakeholders, Canadians and local leaders. The vast majority of newcomers to Canada settle in cities. We, therefore, need to hear from them.

Bill C-436 runs counter to any consultative process by arbitrarily raising family class levels to indeterminable limits. It also runs counter to any principles of balance by leaving the term "relative" undefined. Under the provisions of this ill-conceived bill, the door would be wide open for nearly anyone to sponsor anyone else, regardless of their relationship to each other or whether they had even met.

Since the newly landed relatives could themselves sponsor any relative as soon as they qualified, the family class could potentially overwhelm the immigration program. This is clearly not in the best interests of all Canadians.

I think we can all appreciate the desire for some individuals to sponsor relatives from overseas who are not members of the family class. The current regulations make provision for this under certain circumstances.

All of us also support strong families and strong family class provisions in the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act and regulations. The government's track record is impressive in this regard and will continue to be so in the future.

• (1850)

As I have said time and again, we also have a responsibility to ensure the integrity and stability of the immigration program for future generations. The provision in this private member's bill under debate would violate this trust.

I, therefore, strongly support the government's overall direction and I am completely opposed to Bill C-436 or any special provision that would leave us open to such chaos and to such abuse.

Private Members' Business

Mr. Gurmant Grewal (Surrey Central, CPC): Madam Speaker, I am pleased to rise on behalf of the constituents of Surrey Central to speak to the bill, Bill C-436, sponsored by the hon. member for East Vancouver. The bill is entitled, an act to amend the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act with respect to sponsorship of relatives.

First, I would like to commend the hon. member for her thoughtful and laudable efforts to fix some problems in the immigration system.

Of course there are various pros and cons with respect to the bill. Probably it is a step in the right direction, but it needs to be fine tuned. Some of the objections need to be carefully reviewed and brought to the attention of the authorities so they can be refined and reviewed and the con part can be tackled and the pro side can be highlighted.

I certainly believe the family is an institution which needs to be strengthened. With stronger families, communities are stronger and with stronger communities, then nations become stronger. Canada is a country of immigrants. Some people are first, second, third, fourth, fifth or whatever generation.

As we know, the definition of family could be by marriage, or by blood relationship, or by adoption, any of the three. When this sponsorship issue is dealt with, it is for family reunification. The intent is pro family, and I am very proud to support anything which is pro family. However, we have to deal with the con part, as I said.

Certainly the official opposition welcomes immigrants to Canada. I am sure everyone in this chamber wants legitimate immigrants to come to Canada. However, if they have a shady past or any of the characteristics which make them ineligible to come into Canada, no country wants those people. We welcome legitimate immigrants to Canada. Their legitimacy is defined by different criteria in the Immigration and Citizenship Acts.

I used to be a member of the immigration committee for quite some time and I am quite familiar with the immigration system in Canada, particularly because I come from a constituency which happens to be the largest constituency in population in Canada. More than 210,000 people live in my riding. Most of them are new immigrants, and they have problems dealing with immigration. Some of the problems are pretty reasonable and legitimate, and my staff works overtime on immigration issues. Why? The Department of Citizenship and Immigration is not efficient or effective and the system is clogged.

The caseworks related to different categories of prospective immigrants is entered into the system from one end. It takes a very long time before their cases are processed, then they come from the other end as finished products. Due to the inefficient and ineffective immigration system, the offices of members of Parliament are involved. In fact immigration is like any other department.

Why are members of Parliament not involved with other casework as much as with immigration? Because the immigration department is inefficient, particularly with different categories, whether it is landed immigrants, or family reunification, or other categories of landed immigrants, such as entrepreneurs, even visitor visa cases. All of them are so messed up that it demands there should be some sort of interference in the system from the elected officials on behalf of the constituents they represent.

• (1855)

So even the ministers' permits have been abused—not now but in the past—to give political favours to their constituents. They were politically oriented ministers' permits in the past, many years ago, but I believe there are less of them now. There should be absolutely no political interference in the immigration system or immigration cases. That would be the most preferred choice, but since the system is not working there has to be political interference under the present circumstances, which I believe one day will be eliminated.

It becomes very important because, as the hon. member from the Bloc pointed out, the word immigration is not mentioned even once in the whole budget. The government is completely ignoring the advantages and disadvantages of the system, particularly so with the past cuts in the budget which have meant that the immigration staff, the front end of the security lineup, are not properly trained and do not have proper resources. The system is naturally inefficient.

Many times, the system looks only at the black and white. There is no cultural aspect, no compassionate aspect, and there is no humanitarian aspect reviewed when the initial review of the case takes place outside the country. I can give so many examples, but I will not go there yet.

On the other hand, while we criticize the system, when we say that the system is inefficient, ineffective and clogged, it is also incumbent upon immigrants not to abuse the system. When people in Canada, as well as those outside who want to come to Canada, abuse the system, the system has to draw a line somewhere. When the system is abused, then we have to take hard measures to stop that kind of abuse. No one wants abuse of the system.

I have always given the analogy that Canada is like a home. If someone comes to our front door and rings the bell, we open the door and welcome our guests. On the other hand, if we are sleeping, someone enters through the back door and we wake up in the morning with someone is sitting on the couch, we do not like that. I wish that our immigration system would be such that the front doors are open but the back doors are closed; even the windows and ventilators should be closed.

Some of the delays that cause the abuse to occur are sometimes really very legitimate delays in this system which upset people. For family reunification at present, I think the waiting period is 42 months, which is a very long time. In other countries such as Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom, the waiting time is not as long as it is in the immediate relative category of 42 months in Canada. Moreover, when these people are frustrated after applying for reunification with their relatives, they call the 1-800 number at the department and they are always told to check after three months. When they call after three months, it is another three months and so on until two or three years have passed. That is not fair either.

Certainly in the case of spouses, the criteria become that someone has not been wearing the traditional clothes for 45 days after the marriage, or that 700 people did not show up at the marriage, only 200 people showed up, or that the reception was held not at home but at a community hall or something like that. Those kinds of criteria become impediments in the selection or rejection of that particular case. Such arbitrary criteria really become a pain for people to understand, and in fact it becomes inappropriate to judge a case based on that kind of criteria.

I know of a case in my constituency where a husband and wife have been married for eight years. The husband is a Canadian citizen and sponsored his wife to come to Canada. They have a child who is about eight years old. They still have not been reunited in Canada. Such unnecessary delays cause serious problems in families.

• (1900)

On the other hand, in some cases with respect to spousal reunification, the system has been abused. Many cases have been reported recently of husbands or wives coming to Canada and then running away at the airport. They do not go to their intended family. They simply get married in order to come to Canada, which is a critical problem.

I want to summarize now by mentioning the visitor's visa case. There should be some provisions allowing people to either give a personal guarantee or post a bond so that they can bring in legitimate visitors, particularly in a situation like attending a marriage.

Canada's immigration policy has to be fair and competitive. Such issues should be reviewed so that we can be more efficient in judging immigration cases.

• (1905)

Ms. Libby Davies (Vancouver East, NDP): Madam Speaker, I am happy to rise in the House to finish off the debate on Bill C-436, a bill that I have put forward. I appreciate the comments that have been made by members in the House today.

Bill C-436 has a very basic premise, and that is to assist with family reunification in Canada. As the member for Winnipeg North Centre pointed out so eloquently, when we talk to Canadians, particularly those in urban centres who have gone through the immigration system and know the frustrations and the flaws that exist within the system and the difficulties they have experienced in trying to bring a family member to Canada, they see Bill C-436 as a way to fix the system. For some members to blame family members for the lack of resources from the Liberal government is quite astounding.

I also was astounded to hear the member for Parkdale—High Park say that the bill would create chaos and violate government policy. Maybe she is not aware but it was actually her own former minister of immigration who first brought forward the idea of once in a lifetime. The minister came to Vancouver and put forward this suggestion which was hugely responded to by the local community. When the minister dropped the idea because she received a lot of pressure from her bureaucrats, I thought it was a terrific idea, which is the reason I brought the bill forward in the House.

Private Members' Business

The suggestion that somehow this would create chaos in the system is simply not the case. I believe it is really an attempt to scare people about what is taking place here.

The bill has had tremendous support across the country. I met with various groups in Vancouver. I know my colleagues from Winnipeg North Centre and Winnipeg Centre have held meetings in Winnipeg. The member for Windsor—St. Clair held meetings in his community. Meetings have been held in Toronto, Edmonton and other places. The simple proposition of allowing someone, once in a lifetime, to sponsor a family member who otherwise would not qualify has received strong support in the community.

I would argue that at this point Bill C-436 has a lot of merit to go to the next stage, which is to go to committee where it can be debated and we can look at the definition. As it exists now, as has been pointed out, the definition for family class is incredibly restrictive. It does not reflect Canada's cultural diversity, which is why we have such a problem with the system. The idea of examining the bill, looking at the definition of family class and hearing witnesses on that basis, is what this debate is about. It is about ensuring that the bill can go to committee.

I hope that members will support the bill with the idea that it is about family reunification. It is quite tragic that the Liberal government cannot meet its own established target of 1% immigration levels in Canada. We have to blame the government for that because it has not provided the resources to deal with the backlogs. For members to blame family members for that problem is absolutely unacceptable. If we were to go out to any community, I believe people would be quite horrified to hear that.

I thank the members who have supported the bill and who understand its principle. I even thank the former immigration minister who first proposed this idea because it is a good idea and it should be looked at. For those members who just see the bill as something they can shoot down for whatever political reason, that is unfortunate.

I hope that when the bill comes to a vote it will be supported so it can go to committee where it will get the examination that it deserves. We will be able to hear witnesses and maybe agree upon the fundamental principle that reuniting families in Canada is something that all members of the House should support.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Hinton): Is the House ready for the question?

Some hon. members: Question.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Hinton): Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Hinton): All those in favour of the motion will please say yea.

Some hon. members: Yea.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Hinton): All those opposed will please say nay.

Private Members' Business

Some hon. members: Nay.

2004, immediately before the time provided for private members' business.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Hinton): In my opinion the nays have it.

It being 7:10 p.m., this House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 2 p.m., pursuant to Standing Order 24(1).

And more than five members having risen:

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Hinton): Pursuant to Standing Order 93, the recorded division stands deferred until Wednesday, April 28,

(The House adjourned at 7:10 p.m.)

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