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Monday, November 20, 2006

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Speaker: The Honourable Peter Milliken

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Monday, November 20, 2006

The House met at 11 a.m.

Prayers

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

• (1105)

[*Translation*]

CANADA STUDENT FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE ACT

The House resumed from October 2 consideration of the motion that Bill C-284, An Act to amend the Canada Student Financial Assistance Act (Canada access grants), be now read the second time and referred to a committee.

Mr. Claude Bachand (Saint-Jean, BQ): Mr. Speaker, it is my pleasure to rise this morning to speak on the private member's bill before us. This is a bill of some social significance. Aimed at students, it ensures that they have access to financial assistance to pursue their studies. This is a long awaited bill. It is essentially updating the legislation by taking the regulations made under the previous bill to incorporate them into the act. This makes for something much stronger.

I mentioned that the bill had some social significance because, unfortunately, not everyone in our society can afford post-secondary education. I will cite the example of the aboriginal issue, which I have had the privilege of defending during my first seven years here in Parliament. I would sometimes visit reserves where children who completed high school were being told, "Sorry, but the band council has no money to pay for your post-secondary education".

Each time, I felt a pinch in my heart. To think that, in a country of abundant means and resources like Canada, young people were being told that they cannot continue school the following year. That was just unacceptable to me.

The same thing is happening in society today. We know that the number of single-parent families, for example, is growing. As a result, single parents often not only have a hard time paying for what their children need, but also have to tell their children that they do not have enough money to pay for post-secondary education. This, too, is unacceptable. All young people who want to continue their education should be able to do so without worrying too much about debt, which is another problem.

When I was in school, I had to take out student loans, which I subsequently repaid. Students today have a substantial debt load, and it is time we agreed that in Canada, no one should be penalized for pursuing post-secondary education. As well, it is always tempting for young people, early in life, to take a low-paying first job, which can delay post-secondary studies.

That said, even though we have some reservations about this bill, on the whole we are satisfied with it. As for our reservations, you will not be surprised to learn that we feel that this bill encroaches on an area of provincial jurisdiction. However, clause 14 of the bill states that a province can opt out of the program with full compensation, and that suits us.

In essence, the bill says that regular students can receive up to half of their tuition, to a maximum of \$3,000. Students can also receive assistance for more than one year under the bill. Previously, assistance was available only for the first year of study. Now, it is understood that if students want to complete their post-secondary education, it might be important to help them until the end of their studies if their families cannot afford tuition. Up to \$3,000 is granted for this.

There is another important aspect to this bill: it helps students with disabilities. These may be young people who are blind or who have a mobility impairment. They will receive assistance, which is commendable. As I just said, assistance will be available not only for their first year of study, but for all years of their post-secondary education from now on.

With respect to the reserves I mentioned earlier, not only would this interfere with Quebec's jurisdiction, it would also fail to solve the fundamental problem from our point of view. We think that once the federal government corrects the fiscal imbalance, this kind of problem can be resolved in its entirety, rather than piecemeal. You are well aware of the fiscal imbalance. Members of Quebec's National Assembly, including the Liberal government, have also acknowledged it. It adds up to \$3.9 billion. That is a lot of money.

Student associations are now asking the government to inject a billion dollars into education. If we correct the basic fiscal imbalance, we will not be forced to take a piecemeal approach every time, encroaching little by little on Quebec's jurisdiction.

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The Prime Minister said that he did not want to encroach on provincial jurisdiction. He also wants to fix this problem using transfers—by either correcting the fiscal imbalance or offering tax points or some other way. We have to fix this problem, but that is not what we are doing right now.

I have to say that Quebec's system is exemplary. I think we proved this in the case of the infamous millennium scholarships. Unlike the millennium scholarships, Quebec's system takes more than merit into consideration.

I do not know the exact correlation, but often, students who do very well in school had an easy childhood and wealthier parents—factors that helped them reach their academic potential. Now they are the ones getting the millennium scholarships.

Quebec's program is more universal and based on need. If a single parent family is unable to cover the post-secondary tuition fees for a child, Quebec recognizes this and wants to help.

As I already said, I am grateful to the member who introduced this bill for realizing that this is a provincial jurisdiction and that there can be a transfer with compensation. I think this will be quite interesting.

Furthermore, we must take into account that there is a growing number of single parent families. There is significant poverty among single parent families. The idea of helping young people who want to pursue their education has a lot of merit.

Earlier I was talking about students with disabilities. A description of that clientele exists. Significant functional deficiencies include severe visual disability, severe hearing loss, a motor disability or an organic disability, which prevent the student from accomplishing daily activities easily and limit his or her ability to study or work.

These students must not be left behind on the pretext that they do not have the necessary faculties or aptitude. I met some young people who are blind and who have great intellectual faculties. Just because a person is blind or deaf does not mean they should be cast aside. I think this is important.

If we do not give these young people access to the system, we will come to realize in a few years time that they will always have difficulty. However, if we take care of them, we might find them contributing a great deal to society. Those are my thoughts on the matter.

I will close by saying that a society's wealth is not in its forestry, mines, streams or natural resources. A society's greatest resource is its youth, the young pupils in our schools. We have to take care of them.

Quebec has always kept tuition fees low. We are proud that our tuition fees are the lowest in Canada. Why are we proud? Because this allows more young people to register for and complete their studies. We help out these young people. A society's resource is its youth. The more our young people are educated, the further they will go and the better they will ensure that our society lives on.

•(1110)

[English]

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak in support of Bill C-284, which would extend Canada access grants for students from low income families from the first year of study to each year of a student's first program of study.

While this bill does not address all of the problems in post-secondary education and is itself imperfect, I do support this bill. I believe it represents a more progressive and efficient approach to increasing access to post-secondary education by providing direct funds to students in need at the time when tuition is due.

In my community in Toronto I have spoken with young people who have completely written off the possibility of attending post-secondary education. They believe it is only for the wealthy. Increasingly, I think, these young people are losing hope that they can better themselves and make a constructive contribution to society. That is a terrible tragedy.

I also speak to many other young people who have gone through post-secondary education but who are now living under an incredible, crushing debt. Some of them live with a debt of tens of thousands of dollars, which is the size of a mortgage for some people in some parts of this country.

For young people trying to get a foothold in the workforce, starting out with that kind of debt is ridiculous, especially if they are living in a city like Toronto, with our housing prices. They simply cannot do it. I have young people coming to my office in tears because they are not able to meet the requirements for paying back their student debt.

This is a pressing need not only for these young people, but for our society. Post-secondary education is a public good. It is a social good. If Canada is to remain a wealthy developed country in a 21st century economy, we need to attract the best and the brightest, not only the wealthiest, to proceed with their education.

We have seen huge cuts to education over the last several years. The Liberals, when they were in power, cut over \$2 billion to post-secondary education in the 1990s and slowly added a convoluted patchwork of so-called student assistance programs, tax credits and savings schemes that disproportionately benefited high income families. The Conservatives have perpetuated this system with the textbook tax credit and by raising the student debt ceiling in the budget of 2006.

I believe that all Canadians have a lifelong right to learn. While post-secondary education is important for young people, it is also a public good, and it should be accessible and of high quality for all Canadians. As we see our economy changing and evolving, people no longer expect to be in the same job over a lifetime. As a society, our best adjustment programs recognize this. They help people to keep learning throughout their lives and therefore better equip themselves for different jobs down the road.

Yet we have seen our education system, which had been relatively affordable, become one that is relatively unaffordable. It is interesting to speak to this right after my colleague from the Bloc, who described the system in Quebec. Not only does Quebec have the lowest tuition rates, it offers a universal assistance program for students. Over 70% of students identify financial barriers as the greatest reason not to pursue post-secondary education. Education has become less affordable and less accessible, more so than at any time in our history during this century, which I find astounding.

• (1115)

While I support the bill, I do have concerns. While assistance for the lowest income students is important, assistance for middle class students is also important. The amount being offered to low income students is insufficient when we take into account the true costs of post-secondary education. They still incur enormous debt.

Eligibility for the program is based on income instead of need. Regardless of what kind of program a student is taking, the amount is not increased. As I mentioned earlier, it is important for Canadians to have access to lifelong learning and mature students are excluded.

The program also excludes financially independent students. Even though they live on their own and are financially independent, their eligibility is linked to parental income. As the previous speaker indicated, they do not target students from rural and aboriginal backgrounds where there are particular challenges.

Nevertheless, the bill is a step in the right direction and deserves support.

However, this one bill cannot solve the problem. Canada's post-secondary education system needs an overhaul. An NDP government's first priority for post-secondary education would be to dramatically reduce student debt. We would ensure that tuition is no longer out of reach of even middle income Canadians and that debt levels are reduced. We would shift the focus of student aid to more non-repayable grants and ensure the grants are available when tuition is due.

The NDP would ultimately enact a Canada post-secondary education act that would legislate stable, core funding from the federal government for post-secondary education and enshrine the principles of accessibility, quality, academic freedom and accountability of a public, not for profit post-secondary education system.

In conclusion, while I support the bill as a long overdue first step toward helping students and their families cope with high debt and rising tuition fees, the overall national need for a comprehensive approach to post-secondary education is greater now than ever. This is fundamentally what our country needs to address in the coming months.

• (1120)

Mr. Gary Merasty (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to speak in support of the bill introduced by the hon. member for Halifax West and it is a pleasure for two reasons.

The first reason is that the hon. member has family roots in Meadow Lake, a town in my riding celebrating its 70th anniversary this year and a town that is well-known for its community spirit and

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hospitality. The second reason is that the bill would create real opportunity and respond to challenges in Saskatchewan.

Expanding the Canada access grants gives students from low income families and students with disabilities tremendous aid to meet Saskatchewan's emerging labour force gap.

Saskatchewan is at an unique place right now. Many of our baby boomers are starting to retire. As a result, many jobs, ranging from teachers to nurses, to welders, need new people to come in and fill these positions. To respond to this gap, there is an emerging youthful population in northern Saskatchewan where much of the wealth-generating natural resources are. Thus, northern Saskatchewan represents, in many ways, an emerging new Saskatchewan.

Meeting Saskatchewan's labour gap and building this new Saskatchewan will require many strategies but, most important, we need to enable all young people, regardless of background, to have access to the best skills training and education Canada provides.

Currently, Canada access grants provide financial assistance to students from low income families and students with disabilities for their first year of study. Bill C-284 would extend the availability of this grant to all four years of study. The bill would also give Canada access grants a statutory base that would make it difficult to end or change without parliamentary scrutiny, giving the grants program long term stability. The bill meets a need I saw time and again when I was a student, a teacher and now as a parent.

My wife and I have watched, with immense pride, our oldest children go on to post-secondary education at the University of Saskatchewan. Their accomplishments were as a result of many years of dedication and hard work. Added to that pride is knowing that they are attending a school with the best college football team in Canada, the U of S Huskies.

The biggest challenge for all students is trying to meet numerous costs, like housing and food, while paying for tuition. I know people who simply could not make ends meet and had to drop out regardless of merit and ability.

When I graduated from the U of S, I became a teacher back home in Pelican Narrows. I had the opportunity to meet with some of the greatest emerging minds of Canada, my students, and to help them explore their potentials. However, I was far too often faced with the terrible sight of youth, regardless of obvious merit and tremendous ability, being denied the opportunity to go on to post-secondary only because of a lack of funds.

Over this last week I saw many of the new future leaders of Saskatchewan as I spoke and met with students across my riding. At Meadow Lakes Carpenter High School and Creighton Community School, I spoke with grade 12 students who asked tough questions and had insightful opinions that showed sharp, inquisitive minds and remarkable potential.

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I also met and spoke with NORTEP and SIIT students in La Ronge, students who are further along in their journey of learning. They will soon be assuming the leadership role they have worked so hard to achieve. I am very proud of all of them.

All of these students are on the cutting edge of Saskatchewan. They represent the new Saskatchewan. However, many challenges still must be addressed. Many communities face poverty, need improved roads or basic infrastructure. There also needs to be more investment into education at all levels.

The bill would help so many to contribute by taking away much of the burden of tuition and unmanageable debt. Students would get the opportunity they need and I know many will take this opportunity and run with it for the rest of their lives.

I also had the opportunity to meet with students from the northern adult education class in Green Lake. These students are making education a priority for their lives and their children's lives. This commitment and dedication is an inspiration. However, there is also a deep disappointment with the impact of the Conservative government cuts to literacy. There are feelings of deep betrayal and of being targeted for no good reason.

I have heard of the disappointment from other groups as well. Community access programs and youth employment opportunities are threatened without the commitment of the Conservative government. Industry Canada officials also admit that there are no plans to continue first nations SchoolNet, a huge blow to learning at schools on many first nations reserves. The cuts and lack of commitment to educational tools have hurt northern Saskatchewan. We need to take advantage of all learning opportunities and build more of them.

• (1125)

The bill would help students gain financial stability and encourage them to fulfill their potential. I ask the Conservatives to take a lesson from the bill and fully commit to building opportunities for our future leaders and the new Saskatchewan.

Mrs. Joy Smith (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to participate in the debate on Bill C-284 proposed by the hon. member for Halifax West.

Bill C-284 proposes to extend the Canada access grant for students from low income families to all years of a student's first program of study, such as an undergraduate degree. Additionally, Bill C-284 would repeal the Canada access grant provisions in the Canada student financial assistance regulations and incorporate them in the Canada Student Financial Assistance Act.

Before discussing the substance of this proposed legislation, I would like to reassure the member opposite that Canada's new government is committed to supporting access to post-secondary education. Moreover, I believe our government shares with the parties opposite a common recognition that education is the key to prosperity and advancement. As the philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, so eloquently pronounced:

We are born weak, we need strength; we are born lacking everything, we need aid; we are born stupid, we need judgment. All that we lack at birth and that we need when we are grown is given by education.

The natural resources of Canada will be shaped by cultivation but our human capital, the future generations of leaders and visionaries, will be shaped by education. Through education, we will create the vibrant and dynamic workforce Canada requires to compete and, more important, succeed in a global economy.

Lamentably, during the course of its 13 year tenure, the previous Liberal government's commitment to post-secondary education was questionable at best, negligent at worst. In the words of the member from Kings—Hants, currently a Liberal leadership aspirant, the former Liberal government systematically “slashed transfers to the provinces to such an extent that it created a tremendous vacuum in funding for universities throughout the country. The provinces were simply not able to maintain adequate funding to our post-secondary universities and community colleges across the country. As a result of the deficit that existed in the funding of post-secondary education, we saw, for instance, the doubling of the average amount of student debt after a four year program in Canada. We saw tuition doubling, not just in one province but all across the country”.

Canada's new government, on the other hand, has recognized the need to support the future well-being of Canadians through investments in post-secondary education along with increased individual support for apprenticeships and students. With respect to supporting apprenticeships, our new government has introduced new measures that provide both strong incentives for employers to hire new apprentices and to encourage many young Canadians to pursue apprenticeship training.

These incentives include: first, a new apprenticeship incentive grant which will provide grants to apprentices in the first two years; second, an apprenticeship job creation tax credit to encourage employers to hire new apprentices; and third, a new tools tax deduction to help tradespeople with cost of tools. These new measures will encourage new registrations in apprenticeship programs and support the successful completion of this training.

Furthermore, in budget 2006 we have demonstrated our commitment to assist students acquire an education. We have done so by offering substantial measures, such as the new textbook tax credit, expanded eligibility criteria for students seeking Canada student loans and exempting scholarship and bursary income from taxation.

Budget 2006 also allocated \$1 billion to the provinces and territories to support pressing investments in post-secondary education and infrastructure, such as libraries and laboratories. These measures were well received. As Claire Morris, president of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada stated, they underline Canada's new government's “commitment to promote a more competitive, more productive Canadian economy”.

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In addition to the measures announced in budget 2006, the Government of Canada provides nearly \$15.5 billion to the Canada social transfer fund which provinces can allocate toward post-secondary education and social services. These include \$1.7 billion to support post-secondary education research and \$1.8 billion in grants and loans to enable students to access post-secondary education.

• (1130)

Moreover, our government also provides a wide range of tax measures and savings incentives to assist Canadians with their post-secondary education. These measures include the tuition tax credit and the education tax credit to help cover non-tuition costs of post-secondary education and the student loan interest credit. Also, the Canada learning bond and the Canada education savings program help hard-working families save for their children's post-secondary education.

However, I would like to stress that in cooperation with the provinces and territories we continually examine ways to improve supports for post-secondary students. In this context the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development has been given a specific mandate to undertake discussions with the provincial and territorial governments to discuss the overall objectives for post-secondary education and training, appropriate roles, and ensuring appropriate accountability measures.

Having provided the appropriate context for the balance of my remarks, I will now address the substance of Bill C-284. Each year the Government of Canada makes significant investments in non-repayable assistance for students in need. This assistance includes, for example, grants specifically designed to help students with permanent disabilities, high need students with dependants, and students from low income families.

Currently, the Canada access grants for students from low income families are available to students enrolled in the first year of their first post-secondary program of study, provided this occurs within four years of their graduation from high school.

Bill C-284 proposes to enable students to receive the grants in any year of their first program of study, again providing they started that program within four years of completing high school.

It is important to note that these grants were just recently introduced in August 2005. Accordingly, the Canada access grants for students from low income families have been in effect for only one single year. As a result some observers have noted that there is insufficient data available to confidently conclude what degree of impact this grant has had. Prior to extending this grant it would be beneficial to wait for more data to become available. This additional data would enable us to better analyze and predict the potential impacts of extending the grant to additional years.

Another important consideration in the Bill C-284 debate is the reality that such a proposed change would necessitate extensive intergovernmental consultation with participating provinces and territories. Moreover, further analysis would also be required to determine the extent to which non-participating provinces might be eligible for increased alternative payments.

I would like to further point out that the second component of Bill C-284, which proposes the repeal of the Canada access grants provisions in the Canada student financial assistance regulations and their incorporation in the Canada Student Financial Assistance Act, would have significant consequences.

It should be noted that incorporating the Canada access grants directly into legislation would make it burdensome to adjust both the criteria and the amount of the grants should changes become necessary. The inclusion of the Canada access grants in the Canada Student Financial Assistance Act would mean that Parliament's approval would be required for any future enhancement of the Canada access grants for students from low income families and the Canada access grants for students with permanent disabilities.

Adjusting these grants through the regulations in which they are now included is a far more efficient and effective way to make required changes. Moreover, placing the Canada access grants in legislation would also create a discord of governing authorities over the various grants available through the Canada student loans program. While the Canada access grants would be governed by legislation, the grants available under the Canada student loans program would remain subject to change through regulatory amendments.

For the aforementioned reasons the House should objectively consider the manner in which Bill C-284 proposes to modify the Canada access grants.

Finally, before I conclude, I would like to again assure the member for Halifax West that we share a common commitment to support access to post-secondary education.

• (1135)

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis (Winnipeg North, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am delighted to have an opportunity to participate in the debate on the private member's bill pertaining to Canada access grants for post-secondary education.

As you can tell, Mr. Speaker, for our caucus this is a very important issue, probably one of the most critical issues facing our country today as we look to the future and as we plan for a full employment economy in an era of new technologies and new ventures.

It is our obligation as members of Parliament to ensure that all of our young people have access to post-secondary education if they so choose. We know, from the lineups at community colleges and from the demands we are hearing at universities, that the young people of this nation are prepared to make a commitment to the future of this country, to do their best to further our values as Canadians, and to pursue the very best in all of us. However, they are facing huge difficulties.

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The obstacles to post-secondary education are incredible. The cost for students in this day and age are enormous and many families are finding huge difficulties in creating those opportunities for their young people. As we know, many families will do anything to help their children pursue their life's dreams. We know that some families make this their top priority. They will mortgage their homes. They will go into debt. They will ensure that they scrimp and save on many things in order to be able to afford the ever increasing education costs and rising tuition that young people are faced with today. Anything we can do as a Parliament to ease the way to make it possible to access post-secondary education is absolutely imperative.

I believe that this should be the number one issue for the federal Conservative government as it approaches both its economic update this Thursday and its budget in the spring or late winter. For years we have devoted time in the House to the urgent priority of health care. We set that aside as a number one issue. Canadians believe it is a number one issue and we have done a great deal. We may not have conquered that frontier yet, and there is still much more work to be done. However, we also know that it is imperative for us to invest now in education. It is imperative that we ensure that the government provides increased cash payments to provinces for education.

The proposal we have before us today is one small piece of a big puzzle, one small part of a solution, and one answer to a big problem facing students today, when we think about the fact that the cost of tuition for entering first year university is probably getting close to \$5,000. In my day and age, when I went to university some 35 years ago, tuition was less than \$1,000. It was probably about \$500 a year and we were able to access very reasonable student loans and grants. Today, that is gone. Students have not got that same access to low tuition and they have not got the same access to decent loans and grants. We do not have a comprehensive universal program to ensure that all students, no matter what their income, are able to access post-secondary education.

We have a band-aid of programs. We have the millennium scholarship. We have the RESPs. We have the tax credit for text books. We have a little bit here and a little bit there, but not the universal program that we need. The bill before us is another piece that helps improve the overall situation and that is why we support it, but it is not sufficient.

• (1140)

What is truly required here is for the government to say that this is the number one challenge we face as a country. Let us ensure that our share of money going to the provinces gets back up to at least 25% on an annual basis. We know that we are now looking at single digit numbers. In fact, the federal share of education is below 10%. In other words, the vast majority of the cost for the system is coming out of provincial coffers and individuals, and that has to change.

If we truly believe in creating a bright future for this country, if we truly believe in developing a civil society, in being a leader around the world and being a star on the global horizon, then surely we have to make this our number one priority do everything we can to reverse the present trend.

We saw with the Liberals serious ongoing cuts to education over the last 13 years. We still have not recovered from 1995 when the Liberal government took a huge bite out of transfer payments, \$6

billion altogether in terms of health, education and social assistance, the biggest bite out of social programs in the history of this country. We have not recovered from that point. We were not able to convince the Liberals in the past to restore cash payments and to put in place a formula that would ensure money growth according to population and according to GNP.

We are now at the crossroads, where the Liberals neglected to address this issue for over a decade and now the Conservatives have come with some more tinkering. The last year's budget change, a credit for textbooks, is a little bit of a help, but hardly a replacement for the serious erosion that occurred under the Liberals. We have two governments that have basically put education at the low end of the list of priorities for this country. We must raise that here and now in this Parliament.

This bill helps us to focus our attention on this issue, helps us to move a little closer toward a more complete system of assistance for students.

However, let us be clear. Until the government makes this a priority, and until it actually decides to return to a system of serious partnership with the provinces, we are in deep trouble as a country. We will not be able to train and educate our young people to meet the challenges of the future. We will be lost on the global front because we failed to actually equip our students with both the specific tools of the new trades of the future and because we did not create a lifelong learning process where we understand and encourage the notion that education is about learning how to be good citizens, how to participate in a full, meaningful way and create the fundamental building blocks of civil society.

I urge members to support this bill, but I urge them to do more than that, to go beyond this band-aid approach and to start putting pressure on the government. The government itself must start looking inward and make this our new frontier. Education is about who we are as a nation, how we treat our young people, and how prepared we are for the future.

• (1145)

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to participate in the debate on Bill C-284, sponsored by the member for Halifax West. He has been a real champion on behalf of those in most need in our society. Who could be in more need than low income and disabled Canadians looking for an opportunity to improve themselves by getting post-secondary education so they can fully realize their aspirations and their abilities.

I am surprised that the government simply does not seem to get it. In fact, one of the Conservative speakers has said that having the lowest debt to GDP level in 24 years is bound to help all aspects of our economy, including children looking to obtain post-secondary education.

I know the government is paying down debt, et cetera, but the rubber does not hit the road. The federal government needs to have programs that target them. We cannot only say that the economy is improving and, therefore, low income Canadians will have more income to pay for important activities of their children, such as post-secondary education.

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I am also very disappointed with the government's attitude toward what it has done and how that supposedly will take care of the situation raised by the hon. member. I have looked at some of the issues members have raised. They talk about a text book tax credit, which is about an \$80 value. The rest of the things, whether it has to do with an infrastructure trust or some of the other aspects, are global issues that will not target those who need the help the most. In fact, Bill C-284 raises the fact that the Canada access grant is only available for the first year of study.

What happens after the first year? How do low income Canadian families and families with disabled children carry on? How do they finish what they have started? Nothing will change dramatically in the one year. This is the beauty of the bill. This good idea has been started, but we need to finish the job to make absolutely sure that those who embark on the challenge of post-secondary education have every opportunity to fully complete the program and to take their place as a contributing member of our workforce.

The last Conservative speaker tended to suggest that it would somehow be a real burden for the government to change legislation. All of a sudden, instead of being a regulation, it now has to make changes to legislation. I do not think Canadians will accept the fact that somehow it is a burden to government to make some modest changes in order to implement important programs, where the changes will translate into assisting people who need our help.

In the newspaper today I read a piece about Preston Manning and Mike Harris. They have put out their next missile targeting Canadians yet again. They have said that government has to get out of funding provincial responsibilities. In other words, this is the Conservative brain trust saying to Canadians that the government should get out of this. This is the ideological difference here. The Conservatives want to get out of anything that has to do with provincial jurisdiction. It means not supporting the bill and getting rid of things.

Wait until there are more attacks on the whole aspect of how we support Canadians in areas which have principally been provincial jurisdiction. It is like saying that health care delivery is the responsibility of the provinces so the federal government should not support it when it involves the delivery. However, federal governments have supported it because it is important. Many times prior governments have looked to providing capital funding for MRIs, CT scanners and special programs for wait times.

● (1150)

We have the \$42 billion deal with the provinces to provide the necessary funding so our health care system can establish wait times for critical areas. This was done because the federal government was playing a role in an area particularly to do with provincial jurisdiction.

However, when it comes down to it, the measure of success of a country is not an economic measure. It is a measure of the health and well-being of its people. That means the federal government has a role to play, regardless of jurisdiction. There are ways to collaborate and to work with the provinces to ensure the objectives of all Canadians are met.

I was very disappointed to see that the Conservative brain trust decided that we had to get out of funding provincial responsibilities. The government itself has said that one of the big things it has done is transfer \$15.5 billion to the provinces for post-secondary education. It did that because it was part of its ongoing responsibility. It was not a decision of the current government. In fact, this is under the transfer arrangements that the federal government has with the provinces with regard to health care, post-secondary education and established program financing. Those are ongoing responsibilities of the government.

Members will know that the provinces continue to put pressure on the federal government to continue to provide additional funding up to certain levels so they can deal with the growing demands on our health care system, post-secondary education and established program funding.

I also thought it was interesting that Mr. Harris and Mr. Manning said that the government should get out of funding welfare, that it had nothing to do with welfare. They want to get out of child care. Does this not paint a picture by two prominent Conservative persons, one a former premier and one a former leader of the official opposition for the then Reform Party or the Canadian Alliance Party?

It says that the federal government is getting out of supporting people. It is basically saying that they should fend for themselves, that it will not provide those programs. The line I heard was something to the effect that Canadians should no longer be dependent upon their government for things, that they should not be reliant on the government for anything, that they should take care of themselves, that they have to do their own thing. I cannot believe this is the case.

We are a knowledge based economy. We are an economy where the degree of education of a Canadian will be extremely important in terms of the success rate. I remember doing work some years ago on the economics and implications of a post-secondary education. In fact, in terms of unemployment rates, people with no post-secondary education had a 15% unemployment rate. Those who had some education had an unemployment rate of something like 10%. However, those who had a post-secondary education, whether it be university, community college, apprenticeship or skills training, had an unemployment rate of only 3%, much below the national average. In fact, a post-secondary education was the key determinant of whether someone would have a job.

Bill C-284 says to Canadians that a bit more needs to be done on behalf of low income families and families with disabled children who want to obtain a post-secondary education. They are important to Canada. They are important for our future economic strength and well-being.

Some have said that they cannot afford post-secondary education. We want to eliminate that as an excuse. People should never say they cannot afford it. As a matter of fact, we have to say to people that they cannot afford not to get a post-secondary education. It is because of the unemployment rate, which I mentioned. It is also because of the spread in the income that persons can earn.

Private Members' Business

I thank the member for Halifax West for bringing forward a very thoughtful bill. The previous speaker said that we should wait for a little while to see what the reaction was to the first year of the proposal and then we could think about it and make a decision. It is a no-brainer. We should expand the bill to cover all four years of a post-secondary education.

• (1155)

Mr. Gord Brown (Leeds—Grenville, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have this opportunity to join in the debate on Bill C-284, introduced by the hon. member for Halifax West.

As we have heard during the debate, Bill C-284 asks us to endorse the extension of the Canada access grant for students from low income families from one year, as it is currently, to all years of a student's first program of study. In addition, it proposes we vote to repeal the Canadian student financial assistance regulations that apply to this grant and incorporate them into the Canada Student Financial Assistance Act.

I want to reassure Canadians that the government is determined to find ways to support students from low income families in realizing their dreams of a post-secondary education. We want to enable these young people to obtain the skills and knowledge that post-secondary education can provide. We want all young Canadians, regardless of the incomes of their families, to have the opportunity to compete for the challenging and fulfilling careers of tomorrow. Access to post-secondary education will help them contribute their skills and knowledge and will make our national workforce stronger, more flexible and better positioned to compete in the global economy.

However, as other members have pointed out in the debate, to extend the Canada access grant for students from low income families to cover all years of a student's first program of post-secondary study, while perhaps noble in intent, may be premature at this time. It should be noted that this has been only operating for little more than a year.

The government is doing many things to help post-secondary education and to help access to it across our country. However, before extending this grant to all years of a student's post-secondary education, I believe it is essential that we consider Bill C-284's proposals in the larger context of the support of Canada's new government for post-secondary education, which does include various forms of assistance.

In total, we are providing \$1.8 billion in grants and loans to help students access college or university. This is in addition to \$15.5 billion that the government will provide this year through the Canada social transfer for provinces and territories to allocate for post-secondary education. We also have a wide range of tax measures, including the tuition tax credit and a tax credit for textbooks.

The government is doing many things to help access to post-secondary education, but at this time we believe the proposal is a bit premature. Fundamentally, not only are Bill C-284's proposals not informed by hard evidence, but they would impose an unnecessary obstacle to the provision of effective and efficient support for Canada's students.

Hon. Geoff Regan (Halifax West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to take this opportunity to thank all colleagues in the House who have

spoken on the bill. I know that this is a matter of interest to many, and it should be a matter of interest to many, because if we are going to build a stronger, more prosperous society and a stronger economy in the future, we have to invest in education. We have to invest in young people who are trying to get an education, especially those from low income families.

My hon. Conservative colleague who just spoke said that the government is determined to find ways to help low income students access education. This is a perfect opportunity for the government to demonstrate that. We have seen very little evidence of it so far.

In fact, in the budget there was the \$80 tax credit for textbooks, which is not a heck of a lot when we consider what textbooks cost students every year. Moreover, it was a measure that students have to wait to benefit from until April or later, after they have filed their taxes. The fact is that students need assistance when they are starting in the fall and paying their tuition, not six or eight months later. That is a fundamental problem with the modest measure the government offered in the last budget.

The Standing Committee on Human Resources, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities has been travelling and doing a study on employability. We have heard a lot across the country about the looming skills shortage. A shortage has already begun in many sectors in many parts of the country. We are seeing a looming need because of the fact that people who are in the baby boom age are heading toward retirement. More and more boomers are going to be retiring over the next 5 to 10 years or so, creating a lot of spaces for people in various sectors that will need highly skilled people.

Therefore, not only do we need literacy training to build up the foundation for people, but we also need skills training and higher education. All of these are essential. We cannot leave anyone behind.

The idea of this bill is not to be the be-all and end-all, of course, or to solve all problems. It is to help one particular problem, that of helping low income students get access to and be able to afford post-secondary education, whether it is university or community college. That is absolutely vital. I think we have seen very little interest or action on this from the government side. I hope this will cause the government to reflect and will put pressure on the government to do more.

Government Orders

As we know, the Speaker has ruled that this bill requires a royal recommendation, which is to say that it cannot become law unless the minister of the Crown actually gives it her endorsement. That is disappointing. So far we have not seen this endorsement from the government and I do not think that we are going to now, which suggests that the government is not interested in helping low income students in this very effective way.

This is a program that already exists for first year students who have low incomes or disabilities. We have a vital need to make sure that both of these groups are included in the prosperity of our economy so that we utilize the skills and talents of these people. If we do not provide assistance to them and more assistance to education generally, particularly to universities and community colleges, then we are not going to be able to have all the people who have the talents to be in university and community colleges to be there. They will not be able to afford it.

We have to do more to make it more affordable. I agree with the idea of the dedicated education transfer to the provinces, but I also think it is important that we have direct assistance for students, the kind of assistance that this program provides. It is, in fact, one part of the puzzle.

My hon. colleague from Parkdale—High Park was concerned that the bill did not provide for middle income students. I agree with her wholeheartedly that there is a need to have measures to provide for middle income students. That is why in the election campaign we had in our platform the fifty-fifty plan, which would have paid for half the tuition for a student in the first and last years of an undergraduate program. I think that was a very good measure. It was not the be-all and end-all, but it was a very important start and it would have helped.

Programs like that are important, but I think that this program, the Canada access grant program, is one important program that helps low income students and students with disabilities get into university and it makes it more affordable for them. I think the bill deserves the support of all members of the House.

• (1200)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): It being 12:04, the time provided for debate has expired.

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

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

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

Some hon. members: Yea.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): All those opposed will please say nay.

Some hon. members: Nay.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): In my opinion the yeas have it.

And five or more members having risen:

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): Pursuant to Standing Order 93, the division stands deferred until Wednesday, November 22, immediately before the time provided for private members' business.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

• (1205)

[Translation]

FEDERAL ACCOUNTABILITY ACT

Hon. John Baird (President of the Treasury Board, CPC) moved:

That a message be sent to the Senate to acquaint their Honours that this House:

Agrees with amendments numbered 1, 3, 13, 16, 17, 21, 26, 27, 32, 33, 55(e)(i), 63, 64, 66, 70, 72 to 79, 81, 82, 84, 86, 87, 91, 93, 95, 97, 99, 103 to 106, 111, 112, 114, 117, 122, 124 to 127, 135, 144, 146, 152, 156 and 158 made by the Senate to Bill C-2, An Act providing for conflict of interest rules, restrictions on election financing and measures respecting administrative transparency, oversight and accountability; but

Disagrees with all other amendments except amendments 29, 67, 98 and 153, because this House believes that amendments 2, 4 to 12, 14, 15, 18 to 20, 22 to 25, 28, 30, 31, 34 to 54, 55(a) to (d), 55(e)(ii) to (viii), 56 to 62, 65, 68, 69, 71, 80, 83, 85, 88 to 90, 92, 94, 96, 100 to 102, 107 to 110, 113, 115, 116, 118 to 121, 123, 128 to 134, 136 to 143, 145, 147 to 151, 154, 155 and 157 are in contradiction with the principles of the bill of effectively strengthening accountability, increasing transparency, improving oversight and building confidence in government and parliamentary institutions, and that these amendments contradict the stated policy goal of rebuilding the public's trust in the institutions of government; and

That this House considers this matter to be of significant importance and urges their Honours to respond expeditiously to this message.

More specifically:

Amendment 2 would weaken the Conflict of Interest Act by removing the prohibition on public office holders who have duties in respect of the House or Senate, or their families, on contracting with the House or Senate;

Amendments 4, 5, 8, 9, 11, 12 and 15 would undermine the ability of public office holders to discharge their duties and substitute the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner for Parliament or the public as the final arbiter of an appearance of conflict by expanding the definition of "conflict of interest" under the Conflict of Interest Act to include "potential" and "apparent" conflicts of interest;

Amendments 6, 28, 30 and 31 would weaken the Conflict of Interest Act by preventing the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner from issuing an order to a minister or parliamentary secretary to recuse himself or herself from voting on or debating matters in Parliament when doing so would place them in a conflict of interest as well as limiting the timeframe within which an investigation may be carried out

Amendments 7, 10 and 14 are an inappropriate intrusion into the private lives of public office holders and their families as they would narrow the exemption for gifts to public office holders from "friends" to "close personal friends" and require that any gift over \$200 to a reporting public office holder or his or her family from any person other than a relative be disclosed to the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner and publicly reported

Amendments 18, 23 and 24 would undermine the capacity of the Prime Minister to discipline ministers and maintain the integrity of the Ministry by eliminating the ability of the Prime Minister to seek "confidential advice" from the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner with respect to specific public office holders;

Government Orders

Amendment 19 would deter the public from bringing matters to the attention of the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner through a member of either House, create unfairness to individuals who are subject to complaints whose merits have not been substantiated and undermine the Commissioner's investigatory capacity by deleting the provisions that would protect the anonymity of a member of the public and allow the Commissioner to complete an investigation before the matter were made public by requiring members of either House to keep confidential information received from the public about a possible conflict of interest until the Commissioner issued a report;

Amendments 20 and 22 would prohibit the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner from issuing a public report where the request for an examination was frivolous, vexatious or otherwise without basis thereby reducing transparency and requiring a public office holder who has been exonerated to publicize on his or her own a ruling to clear his or her name;

Amendments 25, 34 to 54, 55(a) to (d), 55(e)(ii) to (viii), 56 to 62, 65 and 94 are unacceptable because they would continue the separate existence of the Senate Ethics Officer contrary to the goal of a unified Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner who could bring a broad perspective to bear on conflict of interest and ethical matters;

Amendments 68 and 69 are unacceptable because they contravene the objective of reducing undue influence in the electoral process by raising the annual political contribution limits from \$1,000 to \$2,000 and providing for a "multiplier" so that the contribution limit is increased by an amount equivalent to the limit for each general election held within a single year;

Amendment 71 would undermine the capacity of the Commissioner of Elections to investigate alleged offences under the Canada Elections Act. The amendment would shorten the overall limitation period from ten years to seven years after the offence was committed (reverting to the status quo) and change the knowledge portion of the limitation period from five years to two years from the time the Commissioner of Canada Elections had knowledge of the facts giving rise to the offence. This would not address the current problems with the limitation period that were identified by the Chief Electoral Officer and only provide an additional six months during which the Commissioner must complete several hundred concurrent investigations after an election;

Amendments 80 and 89 would undermine the authority of the Commissioner of Lobbying by removing the Commissioner's discretion to determine whether to report on the failures of designated public office holders to verify information filed by lobbyists and shortening the period of investigation and limitation period in which the Commissioner may conduct an investigation;

Amendment 83 would seriously weaken the scope of the five-year prohibition on lobbying by designated public office holders by allowing them to accept employment with an organization that engages in lobbying activities provided that they themselves do not spend a significant part of their time engaged in lobbying activities;

Amendment 85 would create significant uncertainty in the private sector and create an inappropriate incentive for corporations to prefer consultant lobbyists over in-house lobbyists as all employees of any corporation that contracts with the Government of Canada would be prohibited for five years from engaging in any lobbying activities with the department involved in the contract. The amendment does not provide for any exemptions from this prohibition and potentially subjects these individuals to criminal liability;

Amendments 88 and 90 would add a prohibition for obstructing the Commissioner of Lobbying and create a specific offence for the failure to comply with a prohibition on communication ordered by the Commissioner. The Bill already contemplates these matters in section 80;

Amendments 92 and 113(a) would not substantively amend the Access to Information Act provisions that apply to the Commissioner of Lobbying as proposed in the Bill. However, these amendments, which only go to form, would technically mean that the government institutions listed in section 144 of the Bill, such as the Office of the Auditor General of Canada and the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, could not be brought under the Access to Information Act until the Commissioner of Lobbying is brought into existence;

Amendment 96 would undermine the merit-based system of employment in the public service by continuing to unfairly protect the priority status of exempt staff who leave their positions after the coming into force of the provision rather than requiring them to compete with public servants for positions in the public service

Amendments 100 and 102 would unacceptably interfere with the exercise of authority by the Government by requiring the Governor in Council to only appoint the Parliamentary Budget Officer from a list of candidates submitted by the selection committee. In addition, these amendments would fix the membership of the selection committee rather than leaving it to the discretion of the Parliamentary Librarian;

Amendment 101 would unnecessarily complicate the procedure by which the selection committee informs the Governor in Council of their list of candidates for the Parliamentary Budget Officer by requiring, in addition to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, that the Leader of the Government in the Senate present the list;

Amendments 107, 109 and 110 would involve members of the Senate in the appointment and removal process for the Director of Public Prosecutions. As this is a body housed within the Executive branch of the government, the involvement of the Senate in the appointment process is inappropriate;

Amendment 108 would undermine the authority of the Attorney General to determine which candidates the selection committee should assess for the position of Director of Public Prosecutions. As this position is exercising authority under and on behalf of the Attorney General, the amendment is an unacceptable interference in the Government's exercise of its executive authority;

Amendment 113(b) would seriously weaken the audit and investigatory capacity of the Auditor General and Official Languages Commissioner. The amendment would limit the exemption in subsection 16.1(1) of the Access to Information Act so that it does not apply to records that contain information created in the course of an investigation once the investigation and related proceedings are completed and would undermine an investigator's ability to guarantee anonymity to a potential witness;

Amendments 115 and 116 would undermine the objective of greater transparency for the Canada Foundation for Sustainable Development Technology by providing the Foundation with specific exemptions that are unnecessary given the nature of its business which is similar to that of other government institutions under the Access to Information Act such as the Department of Industry and the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency;

Amendment 118, which is related to Senate amendment 113(b), would seriously weaken the internal audit capacity of the Government by permitting the disclosure of "related audit working papers" in addition to "draft reports" under the Access to Information Act where a final report has not been delivered within two years;

Amendment 119 would reverse the policy on which the Access to Information Act was based, which policy was not changed in the Bill as passed by this House. The amendment would undermine the balance between discretionary and mandatory exemptions in the Access to Information Act by giving the heads of government institutions the discretion to override existing and proposed mandatory exemptions. In addition, the amendment would give de facto order powers to the Information Commissioner, who, as a head of a proposed government institution to be brought under the Access to Information Act by this Bill, would be able to disclose records obtained from other government institutions;

Amendments 120, 121 and 123 would undermine the objective of greater transparency by forever exempting from the application of the Access to Information Act information under the control of certain government institutions prior to when those institutions become subject to the Act and by removing the Canadian Wheat Board from the coverage of this Act;

Amendments 128 and 131 would undermine the objective of stronger protection for public servants who disclose wrongdoing in the public sector by creating confusion as to the types of disclosure that are protected or not under the Public Servants Disclosure Protection Act. The amendments would confuse the clear parameters set in the Act to guide public servants who are considering making a disclosure by incorporating vague common law principles, which could lead to public servants making public disclosures that they think are protected, but turn out not to be;

Amendments 129 and 132 would unbalance the reprisal protection regime proposed in the Public Servants Disclosure Protection Act by expanding the definition of "reprisal" to include "any other measure that may adversely affect, directly or indirectly, the public servant" and providing for a reverse onus, such that any administrative or disciplinary measure taken within a year of a disclosure is deemed to be a reprisal, unless the employer shows otherwise. These amendments would expand the definition of reprisal to include behaviours unlikely to be under the control of the employer and managers will be reluctant to take legitimate disciplinary action for fear of being the subject of a reprisal complaint, which would expose them personally to a disciplinary order by the Tribunal;

Amendment 130 would increase the risk of disclosure of sensitive national security information by subjecting the Communications Security Establishment and the Canadian Security Intelligence Service to the Public Servants Disclosure Protection Act without additional specific disclosure protection measures;

Government Orders

Amendment 133 would extend the time limit to file a reprisal complaint from 60 days to one year. The amendment undermines the discretion of the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner who already has the authority to extend the time limit beyond 60 days if he or she feels it is appropriate;

Amendment 134 would undermine the objective of the Public Servants Disclosure Protection Act by increasing the maximum amount for legal advice from \$1,500 to \$25,000, or to an unlimited amount at the discretion of the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner. The legal assistance is intended to provide any person who could become involved in a process under the Act with legal advice as to their choices, rights and responsibilities. In relation to reprisal complaints, the Commissioner investigates and determines whether a reprisal complaint should be brought before the Public Servants Disclosure Protection Tribunal and is a party before the Tribunal so that he or she can present the findings of the investigation. The amendment would make all processes under the Act far more legalistic and litigious;

Amendment 136 would undermine the principles of the Public Servants Disclosure Protection Act by increasing the maximum amount for legal advice from \$1,500 to \$25,000, or to an unlimited amount at the discretion of the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner. The legal assistance is intended to provide any person who could become involved in a process under the Act with legal advice as to their choices, rights and responsibilities. In relation to reprisal complaints, the Commissioner investigates and determines whether a reprisal complaint should be brought before the Public Servants Disclosure Protection Tribunal and is a party before the Tribunal so that he or she can present the findings of the investigation. The amendment would make all processes under the Act far more legalistic and litigious;

Amendments 137 and 138 would give the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner the power to compel evidence and pursue information held outside the public sector. This amendment is unacceptable as it would increase the risk of challenges to the Commissioner's authority and jurisdiction without providing significant assistance to the discharge of his or her mandate under the Act, which is to investigate wrongdoing and complaints of reprisal related to the public sector;

Amendments 139 to 143 would increase the risk of harm to the reputations of those that are falsely accused of wrongdoing as the narrowing of exemptions provided to the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner and other heads of institutions under the Access to Information Act, Privacy Act and Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act would increase the risk of their names being released to the public;

Amendments 145, 151 and 154 would limit the capacity of the Governor in Council to organize the machinery of government, specifically with respect to the establishment of the Public Appointments Commission and the position of the Procurement Auditor, and as such are unacceptable;

Amendment 147 would explicitly require reappointments to the Public Appointments Commission go through the same statutory requirements as an appointment. The amendment is unnecessary and redundant because a reappointment is a new appointment and, as such, must conform to all relevant statutory requirements;

Amendment 148 would involve members of the Senate in the appointment of members to the Public Appointments Commission. As this is a body housed within the executive branch of the government, the involvement of the Senate in the appointment process is inappropriate;

Amendment 149 would create confusion as to the proper role of "appointees" in the Governor in Council appointment process under the Salaries Act by expanding the mandate of the Public Appointments Commission to include educating and training appointees, who are not involved in the appointment process;

Amendment 150 would expand the term of appointees to the Public Appointments Commission from five to seven years and is unacceptable as that length of term is not necessary for the efficient and effective working of the Commission;

Amendment 155 would undermine the confidence of private sector suppliers in the government as a business partner and could increase the number of legal actions brought against the government by giving the Procurement Auditor the discretion to recommend the cancellation of a contract to which a complaint relates. The Procurement Auditor was not provided the powers, duties and functions to discharge a mandate that would include reviewing the legal validity of a contract award, but rather the mandate was focussed on whether government procurement practices reflect the government's commitment to fairness, openness and transparency in the procurement process;

Amendment 157 would increase the risk of disclosure of sensitive national security information by removing the ability of the Governor in Council to prescribe, through regulation, those departments would fall within the jurisdiction of the Procurement Auditor; and

That this House agrees with the principles set out in parts of amendments 29, 67, 98 and 153 but would propose the following amendments:

Senate amendment 29 be amended to read as follows:

Clause 2, page 32: Replace lines 23 to 25 with the following:

"64. (1) Subject to subsection 6(2) and sections 21 and 30, nothing in this Act prohibits a member of the Senate or the House of Commons who is a public office holder or former public office holder from engaging in those"

Senate amendment 67 be amended to read as follows:

Clause 44, page 58: Add after line 5 the following:

"(4) Section 404.2 of the Act is amended by adding the following after subsection (6):

(7) The payment by an individual of a fee to participate in a registered party's convention is not a contribution if the cost of holding the convention is greater than or equal to the sum of the fees paid by all of the individuals for that purpose. However, if the cost of holding the convention is less than the sum of the fees paid, the amount of the difference after it is divided by the number of individuals who paid the fee is considered to be a contribution by each of those individuals."

Senate amendment 98 be amended to read as follows:

Clause 108, page 94: Replace lines 1 to 2 with the following:

"(4) Sections 41 to 43, subsections 44(3) and (4) and sections 45 to 55, 57 and 60 to 64 come into force or are deemed to have come into force on January 1, 2007.

(4.1) Sections 63 and 64 come into force or are deemed to have come into force on January 1, 2007, but"

Senate amendment 153 be amended to read as follows:

Clause 259, page 187: Add after line 12 the following:

"16.21(1) A person who does not occupy a position in the federal public administration but who meets the qualifications established by directive of the Treasury Board may be appointed to an audit committee by the Treasury Board on the recommendation of the President of the Treasury Board.

(2) A member of an audit committee so appointed holds office during pleasure for a term not exceeding four years, which may be renewed for a second term.

(3) A member of an audit committee so appointed shall be paid the remuneration and expenses fixed by the Treasury Board."

He said: Mr. Speaker, it is no great pleasure for me to make this speech here today.

[*English*]

Today I am rising to speak once again to Bill C-2, the federal accountability act. I would like to say that it is a pleasure for me to rise again to speak to this bill, but I am very disappointed by the attempts of certain senators to dilute this piece of landmark legislation.

This government was elected on a plan for change. This government was elected because Canadian voters and Canadian taxpayers wanted change. Voters said they wanted an honest and accountable government, a government they could trust. They want to know that elected officials and public service employees act in the best interests of Canadians. I believe that this trust must be earned each and every day and it starts with making government more accountable.

That is why our first legislative priority focused on making government more open, more honest and, most important, more accountable. The public was so suspicious of government as an institution that the then leader of the opposition made a commitment that this would be the first piece of legislation his new government would bring forward, so that there would be no excuses as to why it was not introduced and successfully passed.

Government Orders

On April 11, only nine weeks after this government officially took office, I was very pleased on behalf of Canadians and on behalf of the entire government caucus to introduce the federal accountability act in this House. The act and the accompanying federal accountability action plan, almost as important as the act, focus on making everyone in government more accountable, from the Prime Minister down.

We understand that our success as a nation depends on instituting a more effective capability to get things done better for ordinary working Canadians and their families. By instituting an unprecedented level of rigour and scrutiny across the federal public sector, the federal accountability act provides a firm foundation for rebuilding Canadians' trust in government.

I will tell the House that in drafting this legislation we paid careful attention to a couple of very important factors.

First, we did not want to establish more red tape, more bureaucracy or a significant increase in the number of rules. Most of the new entities created in our bill replace or strengthen the independence of existing ones. Where there are new rules, we have endeavoured to make them simpler, more straightforward and more effective.

Second, we did not want to build a government that stifled innovation and created within the public service a culture that is overly risk averse. We wanted to balance more effective oversight with flexibility. This is incredibly important if we want a dynamic public service for the next generation and the next century. We want to have the best and the brightest in the public service, recognizing that whenever people of good faith act, there will be mistakes from time to time.

In drafting Bill C-2, this government listened to many stakeholders. We received contributions from all parties in the House. I believe that made this piece of legislation stronger. Members of the House of Commons worked to pass the federal accountability act in 72 days. They thoroughly reviewed and analyzed hundreds of separate clauses and amendments. They put in well over 90 hours of work in six weeks, above and beyond their regular duties, to make sure they got it right.

I would like to acknowledge the hard work of the member for Nepean—Carleton in that committee. He worked tremendously hard with all the government members on the committee.

I would also like to recognize a number of others.

I would like to recognize the member for Winnipeg Centre, who worked tremendously hard on this issue. We often disagreed with the member, but we never disagreed on the fact that he was well motivated and wanted to strengthen the bill. I congratulate him for his work. I was particularly pleased with some of the amendments he brought forward, particularly the one in regard to putting the Canadian Wheat Board under the access to information regime. That was one of the best amendments to the bill and we were very happy to support my friend from Winnipeg. I will say to the member from Winnipeg that I read the paper on Saturday and simply want to remind him of the great amendment that he brought forward.

● (1210)

I also want to acknowledge the member for Vancouver Quadra. We often disagreed, but he brought a high level of commitment to the task and I should recognize that.

[*Translation*]

I would also like to thank the former hon. member for Repentigny, Benoît Sauvageau, who worked very hard. As a new member and new minister, it was definitely a great pleasure for me to work with Mr. Sauvageau. His efforts, hard work and friendship were well known to all members. Above all, I would like to underscore here in this House just how important his work was, enabling us to introduce this bill within the first 72 days of this 39th Parliament.

[*English*]

Benoît Sauvageau will be greatly missed, not just within the Bloc Québécois caucus and his own constituency of Repentigny, but by those of us on all sides of the House. Many Canadians watch Parliament, not least of which my performance, and they see a very adversarial system from time to time. What they do not see is quite often members from different parties are able to work together. The late member for Repentigny's work is the best example of that.

I firmly believe that we did a good job in the House of Commons. The committee did a good job. The government did not get everything it wanted, but the bill came out of the special committee stronger than it went in. I firmly believe that this House did its work. I do note that not a single member of Parliament in the House of Commons wanted to go on record as opposing this bill. I do recall that the member for Vancouver Quadra said in his first two minutes of speaking that he supported the bill, as did the member from the Bloc Québécois, and of course the New Democratic Party.

Aside from a few typos and ambiguities in wording, the bill as sent to the Senate was effective, comprehensive and carefully focused. Unfortunately, the majority of the more than 100 amendments proposed by the Senate have drastically diluted the objectives of Bill C-2's wide portfolio of initiatives. I have grave concerns that most of the amendments passed by the Senate, if left in place, would do irreparable damage to the overall intent and effectiveness of the federal accountability act. These include the most egregious examples of amendments, including increasing the political donation limit from \$1,000 to \$2,000.

We want to end the role of big money in politics. One thing we can say about Mr. Chrétien and the Liberal government he led is that they did a lot in this regard. We are finishing the Chrétien work and making it even more modest to ensure that it is middle class Canadians, and not the interests of a few high powered financial contributors, who have a bigger voice in politics. This was a welcome change of which I think all members took great note.

The Senate also proposed amendments to delay the implementation of the new political financing laws until as late as 2008. That is too late. These measures should be put in place in very short order so that Canadians can have the benefit of this new regime.

Government Orders

We had discussions with members of the official opposition and we made what I think is a reasonable and honourable compromise to have these new limitations come into effect on January 1 so it would not affect the current Liberal leadership convention. This was also an issue which was spoken to by the Bloc Québécois and others. In the spirit of working together, in the spirit of cooperation, something, Mr. Speaker, which you know I bring to this House each and every day, we agreed to consider a change.

With respect to political staffers jumping the queue and getting priority placement over other applicants for public service jobs, the Senate wants to allow partisan political aides to get into our non-partisan public service. This is something that has deeply troubled public servants in the nation's capital for many years, where they want to compete for a job but the competition is cancelled and a political appointee gets the job.

If we believe in the merit principle, there should be competition, and that is what we are seeking to do. This is an issue which was brought to my attention even before the election by the Public Service Alliance of Canada representatives, and it is certainly one which I support. Political aides, whether they be Liberal, Conservative or what have you, have a great deal of experience, but they should have to compete like everybody else for a job in the public service.

• (1215)

The other concern I had was the removal of the Canadian Wheat Board from inclusion under the Access to Information Act. We want to bring light where there is darkness. We believe that wheat and barley producers in western Canada should have the right to know what is going on at their Wheat Board. That is important. I was terribly distressed to see the unelected Liberal Senate try for the very first time to remove an agency from coverage under the Access to Information Act. Some people said we were not going far enough but then wanted to retreat. I say to the Canadian Wheat Board and its supporters, what have they got to hide? Let us bring more openness to the Canadian Wheat Board.

Adding exemptions for foundations under the Access to Information Act caused all of us a great deal of concern. It is no exaggeration to say that many of the Senate's amendments would place an unfair burden on the private sector, would shackle managers in the public service and would stifle innovation. This is especially true with the Senate's amendments to the sections dealing with whistleblowing.

Whistleblowing is important to me. It is important to the member for Nepean—Carleton, and I know it is important for all members. For my constituents in Ottawa West—Nepean this was an issue in the recent election. We want our public servants to be confident that they can step forward and follow a simple process to report wrongdoing without concern that they could lose their jobs and not be able to provide for their families. This is a change in culture that we want to take within the public service.

I suspect the measures contained in the federal accountability act go further than measures in any other western democracy with respect to protecting whistleblowers. I am very proud of that.

This House presented a balanced piece of legislation to the Senate and we are now faced with the task of having to restore that balance. This is especially dismaying given that the government demonstrated its willingness to work with the Senate to achieve a strong consensus. We agreed to a number of amendments to the bill, some before it ever reached the Senate, and others subsequently during the clause by clause deliberations in the Standing Senate Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs. I should underline the great work done by the chair of that committee, Senator Don Oliver. He is an exceptional Canadian and he did an excellent job.

Unfortunately, this spirit of cooperation was either misunderstood or simply ignored by some hon. senators. That leaves the members of the elected House of Commons facing a major challenge. We must rebuild this legislation. We must strengthen it. We must restore the measures for increasing the accountability that Canadians want and deserve.

We will look at each of the Senate's proposed amendments on a case by case basis. We will judge each one on its merits. Some are acceptable, but the government cannot support them all.

I am very eager, as are my constituents in Ottawa West—Nepean, as I believe are Canadians in general, that the bill be implemented quickly, but we will not compromise our commitment to deliver more accountable government simply for the sake of expedience. In fact, let us be clear. The Senate, in proposing a host of counterproductive amendments, has unnecessarily delayed passage of the bill. Canadians will see this for what it is and I believe they will ultimately hold those responsible to account.

The federal accountability act and our federal accountability action plan as passed by the House focused on fixing problems. They focused on rewarding merit. They focused on achieving value for money and on being more honest and building a more effective government.

On June 16 I noted in the House that if this Parliament could do one single thing, it would be to end the culture of entitlement and replace it with a culture of accountability. This government remains absolutely committed to achieving that crucial objective.

I urge members of the House to help us meet this challenge by demonstrating the same spirit of cooperation they so wisely adopted four short months ago. Together we can ensure that the federal accountability act serves the purpose it was designed for: to provide a government based on openness and honesty which reflects the very best that Canada has to offer.

• (1220)

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, this is a very important bill. The minister is aware that the parties agreed not to have a vote. In fact, it was deemed to have been voted on and supported by all parties, but there still were concerns. The concerns were with regard to the haste at which the bill was put together. My issue is not so much there other than to make the point that about a third of the amendments that were proposed to the bill by the Senate were by Conservative senators. That is proof positive that there were some flaws in the bill.

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My question has to do with the whistleblower act which was given royal assent last November in the last Parliament. It was a Liberal bill. It had the support of all parties; it passed unanimously in this place. It was going to create a new officer of Parliament. It was going to provide protection for whistleblowers, public servants who came forward to identify, as the minister quite rightly pointed out, wrongdoings by departmental officials and the government.

The issue is that the government still has not proclaimed that act. It has been a year now and it is not an act of law in Canada today because the government has not taken the opportunity to put it into place so that public servants could go to a new officer of Parliament and outline their concerns about the waste and mismanagement of the government.

Why has the minister not proclaimed the whistleblower act from the last Parliament? Will he do it now?

Hon. John Baird: Mr. Speaker, we have real problems with Bill C-11. Conservative members in the last Parliament did vote for it. It was better than nothing. There was a huge change from the beginning of Bill C-11. The Liberal government of the day made massive changes at the end due to pressure.

I do not think one person who came before the committee hearings on Bill C-11 supported the bill, not a single one. Maybe when the Liberal members get up they will mention one group who supported Bill C-11. I look forward to hearing it, but certainly from the *Hansard* that I reviewed—

An hon. member: That is nonsense. Only one union was opposed.

Hon. John Baird: We wanted to make it stronger. The Public Service Alliance of Canada had real concerns, as did its members. The Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada argued strongly that we should not repeal Bill C-11 through the federal accountability act; rather we should improve upon it, and we certainly accepted that advice.

We think that it was not strong. The Conservatives voted for it. It was better than nothing. I am happy to concede that. We think we can improve it. That is why when Parliament reconvened, the very first bill we presented was to do just that. It shows the priority that we placed on it.

I do not think there is a single public servant out there who would say that the improved Bill C-11 from the previous Parliament is not stronger and better as a result of the work by the member for Nepean—Carleton which the federal accountability act puts in place. As a member representing a riding here in the capital, I am certainly very proud of it.

•(1225)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Carole Lavallée (Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to share a few remarks and ask the minister a question. He is criticizing the Senate for having thoroughly studied the bill and wanting to make amendments. Yet in the same breath, he says that he wants the bill to be balanced.

Did the Senate not merely do the work that should have been done by the legislative committee responsible for Bill C-2, that is, take the

time to carefully analyze each clause, hear witnesses, provide opinions, and make changes and amendments?

In fact, I myself sat on the legislative committee responsible for Bill C-2. Its schedule was very intensive, as the minister proudly pointed out. In six weeks' time, there were 72 days of meetings, totaling 890 hours. It was much too fast. The witnesses were paraded through at a dizzying pace and we did not even have the time to get to the bottom of our questions or explore all their comments. People were rushed through in groups. For example, there were people from the executive offices of all political parties, all sitting at the same table at one time. They were given only a few minutes each to speak and we had only a few minutes to ask them questions.

I feel that the Senate's work was reasonable and brought balance to this bill.

Here is my question. The minister said that he would accept certain amendments suggested by the Senate. Could he please tell us which ones he would accept?

Hon. John Baird: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the comments of the member for Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert. We have accepted many of the Senate amendments, as indicated in the motion we are debating and also in the notice paper. I am prepared to provide the list of these amendments in order to facilitate the debate.

I have no objections to the Senate doing its work after this House has adopted the bill. I have no objections to the Senate studying the bill for two or three months. The Senate studied the bill for 120 hours and I do not have a problem with that. What is a problem is that it took the Senate 140 days to study this bill.

The Senate worked for one week in late June and then adjourned for seven weeks. It returned to work for another week and then adjourned for one more week. In my opinion, therein lies the problem. The vast majority of Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert or Ottawa West—Nepean residents do not have seven weeks' vacation.

In my opinion, the Senate dragged its feet and that is why we are here today. We are ready to discuss the amendments and to get on with the vote. It is very important for democracy and for accountability.

•(1230)

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, another hon. Liberal member spoke about the Public Servants Disclosure Protection Act.

[*English*]

It is whistleblower protection, as we say in English. The member asked why we must pass the accountability act with respect to whistleblower protection. I would remind him that the whistleblower protection that our government introduced as part of the accountability act is dramatically different from that which found itself in Bill C-11, the previous Liberal bill.

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To begin with, every stakeholder group opposed the previous Liberal bill on whistleblower protection. There was no support among whistleblowers and virtually no support among public sector unions. There was strong opposition from PSAC. Every whistleblower who came before the committee opposed Bill C-11.

Quite to the contrary, the Conservative accountability act provides for two years of jail time for anyone who punishes or bullies a whistleblower. The bill would create a tribunal of judges who would be capable of ordering the restoration of a whistleblower's career and even provide back pay and consequences to those who abuse whistleblowers. All of that would be managed by an independent tribunal of judges, not by bureaucratic or political leaders.

Finally, it would remove the two cover-up clauses that the Liberals had put into the last whistleblower protection bill, the clauses that would have allowed information related to a whistleblower disclosure to be hidden for up to five years. We have eliminated that and the other cover-up clause.

Would the hon. President of the Treasury Board comment on the very profound improvements to whistleblower protection which are found in the accountability act?

Hon. John Baird: Mr. Speaker, we wanted to make the act stronger. Whistleblower protection was a big issue in Ottawa West—Nepean and in Nepean—Carleton. I should also point out that this was also a big issue in the constituency of the New Democratic Party member for Ottawa Centre.

We felt the measures contained in Bill C-11 were not strong. We have worked together to fix it instead of mix it.

Mr. Brian Murphy (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would request that you remind me when I have approximately five minutes left as I tend to get carried away in these passionate debates.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): I would advise the hon. member, although I am loath to do so, that he has unlimited time.

Mr. Brian Murphy: Mr. Speaker, I did not know that. It gives me a sense of false power, perhaps, but I will keep to the time my whip has given me and remind myself of when I need to wrap up.

I was a member of the Bill C-2 legislative committee.

[*Translation*]

First, I would like to thank the committee's Liberal members, namely our leader on the committee, the hon. member for Vancouver Quadra, and the hon. members for Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine and York West. They worked very hard together, along with the leaders of the other parties, including the members for Nepean—Carleton and Winnipeg South.

I would like to add a special word in memory of the hon. member for Repentigny, who died recently.

[*English*]

We worked together when we could and voiced our opinions with much passion. In many cases, I recall the member for Nepean—Carleton, with exceeding passion in language, which we all remember well.

According to the hon. President of the Treasury Board, this was a project to end the role of big money in politics. How farcical. A year ago, the Conservative Party was campaigning under the slogan, "Stand up for Canada". Today, 10 months later, its true slogan appears to be, "stand up for Conservative friends only".

[*Translation*]

Once again, this Conservative minority government—and I emphasize the word "minority"—is trying to use the House of Commons for partisan purposes. Once again, Conservative partisanship has prevailed over the common good and the interests of all Canadians.

• (1235)

[*English*]

Today we clearly see why the minority government wanted to rush the bill through the House, the committee, then on to the Senate and through its committee. The Conservatives thought no one would see how partisan and biased it actually is in certain respects. The more time we spend on the bill, the more flaws and loopholes we find. That is why there was such a *dépêche*, quite a rush to get the bill out from the spotlight and the microscope of the committees, which did good work, and to the final passage of the bill in the House.

I see it, therefore, as quite ironic in that the Conservatives' campaigned on the promise of cleaning up government and to play by the rules and how today they are trying to tweak the law to sneak in some self-serving loopholes on political donations.

[*Translation*]

All this after an Elections Canada investigation targeted the Conservative Party, following a statement by the President of the Treasury Board to the effect that his party had forgotten to declare costs of some \$2 million relating to its March 2005 convention.

[*English*]

In the process of the hearings, the President of the Treasury Board admitted, particularly in the case at the Senate level, that the Conservatives forgot to declare convention fees as political donations for their convention of March 2005. They had an opinion, which was almost, in this post-football weekend, an audible from the line, the quarterback at the Bill C-2 legislative committee, a representative of the Conservative Party at that point, merely suggested that the Conservatives did not think that convention fees were donations. That has since been ruled completely out of order and improper by Elections Canada officials and by every party in the House except the Conservatives.

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Now we will see, as the theme of the response to the speech by the President of the Treasury Board, that it was really all about cover-up and legitimizing something that is quite possibly illegal. Almost \$2 million is no small change. The Conservative minority talks about tightening Canadian laws and yet it cannot even follow the existing laws when it comes to political donations.

As I say, I am not the only one saying this. The people of Canada should know that the Chief Electoral Officer, Jean-Pierre Kingsley, repudiated the Conservatives' excuses and ruled that the party violated the rules.

Other complaints have been made against the Conservative Party. The Conservatives are attempting to fix their illegalities with certain portions of this law. Today, with Bill C-2, the minority government is trying to cover up its past mistakes and clean up its mess. The very fact that it is trying to change the rules, in extremis, at the last possible minute, clearly is an admission of guilt.

In addition to the convention attendance fees, les frais d'inscription pour les congrès de partis politiques, the fees paid by every party member attending a convention, in addition to the colouring of those as non-political donations, erroneously and quite possibly illegally, the Conservative Party had the temerity and gall in practice to allow corporate observers.

By way of footnote, we must remember that Bill C-24, the very fine Liberal bill brought in under the Chrétien government, made it law that corporate and union donations would not be acceptable. However, the Conservative Party has charged to this date \$1,000 for corporate observer fees which were not reported as political donations.

After 70 meetings of the Bill C-2 legislative committee and following the Senate committee, I now understand what the President of the Treasury Board meant when he said that he wanted to take the big money out of politics. He meant all the big contributions that were made off the radar screen, not under the Canada Elections Act, not reportable and elicited by a Senate hearing in the spring of the year by the committee of which the President of the Treasury Board was a member.

These amounts, totalling probably more than \$2 million, were corporate donations that the President of the Treasury Board and the Conservative Party wanted out of politics. They did not want them reported. Unfortunately, hijacking the House agenda to pass partisan legislation is becoming a full time hobby for the minority Conservative government.

Time and again the President of the Treasury Board stated that he wanted to reduce the influence of big money and make the political process more open.

• (1240)

[Translation]

He said it again on May 4, when he testified before the committee that was reviewing Bill C-2. Even his boss, the Prime Minister, said he wanted to "put an end to the influence of money" in the Canadian government.

[English]

We have it at both levels. We have the President of the Treasury Board, who is sometimes given to bombast, and we can understand his enthusiasm, but on the other side we have the cold eye of the Prime Minister on this very subject saying that he wants to finish the role of big money in politics. Now we see what they meant, which is that the corporate observer status fees and the registration fees for conventions as being out of politics and not reportable. However, we did not see it at the time.

[Translation]

Unfortunately, this government is unable to move from talk to action. On the one hand, it boasts about being a champion for transparency, but on the other hand it finds it normal not to have declared costs of close to \$2 million relating to its March 2005 convention. Today, the Conservatives want to use Bill C-2 to correct their own mistakes of the past.

[English]

Accountability, however, is not a bendable concept that can be adjusted to fit partisan objectives and past illegalities. Contrary to what the Conservatives may think, the Liberals believe accountability should apply to all parties all the time, not only when it is convenient to do so or in their case, when they get caught.

A review of Bill C-2 is necessary because there is more than just the passing illegality and cover up, Watergate-like as it is, by the government with respect to political donations.

There were some accomplishments at the legislative committee with respect to making deputy ministers more accountable to Parliament. This is a good thing, with a tighter lobbyist regime. At first the Conservatives did not want people who were past workers for them in opposition to be able to ratchet up the ladder of influence when the government changed, but there was much debate on that.

There was some discussion of the access to information program and Access to Information Act pertaining to some of the agencies, boards and commissions which it can be argued is good and bad depending on the commission, agency and board. Time does not permit, unlimited as it is, for me to get into all of the agencies, boards and commissions involved.

It bears saying there were also some Liberal accomplishments. The Liberal members, at committee, following on the advice of the legal counsel to this Parliament protected an 1868 constitutional privilege which in their haste the Conservatives tried to roughshod through the House. The Liberal opposition members removed the aspect of the secret ballot and most importantly, despite the words of the minority government, saved aboriginal first nations communities from the overreach of audit principles to be imposed by the government.

However, there were some significant missed opportunities in not properly debating, in the haste that was the aura of both committees frankly, many amendments that were brought forward by all parties with respect to some very key elements which might have made the bill stronger. There was a proposal to eliminate donations from people under 18 years of age. This was ironically proposed and was ironically defeated by the Conservative majority on the committee with the help of the New Democratic Party.

It might also be said that in the haste to put the Bill C-2 legislative committee together there were no opinions from constitutional scholars. There was neither the time nor the inclination of the leading constitutional scholars to give evidence at those committees. One wonders if we had the sage advice, for instance, of Donald Savoie and his thoughts regarding the freeze in public sector and lobbying industries with respect to how government should work, how much different a bill we might have.

Last year the Conservatives campaigned on six key words. We often think they only had five principles, but they are much more imaginative than we give them credit for. They actually used six words in their platform. They used: accountability, opportunity, security, family, community and unity, and those are good words. Now let us take a minute to analyze what the government has done since it came into power.

On the same day the Conservatives announced over \$13 billion in surplus, thanks to good Liberal management, they cut funding to some of the most important community programs in the country, including: literacy, aboriginal programs, minority groups support and women's equality issues. This is their vision for community presumably from their election campaign.

They cut many youth programs that aimed at promoting exchanges between young Canadians of different regions such as the summer work student exchange program.

Furthermore, the Prime Minister publicly accused many Liberals of being anti-Israel. This is presumably their vision of promoting unity, a further campaign promise.

Conservatives decided in favour of sending a \$100 monthly cheque per child to Canadian families, a sum not good enough to pay for quality day care services and child care services, especially when this measure is taxable, while creating no new child care spaces whatsoever. This must be their concept of family as enunciated in their campaign strategy.

As for security, another key word, the Conservative minority government decided to bring forward a very American "three strikes, you're out" law with Bill C-27. The concept of innocence until proven guilty is out the door. This must be the Conservative vision of justice.

• (1245)

Then there is the theme of accountability which is dealt by this bill. In light of what the Conservatives are proposing to do with Bill C-2, it is clear they believe that accountability should mostly be a tool to help clean their own past mistakes, especially the \$2 million in convention registration fees that have not been disclosed, that are the subject of complaints officially filed with Elections Canada, and the untotaled amounts of corporate observer fees given by

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corporations who were, by Bill C-24, outside the scope and allowability of political contributions before this act.

We have large sums of money that have not been accounted for, so how is it that this government can stand on this bill with respect to political contributions and say that it is truly an accountability act? It cannot.

Finally, the last word in the Conservative's campaign was opportunity. Once again, what the Conservative minority government is trying to do with Bill C-2 is to create a partisan loophole, weakening the access to information laws, and watering down the federal accountability act. Opportunity is probably the word that currently best describes the government's principles and modus operandi. More specifically, it is highly opportunistic and partisan.

Today the government should truly stand up for Canada as it promised to do. It promised to adopt the recommendation of the Information Commissioner's report on access to information. It has already had two chances and yet it continues to break this promise. If the government truly wants more transparency and more accountability, it needs to leave partisanship behind and support these amendments. This is what true accountability is all about.

It is important to underline that we have supported in many instances this bill and its thrust, but it is important to underline that the concept of the bill is nothing new.

Bill C-24, as the hon. President of the Treasury Board has already said, was a very good step. It was a Chrétien government step with respect to political financing and transparency. Would that the Conservative government in its most recent clandestine fundraising activities and would that it would follow its own words of the President of the Treasury Board in the House today and be more accountable. Sadly, it is not going to be. It is going to wait until it is dragged, talk about foot-dragging, before the courts and found to have been part of illegal contribution schemes as indicated by Mr. Kingsley.

In the spirit with which the Liberal government brought in Bill C-24 and with which it promised to implement the recommendations of Justice Gomery's report, we moved forward with the deliberations on Bill C-2 and are happy in the further vein to propose these amendments. I move:

That the motion be amended

A. by

1. Deleting from the paragraph commencing with the words "Disagrees with" the following: 25, 34 to 54 (a) to (d), 55(e)(ii) to (viii), 56 to 62, 65, 94

2. Inserting in the paragraph commencing with the words "Agrees with", immediately after the number "158", the following: "and 25, 34 to 54, 55(a) to (d), 55(e)(ii) to (viii), 56 to 62, 65 and 94"

3. Deleting the paragraph commencing with the words "Amendments 25"

B. by

1. Deleting from the paragraph commencing with the words "Disagrees with" the following: 121, 123

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2. Inserting in the paragraph commencing with the words "Agrees with", immediately after the number "158", the following: "and 121 and 123"

3. Deleting from the paragraph commencing with the words "Amendments 120" the letter "s" is the first word, the numbers 121 and 123 and the words "and by removing the Canadian Wheat Board from the coverage of this Act"

● (1250)

C. by

1. Deleting from the paragraph commencing with the words "Disagrees with" the following: 118, 119

2. Inserting in the paragraph commencing with the words "Agrees with" immediately after the number "158", the following "and 118 and 119"

3. Deleting the paragraph commencing with the words "Amendment 118" and the paragraph commencing with the words "Amendment 119"

D. by

1. Deleting from the paragraph commencing with the words "Disagrees with" the following: 67

2. Inserting in the paragraph commencing with the words "Agrees with", immediately after the number "158", the following: "and 67"

3. Deleting the paragraph commencing with the words "Senate amendment 67"

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, do I not have some time to conclude?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): It is my duty to advise the hon. member that since he has now moved an amendment that is the conclusion. I will take the amendment under advisement.

Questions and comments, I recognize the hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Liberal Party has engaged in specious accusations around political campaign funds. The Liberals have complained that the Conservative Party decided not to charge taxpayers for the cost of its convention. Let us be clear on what this accusation entails.

The Conservative Party could have considered all of the convention fees that came from its last convention as political contributions and issued tax rebates or return funds to the original donor. That would have benefited the Conservative Party dramatically. It would have been in the Conservative Party's financial interest to go about its affairs in that way because it would have cost taxpayers to subsidize the convention and not just the donation amount above and beyond the costs of the convention, but the entire convention delegate fee would have been subject to a tax credit.

So, he is right in one sense, that it would have provided a significant financial benefit to the Conservative Party for it to have considered those delegate fees to be donations. However, our party does not believe that taxpayers should fund our operations at a political convention. Therefore, we made the principled decision to forgo the tax credit that goes along with the donation. The Liberal Party, on the other hand, does it another way.

If he is in fact right, is he going to recommend to Revenue Canada that it provide tax credits to all those people who attended the convention? How much would it cost the Canadian taxpayer if all those convention delegate fees were then turned into donations and taxpayers were forced to pay out a rebate?

● (1255)

Mr. Brian Murphy: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member wants us to put a price tag on right and wrong, and a price tag on ethics. I do not think that is the way it works. In fact, that is not what we heard by

way of blathering hyperbole from the hon. member during the hearings on Bill C-2.

However, let me remind the member that there is a law called the Canada Elections Act. There is a section in that act, if the member wishes to write it down for future reference he might be more suited to speak on the subject next time with more information, and that section is 404.(1) of the Canada Elections Act. That is the section that declares or sets out what a financial contribution for which tax receipts would be issued. We have Mr. Jean-Pierre Kingsley saying that the convention fees are political donations and they must be declared as such under section 404.(1).

We have, at least the way I see it, and it does not matter the way I see it I suppose but the way more importantly Jean-Pierre Kingsley sees it, a violation of the Canada Elections Act. What this amendment brought on by the Conservatives attempts to do is to codify their illegality, to slip it through under the white knight of accountability in general, when it is in fact an anathema to the whole principle of accountability and the fact that all laws should grace legal actions, they should not condone illegal actions. It is a fundamental principle that laws cannot condone illegal activity.

So, my friend asks the question the wrong way. His answer, however, is simply this: section 404.(1) exists, the Conservative Party broke that law, and now it is attempting to cover that up.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Carole Lavallée (Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague from the Liberal Party for this immensely interesting presentation. He has provided a thorough assessment of the situation.

I would like to come back to something he said about the haste with which the committee worked on Bill C-2 and, later, the comprehensive work of the Senate. Let us recall that, indeed, our work at committee was performed at breakneck speed. We had far too many hours of sitting each day when the committee heard witnesses. Witnesses showed up very well prepared, with submissions 30 or so pages long. Because we had heard three testimonies before and had four more scheduled that day, we did not have any time to read these submissions or even take a glance at them. We had to make do with the two minutes witnesses were allotted for their presentations and the minute we had left for putting questions to them.

As the minister indicated earlier, the committee was very proud of how quick it had been, 92 hours and seven weeks. He was pleased to see all this work be done only nine weeks after the federal election. It did not produce good work. We complained at the time about having to work too fast and not having enough time to consider, analyse and read documents. It made no sense. It is true, however, that another group took over, which took the time to study the bill and, what is most important, which took the time to reflect between reading submissions and hearing witnesses.

I have a question for the member for Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe. Does he believe that this really helped and made the bill better?

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Mr. Brian Murphy: Mr. Speaker, under the circumstances, the committee's work was effective. Once again, I would like to emphasize how hard Bloc members worked on this committee, especially the member for Repentigny, who has since passed away.

We did not have much time. I would like to mention two extremely important things that happened during the committee proceedings. First, during the testimony of Mr. Donison of the Conservative Party, we learned that the Conservative Party had forgotten to declare the registration fees for the convention it held in April 2005, if I remember correctly. Second, during the Senate committee hearings, the President of the Treasury Board said that these fees amounted to over \$1.7 million.

These two examples show that the work of both committees on Bill C-2 was effective and important, despite the fact that both committee members and witnesses were rushed through the process. I suppose that if we had had time for more thorough discussions during the hearings, we would have come up with much better results than we did. That is entirely possible.

• (1300)

Hon. Marlene Jennings (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I listened with great interest to my colleague from Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe, and I look forward to hearing from my other Bloc Québécois colleagues. As the member just said, the Bloc and Liberal members of the House legislative committee that studied Bill C-2 worked in concert. I think that we did good work, considering the limits the NDP and the Conservatives put on us. The Senate committee compensated for those limits.

My question for my colleague from Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe is this: The President of the Treasury Board claims that the Senate tried to slow down the whole Bill C-2 evaluation and study process and that it tried to interfere with the government's good intentions. Does he think that the President of the Treasury Board's assessment of the Senate's work—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): Order, please. The honourable member for Moncton-Riverview—Dieppe has the floor for a brief reply.

[*English*]

Mr. Brian Murphy: Mr. Speaker, in essence, the Senate did some very good work.

It is important to underline that the bill originally presented as Bill C-2 to the Commons committee is not the same bill before us today. There were a number of carvings away of overreach, of unconstitutionality, of a hasty and inappropriate drafting of a Conservative agenda gone wild. There will probably be a video series out soon called “Conservatives Gone Wild”. Clearly, the work of both committees was very important to the process.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Yves Laforest (Saint-Maurice—Champlain, BQ): Mr. Speaker, today marks the return of Bill C-2 to the House of Commons, after adjustments by the Senate.

To begin, I would say that the Bloc Québécois will support Bill C-2. While the bill is not perfect, it introduces measures that will increase government accountability and transparency. This bill lays the foundation for introducing a culture of openness as opposed to a

culture of secrecy, which we have seen before; a culture of accountability as opposed to a style of management with no regard for the values of the public good. From that point of view, the Bloc Québécois is very happy that this bill paves the way for solutions.

We support Bill C-2, especially because it introduces, in the form of a law, a code of ethics for ministers. In addition, the bill puts an end to the favouritism that enables political staff in ministers' offices to enter the public service ahead of qualified public servants—which we have unfortunately seen in the past.

Bill C-2 also reinforces the powers of the Auditor General and the Ethics Commissioner, as well as placing more restrictions on lobbyists, which is not inconsequential. This bill significantly reduces the influence of money in election campaigns, nomination meetings and leadership campaigns. In addition, Bill C-2 establishes the position of Director of Public Prosecutions, thereby reinforcing the independence of the judiciary. Above all, Bill C-2 is a response—albeit partial—to many of the problems raised by the sponsorship scandal.

The Bloc Québécois especially supports this bill because many of its traditional demands have been incorporated into Bill C-2, in particular, the appointment of returning officers by Elections Canada on the basis of merit.

The bill establishes a Commissioner of Lobbying, who will no longer be a public servant but rather an officer of Parliament. Thanks to Bill C-2, the law dealing with financing of political parties will more closely resemble the Quebec legislation. As a result, corporate donations will be forbidden and individual contributions will be limited to a much more reasonable level.

We will be seeing the powers of the Auditor General strengthened, as I said earlier: she will now be able to follow the money to its end recipients. As well, unlike what was in the initial bill brought forward by the government, rewards for whistleblowers have been eliminated. We argued—and we still argue—that a measure like that would have resulted in an unhealthy culture of informing being created in the public service.

The Bloc had also asked for something else: that the Ethics Commissioner, rather than a minister, have the power to exempt political staff from the act, particularly in the case of students, junior employees or part-time workers.

We are also very pleased that a requirement has been incorporated in Bill C-2 for the Conflict of Interest Act to be reviewed in five years. At that time, members of Parliament will have an opportunity to consider the effects of the act. In our opinion, that exercise will tell us that the Conflict of Interest Act has no teeth and no power.

There is also, and most importantly, the request made by my former colleague from Repentigny: that the word “imputabilité” be replaced by the word “responsabilité”, so that the title of the act is now written in correct French.

Government Orders

The Bloc Québécois supports the government's motion concerning the amendments proposed by the Senate. It supports the government's adoption of a number of Senate amendments that promote ethics and transparency, and in particular the improvement of access by the Parliamentary Budget Officer to government financial and economic information, by replacing "access at all convenient times" with "access".

● (1305)

As well, it strengthens the Access to Information Act by allowing the National Arts Centre Corporation to protect the identity of patrons who insist on anonymity.

We will also have more transparency in relation to exemptions granted to the Ethics Commissioner, who must now publish the exemptions he grants. That is amendment 16.

Amendment 95 is in response to a criticism by the President of the Public Service Commission, who was afraid that clause 106 of Bill C-2 would allow ministers to appoint special and political advisers to the public service.

The Bloc Québécois also supports the government's rejection of a number of Senate amendments that do not promote ethics and transparency.

Some senators would like to keep their own Senate adviser and a puppet adviser under the authority of Senate committees. A number of Senate amendments would have operated to reduce the time the Ethics Commissioner and the Commissioner of Elections have to prosecute offenders. That is amendment 89.

A Senate amendment introduced a grandfather clause that would allow political staff to continue to join the ranks of the public service for another year, with priority over other applicants, and this is contrary to a measure like the one we have just supported. Some amendments proposed by the Senate operated to exclude certain public bodies from the Access to Information Act. Here again, we will have to speak to those amendments.

As I said earlier, this is not a perfect act and we regret that the government is rejecting several Senate amendments that were valid in the eyes of the Bloc Québécois. By amending Senate amendment 67, in our opinion, the government is trying to exempt certain political contributions from the scope of the political party financing legislation. The government is rejecting several Senate amendments designed to provide better whistleblower protection. The Senate suggested broadening the definition of "reprisals" in order to include "any other measure that may directly or indirectly harm a public servant", which to our mind was much better. The Senate suggested increasing the time limit for filing a reprisal complaint from 60 days to one year. The Senate also suggested eliminating the \$10,000 ceiling on awards for pain and suffering. The Senate suggested increasing the maximum for legal advice reimbursements from \$1,500 to \$25,000, or not setting any ceiling, at the commissioner's discretion.

Amendment 119, which adds an interpretation clause, would authorize the communication, for reasons of public interest, of any banned document. This would be a very significant improvement to the Access to Information Act, in particular.

Then there is amendment 85, designed to solve the problem of consultants who are retained by certain departments to provide them with assistance in developing policies and who then lobby the same public servants on behalf of private clients. There is an ethical issue here.

Amendment 90 gave more clout to the lobbying commissioner. Under this amendment, the commissioner can prohibit lobbyists from lobbying for two years if they do not comply with the law. If a lobbyist failed to comply with the lobbying prohibition, he would be subject to a \$50,000 fine. So this would have been a good amendment, one that would have consolidated the ethics commissioner's power.

The Bloc Québécois condemns the idea of postponing the comprehensive reform of access to information; this very important aspect is missing from Bill C-2. We have already mentioned this and we maintain our position.

The Bloc Québécois also condemns the fact that the government is trying to exclude from the political financing legislation the contributions made by supporters during conventions. It also condemns the fact that the Conservative Party did not keep its campaign promise to subject all crown corporations and foundations to the Access to Information Act. This is no longer in the bill. It is also disgraceful that the government refused to increase penalties for people who violate the ethics legislation. Another negative aspect is the fact that the new parliamentary budget officer is attached to the Library of Parliament.

● (1310)

As we all know, Bill C-2 stems from the problems associated with the sponsorship scandal. The Bloc Québécois made a number of recommendations to Commissioner Gomery in order to improve the current state of accountability. The Bloc Québécois 2005-06 election platform included various recommendations along the same lines. We are very pleased that several measures regarding accountability are now an integral part of Bill C-2.

We succeeded, for example, in making the legislation concerning the financing of political parties very similar to legislation that has existed in Quebec for several years. We also achieved some strengthening of the Lobbyists Registration Act.

● (1315)

The Speaker: Order, please. I am sorry to have to interrupt the hon. member, but he must know that an amendment was proposed. I must indicate to the House that, in the opinion of the Chair, the amendment is in order. Thus, I must put it to the House immediately.

[*English*]

Accordingly I declare the amendment in order.

[*Translation*]

Resuming debate, the hon. member for Saint-Maurice—Champlain. I am sorry for the interruption.

Government Orders

Mr. Jean-Yves Laforest: Mr. Speaker, I was saying earlier that one of the significant flaws of Bill C-2 pertains to access to information. I was saying that several elements are far from perfect, particularly with regard to access to information. The legislation was adopted in 1983 and has remained virtually unchanged since then. The government chose not to include reforms in this regard in Bill C-2. Thus, the government is being rather inconsistent by pushing for adoption of this legislation, as just mentioned by my colleague for Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert, while at the same time stating that additional consultations are needed to reform the Access to Information Act. The government should have completed its consultations before introducing this legislation. It was the President of Treasury Board who said so.

In consideration of all these factors, I would like to propose, seconded by my colleague for Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert, the following subamendment to the amendment just tabled, that reads as follows:

That the amendment be amended by deleting paragraphs “A” and “B”.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): I declare the subamendment in order.

The hon. member for Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert, for questions or comments.

Mrs. Carole Lavallée (Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to put a few questions to the hon. member regarding the Access to Information Act. My colleague wanted to bring up this issue but, unfortunately, he ran out of time.

As we know, the Access to Information Act was first passed in 1983. Despite numerous calls to consolidate it, to update it, not much has happened. The Conservative government even decided not to include a reform of the Access to Information Act in its Bill C-2.

Last spring, when the legislative committee reviewing Bill C-2 was stepping on the gas pedal and trying to establish a Guinness record for passing this legislation in record time, the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics was doing just the opposite: it was conducting its review of the Access to Information Act with both feet on the brake pedal.

Despite all the work done over a period of 20 years, the various governments in office have always put their foot on the brake pedal when it came to modernizing the Access to Information Act, and it is going to be interesting to understand why. Now, the Conservatives are refusing to include such a reform in Bill C-2.

Just recently, the Minister of Justice went so far as to tell members of the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics that they could fix the Access to Information Act, despite all the documents prepared and all the studies made, including those by the Information Commissioner.

I have a question for the hon. member for Saint-Maurice—Champlain. We asked the Minister of Justice, among other things, to table in committee, by December 15, an access to information act. I wonder if my colleague could tell us about the benefits of potentially including the Access to Information Act in Bill C-2.

● (1320)

Mr. Jean-Yves Laforest: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my hon. colleague from Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert for her question.

After having gone through the same delay at the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics, we unfortunately had a double debate. The government was in a hurry to have Bill C-2 studied by another committee so that it could be passed while at the same time talking about transparency and accountability. The Access to Information Act is extremely important in this great debate.

The Access to Information Act helps the general public and the media access information. Information of this kind was missing, by the way, at the time of sponsorship scandal.

If people had had enough information, there might never have been a scandal. However, the Access to Information Act goes back at least 23 years and has never been thoroughly overhauled. There have been problems, therefore, and to some extent, deficiencies in the act are to blame. The general public feels that it did not have the means to protect itself.

We really wonder why the government did not wait for all the information to come in. The President of Treasury Board told us that they must consult further before proceeding. I think there was plenty of time previously for consultations on everything in Bill C-2. It is really a shame.

Among other things, there was an amendment of—
[English]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): Questions and comments, the hon. President of the Treasury Board.

[Translation]

Hon. John Baird (President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to comment first on the amendment to the amendment proposed by the hon. member for Saint-Maurice—Champlain.

I think that is the riding where Shawinigan is located, is it not? It is certainly a beautiful riding in Quebec.

I want to start by saying it is always a great surprise to see a very good subamendment like the one proposed here. I agree with it and will support it because the Canadian Wheat Board needs to be included in the Access to Information Act. It is very important for farmers in western Canada to know how their board works, and I am very much in favour of this idea.

I am also in favour of the other change proposed by my hon. colleague for Saint-Maurice—Champlain, that there should be an ethics counsellor. I think this is very important. Someone with legal experience would be helpful in the House, and in the Senate as well.

For these reasons, I thank my hon. colleague for his excellent intervention.

Mr. Jean-Yves Laforest: Mr. Speaker, I am very happy to have tabled this subamendment which re-establishes, to some degree, what was originally intended and which was changed in a major way by the amendment tabled this morning.

Government Orders

I believe that it is important for us also that the Canadian Wheat Board be subject to the Access to Information Act. In addition, I believe the whole question of the ethics commissioner is extremely important. This is a crucial issue: we must restore the original proposal, which is to have a single ethics commissioner.

• (1325)

Hon. Marlene Jennings (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I very much appreciated the comments of my colleague from the Bloc Québécois concerning Bill C-2 as amended by the Senate.

We know that the government wants to restore several sections and retain the wording of the bill as it was when it left the House to proceed to the Senate.

I also know that your former colleague from Repentigny, Benoît Sauvageau, and your deputy House leader, whose constituency name I cannot remember, and I worked almost as a team on several sections of Bill C-2. At the House legislative committee, we tried to make some amendments but because of the alliance between the NDP and the Conservatives we were not successful.

I would like to know today whether the member is still of the same view concerning certain amendments that we tried without success to include but which the Senate has proposed.

For example, I point to sections 115 and 116, where we tried to add the Canada Foundation for Sustainable Technology as a body that could refuse to disclose its scientific, technical and trade secrets. At the legislative committee, we tried unsuccessfully to provide that protection to the foundation. The Senate has included an amendment to that effect. Does the Bloc Québécois still believe that this foundation should have that protection?

Mr. Jean-Yves Laforest: Mr. Speaker, I would like to reply to my colleague because I am familiar with the positions that the Bloc supported last spring.

We talked about this earlier and I must say in all honesty that the bill contained many sections and that it was given a fast track review.

Unfortunately, I have no answer to her question, but I will inquire of other members of the Bloc Québécois and we may respond to that question a little later.

[*English*]

Mr. Pat Martin (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to enter into the debate at this stage of Bill C-2.

Let me start by laying the foundation of the remarks that I hope to make. I firmly believe that if we did nothing else in this 39th Parliament other than to pass the federal accountability act and give meaning and substance to the clichés of transparency and accountability, we would at least be able to say that we spent our time well and we would have something to show the Canadian people.

I start my remarks with that note because I can say without any fear of contradiction that the federal accountability act is in a very fragile state as we speak. We run the risk, and I believe due to political mischief, of losing the federal accountability act, this great project that we undertook many months ago. At that time we cautioned that if we did not move swiftly, with a collective will and

with some cooperation, a project of this magnitude is fraught with pitfalls and could easily collapse under its own weight or fall vulnerable to political influence and political mischief that have nothing to do with making the nation-state of Canada more transparent or the system accountable.

The debate will become very complex as we debate 154 amendments from the Senate. A comprehensive amendment from the Liberal Party has just been moved, as has a comprehensive subamendment from the Bloc Québécois. Let us bring this back to basics.

What we started back in April with Bill C-2, the federal accountability act, would have given us for the first time ever comprehensive whistleblower protection. That alone I would have voted for in Bill C-2, just to be able to have done that one thing in this 39th Parliament.

The public appointments commission, the PAC, alone would put an end to patronage. Imagine, on behalf of the people of Canada, putting an end to pork-barrel patronage in the 39th Parliament. We could tell our grandchildren that we did something in this Parliament if we could deliver on that one chapter of Bill C-2 alone. It would be spectacular. It would be sensational. Those things are at risk as we speak.

The parliamentary budget officer, the director of public prosecutions, all of these worthy initiatives that are not very controversial and have broad support from all the political parties, are now vulnerable. They could crash and burn as we bicker and toss back and forth between the Senate chamber and the House of Commons amendments on the most minuscule, trivial, virtually meaningless things.

Let us strip it down to basics. The one thing that is holding up the bill right now is whether or not a single ethics commissioner would administer the two codes of conflict of interest for this chamber and the Senate or if there would be multiple ethics commissioners. We are debating how many ethics commissioners can dance on the head of a pin. That is really what the whole thing boils down to. All of these wonderful initiatives will fall by the wayside if we cannot agree to something that silly.

To hear the senators tell it, it would be a constitutional crisis if there were two ethics commissioners. Constitutional crisis is a phrase that is tossed around in modern day Canada, saying constitutional crisis is the last refuge of a scoundrel in Canadian terms. It is a smokescreen to stall and delay the important reforms that Canadians expect, Canadians demand and which Canadians sent us here to put into place.

Government Orders

People tuning in or trying to weave their way through this quagmire that is the federal accountability act and all the amendments, subamendments and compounding amendments, should just remember that we are trying to implement whistleblower protection. We are trying to implement a public appointments commission so we cannot make political patronage appointments to unqualified nephews, et cetera. We are trying to put in a parliamentary budget officer, and we are hung up on things like how many ethics commissioners shall administer our codes of conduct. It is so petty that a lot of people would not believe that we could be tripped up so readily, to have such a noble pursuit held up, intercepted and sabotaged by such trivial arguments.

● (1330)

I am very proud of the role that the New Democratic Party has played in trying to make sure that at least the key elements of this bill are salvaged and come to possible fruition.

I should pay tribute to the contribution of my former colleague, the former leader of the New Democratic Party and member for Ottawa Centre, Mr. Ed Broadbent. In the 38th Parliament it was Ed Broadbent, in coming back to the House of Commons after many years of doing other work, who recognized there were enormous gaps and lapses in the ethical standards and conduct of the Parliament that he left those many years ago. He put in place a seven point ethics package. A great deal of the elements from Ed Broadbent's recommended package of reform for this House of Commons found its way into Bill C-2.

It was a natural match. For those who may think it is strange bedfellows to see the NDP in support of an ethics package put forward by the Conservative government, we did not find it to be contradictory at all. Nobody has a monopoly on ethical standards. We were pleased to see some of the things that were suggested and recommended by Ed Broadbent in Bill C-2, so we could say that we would support it.

I honestly think sometimes that we in the NDP over here in this corner are wearing blue helmets, like peacekeepers, in this initiative. We are the honest brokers in this. There is politics being played over there. There is politics being played over there, and yes, there is politics being played by the federal government in trying to achieve secondary objectives with Bill C-2. We in fact have a sincere and genuine interest in trying to fix the things that are broken so that we can be proud when we go home and tell our people what we did for them when they sent us to Ottawa.

Let us be clear. The power to kill Bill C-2 rests totally with the backrooms of the Liberal Party as we speak. It is the Liberal Senate that has been holding this bill up unreasonably. I heard comments from my colleagues. Maybe they did not notice but the Senate had this bill for months and months. It heard the same witnesses that we heard, asked the same questions that we asked, endless and needless hours of study that we believe was designed to stall this bill until the Liberal convention was finished. They were hung up on how the election financing changes would impact the Liberal leadership convention. They pretty much served notice that they were going to sabotage and undermine the bill when it was introduced in April, at least until it got past that hurdle.

I am asking them now to stop their delay and stalling tactics. They got away with it. They managed to delay implementation of the bill until their convention is over. The implementation date is January 1, 2007. They should stand down on that issue because the undemocratic and unelected Senate did not just amend the federal accountability act, it took it hostage. Today we are debating the outrageous ransom demands that still threaten to kill Bill C-2 unless we give in. Well, we have given in on a great deal, incidental issues that simply do not weigh enough to justify blocking the passage of the whole bill.

Now we are saying that it was the rudderless Liberal Party that allowed those rogue senators to run amok, as it were. It would be interesting if some of the Liberal leadership hopefuls would show some leadership and maybe intervene at this point and rein in their rogue senators, those senators who have blocked this bill and still threaten to kill it.

Let us not kid ourselves. If we send this bill back to the Senate again and the senators still do not like it—let us say it still calls for separate ethics commissioners—they have the ability to debate it endlessly, send it back to committee, make more amendments and send it back to the House of Commons, until we reach an absolute impasse, a logjam. If we delay it much further, we can all acknowledge we will be at the polls sooner rather than later. This entire project could collapse and I do not know how it would ever get rebuilt.

● (1335)

It is really only in minority parliaments that we can do these kinds of comprehensive amendments. I do not like our chances of getting a sequel, bill C-2 the second, through in a majority parliament, whether it be a Liberal majority or a Conservative majority. Maybe if it was an NDP majority government this initiative would survive. We would be proud to make it our first bill in an NDP government.

In much of what the Senate did, and my colleagues in the Bloc should be very sensitive to this, the Senate exceeded its place in the Constitution. It is supposed to be a chamber of sober second thought. It is supposed to watch for constitutional or legal errors that may have been made by this chamber. It is never supposed to interfere with a piece of legislation from the elected chamber to the point where it would be a serious policy shift. It is not supposed to undermine the government's initiatives or the initiatives of the elected chamber.

Many of the amendments that the other place put through did all of these things. Many of the amendments that it put through are spurious, mischievous, raise constitutional problems and some of them are simply in error. I will point out some of those should time permit.

I know that I am speaking broadly and in general terms. I will narrow my remarks to the amendment moved by the Liberal Party. I can support half of what the Liberals put forward as an amendment to the motion put forward by the government and I will have to reject the other two. Let me speak specifically.

Government Orders

Part A of the Liberal amendment speaks to the Senate ethics commissioner. It brings back the notion that there should be separate ethics commissioners, one for the Senate and one for the House of Commons. I do not care. It is not that important to me. I am not going to jeopardize the success of this whole project arguing how many ethics commissioners can dance on the head of a pin. I do not care if we have 10. I will recommend that the NDP vote in favour of this amendment that the senators have their own separate Senate ethics commissioner. I do not buy their line that it is a constitutional crisis, but I do firmly believe that if they are going to get stubborn and ruin this whole project, the senators can have a separate ethics commissioner.

Part B argues that the Wheat Board should not be subject to the Access to Information Act. I also will vote in favour of this. I support this, notwithstanding what went on at the committee meeting on C-2. Since that time the government has launched a full-blown attack on the Canadian Wheat Board. An absolutely mad crusade has begun to undermine the important work of the Canadian Wheat Board and I will not be a party to it.

I will officially state that I will not support anything that will undermine that great prairie institution the Canadian Wheat Board. I will proudly stand in my place and vote in favour of the Wheat Board. I will not participate in this lynch mob mentality, tactics that Mussolini would be proud of, in trying to undermine the Canadian Wheat Board, denying its members even the right to vote. Their statutory guaranteed right to vote on their own future is being denied to them by the Conservative government. I will not be a part of it. I will not be a party to it. I will support the Liberals' amendment regarding whether or not the Canadian Wheat Board should be included under the ATI provisions of the act.

Part C deals with internal audits and papers. It says that the Liberal Party believes that internal draft documents should be subject to access to information as well. I would only ask that my Liberal Party colleagues look at what the Auditor General had to say about that. She does not believe this is a good idea. She specifically spoke to this at committee not only once, but twice. She feels it would be a serious error if all of the working documents and draft notes dealing with an audit were subject to access to information requests because much of her work relies on the free communication of background information. People would bury that information and would simply not have it available if they were worried that it would become public. This is a bad idea. I wish my colleagues of the Liberal Party would reconsider this. We will vote against this one which amends Senate amendment 118.

● (1340)

Also, on Senate amendment 119, the Liberal Party would have us introduce the concept of a public interest override within the context of the Access to Information Act. The NDP will not support this either. There is good background for that. NDP members are not being stubborn.

We believe that if the public interest override were introduced to the bill as contemplated by Senate amendment 119, it would put the public interest override in the hands of the head of the institution and not in the hands of the Information Commissioner. It actually would weaken the Access to Information Act and the discretionary

authority of the Information Commissioner. Again, I do not think the Liberals thought this through, but I wish they would reconsider. The NDP cannot support this at all.

The last element of the amendments put forward by the Liberal Party deals with convention fees. This has been the second source of mischief that has delayed and stalled this bill, the first being the dual ethics commissioner and the second being the whole sensitive subject of convention fees, election financing limits, et cetera.

NDP members read the current Elections Act the way we always have. We have no conflict. We have no misunderstanding. We do not believe it should be changed or altered in any way. We believe the election financing limit should be \$1,000 per year and that convention fees should be viewed as political donations and should be treated that way, just like we have always treated them.

I know that the other parties are having problems, partly due to their own greed. When a party charges \$995 for a convention fee and the donation limit per year is \$1,000, that party is going to run into trouble. NDP convention fees are \$135, with an early bird fee of \$95. We in the NDP do not have that problem, so I would advise the parties that are having difficulty fitting in underneath the new election campaign donation limits to look inward, to have a look at themselves in the mirror. That may be where they find the problem, not within the Elections Act.

As far as the subamendments that have been put forward by my colleagues from the Bloc Québécois are concerned, I know that Bloc members are not big fans of the accountability act. It is no secret that the Bloc Québécois will do better in the next federal election if the federal government is still corrupt. Those members do not really want the federal government to be cleaned up, because they have to be able to point to a corrupt federal government to justify voting for the Bloc Québécois. We in the NDP do not buy into that and will not support that. So the Senate ethics—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Pat Martin: I do not know why they would undermine the Canadian Wheat Board, because supply management in Quebec is very important to the well-being of the agricultural sector in Quebec. In a similar way, the Canadian Wheat Board is very important to the good people in the prairie provinces where I live. I do not know why they would seek to undermine the Canadian Wheat Board in this way.

As far as a Senate ethics commissioner is concerned, again, I will not get into that debate. I do not care how many ethics commissioners those members want, as long as they do not hold up the important amendments dealing with Bill C-2.

We worked like crazy on this bill. It has been a pleasure to be part of something productive. If we get this bill through the Senate this time, it will be something that we can all look back on and be proud of, because we will have changed the way Ottawa does business. We will have changed the culture of secrecy and corruption that caused us all such consternation with the past government.

Government Orders

I understand why the Liberal Party hates the federal accountability act. It is all about the Liberals' last 10 to 12 years. Every page of it, I suppose, would be an insult if one were a member of the Liberal Party, because a lot of what it does changes the culture of secrecy that allowed corruption to flourish in previous years. It is the job of members to put a stop to it. We are going to do our best to see the speedy passage of Bill C-2, even if it means compromising on some of the minor details.

• (1345)

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to address a component of the accountability act for which the member can have some personal satisfaction. It was he who put forward an amendment that banned political patronage and enacted transparency in the public appointments process to end what over the last decades has been a tradition in Ottawa, that of party insiders getting privileged access to plum patronage positions.

It was the member for Winnipeg Centre who stepped forward with an amendment to ban political patronage and to put in place a public appointments commission that would elevate merit above political connections in the appointments process. That is what is at stake. If this bill is stalled and delayed until after the next election it will not pass, and initiatives like the one the member for Winnipeg Centre is responsible for, that of banning political patronage, will die along with it.

I would like the member to comment for a moment on the important work that he and his fellow NDP member for Ottawa Centre did to ban political patronage and on how important it is that this law be passed as soon as possible so that those principles can be enacted into statutory law.

Mr. Pat Martin: Mr. Speaker, one of the many details about Bill C-2 that we in the NDP found worthy of support was the idea that we can put an end to patronage with a public appointments commission, so that people would get these appointments and fill these many governor in council appointments based on their merit and qualifications, not on which political party membership card is held in a person's back pocket. I would argue that this is one of the key three irritants for the general public with regard to the way politics operates in Ottawa today: it is who people know that gets them to the top.

There are literally thousands of these appointments made every year, and they used to be done from a single desk and a single telephone in the PMO. People simply would work their Rolodex of party faithful. That is who would get these important jobs, critically important jobs such as those at the Immigration and Refugee Board, jobs that do require great specific skills in order to provide a service to the public.

The public appointments commission alone would be worthy of our support. If it were a stand-alone bill or the only thing we managed to achieve in passing this bill, that alone would be worthy of the support of members of the House of Commons. I am proud to be associated with and to have played a role in the introduction of this important reform of how we do things in Ottawa.

• (1350)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Yves Laforest (Saint-Maurice—Champlain, BQ): Mr. Speaker, earlier, our colleague spoke at length about the debate in the Senate on Bill C-2. He asked whether we knew that the same discussions were taking place, the same questions were being asked and sometimes the same witnesses were appearing before the legislative committee in charge of reviewing Bill C-2.

He went pretty far in criticizing the work of the Senate and even questioned the Senate's role. The Bloc Québécois has a position on the Senate. For a long time, the Bloc has been convinced that the Senate is not really useful, although it does make its presence felt. In light of the questions he asked and the points he raised, is he going so far as to question the relevance of the Senate?

[*English*]

Mr. Pat Martin: Mr. Speaker, the official position of the NDP is that the Senate should be abolished. I do not share that view. I have different views. I think the Senate can be salvaged and that we should have a bicameral system of government in Canada, but what the Senate has done with Bill C-2 makes it very difficult for me to say that the Senate has any merit or should be staying in any form. The Senate has overstepped its boundary. It has interfered with this bill in a way that is far beyond what senators are mandated to do.

Let me simply and by example say that even though there was great urgency to Bill C-2 and even though we wanted the bill to be passed in the first session of this Parliament, the Senate took the entire three month summer break. When the Senate came back for a week, it lost another full week of work because one of the senators had to be on a parliamentary junket to the Philippines. One senator was on a beach in the Philippines and we had another week's delay for Bill C-2. How can that be defended? It simply cannot.

As well, many of the amendments that the Senate has put forward simply put the Senate's nose into business where it has no place being. In regard to the public appointments commission, some of the amendments put forward by the Senate say that the Senate should have a role in the process of appointing those commissioners. That is simply problematic. It is unclear if it is a constitutional issue.

Much of what the Senate did was self-aggrandizing. Fully 43 of the Senate's 154 amendments dealt with this separate ethics commissioner, as to whether there should be one, two or three ethics commissioners. It was all about the senators. It was not about making the bill better. It was all about protecting their own backyard.

I think the Senate wasted an enormous amount of time. I do not apologize to anyone for saying it. I think it was political mischief so that the Senate could delay this bill until the Liberals have had their Liberal leadership campaign. Those Liberal leadership hopefuls should fall in line now, show some leadership and tell their rogue senators to stop mucking around with this bill and allow it to pass.

Statements by Members

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the member was a member of the government operations and estimates committee when we dealt with the whistleblower bill in the last two Parliaments. The member will know that the committee basically rewrote the bill from the beginning, including introducing the creation of a new officer of Parliament who is going to oversee the whistleblowing complaints function.

Bill C-11, the whistleblower bill, received royal assent in the last Parliament, but it is not in force in Canada under the law because it has not been proclaimed. It brings into play all of the crown corporations and agencies under a redefinition of what constitutes a public servant. It creates an officer of Parliament. It also provides protection for public servants.

Will the member advise the House of whether or not he believes that the whistleblower bill, as passed unanimously by all parties in committee and in this place, should be proclaimed immediately?

• (1355)

Mr. Pat Martin: Mr. Speaker, many of us spent the 37th Parliament and the 38th Parliament trying to get the Liberal government to introduce some measure of whistleblower protection. I had a private member's bill and I think my colleagues did, even those within the Liberal Party, trying to get the government to move.

What we wound up with in Bill C-11 was the best we could achieve with an unwilling government of the day. It was a flawed bill from the start. I like the chapter on whistleblowing in Bill C-2 far better than I ever liked Bill C-11, so there was no point in trying to implement Bill C-11 while Bill C-2, we hoped, would have had royal assent by now.

I do not agree that we should have done both of them, because implementation would have been a nightmare. The best thing we can do to introduce meaningful whistleblower protection is pass Bill C-2 as quickly as possible.

[Translation]

Mrs. Carole Lavallée (Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I do not really have a question. Instead, I have a comment.

The member for Winnipeg Centre said earlier, in reference to the Canadian Wheat Board, that the Access to Information Act undermined the organizations subject to it.

I am extremely surprised to hear such a statement from the member for Winnipeg Centre, and I just wanted to let him know. I do not need to hear his response.

On the contrary, the Access to Information Act makes organizations stronger and more effective, because they look at themselves, becoming more democratic and more transparent in the process.

[English]

Mr. Pat Martin: Mr. Speaker, I do not care if the member wants to hear what I have to say afterwards. I will tell her what I have to say afterwards. Access to information legislation for government agencies is fine. I believe in absolute freedom of information.

The Canadian Wheat Board is not a government agency. It is an organization of farmers. Not one penny of government money goes into the Canadian Wheat Board. The government has a plan to try to

abolish the Canadian Wheat Board. The Conservatives are on a mad crusade to try to abolish the Canadian Wheat Board because they are ideologically opposed to collective action.

It is the collective action of farmers trying to look after their own interests that formed the Canadian Wheat Board and continues to serve them well. We should not play into the Conservatives' scheme to undermine the will of the people on the Canadian prairies. The Canadian Wheat Board is a great prairie institution. We on this side of the House will do nothing to undermine it.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Speaker, to include an organization under access to information does not equate to attacking that organization. I know the member supports expanding access to information. He believed in expanding access to information to the CBC, and quite rightly. Does he believe that he was attacking the CBC when he put forward that expansion?

Access to information is perfectly consistent with good governance. He has always been an advocate of access to information. Why will he not join us in supporting giving farmers the right to access to information at the Canadian Wheat Board?

Mr. Pat Martin: Briefly, Mr. Speaker, treated in isolation, I did not object to the notion at the committee stage. Shortly following our treatment of the Wheat Board at the committee, the government undertook a full frontal assault on the Canadian Wheat Board, announcing that it would undermine the board's single desk selling without a vote, and muzzling farmers and the Wheat Board from even representing their own points of view. It then became clear this was part of a package to undermine the Canadian Wheat Board. We will not play into that. We may have been duped at one point. We are going to fix that today.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

• (1400)

[English]

SRI LANKA

Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to represent a riding which many Sri Lankans call home: Tamil, Sinhala, Muslim and Christian. As such, my constituents keep me very well informed about the conflict in that country.

One constituent has explained that the northern region is experiencing great hardship due to conflict and resurgent violence. Residents, who once produced their own food and exercised freedom of movement, are locked down and unable to meet their daily nutritional needs. They are surviving on remittances from Canadian based family members.

This is a civil war that no one can win. NGOs, which went into the country post-tsunami, are well funded and eager to help, but they are pulling out, discouraged, frustrated by bribery, corruption and intimidation.

Statements by Members

Allan Rock, the former UN ambassador, reports that the government of Sri Lanka has been complicit in allowing the abduction and enlistment of child soldiers, as have the Tamil Tigers. Canada cannot sit by while that nation spirals into civil war.

I call upon the Government of Canada to take an active, even-handed approach, as did the previous government—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): The hon. member for South Surrey—White Rock—Cloverdale.

* * *

AUTISM

Mr. Russ Hiebert (South Surrey—White Rock—Cloverdale, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is my pleasure to rise today to recognize some constituents of mine who have travelled to Ottawa this week to raise awareness about autism spectrum disorder.

Members of the Families for Early Autism Treatment and members of the Autism Society of British Columbia have come to Parliament Hill to meet members of Parliament and inform Canadians about this disorder.

Autism is a neurological disorder that impairs social interaction and communications skills. Despite autism's sometimes serious impacts, there is treatment available to help many of those affected. For example, applied behavioural analysis therapy has proven beneficial for many autistic children.

While funding for this therapy is at the discretion of Canada's provincial governments, our new government is proud of the \$1.1 billion increase in the Canada health transfer that we have provided in budget 2006. Our government is also proud to invest \$3.5 million annually in research into the causes and treatment of autism.

* * *

[*Translation*]

UNIVERSAL CHILDREN'S DAY

Ms. Diane Bourgeois (Terrebonne—Blainville, BQ): Mr. Speaker, today I would like to acknowledge the significant step for the well-being of children throughout the world taken on November 20, 1959, when the Declaration of the Rights of the Child was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly.

Principle 2 of the Declaration states:

The child shall enjoy special protection, and shall be given opportunities and facilities, by law and by other means, to enable him to develop physically, mentally, morally, spiritually and socially in a healthy and normal manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity—

What measures does the federal government intend to take to help the million children still living in poverty in Canada despite the promise made in 2000 to eradicate child poverty?

The Bloc Québécois is calling on this government to stop taking action that can diminish the quality of life of children in this country and throughout the world.

[*English*]

LUCILLE BROADBENT

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis (Winnipeg North, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to pay tribute to Lucille Broadbent, who passed away this weekend, and to offer condolences to her lifelong partner, Ed Broadbent, her children Paul and Christine and to people everywhere who loved Lucille with a passion.

Lucille was a tireless fighter for social justice, francophone rights, women's equality and more. Lucille was a leader in her own right. As I said in 1989 at our farewell to Ed as leader, she was not born to shop.

She was also Ed's partner. She was the wind beneath his wings. For 35 years, Lucille was there working with Ed. Then, when serious illness confronted her, Ed left the job he loved to be by her side.

As our leader said on May 5, when Ed announced his decision not to run again for member of Parliament for Ottawa Centre:

—the sharing we should salute today is that which Lucille has done, because without it, this country never could have come to love Ed, and without it, our political discourse would be the worse for it.

This is the legacy that will live on, a commitment between two people that supports dreams and that rises above personal and political ambition. It is about a love that endures.

When I first met Ed and Lucille, I saw them loving to dance. Today I say, Lucille, dance wherever you may be.

* * *

2006 GREY CUP

Mr. Randy Kamp (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge—Mission, CPC): Mr. Speaker, yesterday Canadians from coast to coast watched the 94th Grey Cup that was held in Winnipeg. Named for a former governor general, the Grey Cup is one of Canada's great sporting traditions.

As a British Columbian and an avid fan of the B.C. Lions for more than 45 years, and a seasons ticket holder, I am proud to say the B.C. Lions are the 2006 Grey Cup champions after a hard fought win over the Montreal Alouettes.

The B.C. Lions' fight song says, "From the mountains to the sea, you are the pride of all B.C." From Nakusp to Nanaimo, from Vanderhoof to Vancouver, B.C. is proud of its five time Grey Cup champions.

I know all B.C. MPs will want to join me in congratulating Coach Wally Buono, coordinators Jacques Chapdelaine and Dave Ritchie and all of the B.C. Lions. They made us proud and we are looking forward to another successful season in 2007.

I know I am not alone when I say, go Lions go.

Statements by Members

● (1405)

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Hon. Andy Scott (Fredericton, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, despite nine months in office, the government has failed to advance the serious issue of helping individuals exposed to agent orange and other herbicides at CFB Gagetown.

The Prime Minister's promise of full and fair compensation has yet to materialize. While it made a nice story during a New Brunswick election stop in January, the Conservatives have not even followed through on the demands they made of us on this file while in opposition.

The former government expanded the independent review and looked into claims by veterans and civilians who believed they were sick as a result of working during the annual spray programs at CFB Gagetown between 1956 and 1984. This is what the community and the Conservative opposition asked for.

Veterans Affairs is still only considering applications for disability pensions, retroactive to a handful of days when agent orange was tested in 1966 and 1967.

Veterans are passing away each week. It is time for the government to act on its promise.

* * *

2006 GREY CUP

Mr. Steven Fletcher (Charleswood—St. James—Assiniboia, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today I wish to acknowledge the tremendous success of the 2006 Grey Cup game held in my hometown of Winnipeg.

The people of Manitoba once again have demonstrated to the world that Winnipeg is an excellent city to host world-class sporting events, including the Pan Am Games and the World Hockey Championships.

This past weekend, the Grey Cup parade attracted over 100,000 spectators. The game was sold out, and the week preceding the game was jam-packed with fun festivities. In fact, many Conservative youth caucus members of Parliament were in Winnipeg this past week reaching out to students in high schools and universities and telling them how to get involved in their community. The MPs were also able to enjoy the legendary Winnipeg hospitality.

Congratulations to the CFL finalists, Montreal Alouettes and B.C. Lions.

Once again, Winnipeg has demonstrated why we say “friendly Manitoba”. I encourage all Canadians and citizens of the world to visit and enjoy the glorious beauty and unbridled entertainment that Manitoba has to offer.

* * *

[Translation]

AFRICAN INDUSTRIALIZATION DAY

Ms. Johanne Deschamps (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Mr. Speaker, on this African Industrialization Day we should be celebrating the achievements and development of that continent so

long plagued by humanitarian crises. However, development work for Africa is far from being completed.

Instead of helping—far from it—the Conservative government is hindering Africa's development by withdrawing from the Kyoto protocol. As noted at the conference in Nairobi, Africa will be the continent the most seriously affected by the environmental and economic repercussions of global warming, not to mention the actions of a number of Canadian companies that continue to exploit this continent.

The Conservative government is so afraid to upset the oil industry that it is jeopardizing decades of efforts to ensure that Africa can finally begin to develop. Shame on the Conservatives.

* * *

[English]

UNIVERSAL CHILDREN'S DAY

Mr. Mike Lake (Edmonton—Mill Woods—Beaumont, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today countries around the world celebrate Universal Children's Day. This day reminds us of our shared commitment to the International Convention on the Rights of the Child. The convention recognizes the fundamental role that parents and families play in the lives of children.

Indeed, supporting families with children is a key priority of the government. That is why we have introduced Canada's universal child care plan, a plan that helps all parents balance work and family life as they see fit, regardless of where they live or their child care preferences. We recognize the diversity of families. We know that no two families are exactly alike and each has its own distinct needs.

On this day of the child, my wife Debi and I are thankful for our own children, Jaden and Jenae, and the joy that they bring to our lives.

Let us all take a moment today to celebrate our children, to be thankful for their presence in our lives and for the future that they represent.

* * *

● (1410)

NIMA MAAMOBI COMMUNITY LEARNING CENTRE

Hon. Anita Neville (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today I want to salute the efforts of Kathy Knowles, a constituent in Winnipeg South Centre who has had a dream realized: the completion of a major project to promote literacy in Ghana.

On November 18, Ms. Knowles, along with the Canadian High Commissioner, Ghanaian dignitaries, many Manitobans and hundreds of local school children, unveiled the Nima Maamobi Community Learning Centre, a literacy centre to supplement the community library in Accra, Ghana.

On November 27, the Governor General of Canada will be paying a visit to see this remarkable centre that has been constructed there. The centre, designed by Ghanaian-born Canadian architect Roger Amenyogbe, is designed to resemble an open book when looking at it from one angle.

Statements by Members

The centre is indeed a testament to what happens when the power of one, in turn supported by a group of dedicated people, puts committed heart and soul into a project to make it happen.

We thank Kathy. Her dream will provide opportunity for many.

* * *

[*Translation*]

OSTEOPOROSIS MONTH

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher (Beauport—Limoilou, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to inform the House and the Canadian public that November is Osteoporosis Month.

Osteoporosis is a chronic bone disease characterized by low bone mass and deterioration of bone tissue. Bone loss happens without any noticeable symptoms to those affected. It affects approximately 1.4 million Canadians, including one in four women over 50 and one in eight men over 50. It may however appear at a younger age. There is no cure for osteoporosis, but it can be treated with medication. The Osteoporosis Society of Canada works to educate, empower and support individuals in the prevention and treatment of osteoporosis.

I urge all members to join me in congratulating the Osteoporosis Society of Canada for its education and support work with Canadians in the prevention and treatment of osteoporosis.

* * *

[*English*]

TRANS DAY OF REMEMBRANCE

Mr. Bill Siksay (Burnaby—Douglas, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today, around the world, members of the transgender and transsexual communities and their allies are marking the Trans Day of Remembrance. This annual event remembers the victims of transphobic violence, hate and prejudice, those who have died, those who have been beaten and those who face daily discrimination.

Canada must take a leading role in ending violence against members of the trans community. Discrimination on the basis of gender identity and expression must be prohibited. Trans Canadians must enjoy the direct, full protection of the charter and the Human Rights Act and have full and fair access to health care, to housing and to employment.

We must challenge our assumptions and behaviours that put unacceptable limits on the lives of trans Canadians. We must ensure that opportunities exist for trans Canadians to tell their stories and for us all to learn from their life experience.

Trans Canadians, who are members of our families, our friends, our neighbours and our co-workers, must be supported as they take their place in Canadian society. Today we commit to that transformation as we stand in solidarity and as we remember.

* * *

BIONORTH 2006

Mr. David McGuinty (Ottawa South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today and tomorrow the 13th annual Bionorth Conference, “Canada’s International Biotechnology and Life Sciences Conference and Exhibition”, will be held in Ottawa by the Ottawa Life Sciences Council.

Canada is an international leader in research and development. Since 1995, the city of Ottawa has attracted over 50% of all incoming venture capital to Canada.

This year Bionorth focuses on competing in a global market. Now, more than ever, investments in education and research put us ahead. For that reason, I am very disappointed that the Conservative government has not made innovation a priority. Where is its plan?

Our government’s innovation strategy fostered an outstanding business climate. The private sector today spends more than \$3 billion a year in life sciences research and development, producing well over 70,000 Canadian jobs.

Innovation is at the core of Canada’s economic success. Where is the minority Conservative government?

* * *

[*Translation*]

CANADA VOLUNTEERISM INITIATIVE

Mr. Robert Bouchard (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, despite exorbitant surpluses, the Conservatives have eliminated the Canada Volunteerism Initiative. In Quebec alone, this cut is affecting over two million volunteers who do 308 million hours of volunteer work. Yet, according to Canadian Heritage’s website, 80% of Canadians feel that the government should encourage people to do volunteer work.

Unfortunately, the Conservative government is turning a deaf ear. Two weeks ago, I met with the president of the Regroupement des organismes communautaires de La Baie et du Bas Saguenay, Lise Savard. She strongly condemns this measure, because it jeopardizes organizations such as the Maison de l’Espoir, youth centres, the Maison des Familles, and many more. These organizations manage to survive thanks to volunteers.

I challenge the Minister of Canadian Heritage to come and visit the organizations that she just abandoned, and to explain to them her decision to do so.

* * *

●(1415)

[*English*]

NATIONAL CHILD DAY

Ms. Tina Keeper (Churchill, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today the world is celebrating the adoption by the United Nations of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The theme of this year’s National Child Day is the “Right to be Heard”.

Oral Questions

It is a shameful fact that no group of young people in Canada faces a greater gap in life chances than aboriginal children. Last year's Kelowna accord targeted \$5 billion over five years to close the gap between aboriginal peoples and other Canadians in areas such as education, health, housing and economic opportunities. Yet the minority Conservative government cancelled the \$5.1 billion accord.

Canada's aboriginal children deserve better. All of us in the House must make Canada a nation that listens to the needs of our aboriginal children and youth. It is their right to be heard.

* * *

[*Translation*]

UNESCO

Mr. Daniel Petit (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, CPC): Mr. Speaker, last week Canada hosted the Organization of American States' inter-American meeting on culture in Montreal.

The Minister of Canadian Heritage took advantage of the opportunity to reiterate the commitment of Canada's new government to promoting the ratification of the UNESCO Convention on the Diversity of Cultural Expressions.

Together with the Government of Quebec's minister of culture and communications, Canada's new government held bilateral meetings with representatives of OAS member states.

Since coming to power, the new government has given Quebec a seat at UNESCO and continues to work with Quebec on the world stage.

For years, the Bloc asked for a Quebec delegation to UNESCO, but to no avail. Their little Liberal friends refused. Only our government had the will to act in Quebec's interest.

That is what we mean when we say open federalism. I am proud that Canada's new government is taking every opportunity to promote ratification of the convention—

The Speaker: I apologize for interrupting the hon. member, but it is time to begin oral question period.

ORAL QUESTIONS

[*Translation*]

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Hon. Bill Graham (Leader of the Opposition, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is hard to believe, but this government managed to embarrass Canada on three continents at the same time.

First, the Prime Minister cancelled a summit in Europe for fear of being criticized. Then, in Asia, he made a laughingstock of himself in connection with his meeting with the president of China. Furthermore, in Africa, instead of moving forward on a file that is so important to Canada, the Minister of the Environment gave the worst performance and was criticized by her international counterparts.

Can the Prime Minister explain how he could do so much to tarnish Canada's reputation in just two weeks?

Mr. Jason Kenney (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are extremely proud of our Prime Minister's approach internationally.

Our country has a leader who went ahead and defended Canadian interests and values on the international scene. We have an environment minister who spoke the truth to the rest of the world, while the Liberals lied to the international community about environmental policy. We have an honest government with principles when it comes to international policy.

[*English*]

Hon. Bill Graham (Leader of the Opposition, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as the parliamentary secretary's response clearly indicated, the government's foreign policy is dangerously driven by preconceptions, deceptions, self-delusions and arrogance.

The Prime Minister tries to pretend that a brief meeting with the President of China on the way into dinner was a historical event, but the Chinese news agency put it at the bottom of a story about President Hu's meeting with the leader of Papua New Guinea.

The Prime Minister promised specifically to intervene on behalf of a Canadian being held in China. He told us that he knew how to deal with the world's growing superpower.

If the Prime Minister's meeting was as great as he claims, could the parliamentary secretary tell us when Mr. Celil will be returned to Canada?

● (1420)

Mr. Jason Kenney (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, would the Leader of the Opposition tell us why his party, before we broke, vetoed a motion in the House seeking the release of political prisoners in Canada, including Mr. Huseyincan Celil. Would he tell us why the Liberal Party has criticized the government for being willing to speak up on behalf of a Canadian citizen imprisoned abroad?

I will tell the House that Amnesty International, the Human Rights Watch, the Canadian Chinese National Congress, Mr. Celil's lawyer and the Uyghur Canadian Association have all applauded the courage and forthrightness of this Prime Minister.

Hon. Bill Graham (Leader of the Opposition, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I hope they do not applaud what the Prime Minister failed to achieve. Let us save the applause until we see some concrete results. In fact, the meeting failed to achieve anything.

The Prime Minister takes credit for a technology agreement with China but that agreement was signed last year by his Liberal predecessor, the member for LaSalle—Émard.

Why did the Prime Minister fail to obtain the foreign investment agreement with China that he was out there to get? Why did he fail to achieve the tourism agreement that he was supposed to get?

Oral Questions

Since he is so boastful about his success, why did the Prime Minister score a big fat zero on human rights, foreign investment and tourism for the people of Canada and then boast about it?

Mr. Jason Kenney (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I recall that 13 years of failed Liberal policy in that respect delivered a growing trade deficit, a shrinking export market share and no preferred designation status for Canada.

I will tell the House what Mr. Celil's lawyer said about this Prime Minister. He said, "I was very pleased to see the Prime Minister raise the case and stand up for Canada when they are being pushed around abroad". This is what the *Toronto Sun* said, "As Canadians we should all feel pride and mutter silent alleluias that a Canadian Prime Minister is prepared to make a stand on behalf of us all".

* * *

[Translation]

THE ENVIRONMENT

Hon. Lucienne Robillard (Westmount—Ville-Marie, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Canada is really paying the price for the Conservatives' amateurism on the international stage.

Canadians who believe in Kyoto hoped that the Minister of the Environment would take the opportunity in Nairobi to reassure them. Instead, she used an international forum to get even with those who do not share her views.

Does the minister realize that, with her partisan approach in Nairobi, she embarrassed Canadians and made us look bad on the international stage?

Mr. Jason Kenney (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the difference between the Conservative government and the former Liberal government with respect to the Kyoto protocol is that we are honest with the world. The Liberals were dishonest. The Liberals lied to Canadians and to the world about their Kyoto protocol commitments when they said they intended to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. They increased them by 30%.

This government, the current government, is honest with the world when it says that the Liberals wrecked our environmental policy, and it is taking action to improve our environment.

Hon. Lucienne Robillard (Westmount—Ville-Marie, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, last week in Nairobi, France commended the coherence of the former government's environmental policy and reserved special praise for Quebec's plan. For her part, the Minister of the Environment did nothing but paint a very negative picture of all the past actions in our country, all the efforts by individuals, NGOs, industries and the provinces.

Why is the minister so arrogant? Why is she so determined to isolate herself, instead of joining in the Canadian consensus?

Mr. Jason Kenney (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, speaking of hypocrisy, I would like to quote this weekend's *Globe and Mail*.

[English]

An article in this past weekend's *Globe and Mail*, speaking to the Liberal policy and its criticism of this government's representation abroad in Kyoto, states:

It is the hypocrisy that is most distressing.

If only the former Liberal government had matched his unbecoming sanctimony with real accomplishments.

We will not deliver that kind of unbecoming sanctimony. We are honest with the world that the Liberals wrecked this country's commitment to the Kyoto accord. We are doing our best to make up for the lost ground under 13 years of Liberal inaction.

● (1425)

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Gauthier (Roberval—Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Mr. Speaker, at the climate change conference in Nairobi, the Government of Quebec asked for 45 seconds to outline its position. The federal government refused this modest request.

My question is as follows: why did it refuse given the Prime Minister's offer, the promise made in the election campaign, to give Quebec a special place on the international scene? Did this place, this promise, not warrant 45 seconds in Nairobi?

Mr. Jason Kenney (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we should remember that it was this Prime Minister who, for the first time, signed an agreement with Quebec to ensure its representation at UNESCO.

In addition, the Minister of the Environment continues to work with her Quebec counterpart, the Quebec minister of the environment, to make progress on the environmental plan. The province of Quebec has a good environmental plan and we will work with it to obtain tangible results for all Canadians and Quebecers.

Mr. Michel Gauthier (Roberval—Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Mr. Speaker, no matter what it says or does, the bottom line is that the federal promise was not worth 45 seconds.

Are we to understand that all the efforts of this government to hide Quebec's plan were made to avoid explaining to the international community why this government, which collects more than half of the taxes paid by Quebecers, refuses to pay Quebec the \$328 million that would enable it to reach all the targets of the Kyoto protocol?

Mr. Jason Kenney (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the government works with all provinces on various issues, including the environment.

The Minister of the Environment has met with her Quebec counterpart several times. This is an important initiative. We must and we will collaborate with the provinces, including Quebec, to clean up the environment, something the Liberals did not do when they held office.

Oral Questions

Mr. Bernard Bigras (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the federal government would very much like to present a positive image of its participation at the Nairobi conference, but that is impossible.

Can the Minister of the Environment admit that she kicked Quebec out of Nairobi so that she would not be forced to admit that the Kyoto protocol objectives are indeed attainable and that Quebec's plan proves it?

[English]

Mr. Mark Warawa (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member well knows that the conference in Nairobi was a huge success. Canada is one of 165 countries that signed on to address greenhouse gas emissions past the 2012 reporting stage. I encourage the hon. member to work with the government and not try to sabotage our efforts.

[Translation]

Mr. Bernard Bigras (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, how can the federal government be satisfied with its performance in Nairobi when we know that Canada has won the most fossil awards at the conference, for example, the fossil award for hindering the negotiations and the fossil award for misleading the international community? It won at least six of these awards.

How can it be happy under these conditions?

[English]

Mr. Mark Warawa (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that Bloc member's behaviour in Nairobi was shocking and shameful. That member should be embarrassed for what he did. He owes Canadians an apology for trying to sabotage what Canada is trying to do.

We are in a crisis on the global environment. We need to work together on the environment. I am going to ask that member to stand up right now and apologize for his shameful behaviour in Nairobi.

Hon. Jack Layton (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the government members now claim that the conference in Nairobi was a huge success. For whom? For Exxon Mobile? Is that whom they are talking about?

The fact of the matter is that Canadians looked on with enormous disappointment as the world was forced to tell our country, Canada, to get its act together. Kofi Annan said that there was a "frightening lack of leadership". He was talking about countries like Canada.

What changes is the government ready to make to its approach, given that the world has called on Canada to get its act together, so we can have healthier air for our children?

• (1430)

Mr. Jason Kenney (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that question is typically ridiculous. The fact of the matter is that the world's major emitters do not belong to the Kyoto agreement. Many, if not most, of the signatories to that accord have not met their targets.

Our Minister of the Environment was simply honest in telling the world that, because of the previous government's 13 years of inaction, carbon emissions have risen by 30%, making it effectively

impossible to reach our phase one targets, but that we are fully engaged in a plan to move forward in reducing those emissions and toward a meaningful phase two.

Hon. Jack Layton (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in other words, the government is not prepared to change its direction, even though the entire world is asking Canada to do so and so are Canadians. I guess we got our answer there.

[Translation]

The world is teaching Canada a lesson. The President of France, Jacques Chirac, criticized Canada, deploring the terribly inadequate mobilization of countries like Canada, which are now going back on their commitment to the Kyoto protocol and not adhering to its provisions.

Why is the Prime Minister placing Canada among the ranks of environmental offenders on the world stage?

Mr. Jason Kenney (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to remind the leader of the NDP that this government has been here for nine months and that Canada has been a signatory to the Kyoto protocol for nine years, nine years of inaction by the Liberal government.

We inherited this situation, but we take our responsibilities seriously. That is why the Minister of the Environment introduced a bill to give the government the ability to take action and improve our environment. We will work with all the opposition parties on this.

[English]

Hon. John Godfrey (Don Valley West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, when she appeared before the environment committee, the minister denounced the evils of emissions trading. She claimed that it would cost Canadians billions. She also claimed that the European trading market collapsed and that we were wasting money overseas. Six weeks later she has changed her tune. Emissions trading is now all the rage. Now she sees how the clean development mechanisms can help Canada meet its targets.

Will she clarify her position on international emissions trading? Does she support it or not?

Mr. Mark Warawa (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, obviously the hon. member has not read the clean air act. Actually, she has answered that question many times. I encourage him to read clauses 27, 29 and 33 of the clean air act. That question has been answered. The government supports exchange markets of carbon. He should read the act.

Hon. John Godfrey (Don Valley West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I heard the minister. The minister was in Nairobi last week pretending to support Kyoto while the Prime Minister was in Hanoi plotting to destroy it. At the environment committee, the minister alleged that billions of euros had been lost on emissions trading and she would never support the international trading system. Now she says she has learned a few things, including the value of trading credits.

Does she intend to educate the Prime Minister? Will she guarantee that Canada will be ready to join the international emissions trading market by January 1?

Mr. Mark Warawa (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, a carbon market requires a regulatory system and obviously the member has not read the clauses of the clean air act. I encourage him to do that. I encourage him to read the act and to participate, not try to sabotage what the government is doing.

We acknowledge the support of the NDP and its thoughtful process, but after 13 years of Liberal inaction, it is no surprise that all the Liberals can do is sabotage. We need to work together. We heard that in Nairobi. We need to work together on climate change. I encourage the Liberals to stop trying to sabotage and work with the government.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia (Lac-Saint-Louis, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of the Environment said that Canada would continue to participate in the Kyoto protocol and that all our obligations would be fulfilled, except those having to do with greenhouse gas emissions of course. But Kyoto is essentially objective based, and targets have to be met by 2012.

How can the minister support the Kyoto protocol without supporting the Kyoto objectives?

• (1435)

[*English*]

Mr. Mark Warawa (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the government has been very clear all along that we have committed to the Kyoto protocol. The problem that the hon. member may not remember is 13 years of Liberal inaction. We would not have the problem if the former government would have done something on the environment. That is the problem.

Now we have the clean air act. I encourage the member to stop playing games and stop the rhetoric. Let us work together on the clean air act.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia (Lac-Saint-Louis, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the minister and her parliamentary secretary are living in a world of illusions and contradictions.

The industrialized nations are supposed to set an example by reducing their greenhouse gas emissions. Instead, the Prime Minister met with Australian officials to explore ways to reduce emissions outside the Kyoto framework.

How can one support Kyoto and be fully committed to it while at the same time exploring ways to circumvent it and, in so doing, destroy the protocol?

[*English*]

Mr. Mark Warawa (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to read a quote from the minister. She stated in Nairobi:

Oral Questions

There are some who are using the Kyoto Protocol to create divisions within our country—but we will not let that happen. Canada has one target and we all share the responsibility to work together to fulfill our obligations.

I encourage the hon. member to work with the government on the clean air act. Let us work together so that we can deal with cleaning up our environment, our greenhouse gas emissions and pollution, for the health of all Canadians.

* * *

[*Translation*]

TAXATION

Mr. Pierre Paquette (Joliette, BQ): Mr. Speaker, by cutting payments to the most disadvantaged people instead of cutting its operating expenses, which continue to spiral upward, the government has chosen the wrong target.

Will the government admit that, by using the \$13 billion surplus and by implementing the plan to cut operating expenses by \$16 billion over three years as proposed by the Bloc Québécois, it has all the latitude it needs to fulfill the promise made to the people of Quebec that it would resolve the fiscal imbalance once and for all?

Hon. Michael Chong (President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs and Minister for Sport, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we did a lot of things in the 2006 budget to restore the fiscal balance in this country. We will have to do more in the 2007 budget, with the Minister of Finance and the Prime Minister.

Mr. Pierre Paquette (Joliette, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the government can save \$16 billion over three years by cutting purchases of professional services, reducing the public service through attrition and limiting its other operating expenses.

Instead of constantly narrowing the scope of its commitments to Quebec, instead of lowering the bar, will the Minister of Finance admit that the government has the resources to resolve the fiscal imbalance by the \$3.9 billion that Quebecers were promised?

Hon. Michael Chong (President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs and Minister for Sport, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have already said that our government took major steps in the 2006 budget to restore the fiscal balance. I will tell my colleague that our government has done a lot of things when it comes to the fiscal imbalance.

During the years when the Liberals were in power, they refused to recognize that the problem existed. The Bloc Québécois can promise the moon because people know it is a party that will never be in a position to keep its promises.

* * *

AGRICULTURE AND AGRI-FOOD

Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, Quebec grain producers referred to the recent federal-provincial conference of agriculture ministers, held in Calgary, as a “missed meeting”. Producers find themselves without any protection, and they are unable to hold their own against American dumping.

Oral Questions

Why does the government refuse to put in place a program that would provide tangible assistance to our farm producers, so that they can hold their own against American dumping in Canada and in Quebec?

[English]

Hon. Chuck Strahl (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and Minister for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the meeting in Calgary with provincial counterparts was very successful. We were able to discuss everything from not only trying to fix the failed support programs that we inherited from the previous Liberal government but we also agreed to proceed with the disaster relief program which is going to help farmers, especially in Saint-Amable as a good example. We must also engage with farmers on ways to enhance and augment the current program because we agree, along with the provinces, that it needs to be fixed to meet the needs of farmers.

• (1440)

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the coast to coast approach that the federal government is trying to implement across Canada does not work in Quebec, and the government's apathy is jeopardizing the future of Quebec's farm income stabilization program.

When will the minister understand once and for all that he must set up an assistance program that is geared to the specific needs of Quebec's agricultural reality?

[English]

Hon. Chuck Strahl (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and Minister for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, agriculture is a shared jurisdiction between the federal and provincial governments. That is why we have federal-provincial conferences. I have had three of them now with our provincial counterparts. At every occasion we sit down and talk about what we can do nationally, and also what we can do on a regional basis or on a sectoral basis.

At every occasion we made improvements on current programing, but more importantly, we are working together to ensure we can enhance profitability for farmers right from the field to the plate.

* * *

FEDERAL ACCOUNTABILITY ACT

Mr. Mark Holland (Ajax—Pickering, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, under the cloud of investigation by Elections Canada for trying to hide nearly \$2 million in illicit donations for its 2005 convention, jaw-dropping Conservative hypocrisy strikes again.

Caught breaking the law, government members want to rewrite the accountability act to let themselves off. The Conservatives want to create a loophole that would allow their flagrant violation of Canada's election laws to stand. So much for accountability.

My question is for the Prime Minister. When will the Conservatives drop this dishonest amendment, pay back any illicitly received funds, and own up to the fact they broke the law?

Hon. John Baird (President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is always fun to get a lecture from Liberals on embezzling

taxpayers' money. If corruption were an Olympic sport, the Liberal Party of Canada would be getting the gold medal.

Mr. Mark Holland (Ajax—Pickering, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am glad the minister takes such fun in breaking the law. His party has broken the law and that is what is at issue. The Reform Party, the Alliance and even the Conservatives, back when they were progressive, all followed the laws for conventions. When they came together in 2005, are we supposed to believe they had amnesia? The reality is that every party in this House knew the rules and the Conservative Party broke them. What that party is trying to do now is cover it up. Well it will not work.

If the Prime Minister will not take responsibility for this mess, Canadians will in the next election. So one more time to the Prime Minister, drop this mockery of an amendment. Pay back the money and accept the consequences of breaking the election—

The Speaker: The hon. President of the Treasury Board.

Hon. John Baird (President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, there were obviously two interpretations of the situation. We know that because another political party testified before one of Parliament's committees and told it the exact same thing. We will of course—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order, please. We do not want to make the President of the Treasury Board raise his voice unduly to be able to be heard. He has the floor and we want to hear the President of the Treasury Board's answer.

Hon. John Baird: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. You know how much I dislike raising my voice to be heard.

I know all parties will do their best to comply with the law. However, I do know that the Liberal Party of Canada wants taxpayers to subsidize its multi-million dollar conventions. I do not think hard-working Canadian families should have to do that.

[Translation]

Hon. Marlene Jennings (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the President of the Treasury Board blows in the wind so much that he is beginning to look like a weather vane. Today, the Conservatives are admitting that they were caught breaking the law when they tried to hide some \$2 million in political donations from the Chief Electoral Officer.

Are they prepared to admit guilt? Is the President of the Treasury Board prepared to stop his attempts to make his gimmickry retroactively legal? Is he prepared to admit guilt? Is he prepared to stop—

• (1445)

The Speaker: The hon. President of the Treasury Board.

*Oral Questions**[English]*

Hon. John Baird (President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I do not think it will come as any surprise to the member opposite that I do not share her diatribe on her version of the facts. However, the Liberal Party never lets the facts get in the way of a good argument.

On the subject of apologies, we are waiting for an apology to Canadian taxpayers from someone named Gagliano. We are waiting for an apology to taxpayers from someone named Ouellet. We are waiting for an apology from someone named Dingwall. Have we received one?

[Translation]

Hon. Marlene Jennings (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, this is not a Liberal Party interpretation, but that of the head of Elections Canada. He is not answering my question.

The Conservatives broke the rules. They got caught in the act. They had the gall to deny it but they can no longer do so, as they attempt to rewrite the law to make their illegal actions legal.

What kind of fools does the President of the Treasury Board take Canadians for?

Hon. John Baird (President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will say very clearly that, as far as I am concerned, all political parties in Canada follow the rules. Once in a while, political parties are given bad information. We have heard another party, which is neither the Liberal Party nor the Conservative Party, comment before a committee of this House that it got bad advice.

It is very clear that there is a party which wants to use public money to finance its political conventions. But our caucus, this government, does not think it would be a good idea for—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Louis-Hébert.

* * *

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

Mr. Luc Harvey (Louis-Hébert, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of International Cooperation and Minister for la Francophonie and Official Languages and the Minister of Foreign Affairs jointly announced \$40 million in funding during the Global Microcredit Summit. Subsequently, the opposition claimed that this was not new money.

Can the minister give us some more information about this funding?

Hon. Josée Verner (Minister of International Cooperation and Minister for la Francophonie and Official Languages, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for his excellent question. We announced \$40 million in supplementary funding for new multi-year funds in addition to what has already been committed to microcredit projects, including projects in Afghanistan.

CIDA's microcredit spending has risen by about 31% over the past year from \$26 million to \$34 million. This announcement is proof positive of our commitment to make financial services accessible to poor people, especially women.

*[English]***NATIONAL DEFENCE**

Ms. Dawn Black (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Mr. Speaker, documents I have show that the Department of National Defence informed the minister that security for the 2010 Vancouver Olympics could limit the force's ability to deploy a large number of soldiers abroad.

Given that the chief of defence staff believes we will need to be in Afghanistan for 10 years or more, where will the minister find the troops to protect the Olympic venue? Will he choose Vancouver or will he choose Kandahar?

Hon. Gordon O'Connor (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have said a number of times in this House that we have sufficient capacity to meet our commitments in Afghanistan.

Quite separately, we recognize that there is an Olympic games in 2010. We have not been formally requested by the province to provide troops but we are sort of advancing our plans now.

The member must be aware that this country has somewhere near 50,000 army, air force and navy troops available.

Ms. Dawn Black (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we know that the extension of the counter-insurgency mission in southern Afghanistan has put real strain on our defence resources and the minister actually said that our military no longer has a second land task force and that there is a scramble to prevent soldiers from doing more than one tour in Afghanistan.

Is the minister telling this House that he has no plans for the largest domestic security deployment Canada has seen in decades? Is he actually saying that to the House today?

● (1450)

Hon. Stockwell Day (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to report that the security that will be taking place at the Olympics will be very significant and will be provided by a variety of agencies. I have been able to tour the entire site and will continue to work with all of our agencies in providing security. We have also benefited greatly from the experience of recent Olympics.

I can assure Canadians and all who are coming to that fantastic event that this will be the safest and most secure Olympics that we have seen and a joy for everybody to be there.

* * *

INCOME TRUSTS

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, three weeks ago, the Conservative minority government double-crossed income trust investors. The government promised that the billions of dollars of overnight losses would be recovered but they were not. The government's take a Valium approach was an insult and simply did not work.

Oral Questions

The Prime Minister promised not to tax income trusts and Canadians invested based on that promise. Canadians then lost much of their hard-earned savings because the Prime Minister broke his promise.

How can average Canadians ever trust the Conservative minority government again?

Ms. Diane Ablonczy (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to say that Canadians can trust this government to do the right thing for the country, to protect our social programs and to protect the revenues that allow Canadians to be provided with these programs.

The member will know that the circumstances changed very quickly, which made this necessary, and the government took the right step for Canada.

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, last week the Canadian Association of Income Funds said:

The increase in the Tax Credit for Age and the splitting of pensions will offer marginal compensation, if any, to the great majority of investors who are struggling with heavy losses.

The following is what this Conservative minority government has achieved thus far: first, it raised taxes on those who earn the least; second, it slashed programs for those most in need; and third, it butchered, without warning, a lifetime of hard-earned savings.

Who is next on its hit list?

Ms. Diane Ablonczy (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, on the contrary. The new tax fairness plan delivered over \$1 billion in additional relief to pensioners and seniors.

In addition to that, the government is planning further tax relief to Canadians because we believe Canadians are overtaxed. They have been overtaxed for over a decade by the members opposite and their government and we will fix that.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marcel Proulx (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, three weeks ago, the government renege on its promise not to tax income trusts. The Minister of Public Works and Government Services suggested that small investors take a Valium and wait for the market to bounce back.

The income trust sector is still posting over \$25 billion in losses.

When will the prediction made by the Minister of Public Works and Government Services come true? When will small investors recover the money that disappeared?

[*English*]

Ms. Diane Ablonczy (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is fair to say that the market is working to make some changes in the programs and the offerings that investors can access in order to fund some of their retirement programs.

However, more than that, this was a step to preserve services and support for Canadians, especially seniors, in the years to come. This was a very important step in that direction.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marcel Proulx (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, if this government is so anti-Bell and anti-Telus, perhaps the Minister of Industry should justify his recent decision concerning them.

But that is not the issue. The Minister of Public Works and Government Services predicted that the income trust market would recover quickly.

Three weeks later, that still has not happened.

Did the Minister of Public Works and Government Services try to lead small investors astray?

[*English*]

Ms. Diane Ablonczy (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member will know that markets do go up and down but sometimes changes are a necessity for the government. The former government on the opposite side knew this needed to be dealt with but botched the whole thing.

Our government believes we must do the right thing for Canadians rather than just the right thing for our own party and we did that. We preserved our important social programs and we preserved the revenue stream that supports them. Canadians know that it was the thing that Canada needed at this time.

* * *

● (1455)

[*Translation*]

QUEBEC

Mrs. Vivian Barbot (Papineau, BQ): Mr. Speaker, true to their old habits, the Liberals are tearing themselves apart trying to figure out if they are going to acknowledge something that is obvious, that Quebec is a nation. For his part, the Prime Minister refuses to talk about it and simply utters empty words that allow him to deny the Québécois difference.

Instead of continuing to dodge the issue, can the Prime Minister tell us whether to him Quebec is a nation?

Hon. Michael Chong (President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs and Minister for Sport, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this government is committed to creating a federalism of openness that builds on the strengths of every province and every territory in our federation and that recognizes the culture, the civil law tradition and the French-speaking majority of Quebec.

Our government is addressing the priorities of Quebeckers by supporting families, lowering taxes and fighting crime. We are not going to get sidetracked by semantics.

Mrs. Vivian Barbot (Papineau, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister keeps saying he wants to have a federalism of openness. Since his election, it has been hard to see any concrete examples of that.

Can the Prime Minister tell us how his approach is any different from that of the previous government, which did its best to deny the existence of the Quebec nation?

Oral Questions

Hon. Michael Chong (President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs and Minister for Sport, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government has already taken concrete action to demonstrate the unique place Quebec has in Canada, consider Quebec's role at UNESCO and our support for the celebration of Quebec City's 400th anniversary.

Our government is addressing the priorities of Quebecers by supporting families, lowering taxes and fighting crime. We are not going to get sidetracked by semantics.

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[English]

CHILD CARE

Mr. Omar Alghabra (Mississauga—Erindale, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today Canada marks National Child Day. It is an opportunity to assess how we are meeting the needs of this and future generations of young Canadians.

Sadly, the minority Conservative government is moving backward by cancelling our investment in 600,000 new child care spaces. Canadian families are frustrated. The Conservatives have not created a single child care space while waiting lists continue to grow and costs continue to rise.

The Conservatives are abandoning Canadian children and families are wondering why children are not a priority for the government.

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as the hon. member knows, his government sat on its hands for 13 years promising to help parents but it never did.

One of the top five priorities on which we have already delivered was the \$100 monthly universal child care benefit that was given directly to the parents of each child under the age of six. As of April 1, 2007, we will have the incentives in place to create the new child care spaces.

* * *

FEDERAL ACCOUNTABILITY ACT

Mr. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, during the break week, Canada's new government got down to work, rolled up its sleeves, worked constructively with opposition colleagues in the House and rebuilt the federal accountability act back into the toughest anti-corruption law in Canadian history.

Unlike the Liberal Senate, which took almost six months to bring forward its amendments to the act, Canada's new government only took a week to respond.

The government has indicated that it will reject many of the amendments from the Senate. Could the President of the Treasury Board tell the House why he is rejecting those amendments?

Hon. John Baird (President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to say that, unlike the unelected Liberal Senate, I believe that the House of Commons has acted responsibly in considering the federal accountability act. I believe that the member for Vancouver Quadra, the Bloc member for Roberval—Lac-Saint-Jean and the NDP member for Winnipeg Centre have all acted

responsibly in giving expeditious consideration to this important piece of legislation.

I will tell members why we are not accepting the unelected Liberal Senate's amendments. We do not believe in doubling the donation limit from \$1,000 to \$2,000. We do not believe in increasing secrecy by not including the Canadian Wheat Board. We do not believe that Liberal political staffers should have unequal access to the public service over—

● (1500)

The Speaker: The hon. member for Trinity—Spadina.

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POVERTY

Ms. Olivia Chow (Trinity—Spadina, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today is National Child Day, when every child around the world has the right to be heard, but apparently not in Canada, because I do not think the Prime Minister is listening.

One out of every two Canadian working families thinks they are just one or two paycheques away from being poor. The gap between the rich and the poor is growing. People are fearful about the future of their kids. Some are even losing hope. I want to ask the Prime Minister, how much child poverty is he willing to accept?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we recognize that children are the future of this country. That is why we have to invest in them.

That is why we have to make sure that the needs of different families are recognized. Because not all families are the same, that is why we delivered the universal child care benefit. That is why we are assisting families with the workers investment tax benefits. That is why we took so many thousands of people off the tax roll with the last budget. We are going to help alleviate poverty in this country.

Mr. Tony Martin (Sault Ste. Marie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I was in Calgary last week and saw thousands of homeless people, many turning to crack and crystal meth to meet their most basic needs. There were thousands of people sleeping in shelters and on the streets of one of Canada's richest cities.

Today a new report indicates that half of all Canadians fear that they are but a paycheque or two away from poverty. The Liberals destroyed the social safety net. The Conservatives have done nothing to fix it. Why does the government continue to give billions of dollars to big oil based in Calgary and nothing to the homeless and the poor?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member has his facts all wrong. One of the earliest moves of Canada's new government was to extend the national homelessness initiative. With full funding from previous years, we carried it through in exactly the same format and process as before. Also, Canada's new government added \$37 million in assistance to the homeless that the previous government did not even bother to spend.

Routine Proceedings

We are taking real action: promises made, promises kept.

* * *

GOVERNMENT POLICIES

Mr. Omar Alhabra (Mississauga—Erindale, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the minority Conservative government backtracked on a commitment to protect the young child supplement portion of the Canada child tax benefit and, get this, it also cancelled the summer youth program.

The Conservatives cancelled Canada's youth international internship program. They are also pondering the cancellation of Canada's millennium scholarship. They voted against making RESPs tax deductible. They have reduced investment in post-secondary education by \$2.7 billion.

It is no wonder that Canadians are alarmed. How can the Conservative government justify its reckless behaviour that risks the future of our—

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Human Resources and Social Development.

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the list of errors in that delivery was so long I could not even begin to get through it all in 35 seconds.

The Liberals talk about investing in youth. The previous Liberal government cut \$4 billion out of post-secondary education.

We instead have invested a billion dollars in infrastructure for post-secondary education and \$185 million to help students with textbook tax credits, scholarships and bursaries. We are also investing over \$2 billion in apprenticeships to help students learn something other than at university and college and to help them contribute to the workforce, in a way the previous government never did.

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

• (1505)

[English]

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO PETITIONS

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 36(8)(b) I have the honour to table, in both official languages, the government's response to 60 petitions.

* * *

COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS AND NORTHERN DEVELOPMENT

Mr. Colin Mayes (Okanagan—Shuswap, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the fourth report of the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development regarding the United Nations declaration on the rights of indigenous people.

CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION

Mr. Norman Doyle (St. John's East, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the eighth report of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration in relation to the supplementary estimates 2006-07.

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BILL C-2—FEDERAL ACCOUNTABILITY ACT

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, there have been discussions among all the political parties and I believe you would find unanimous consent for the following:

That, notwithstanding any Standing Order or usual practices of the House, with respect to the motion concerning amendments made by the Senate to Bill C-2, after no more than two days of debate, or when no member rises to speak, all questions necessary to dispose of the motion shall be put without further debate or amendment; and if any amendment is under consideration that contains more than one proposition, the Speaker be given the authority to divide the amendment for the purposes of voting, after consultation with the parties.

The Speaker: Does the hon. government House leader have the unanimous consent of the House to move this motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to)

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PETITIONS

AUTOMOBILE INDUSTRY

Mr. Massimo Pacetti (Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is my pleasure to present a few petitions from Canadians across the country who are calling upon the Government of Canada for a new automotive trade policy. They are asking the government to cancel negotiations for a free trade agreement with Korea, which would worsen the one-way flood of automotive products into our market. Second, they are asking the government to develop a new automotive trade policy that would require Korea and other offshore markets to purchase equivalent volumes of finished vehicles and auto parts from North America as a condition of their continued access to our market.

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QUESTIONS ON THE ORDER PAPER

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the following questions will be answered today: Nos. 94, 96 and 100.

[Text]

Question No. 94—**Ms. Penny Priddy:**

With respect to programs and spending administered by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, CMHC, within the riding of Surrey North: (a) what is the total annual budget of CMHC spending in 2006; (b) what is the projected budget for 2007; (c) how many CMHC funded housing units for singles and families currently exist; and (d) how many CMHC funded housing units for singles and families are planned for the remainder of 2006 and 2007?

Routine Proceedings

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, with respect to programs and spending administered by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, CMHC, within the riding of Surrey North, CMHC currently administers 681 units, representing current annual funding of some \$600,000. There may be additional units receiving ongoing federal assistance under federal-provincial programs administered by the province of British Columbia. The province has the lead role for these units and does not report subsidies by project to CMHC.

Under federal housing renovation programs, some \$47,000 has been committed for 11 units in the riding between January 1, 2006 and October 31, 2006. CMHC is unable to provide a forecast of how many more units and dollars will be committed by year-end 2006 or 2007, since this will depend on the number of applications received and approved, as well as the availability of funding in 2007-08.

British Columbia Housing administers the Canada-British Columbia affordable housing program agreement. According to information provided by BC Housing, there have not been any commitments under this program in the riding of Surrey North to date. It should be noted that BC Housing is not required to provide forecasts of units planned by riding to CMHC.

Question No. 96—Mrs. Irene Mathysen:

With regard to the \$45 million funding cuts over the next two years to Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, CMHC, announced in September 2006: (a) from specifically where within CMHC does the government plan on cutting this funding; (b) when will these cuts take place; and (c) will the government provide a detailed timeline for these cuts?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the \$45 million in efficiency savings will come from the assisted housing programs line in Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation's, CMHC's, 2006-07 main estimates and the equivalent line in CMHC's 2007-08 main estimates, when approved. The assisted housing programs budget line primarily supports funding for some 633,000 existing social housing units and the affordable housing initiative.

Efficiency savings apply to social housing that is funded and administered by CMHC through a number of existing agreements. The efficiency savings result from lower than forecast mortgage interest rates and inflation.

Social housing is funded through long term federal subsidies. Social housing expenses usually include a mortgage cost component which may vary as mortgage interest rates increase or decrease over time. Non-mortgage expenses increase or decrease over time due to inflation. At the social housing project level, the cost of CMHC's assistance can also increase or decrease accordingly.

Assumptions regarding increases or decreases in expenses are factored into CMHC annual program budget costs and the corporation's main estimates. If mortgage interest rates and inflation were to go up, the cost of CMHC housing subsidies would go up. If mortgage rates or inflation were to decrease, CMHC subsidy costs would go down.

Final social housing costs for 2006-07 and 2007-08 are expected to be lower due to lower than assumed interest rates on social housing renewals and inflation. The efficiency savings devoted to

expenditure review will be \$30 million in 2006-07 and \$15 million in 2007-08. The timeline for the realization of the savings is relatively constant over the two fiscal periods.

Existing funding contracts with provinces, territories and third-sector housing providers, e.g., non-profits and housing co-operatives, continue to be fully honoured as federal funding will be sufficient based on the terms of these contracts. There is no impact on low income tenants of the social housing in question since they will continue to pay the same level of subsidized rent.

Question No. 100—Ms. Olivia Chow:

With regard to the government's plans for child care: (a) how many spaces will be created by the end of March 2007 from the \$650 million that was transferred to the provinces and territories to create child care spaces; (b) what kind of phase-out plan will be implemented to deal with the loss of those funds on April 1, 2007; (c) what is the timeline for launching the \$250 million child care spaces initiative; and (d) how many child care spaces will be created from the \$1.6 billion universal child care benefit?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in response to (a), the Government of Canada is recognizing the diverse needs of Canadian families through Canada's universal child care plan, a plan that is providing universal support for all parents of young children. The plan is composed of two key elements: the universal child care benefit and the child care spaces initiative.

As per budget 2006, the Government of Canada has provided \$650 million in 2006-07 to all provinces and territories, distributed on an equal per capita basis. This funding provides provinces and territories with transitional funding as the bilateral agreements for early learning and child care that were reached under the previous government are phased out. In order to assist them in adjusting to this new federal approach, provinces and territories have flexibility to use this funding as they see fit for early learning and child care.

Provinces and territories are committed to clear accountability to Canadians and already report on their annual activities and expenditures related to early learning and child care. Provinces and territories will continue this practice and include information on this funding and how it has been used for the creation of child care spaces in their annual public reports.

Government Orders

In response to (b), in February 2006, all provinces and territories received notification that the bilateral agreements for early learning and child care that were reached under the previous government would be phased out as of March 31, 2007. This provided all provinces and territories with more than 14 months' notice to adjust to the change in federal approach.

Only three jurisdictions, Ontario, Manitoba and Quebec, had signed bilateral funding agreements with the previous federal government. Those agreements had a clause allowing either party to terminate them with 12 months' notice. The Government of Canada provided those jurisdictions with formal written notice invoking the termination clause of their funding agreements. For the remaining jurisdictions, the Government of Canada provided notification of the federal intention to provide one year of transitional funding for 2006-07.

As per budget 2006, the Government of Canada has provided provinces and territories with \$650 million in 2006-07, distributed on an equal per capita basis, to assist them in adjusting to the new federal approach to child care.

In response to (c), the Government of Canada recognizes that the availability of child care is a challenge faced by many Canadian parents. That is why, as set out in budget 2006, the federal government will be investing \$250 million per year, beginning in fiscal 2007-08, to support the creation of child care spaces across the country.

In response to (d), through the universal child care benefit, UCCB, the Government of Canada is providing universal support to all families with young children through an income benefit of \$100 per month, up to \$1,200 a year, for each child under the age of six. Beginning with the first payment in July, approximately two million children and their families are benefiting from this new initiative each month.

The intent of this initiative is not to create child care spaces, but rather to provide all families with support that they can use to provide their children with the kind of care they choose. For example, families could use this benefit to offset part of the cost of child care fees or part time preschool programs, or for occasional care by a friend or neighbour. By providing a universal benefit, the federal government is recognizing the diversity of family needs and preferences when it comes to caring for their children.

* * *

[English]

QUESTIONS PASSED AS ORDERS FOR RETURNS

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, if Questions Nos. 70 and 99 could be made orders for returns, these returns would be tabled immediately.

The Speaker: The questions enumerated by the hon. parliamentary secretary have been answered. Is it agreed that Questions Nos. 70 and 99 be made for orders for returns?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

[Text]

Question No. 70—**Mr. John Cummins:**

With regard to contracts let to Morrison Hershfield by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation and the National Research Council: (a) name the contract; (b) the title of any research paper if a paper was prepared; and (c) the dollar value of the contract for each fiscal year beginning in 1980?

(Return tabled)

Question No. 99—**Mrs. Irene Mathysen:**

With regard to the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) spending: (a) how much was spent on low income housing for the fiscal year ended March 31, 2006; (b) what is the projected spending on low income housing for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2007; and (c) what is the detailed breakdown of CMHC spending for the fiscal year ended March 31, 2006 and the projected fiscal year ending March 31, 2007?

(Return tabled)

[English]

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, I ask that all remaining questions be allowed to stand.

The Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Speaker: During petitions the Chair failed to recognize the hon. member for Parkdale—High Park, who was rising. I would ask, therefore, to go back to presenting petitions to allow the hon. member for Parkdale—High Park to present her petition.

* * *

PETITIONS

CHILD CARE

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP): Mr. Speaker, on National Child Day I am pleased to present on behalf of my constituents three petitions that urge the government to commit to multi-year funding for child care across this country and to enshrine this in legislation with a national child care act, which should be a cornerstone of our commitment to the next generation.

* * *

● (1510)

COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

FINANCE

Mr. Brian Pallister (Portage—Lisgar, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the fifth report of the Standing Committee on Finance in relation to the supplementary estimates for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2007.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[Translation]

FEDERAL ACCOUNTABILITY ACT

The House resumed consideration of the motion, of the amendment and the amendment to the amendment.

Government Orders

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have the opportunity to share with the House my reaction to the amendments proposed by the Liberals.

[*English*]

There are four principal amendments put forward by the Liberals that I would like to address. I would like to discuss what they would actually mean for the accountability act.

To start with, the Liberals in this House have put forward an amendment that would exempt their friends in the Senate from a new ethics watchdog created by the accountability act. The accountability act seeks to put in place a tough watchdog who can keep tabs on the ethical behaviour of members of Parliament and senators. We propose in the interests of fairness that this watchdog be responsible for all members of Parliament, including those in the upper chamber.

The Liberals for some reason believe that their senators should have a free escape hatch, that they should not be covered by this watchdog. They therefore have put forward an amendment denying this new ethics watchdog the right to watch over the behaviour of Liberal senators.

We on this side of the House believe that senators should have nothing to hide, that all senators should be prepared to live up to the same standards as their democratically elected counterparts here in this House. As such, we will not support amendments to protect Liberal senators from accountability. We believe accountability should apply in both chambers and as such, we will seek to give this new watchdog the power to oversee the ethical conduct of members in the upper chamber as well as here.

Second, the Liberals seek to take away the right of farmers to have access to information at the Canadian Wheat Board. Liberals believe that farmers should not know what is going on with the Canadian Wheat Board, that they should not have the ability to access critical information, such as the budgetary decisions of the Wheat Board, the hospitality expenses, the decisions that affect the bottom line of everyday farmers. All of that should be kept secret from farmers according to the Liberal amendment.

We on this side believe that the Wheat Board should have nothing to hide. If the Wheat Board is conducting its affairs above board and with the utmost of integrity, the Wheat Board should not have any concern whatsoever with giving farmers the right to access to information. This is the same exact right that we have extended as a government to crown corporations that are competitive, to government departments, to a whole assortment of organizations that operate in a competitive environment. All of them must live up to the demands of the Access to Information Act. That is a method of accountability, because everyday people ought to have the right to know what their government institutions do. In this instance, farmers ought to have the right to have access to information over the Canadian Wheat Board which controls and monopolizes all the distribution of Canadian wheat in the Prairies.

Third, the Liberals have put forward an amendment called the public interest override related to access to information. The member for Winnipeg Centre has already demonstrated with great clarity that this amendment would actually decrease access to information and

would inhibit the ability of Canadian taxpayers to access information that would otherwise be secret. It puts the executive branch of government, that is, the bureaucratic and political leaders of this country, in charge of determining the public interest. Those political and bureaucratic leaders under the Liberal amendment would have the ability to reject access to information requests in order to keep secret documents and information that they want held back from the public.

Finally, Liberals in this House want to force Canadian taxpayers to pick up the tab for their convention. Liberals believe that convention delegates who pay a fee to be part of a grand political event, a convention, should be allowed to do so on the backs of taxpayers by using the political tax credit. We on this side of the House of Commons believe that taxpayers should not be forced to unduly subsidize political conventions. As such, we have not reported as political donations the delegate fees that go to finance those conventions.

● (1515)

If the Liberals had their way, they would retroactively apply a new rule forcing Canadian taxpayers to pay the cost of political conventions. Let us ask ourselves what this means for the Conservative convention that was held in April 2005. If they were able to change the interpretation of the law to force delegate fees to be considered as political donations, the Canada Revenue Agency would be forced to go back two years and issue hundreds of thousands of dollars in tax rebates to Conservative convention goers. That might be in the interests of the Conservative Party, but we do not believe that taxpayer funded conventions are in the interests of Canadian working families. As such, we do not support the Liberals' interpretation.

We note that in every instance the Liberal Party seeks to structure the rules in a way that is most financially beneficial to the Liberal Party itself. We on this side of the House would like to structure the laws in a way that is most financially beneficial to the Canadian taxpayer. As such, we did not ask taxpayers to subsidize our last convention. It is the Liberal Party that has done so in its coming convention. In order to cover their tracks and justify their behaviour, the Liberals are now asking the Conservative Party to go back retroactively and do the same. We disagree and as such, we will vote against this amendment.

[*Translation*]

I would like to return to a point I mentioned earlier concerning the Canadian Wheat Board.

I would now like to thank the former hon. member for Repentigny, Benoît Sauvageau, who worked so hard to increase government accountability. This member worked with members from all parties in order to improve our system of government. He and his party supported an amendment to include the Canadian Wheat Board in the Access to Information Act. It is a matter of principle. I would therefore like to thank this hard-working member. He is no longer with us and will be sadly missed. We were all together for his funeral and I would like this House to recognize his contribution.

Government Orders

Today, the Bloc Québécois proposed an amendment to make the Canadian Wheat Board subject to the Access to Information Act. On behalf of western farmers, I would like to thank the Bloc members who proposed this amendment, because it is a good principle. Although the Bloc does not represent western Canada, I believe it made an excellent decision in supporting the rights of farmers to access information. I am very proud to work with the Bloc and with all members who support transparency in order to ensure this right for our farmers in western Canada.

● (1520)

[English]

I would like to say in English as well that I thank the members of the Bloc who put forward an amendment to include the Canadian Wheat Board in access to information so that western Canadian farmers have the right to know how the Wheat Board functions and the ability to know what is going on with the organization that monopolizes the distribution of their wheat.

Perhaps there are Liberal members across the way who have something to hide, who do not want certain information to be available to farmers, who have conducted themselves in a way that they perhaps do not want the public to know about and they are working feverishly behind the scenes and publicly to prevent farmers from having the right to have access to information. I regret that a great deal, but we only ask what it is they are hiding that they do not want farmers to have the right to access to information.

Some in the Liberal Party have said that this has something to do with supply management. Anybody who knows anything about agriculture knows that the Canadian Wheat Board is not a body of supply management. It does not carry out supply management. It is a marketing board. It has nothing whatsoever to do with supply management. They are engaging in specious arguments to distract from the fact that they are hiding critical information from farmers that they do not want to be made public.

I think that when members stand in the House to defend their decision to deny farmers the ability to have access to information, they should tell farmers what it is they are personally hiding, what it is they might have personally been involved in that they do not want farmers to know about. Certainly, farmers want to have that right. They want to know what is going on in their organization.

The Liberals have said that access to information at the Canadian Wheat Board would cause some sort of competitive disadvantage. We are putting crown corporations that compete in the open market under access to information. For example, we are putting Export Development Canada under access to information. That is a group that actually competes internationally. We are putting the Business Development Bank under access to information. A whole assortment of organizations that compete internationally and that compete here at home in Canada are all going to be covered under the access to information law.

The argument by some who want to cover up information at the Wheat Board that it cannot happen due to commercial confidences is a specious one. They ought to explain why they want farmers to be denied the right to have access to all that information.

Regardless of what some people think of the Wheat Board, there are various opinions and I respect them all, one thing about which farmers are unanimous is the view that they ought to have access to information related to the function of the Wheat Board because that wheat board has total control over the marketing of their grain as a monopoly. That organization, which was sanctioned and put in place by the federal government, ought therefore to be open to the farmers that it is meant to serve. I would defy any member of the House to oppose farmers' rights to access to information.

I would reiterate the importance of the act. The accountability act bans political patronage in an amendment put forward by the NDP. It brings ironclad whistleblower protection to public servants who are conscientious enough to speak out against wrongdoing. It expands access to information to roughly 30 new organizations, some of which the Liberals are trying to take back out, but that is what the original act intended to do. It bans big money and corporate cash from political campaigns. It expands the powers of the Auditor General to shine her light in every dark corner in her hunt for waste and corruption. It moves in all directions toward more transparency and more openness.

The critical objective of the House must now be to pass the accountability act into law. There have been thousands of hours of study. It went through record hearings in the Senate. The Senate saw the bill for twice as long as it was studied in the House of Commons. There has been plenty of time, plenty of debate. In fact, many of the measures in this bill have been discussed now for roughly a decade.

● (1525)

The time for talk is behind us; the time for action is now. If the Liberal Senate and the Liberal Party continues to delay the passage of the bill, then they very well might get their way and delay it until the election comes at which time, by convention of Parliament, it would die. They would, as a party, be forced to explain that conduct to the Canadian electorate.

Canadians voted for the accountability act in the last election. We, as the Conservative government, followed through on our promise to them by introducing the bill as the first piece of legislation before the House and introduced by the President of the Treasury Board. It is the toughest anti-corruption law in Canadian history. It expands accountability in every single way. It fulfills the hopes of thousands of Canadians and hundreds of members of Parliament in the House to have a cleaner more accountable government.

We have worked as a government to bring forward this legislation because the Canadian people voted for it. They demanded it. We have now delivered on it.

We would ask that members of Parliament and members of the Senate stop their delays, and allow the bill to become law, allow the Canadian people to have their aspirations for more accountable government fulfilled.

Government Orders

It is interesting that not one single solitary member of the House has proclaimed him or herself against the accountability act, not one. All members say they support it. Not one member of Parliament voted against it when it came before the House, not a single solitary one. Not a single member of the committee on the accountability act voted against the bill. Every single member of the House has voted for it.

Therefore, if members are true to their word when they say they support the bill, then they ought to allow it swift passage into law. The time has come and the place is here. I ask the members of all parties to join and lock arms with all of us to put this historic law, the toughest anti-corruption law in Canadian history, into the statutory books of this country. I now anticipate the queries of my distinguished colleagues.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I heard a lot of rambling from the parliamentary secretary but nothing of substance, especially as it relates to the Canadian Wheat Board.

I would ask him to answer this question, if he could, directly. Did I hear the member correctly when he said that it was absolutely unanimous among western farmers that access to information should apply to the Canadian Wheat Board?

If he did not, I ask him to be very careful in his answer, because I know that not to be true. The Canadian Wheat Board is probably the most transparent organization in the country. He may have never been there. He may never have visited its offices. He is obviously listening to the propaganda from the international grain trade which wants access to information to the Canadian Wheat Board, not necessarily on the commerciality of the operation but clearly to be a nuisance factor.

The fact of the matter is that the Canadian Wheat Board has an annual report audited. The Canadian Wheat Board is not a crown corporation and the government knows that. It says that specifically in the act. The Canadian Wheat Board holds district meetings in every one of its districts with officials of the Canadian Wheat Board there to answer any questions, financial or otherwise. It is very transparent. It has a department within the operation which answers calls 24 hours a day, so it is very transparent.

The parliamentary secretary said that farmers unanimously wanted access to information to apply. Most farmers do not. I wonder what concrete evidence does the member have to make that statement in the House of Commons or is he just trying to mislead the Canadian people.

• (1530)

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Speaker, the member lists all of the great mechanisms of transparency that are embedded in the current operation of the Canadian Wheat Board. It answers the phone. It has a department that responds to questions. It has annual meetings. It has audited books.

That is true of every department in the government, so by his logic, we would eliminate access to information for every department in the Government of Canada because they have audited books, they answer their phones, and they have annual financial statements.

If he really believes that all of those things disqualify an organization from coverage under the Access to Information Act, then he ought also to believe that there is no organization in Canada in the government that should be covered by access to information.

That is exactly what he is suggesting. If he believes that an organization of the government, which spends public money, should not be covered by access to information just because it answers the phone, just because it holds an annual meeting, and just because it has audited books, again he would literally eliminate the very existence of the Access to Information Act.

He says that the Canadian Wheat Board is already open. Fair enough, I will take his word for it, but what is the problem with having a belt and suspenders? If the organization is already 100% transparent then it should have no problem responding to access to information requests. In fact, I would be surprised if anyone would even file an access to information request. If the organization is already 100% open, there would not be any need for it, but there is nothing wrong with having a belt at the same time as suspenders, just to make sure.

I just go back to the same question. What is the member afraid of? What are the people who are opposed to access to information hiding?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Monique Guay (Rivière-du-Nord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, we have to pay attention to the words being used when we talk about obstruction. In my opinion, the Bloc Québécois has never been obstructionist. I have never seen a committee sit for so many hours in so short a time to try to get a bill passed. This is the first time that has happened here in the House of Commons.

We have cooperated and we have made gains that we consider to be important in relation to the bill. Serious work has got to be done. We have received 158 amendments from the Senate. I think that we have to take a serious look at them. We cannot say in this House that everything is fine and we will pass it all right away. That is why there is an amendment by the Liberals and a subamendment by the Bloc Québécois, to study the question and meet each of our requests as best as can be done.

I would like to know whether the government is at all open to trying again to improve this very important bill, which we support and which, in our opinion, is in need of a few changes. We know that the bill will go back to the Senate and we would like the government to say whether it is open to these changes at all.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank this member specifically for her work in committee. She has worked extremely hard for her constituents and for Quebecers on the question of the Accountability Act.

She has clearly asked me whether we are prepared to accept further amendments to make more improvements to this bill. My answer is yes. We are prepared to listen to her comments and her amendments.

Government Orders

I have said that I will support a number of amendments that her party proposed earlier today in this House. One of her colleagues has already submitted amendments to this House. I think that some of those amendments are excellent and I will support them, as will my party in general. This is a team effort. We are very grateful for the work done by the hon. member and the work done by the NDP members to improve this bill. Everyone has been working on it for months and now that work has to be put into action. We cannot allow any more delay because Canadians are demanding that this bill be passed.

• (1535)

[*English*]

Hon. Shawn Murphy (Charlottetown, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I see a disconnect between what the act states and the actions of the government, particularly in the area of appointments. I have been following it since February, and every appointment has a common denominator and that is a member of the Conservative Party.

Another thing that puzzles me is that the first act of the Prime Minister did not seem to accord with the fundamentals of the act. The first thing he did was to appoint his co-chair to the Senate. The second thing he did was to appoint his co-chair/Senator as a member of cabinet. We have the spectacle right now of a man walking around Ottawa, and I have no idea what he looks like, who is spending \$40 million or \$50 million a day of government money. We have no way to hold him to account and we cannot ask him questions.

My question is, does the act live up to any semblance of accountability that is expected in this institution?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Speaker, that member will note as well that we have appointed a judge who is the head of the Laurier Club, which is the fundraising arm of the Liberal Party. That was a non-partisan decision of the government because we believed that particular individual was capable of sitting on the bench and doing the job.

We, on this side, make decisions regardless of partisan label. We have appointed people of all different partisan backgrounds and some who have no partisan affiliation whatsoever. We are cleaning up by behaviour that which the law will eventually clean up in statutory acts.

I would encourage the member to support us in swiftly passing the accountability act, which includes a new ban on political patronage, put in by the NDP, granted, but it is a new public appointments commission put forward by the member for Winnipeg Centre. It is now in the act, but it will only come into effect when we have passed the accountability act, so I encourage that member to join with us to do that as swiftly as possible.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Marlene Jennings (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure for me to rise today to take part in this debate.

The hon. members of this House and our fellow citizens who have followed the work of the legislative committee of the House of Commons dealing with Bill C-2 know well that I was on this committee together with other members of the Liberal caucus. I

would also like to underscore the work done by the hon. member for—

An hon. member: Rivière-du-Nord.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: I would like to underscore the work done by the hon. member for Rivière-du-Nord, who is also the Bloc's deputy leader in the House of Commons, and her former colleague, the late Benoît Sauvageau, who was a friend, a professional colleague, and a man who made a real contribution to the work of this legislative committee.

Despite the genuine effort that the members of the Bloc Québécois and the Liberal Party put into Bill C-2, the Conservatives called it in French the *Loi fédérale sur l'imputabilité*. This is prime example, I think, of a government in such a hurry to prove that it is doing something that it has made an elementary mistake. In English it is possible to say the *Federal Accountability Act*, but anyone with the least knowledge of French should know that in this language it would be the *Loi fédérale sur la responsabilité*.

I should add that it was Mr. Sauvageau, the hon. member for Repentigny at the time, who moved an amendment to the bill to correct the French title. Although I thanked him at the time, I would like to thank him again posthumously.

This is an ideal example, I think, which shows, first, that the Conservative government has no understanding at all of accountability when it comes to being responsible, and second, that this government's discourse is basically dishonest.

For example, the parliamentary secretary to the President of Treasury Board just delivered a speech in which he repeated ad nauseam that the Liberals want to get illegal donations and that by amending the Canada Elections Act, the Conservatives are ensuring that registration fees for political conventions will not be included in the definition of a contribution. He claimed as well that only the Liberals interpret the existing law in this way. So they are being dishonest in this regard.

People who are listening to the work of the House on television but cannot easily get the Canada Elections Act will think it really is illegal to claim registration fees for a party convention as a political donation for which a receipt should be issued for a possible tax credit.

What the Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board failed to mention is that, since being appointed the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada over 10 years ago if I am not mistaken, Mr. Jean-Pierre Kingsley has interpreted section 404.1 of the Canada Elections Act to include registration fees for political conventions.

Consequently, the Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board is trying to mislead Canadians by claiming that it was the Liberals who misinterpreted the law in an attempt to have taxpayers foot the bill, which is not true.

Government Orders

● (1540)

The Chief Electoral Officer interprets the statute. He decides whether or not the Liberal Party of Canada, the Bloc Québécois, the NDP, the former Progressive Conservative Party, the former Reform Party and the former Canadian Alliance acted appropriately and within the law with regard to reporting convention fees.

The parliamentary secretary is trying to distort the debate. The Conservative government knew that the Canada Elections Act requires a political party to disclose the registration fees for its conventions to the Chief Electoral Officer. Then why did it not do so and why did it hide these registration fees? Today we learned that these fees totalled \$2 million. This party hid the \$2 million from the Chief Electoral Officer and it is now under investigation. If he really wanted to speak honestly, the Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board should have mentioned it in this House

When we, Liberals and Bloquistes, put questions on the interpretation of section 404.1 to the chief electoral officer and to political party officials, everyone unanimously agreed that the interpretation of the chief electoral officer was the correct one. Convention fees should be considered political contributions and, therefore, they should be declared by the party to the chief electoral officer. The government is omitting to mention this in the House in order to create a false impression in the minds of Canadians.

When the Senate, because of the dishonest behaviour of that party, makes the law very clear on this issue, what does the government do? It wants to reject the Senate's amendment, while claiming that the Senate has dragged its feet, has engaged in filibustering, etc. This same government does not want to tell Canadians that the quality work accomplished by the Senate has made the government realize that some fifty amendments were necessary to correct the legislation, otherwise its own bill would not make sense in a number of areas.

Here is a little reminder of the facts. The Senate heard over 140 witnesses during 98 hours of hearings. It came to the conclusion that the accountability bill was seriously flawed, and that amendments to this legislation were required to live up to the commitment made by the minority Conservative government. Of course, a number of amendments were made. Some are accepted by the government today, but others are not, which explains why the Conservatives are attempting to make their gimmickry retroactively legal. Hiding political donations of \$2 million from the chief electoral officer is indeed engaging in gimmickry.

● (1545)

If this government were honest and the President of the Treasury Board were an honest man, he would admit it in this House.

The Speaker of the House has already ruled, saying that if the person were honest, he would do something. So it is parliamentary. I said it, if the President of the Treasury Board were an honest man, an honest person, he would say that it is not true that this government wants to shed light on the federal government's work. It is not true. If it were true, certain amendments that the Bloc and the Liberals tried to make as part of the House legislative committee—for example, to the Public Servants Disclosure Protection Act—would not have been

blocked by the Conservative members, with the support of the NDP. Still the Senate was able to adopt them.

So I return to my subject. Concerning political financing, the Senate suggest setting the limit on political party donations at \$2,000 a year. This decision was made because the government was not able to demonstrate that the current limits undermined electoral procedure at the federal or provincial level, where the limits, when there are any, are much higher than those proposed in Bill C-2.

Second, donations made to political parties play an important role in our democratic system. Limiting them too strictly might affect the participation of small parties in political life. Furthermore, limiting the amount of these donations too strictly reduces the resources which political parties must have to fulfil their legitimate role in debates in Canada, and this leaves more room for third parties that wish to influence the debates. This is interesting. The Prime Minister, who was formerly, I think, the CEO or president of some federation, of an NGO, appealed all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada for third parties to be allowed to advertise and spend during a federal election campaign, claiming that the limits the former government had put in the Canada Elections Act on spending by third parties during an election campaign were unconstitutional.

It is interesting because this Prime Minister has still not disclosed who the donors to his own party leadership race were. He still has not disclosed who the donors were to the federation which he led before returning to politics. It is interesting for a Prime Minister and a party that pride themselves on wanting to ensure accountability and transparency. But they are hiding things.

With regard to access to information and privacy, the Senate and the senators are proposing to remove the Canadian Wheat Board from the coverage of the Access to Information Act so that the board can stand up to international competition better when representing Canadian farmers. Here again, the Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board is claiming that the Liberals are supporting an amendment that will remove the Canadian Wheat Board from the coverage of this act because they have something to hide. He knows that this is completely untrue.

The Canadian Wheat Board represents Canadian farmers on the international stage against competitors from other countries. Obviously, these competitors would love to have commercial, scientific and other information that helps the Canadian Wheat Board represent Canadian farmers effectively.

● (1550)

Wanting to remove the board does not mean hiding something from Canadian farmers. It means protecting Canadian farmers who want the board to sell their products on the international market.

I would also like to address the issue of better protection for personal information on donors to the National Arts Centre. The members of the House of Commons legislative committee in charge of reviewing Bill C-2 had understood—at least the Bloc and Liberal members had understood—that some donors to the National Arts Centre wanted their identities to remain confidential. That is their choice.

Government Orders

Artists may also donate their time and talent or charge much less than the regular market rate. But they do not want potential clients to know that they donated their time or gave a concert for no charge or for half price for charitable reasons or because they want to promote a certain type of music or activity. They do not want this information made public. A potential client could say the artists billed only so much and that it will therefore pay them only a given amount.

• (1555)

[English]

The Senate brought into place many excellent amendments. It pains me to see the government continually talk about how the senators have attempted to block the legislation, that the senators do not want to see transparency, that the senators do not want to see accountability and that Liberals, the official opposition, also do not want to see it. Nothing is further from the truth.

Let us look at it. It was a Liberal government that adopted whistleblower protection legislation, Bill C-11. It was never brought into effect by the current government. There were witnesses who came before us who said they would like to see that legislation enacted immediately. I remember Mr. Sauvageau and the member for Rivière-du-Nord asked that the government proclaim it and bring it into force immediately while we had the opportunity to study and work properly on Bill C-2. The government refused.

We then attempted to bring amendments here. Here are some of the amendments the Liberal members tried to bring forward and the government, with the aid of the NDP, blocked: one, to provide a reverse onus so that any administrative or disciplinary measure taken within a year of a disclosure would be deemed to be a reprisal unless the employer showed otherwise; two, extend the time limit to file a reprisal complaint to one year instead of the 60 days that the Conservative government proposed and is now trying to bring back; and three, remove the \$10,000 limit on awards for pain and suffering and increase the amount for legal advice from \$1,500 to \$25,000.

Those are reinforcements that we attempted to bring forward and the Conservatives and the NDP blocked them, yet they say they are for protecting public servants who divulge wrongdoing on the part of government.

Hon. John Baird (President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened with great interest to the interventions from the member for Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine. I know she cares deeply about integrity in politics in the governmental process. She mentioned a number of issues.

One of the things I dislike about this Parliament is if there is any difference of opinion on facts, the accusation of liar, liar goes back and forth. In fairness, it probably exists on both sides of the House. No party in the House, least of which me, can claim innocence on that. However, people can have different opinions. No presentation of the facts are indisputable. Two different people might reasonably come to two different solutions.

The member opposite has said that many of the Senate amendments are excellent. I take no fault with the Senate wanting to take a reasonable period of time. There was some suggestion it should pass this immediately in July. In fact, we said that if it wanted to take three months to review the bill, in addition to the 72 days the

House took in addition to the 58 day election campaign, by all means take it.

I was scheduled to be the last witness with the Attorney General at the end of September, but then things changed. They thought they had an agreement and that fell apart, and that is unfortunate.

I do not take issue with wanting to sit 120 hours. What I did take issue with was the amount of time it cumulatively took. The Senate took one week in the end of June. It took off for seven weeks. Then it came back for a week. Then it took off. We expected it would have looked at the amount of time all members of Parliament in the House took to deal with the bill. The bill is not perfect. It was not perfect coming out of the House and it is not perfect coming out of the Senate, but it is important.

Another issue the member raised was Bill C-11. The Liberal government was the first to bring in a whistleblower bill. I will concede that Bill C-11 was better than nothing. There are those of us who represent ridings in the national capital.

• (1600)

[Translation]

Like many of my colleagues, including the members for Gatineau, Ottawa Centre, Nepean—Carleton and Ottawa—Orléans, as well as official opposition members, I know that a lot of public servants say they are still afraid to blow the whistle.

[English]

Many public servants still remain concerned and worried that if they stand up and speak out, they will be hurt. We wanted a system that was tougher and stronger. I think all parties contributed to that and this is what is before us today.

I noticed, though, when the Liberal senators on the committee put forward a press release talking about the amendments they were presenting, they left off a lot of them. They left off the fact that they were doubling the amount of money people could donate to political parties. They left off the fact that they were going to allow political staffers to go into the non-partisan public service. They left off many of the amendments which would be considered as gutting the bill.

Could the member for Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine enlighten us as to why they would not have been proud of those amendments?

Hon. Marlene Jennings: Mr. Speaker, it was quite interesting listening to the President of the Treasury Board talk about the number of hours the House of Commons legislative committee sat on Bill C-2 and the number of hours members of the Senate sat. Then he said he did not want to reproach them, but in effect he kind of did.

I have been a member of the House of Commons since June 1997. I have had the opportunity of sitting on at least one, if not more, legislative committees prior to this one. The experience I had under this legislative committee for Bill C-2 was literally horrendous.

Government Orders

I sat on a legislative committee that dealt with an amendment to the Constitution of Canada. The committee was allowed the time to fully hear witnesses. The committee was given the time to hear witnesses when they brought forth briefs. Sometimes those briefs literally contained hundreds of pages. They were very dense and dealt with very complex matters. We had the time to sit, to read and to study them and to go to committee prepared. It also allowed the parliamentary staff, our researchers and our clerks, to properly do their job. It meant that the quality of the work, which was done at the end of the day, made up for the time that was taken because the legislation was not flawed.

The legislative committee on Bill C-2 was literally forced by the majority held by the government, with the cooperation of the NDP. When votes were tied, the chair, who is a Conservative member, broke the tie and sided with the government. We were calling witnesses a maximum of 24 hours before the date of the committee hearing, asking them to provide a brief on a grave issue that required serious research and reflection. In some cases they were told they did not even have five minutes to explain their position. Witnesses were leaving the Bill C-2 legislative committee, some of them almost in tears, saying that they did not have an opportunity to express themselves and that they wanted to come back. Guess who refused it? It was the Conservatives members with the help of the NDP.

I gained no pride whatsoever from the work of that legislative committee of the House of Commons. We were denied the possibility of doing quality work. We were denied the possibility of ensuring that the legislation did in fact do what the Conservative minority government had promised, which was it would provide transparency, it would provide real protections for whistleblowers in the public service and it would ensure that Canadians could have access to information and that their personal information would be protected. That bill did none of this.

The Senate attempted to correct as much as it could. Even the Senate was limited. Certain rules and regulations did not allow the Senate to do everything. The Senate was not given the scope to do everything.

What is the government trying to do now? It is trying to reinstate virtually the identical bill that went out of the House and into the Senate, knowing full well it was a flawed bill.

• (1605)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Monique Guay (Rivière-du-Nord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to take a minute to remember my former colleague, Benoît Sauvageau. He worked on this bill with me, bringing much wisdom and many improvements to it. I would like us to take a moment to remember him because he devoted a lot of time and energy to this bill.

He and I worked together for an unprecedented number of hours during that time. I have never seen such a thing here in Parliament. In 13 years, I have never seen a legislative committee sit for so many hours over such a short period of time because the government insisted on passing this bill.

The reason it was so adamant is clear: it is well aware that the Liberal convention is looming and that this bill contains detrimental

provisions—provisions that affect, among other things, the \$1,500 convention registration fee. Jean-Pierre Kingsley made it clear that such fees are considered donations. The bill puts a \$1,000 cap on donations. It was clear to us that this would apply to the Liberal Party convention and that this was why the government wanted to ram the bill through.

Nevertheless, the important thing for the Bloc Québécois is to improve it as much as possible because we need an accountability act. As my colleague from Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine said, we fought incredibly hard for the word “responsabilité”. We had to go to the Office québécois de la langue française. We had to make use of every tool at our disposal to make the government understand that the word “imputabilité” was clearly an anglicism, not a French word at all. Eventually we won. We made the government understand that the appropriate French term was “responsabilité”. Unfortunately, a lot of time was wasted just on that, even though there were other extremely important issues in the bill.

My hon. colleague referred to this earlier, and I think it is worth mentioning because it is true: many witnesses wanted to appear before our committee. Many had things to tell us, many wanted to improve the bill and noticed flaws in it, but did not get a chance to appear because they only had 24 hours notice. They did not appear because 24 hours was not enough time for them to draft a brief, in both official languages, to satisfy the requirements of our legislative committee. These people were left empty-handed, and we can imagine that, today still, they are extremely unhappy about not having been heard. While ours is supposedly the greatest democracy, these people did not get to be heard by the committee. It is extremely important to point this out again.

I have been told that the Senate heard more than 140 witnesses and that a number of amendments will have to be taken into account because they were made in a structured fashion and make some sense.

As we have been saying since the beginning, we have never filibustered at committee and we have no plans to do so here, but we have things to say about this bill.

The merit-based appointment of returning officers is a fantastic gain. It is well known that the process for appointing returning officers was a partisan one. I know this for a fact because it happened in my region. When the Liberals were in government, a good Liberal would be appointed, a guy in charge of overseeing our campaigns. Very often, in several ridings, this caused partisanship problems to such an extent that the system did not work. In addition, being a good Liberal and a decision having been made to make partisan appointments, efforts were made to thwart the candidates from the Bloc Québécois or other parties. But no more; from now on, returning officers will be selected based on their merits, not on their political allegiance, which is an excellent thing.

We were even consulted. They actually consulted members of Parliament, asking us if we were happy with our returning officers. This is a step in the right direction to ensure the legitimacy of the selection process for someone who is, after all, appointed for a ten-year term.

Government Orders

•(1610)

This is someone who is in office for a long time. He or she must be appointed on a non-partisan basis and in light of his or her ability to play that role for the next 10 years, especially since, with a minority government like the one we currently have, we have repeated elections. We had elections in 2004 and 2006, and we could have another one next year or even this year. These people become extremely important. They have non-partisan training and have to provide services for all the candidates in their riding.

There is also the whole issue of the political party financing legislation. The Bloc could not disagree with that, because we already comply with the legislation in Quebec.

Personally, I do not have many donors who give me \$2,000 during the course of the year. I receive far more \$5 and \$10 donations than \$2,000 donations during an election campaign or a fundraising campaign. There are people involved, party members, people who do not write cheques for thousands of dollars. There are no such people in my riding, and I would be very surprised to receive such an amount. In Quebec, we already comply with this requirement, and we will continue to do so.

I feel it is time to make major changes at the federal level, because the parties could receive donations of thousands of dollars from companies. This is not conducive to non-partisan work by members or ministers.

If someone gives me a \$25,000 donation, I will feel indebted. But if I receive relatively equal amounts from my various constituents or party members, I feel much more at ease. I am indebted to everyone because I am elected, but I do not feel particularly indebted to someone who gave me \$25,000 or \$30,000.

There was also the whole issue of whistle-blower compensation, which was discussed at length. Several witnesses testified that it was not a good idea to pay a whistle-blower \$1,000, \$2,000 or \$5,000. That could lead to informing, something that must not be encouraged.

In any event, public servants are duty-bound to report any wrongdoing, any mismanagement in the department where they work or anyone who is not doing his or her job properly.

It does not make sense to begin rewarding whistle-blowers. It should be part of the duties of a public servant who learns about an instance of wrongdoing, work not being done properly or mistreatment to report it. How that person learns about it is not important. That person should report it without a reward. In our opinion, it did not make sense to offer a reward. The government realized this, so this is a good point.

As I mentioned earlier, the Senate heard from 140 witnesses, calling certain witnesses back to clarify certain clauses of the bill.

Some clauses are good and others are not as good. I cannot list all of them here, but one in particular is very important and the Bloc Québécois condemns the fact that the government rejected this amendment because it was an important one. The Senate proposed increasing the ceiling on fees for legal counsel from \$1,500 to \$25,000, or removing the ceiling altogether, at the commissioner's discretion. I would like to explain why the Bloc supported that.

We saw in committee the number of hours legal counsel spent working, yet could not keep up. The maximum of legal counsel were hired, but they could not keep up despite crazy hours.

•(1615)

These people deserved additional remuneration. That was part of it. The government does not agree with this. I do not know how this is going to play out, but I thought it was a good measure.

The Senate also proposed removing the \$10,000 limit on awards for pain and suffering. Depending on the situation, I think the Senate was right to propose this measure. We cannot put a limit on a sum of money for pain and suffering. Each case must be examined to determine how much the individual was affected and to then decide the amount of the award. But the government rejected this amendment.

I must explain what happened during the committee's hearings. This is very important. Things were going so fast that, at one point, all committee members, from all parties, received a notice from Mr. Walsh, telling us to stop. Mr. Walsh is not just anybody. He is a very important official in the House of Commons. He is the guardian of the rights of members of Parliament and senators, in other words our rights as parliamentarians. At one point, Mr. Walsh alerted us. He told us that this bill would restrict the rights of members of Parliament and senators, that we were mixing legislative and parliamentary issues. We wanted him to appear before the committee, but some Conservative members had a fit and asked who that person was. As we can see, there are people who do not really know how things work around here. Everyone knows who Mr. Walsh is.

We said that we absolutely wanted him to appear before the committee, because what he had to tell us was very important. We were playing with our rights as parliamentarians. We were mixing judicial and parliamentary responsibilities. The work that we do here, in Parliament or in the Senate, could have been challenged. That did not make any sense. So, he brought important amendments to the committee to protect our rights as parliamentarians and elected representatives. Most of these amendments were accepted.

This proves one thing: when we try to go over something too quickly, when we try to run faster than we can, this compels the primary guardian of our rights, here in the House of Commons, to react very strongly. Indeed, the way the bill was drafted did not make sense.

Obviously there were some extremely serious problems. We solved a few of them, but there are still some left. This is not a small bill. What I find reassuring is that we demanded, and the government accepted, that the bill be reviewed in five years. At first they wanted a review in 15 or 20 years. Imagine what it would be like to work with a piece of legislation that is not reviewed regularly because it was decided that the act would be implemented for an unlimited number of years.

Government Orders

We agreed to support the bill on accountability. We understood that the government wanted this to go quickly, but this legislation needed to be reviewed in the next five years. This is new legislation and it is extremely complex. When it is implemented it will need to be reviewed as soon as possible in order to correct any mistakes in it. I am certain that when it is implemented we will realize there are some aspects that cannot be put into effect. We will have to go back to the drawing board and do it over.

As far as access to information is concerned, the Conservatives refused to budge. The Access to Information Act was passed in 1983. Since then, despite a number of requests for its revision, it has stayed essentially the same. The Conservative government chose not to include reform of the Access to Information Act in its Bill C-2. We would have nonetheless appreciated the government agreeing to this. If we are going to have legislation on accountability, why not include the Access to Information Act? It is complementary and we could have had a truly complete piece of legislation.

●(1620)

However, this did not happen because we were told there was not enough time, we were told that 100 recommendations were needed to revise the act, we were told that the accountability bill had to be adopted before the year-end, we were given 100,000 reasons save one—the real reason why we were unable to confirm all of this.

There is still a lot of confusion in this bill. We will have to see how the senators' amendments that are accepted fit in with the bill as it stands. Our legislators will be able to tell us.

This is extremely important and it cannot be done in five minutes. I know that the Conservatives want this to move along very quickly. However, so long as the two bills—the one here in Parliament and the one in the Senate—are not similar, there will be no law and we will not be able to promulgate this law. We will play ping pong for who knows how long because we will send the bill back to the Senate, the Senate will again make its recommendations that will come back to the House, we will then make our recommendations that will go to the Senate, and so forth.

It is important that we find a way to not delay unduly the implementation of Bill C-2 and we will not be the ones to do so. We have said it from the very beginning. My colleague for Repentigny at the time and I were accused of filibustering and delaying adoption of the bill. That was not our intention. We wanted the bill to be a good one. For it to be good, such an important piece of legislation on accountability must be well written and properly implemented.

I will say it again. Mr. Walsh made some very important recommendations. If Mr. Walsh had not sounded the alarm, all of us in this House would have lost fundamental rights that we cherish, our rights as parliamentarians here in the House of Commons. Mr. Walsh finally got his message across to the other side of the House. Mr. Walsh is a non-partisan individual and he is there to protect the rights of all members. If Mr. Walsh had not been there, we can just imagine what might have happened to us.

This is a very significant, important and broad bill. In my opinion, some people also raised the alarm in the Senate, and we should look at this carefully. It goes without saying that we should not engage in filibustering for no reason, but we can definitely not pass this

legislation at full throttle. We must be absolutely sure, and so must our researchers and the legislators. All those who worked on this bill find it complex. They know that once it is enacted, it will become the law. We must not create conflicts of interest with already existing laws, because this bill amends a large number of them. So, things must be clear and we must do serious work. This is what we have done in the past, and this is what we will do in the future. We will support this bill, while taking into consideration the points that I made.

If some people, some experts feel that major changes should be made to the bill, because it impacts on another act, or because it completely destroys it—and this could well be the case—these people should have the time to thoroughly examine this bill in order to propose the necessary changes to improve it, change it and amend it, so that in the end it will really work and we will have a true accountability act, a true piece of legislation that will compel us to be responsible as parliamentarians, ministers and elected representatives.

●(1625)

[*English*]

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I listened closely to the hon. member's remarks and I noticed she did not mention the Canadian Wheat Board and the amendment the Bloc has put forward relative to that.

However, I want to raise a question with her because it is her party, the Bloc Québécois, that has put forward an amendment to bring the Canadian Wheat Board under access to information at, no doubt, the behest of the Prime Minister. I am absolutely amazed that the Bloc Québécois would follow the endeavours of the Prime Minister to put the Canadian Wheat Board under access to information.

Mr. Leon Benoit: What are you hiding?

Hon. Wayne Easter: The member opposite wants to know what I am hiding. The one thing he knows about the Wheat Board is that it is transparent. It is out there and it provides the information. The member wants access to information to apply to the Canadian Wheat Board because he wants the nuisance requests coming in from its competition, the big grain trade, so it can undermine the Wheat Board and not allow it to do its job in terms of representing primary producers and maximizing returns to primary producers. That is what that party is all about.

What I am absolutely surprised at is that the Bloc would fall for that endeavour of the government because within the province of Quebec there are other agencies similar to this. Does the same principle hold true?

The act itself states that the Canadian Wheat Board is not an agency of the Crown. It is not a government institution. It is a marketing institution of farmers. Does the Bloc not fear that by allowing access to information to apply to a farmer marketing institution it is running the risk of the same thing happening to some other agencies within Canada that operate in the interests of Quebec farmers?

Government Orders

I sincerely believe that the Bloc is making a tragic error as it relates to the farm community and I would ask the Bloc to reconsider its position on this amendment.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Monique Guay: Mr. Speaker, in Quebec we have the UPA, which does extraordinary work in the agricultural markets. Our fear was that with this access to information, Quebec's toes would be stepped on yet again. Quebec is very well served by the UPA. In that regard, hon. members will simply have to accept our position. We have a different way of doing things in Quebec and we find this is an encroachment into our existing jurisdictions.

Nonetheless, as my colleague who loses his cool quite easily—I guess that is his nature—can see, we will never have unanimity here. There will always be someone complaining that something does not work in Bill C-2, that something—an article or a comma—should not be included in it. We did this work in committee and this was done in the Senate. Nonetheless, I believe that we can still discuss this and see whether there are still some things that can be settled. Through working on this bill we know it well and have assimilated it. We made some recommendations, as did the Liberal Party and the NDP. Even the Conservatives made recommendations because they themselves realized that some things did not make any sense in this bill. But we worked very quickly.

Members know my concern about passing this bill too quickly. There are still 158 Senate amendments. We are trying to pass it very quickly here in the House of Commons. In my opinion, we need to take the time to go over this thoroughly. Maybe the senators proposed other amendments because they met other witnesses who raised red flags like Mr. Walsh did for us. We have to take the time to consider this and make all the necessary improvements.

That being said, it is clear that the accountability act will never get the full support of the House. There will always be something someone does not like or some small problem. If it includes most of the Bloc Québécois' amendments, most of what we asked for, as it does now, we will vote in favour of the bill. However, we cannot ask for the moon. I think that everyone has found something in this bill that is worth supporting. I know that we will vote in favour. The NDP will probably vote in favour, but in the end, the important thing is to have a good law. We have never had a good accountability law, and it is high time we did.

Once again, we must proceed with wisdom and knowledge. We must ensure that it is well-written and that we do not end up with legislation that will cause chaos in the departments or clash with other bills. That is extremely important. So let us take our work seriously, as we have done from the beginning. Obviously, when things are different for Quebec, we will act accordingly. That is why we do not support this amendment.

• (1630)

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis (Winnipeg North, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member for Rivière-du-Nord unfortunately did not answer the question posed by the hon. member for Malpeque. He asked a very important question about the future of the Canadian Wheat Board.

I rarely agree with the Liberals, but today, the member is right to ask the Bloc members why they decided to nearly destroy an

organization that is so important to wheat farmers across Canada. Even though that organization is not very active in the province of Quebec and, as the member indicated, the UPA functions very well without Canada, this does not explain why the Bloc decided to destroy the Canadian Wheat Board, which is very important to the rest of Canada. Why do the Bloc members completely refuse to grasp the importance of cooperation within our agricultural sector?

Ms. Monique Guay: Mr. Speaker, I answered the question.

The member is talking about destroying the Canadian Wheat Board. But wait a minute. The Canadian Wheat Board still exists and will continue to exist. The only thing we reject is simply that it is included in this bill. That is all. The members on the other side of the House should calm down.

We decided that the Canadian Wheat Board had no place in this bill, but it will continue to exist and operate, nonetheless. In addition, we have the UPA. We will vote based on what works for us.

If the Canadian Wheat Board is not working, we will not vote in favour of including it in Bill C-2, especially if Ottawa starts encroaching on jurisdictions that are very important to Quebec.

My job and that of other members of the Bloc Québécois is to defend the interests of Quebecers. I repeat, the Canadian Wheat Board will never disappear. It will continue to exist, except it will not be included in Bill C-2. That is all there is to it.

• (1635)

Hon. Keith Martin (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I know it would be a big mistake for the government to pass this law.

[*English*]

This has nothing whatsoever to do with accountability. In fact, the definition of accountability is not even in the bill.

Does the member not think that Bill C-2 has nothing to do with accountability? Will her party say no to supporting the bill as it is going to cause gridlock in the public service?

[*Translation*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): I must warn the hon. member that she has 20 seconds for her response.

Ms. Monique Guay: Mr. Speaker, I will try to be brief.

As I said, I do not think that this bill is perfect. However, I think that accountability is part of it and that we have to start somewhere if we want to make progress. As I said earlier, the Bloc Québécois will support Bill C-2.

[*English*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): Order, please. It is my duty pursuant to Standing Order 38 to inform the House that the question to be raised tonight at the time of adjournment is as follows: the hon. member for Mississauga South, Foreign Affairs.

Resuming debate, the hon. member for Charlottetown.

Government Orders

Hon. Shawn Murphy (Charlottetown, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in this debate. There has been much discussion on the accountability act since we came back here after the January election. It was discussed in detail by the House and then referred to the Senate. The Senate, as we have heard today on many occasions, spent a lot of time, energy and effort on it, and the senators have suggested a number of amendments. I believe there are 150 amendments. The bill is back before this House for debate.

I say at the outset that I do support the general principles set out in the proposed act, the broad thrust, so to speak. Some issues that I am passionate about are in here and I do support them. In my view, the most important concept by far is the one making deputy ministers accounting officers accountable to Parliament for the individual financial management of their respective departments. Others are some of the provisions concerning lobbying, the repeal of the section of the public service act that allows exempt staff preferential treatment in the civil service, appointments based upon merit, and certain provisions dealing with whistleblower legislation. I, as a member of Parliament, certainly do support them.

However, as has been pointed out by a number of speakers today, this is an omnibus bill. I believe it has about 220 pages. It deals with a whole host of issues dealing with political financing, oversight bodies, et cetera, much of which, I submit, has very little to do with accountability. I believe the previous speaker pointed that out in a question.

Just for the sake of reference, I note that there are many definitions of accountability. One that I use refers to the way in which office holders, elected and non-elected, explain the actions taken through the use of powers delegated to them by ministers or other office holders. When we refer to that definition and other definitions, we see that basically accountability is a duty to explain. It is the duty of those who are responsible to explain their actions. When we take that definition or any other definition of accountability, we can see that most of the provisions in the bill, not all but a lot of them, have very, very little to do with accountability.

To go back, the bill was referred to a legislative committee of the House. I want to thank each and every member of that committee for the time and effort they put into the bill. It was sent to the Senate. There were 150 amendments made and it was sent back to this House. I should point out for any viewers watching and listening today that a lot of these amendments are inconsequential. They are spelling errors or minor errors that were made in the original drafting of the legislation. Even some of the amendments that we are debating here today are not as substantive or fundamental as perhaps one would consider.

I would point out that we are in a minority government. No party has a majority. It is our duty and obligation to express the will of the Canadian people, so I say that once we have this debate here in Parliament, then we vote on the amendments. Then the accountability act of course will have to go back to the Senate. The accountability act will then become law and we can move on to other issues which, I submit, are just as important as the issue we are dealing with at present, or perhaps more.

I do want to spend a minute, if I may, talking about the issue that I think is so important in this proposed act. At present, I chair the Standing Committee on Public Accounts. There is a recommendation that we in our committee have made on a number of occasions and it is finally seeing the light of day in the accountability act. That, again, is the concept of making deputy ministers accounting officers to Parliament so that they are personally responsible for the financial and other administration of their particular departments. They would be accountable to organize resources, to deliver programs in compliance with government policies and provisions, to establish and monitor the system of internal control and the signing of accounts so that all accounts truly reflect the actual financial transactions that happened in their particular department, and of course there is the performance of other specific duties.

● (1640)

I say this in the context that deputy ministers have very difficult jobs in government now. They are under intense scrutiny from the media, the public, the courts, the opposition and oversight bodies. They answer not only to their ministers but to the Privy Council Office and the Prime Minister. There is a whole host of horizontal issues that they have to deal with on a daily basis. Generally what I am saying is that Canada is well served by its deputy ministers.

However, when I look at what has come before the public accounts committee in the last six years, I believe the pendulum has swung too far in one direction, in that the deputy ministers are too much concerned with horizontal issues and policy issues and not as concerned as they ought to be with the actual day to day management of their respective departments.

Again, I believe that this provision, if it is coupled with other provisions I will speak to, will improve that particular situation. However, it will improve the situation only if other events happen.

One issue is the whole oversight regime of the Treasury Board Secretariat. In the public accounts committee, we are presently in the middle of a review of its mandate, roles and responsibilities, with particular emphasis on the change in regime with the expected proclamation of the federal accountability act.

Again I want to say that I believe a lot of work has to be done in developing just exactly what happens to these so-called accounting officers once the act is proclaimed and on the development of a protocol, the role of the comptroller general and how this new system will work. I believe there may be some in government here in Ottawa who just consider that nothing will change. I hope they are not right.

Another issue that of course is not covered in the act goes right to the foundation of accountability and again very much relates to the topic that I am discussing, that is the tenure of deputy ministers. This is another issue that the public accounts committee has recommended for on many occasions. It has been ignored by the government. The present government and the previous government have basically said that it is no business of Parliament. I find that distressing and disturbing. I do hope that the government will follow the recommendations of the public accounts committee and increase the tenure of deputy ministers so that we can get true accountability on the management of government operations.

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However, what I find extremely puzzling in this particular legislation is the total disjointedness between what the act says and what the government has been doing since it was sworn in earlier this year.

We have had the Gomery commission. I have a copy of the report right here in my hand. It is called "Restoring Accountability". It was a very extensive work and made 19 recommendations. The accountability act deals with about five of them.

I will talk about some of the most important. One is that to "redress the imbalance between resources available to the Government and those available to parliamentary committees and their members, the Government should substantially increase funding for parliamentary committees". Another is that it should increase resources for the public accounts committee. Another is that there should be a charter for public civil servants. The list goes on and on. Thirteen of the 19 recommendations have been ignored by this bill, basically, and some others have had only partial attention paid to them. I find that extremely troubling. I am going to come back to that a little later.

All the actions of the government are totally disjointed from what the bill states. Right from the beginning, what did the Prime Minister do? The very first thing he did was appoint his co-chair to the Senate. What was the second thing he did? Does anyone know? He appointed his co-chair/senator to cabinet. That is what he did. Does that comply with what the bill states? Is that accountability?

• (1645)

We had established a couple of years ago a fundamental principle of accountability in that the committees of this institution elected their own chairs. What is the third thing that the Prime Minister did? The third thing he said was that is over. The committees that the government chairs would be appointed by the Prime Minister of Canada. He would tell those people that they are the chairs and that is how the system would operate.

Is that accountability? We have the muzzling of members of Parliament in this House. We have had the muzzling of the whole cabinet. We had the spectacle over the weekend of the Prime Minister's communications director writing secretly to the communications directors of all cabinet ministers asking for a review of their respective ministers. That is not accountability.

We had the appointments process right in the accountability act in the summary. It indicated that appointments would be based on merit. What has happened? Everyone in this institution knows what has happened. Everyone in Canada knows what has happened. Every appointment has been based upon one basic principle, membership in the Conservative Party. A person has to be a high ranking Tory.

I have been following this issue very closely since February. I cannot speak for all provinces so let me say east of Montreal. If there is anyone in this House that knows, of all the dozens and dozens of appointments that were made, of any person east of Montreal who was not a high ranking Conservative member, please stand up at the end of my speech and identify that person. I do not know that such a person exists. Is that accountability?

The point I am making is that there is a total, absolute, and utter disturbing disconnect between what the act states and the actions of the government.

I identified some of the broad thrusts that I certainly agree with and am very supportive of, but there are certain things that I really think should not be happening.

The whole act talks about compliance and the avoidance of sin. We do not need more rules. This is certainly the feeling of the Auditor General. She agrees with me on that. We have sufficient rules. We have the Financial Administration Act. We have a whole host of guidelines, policies and procedures issued by the Treasury Board Secretariat.

I believe from my experience that those are sufficient. They have to be understood. There has to be a culture of compliance. There has to be compliance in the fundamental principles of personal responsibility and accountability, and if there is any non-compliance, of course there must be sanctions.

The act calls for additional oversight bodies, a director of procurement, a director of advertising, and a director of prosecutions. It is my view that these oversight bodies are not needed. It amounts to Parliament abandoning its accountability role. It is up to Parliament and the committees of Parliament to hold the executive of government to account.

This institution is an institution of accountability. If we read the recommendations of Mr. Justice Gomery, he comes back to that fundamental principle. He comes back to restoring the imbalance that exists between the legislative branch of Parliament and the executive branch of government.

As I stated, there were 19 recommendations made and only five or six were partially adopted. I would ask members to read the recommendations. I would ask members to ask themselves why they were basically ignored and why there was no discussion about these individual very important recommendations.

The general problem is that there is an imbalance. I have pointed that out. We have the executive of government, the Governor General, the leader, the cabinet and the whole bureaucracy. We have of course the judicial arm and the legislative arm. It is our job and duty to approve appropriations, to pass legislation and, of course, hold the government to account.

• (1650)

Over the last 50 or 60 years we have allowed a very severe imbalance to develop between the legislative arm of government and the executive arm of government. Of course, the executive arm of government has allowed a very severe imbalance to develop between the executive generally and the office of the Prime Minister. We can see what is going on these days when the control is put on individual cabinet ministers. We do not have to say anything more. We can see what is going on.

Again, I am not suggesting that this started with the office of the present Prime Minister. This is a trend that has been developing for the last 40 or 50 years. It has gotten worse in the last eight months, but it did not start eight months ago.

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In order to restore accountability, we have to cure the imbalance. I suggest and submit that the first step would be to read the first recommendation of the report of Mr. Justice Gomery. He talks about restoring that important balance that is necessary so that we have accountable institutions in Parliament. That is an issue that has been talked and written about but of course nothing ever gets done.

The point I am making is that there are some good provisions in this act. There are some that I support to my dying breath, but the act, to a large extent, has very little to do with accountability.

In closing, I agree with the overall thrust of the legislation. We have, kicking around the chamber, approximately 150 amendments. Some are very inconsequential. Some have been agreed to by the parties. It is up to us as parliamentarians to continue the debate.

It is a very complicated piece of legislation. We are getting into the law of unintended consequences, when we think it is good but when somebody else points out something in another act, it may not be as simple and uncomplicated as we first thought. Sometimes it takes a little more thinking and deliberation than we initially thought.

It is up to us to continue the debate and put the amendments to a vote in the chamber. We, representing the Canadian people, will vote on them. The amendments that pass this House will become law. The amendments that do not pass the House will not become law. Let us see the act become law as soon as possible.

• (1655)

Mr. Dean Del Mastro (Peterborough, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened with great interest to what the hon. member had to say. As we know, the hon. member was actually the daily filibuster, as it were, on the former sponsorship program when the Conservatives were trying to get to the bottom of what actually happened. We know the member stood in the way of that.

What I and the members on this side of the House would really like to know is why the Liberals are using the unelected Liberal Senate to hold up the bill? If they do not agree with accountability, then they should stand in the House and vote against it. They should have some courage and not use their unelected friends in the Senate to do it for them.

Hon. Shawn Murphy: Mr. Speaker, I do not understand the question at all. The bill is in the House now. We are debating it and we are going to be voting on it. It is not being held up at all. It went to the Senate and came back with some amendments. We have only been on this for six months. It has gone through the House as quickly as any other bill that I remember.

The member for Peterborough talks about the unelected Senate. Why did his leader appoint an unelected member, a co-chair of his campaign, to the unelected Senate, and then appoint that unelected senator/co-chair to the cabinet of this country who spends \$25 million per day while being unaccountable to any person in the House?

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we know there are many kinds of accountability in the House. Certainly, I have seen a disdain for the will of the House. I wonder if the member could comment on that specifically.

Over the last couple of days the Prime Minister talked about the fact that human rights will not be trumped by the mighty dollar in

reference to China. Yet, we have a situation right now with the declaration of indigenous rights that is before the United Nations. Opposition members have supported that declaration and yet we have a Conservative government that will not listen to the will of the majority of the House and support that very important declaration on indigenous rights. I wonder if the member could talk about that kind of accountability and disregard for the will of the House.

Hon. Shawn Murphy: Mr. Speaker, I am very perplexed with what is going on in this House. I will attempt to answer that question, but we are in a minority government and I do not see the acknowledgement of that minority government.

We are here elected by people involved in 308 ridings. When a piece of legislation, whether it is a bill or a motion, is put before the House and is voted upon, that is the will of the Canadian people. That is my understanding of how the system ought to work, but that is not the way the system is working.

The present government does not acknowledge that it is in a minority situation. We are seeing that day after day where it completely ignores the motion that the member across is talking about regarding indigenous people, but a whole host of other motions.

If I had two hours, I could go over the whole list of legislation, motions and bills that are totally and absolutely ignored by this government. I do not understand that at all and we are here talking about accountability. That is a question that will have to be put to the Prime Minister.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the member for Peterborough asked about the amendments that were made by unelected senators, as he called them, but I think the evidence that this was a hastily drafted bill, poorly worded and requiring a lot of amendments, probably comes from the government itself.

I know the member for Charlottetown has spent considerable time studying this bill. When I go through the amendments, I have not counted them up yet, there seems to be certainly in excess of 40 amendments from the government itself. Could the member explain to me why that is the case? Is it poorly drafted? How many amendments are there and why did the government not do it at least half right in the first place? It was so anxious to try and make an issue of accountability, we know that, but without really dealing with accountability in a concrete way.

I might ask him, as well, is there anything in this bill to do about political patronage from the Government of Canada? We have seen some terrible appointments from the government and I wonder if this is addressed in any way by Bill C-2.

• (1700)

Hon. Shawn Murphy: Mr. Speaker, there are two or three questions in that statement. First, I want to deal with the last one.

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We talked about the patronage appointments and I challenged anyone in the House if they were aware of anyone east of Montreal who was appointed to please stand and point that out and correct me. I want to point out and let the record show that no one stood. That is a sad indictment of what is going on with this particular government.

The second issue he talks about pertains to the amendments. Yes, there were about 40 made by the Conservatives and about 100 made by the Liberals. In fairness to both sides of the House, this is a very complex omnibus bill. I believe it has around 221 pages. It involves a lot of other acts. We are dealing with situations where if we make one amendment it involves another act. Sometimes it deals with the executive arm of government and sometimes it deals with the legislative arm.

It is not simple. In fairness to everyone who was involved, it is my honest view that the legislative committee put a lot of time, effort and work into this and did its best. I believe the Senate equally put perhaps more time. It had more time to spend on it.

It sounds like a lot of amendments, but again, a lot of them were inconsequential, some of them were spelling typos and things like that, and it is just a matter of the work that went into it. It relates to the complexity of the legislation. As has been pointed out before, the amendments are before us. Let us talk about them. Let us, by representing the Canadian people, vote on them and let us see that this legislation becomes law.

Mr. Gary Goodyear (Cambridge, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have a question for the member. For heaven's sake, for 13 years we had a government that stacked all these boards with its own members. These boards are now recommending certain members who happen to be Conservative. I think that goes to say how very intelligent some of the recommendations are. We have only been in government for nine months and we sure cannot clean up 13 years of Liberal appointees.

This government made an attempt to put forward the name of a man who was the top, most respected CEO in the entire country. His name is Gwyn Morgan. He would have worked for \$1 and would have taken these decisions out of the hands of folks who use patronage to get ahead and infiltrate, almost to the point of infesting all of those areas.

I know the members opposite have a hard time believing or even thinking that anyone but a Liberal could make an appointment to the bench or make any kind of an appointment. However, we put forward an opportunity to remove the patronage issue from this process. To hear the member stand and complain about what is going on is, frankly, very funny but atypical of the members opposite.

I wonder if the member would like to comment on our attempts to clean up the process versus the members' opposite attempt to keep the status quo.

Hon. Shawn Murphy: Mr. Speaker, I believe the member for Cambridge misunderstood the point I was making.

The point I was making concerned the hypocrisy of what was stated by the proponents of the bill and what is stated in the bill, which is that these appointments would be made on merit. I challenged and I will challenge again and again, if there is anyone east of Montreal, of all the dozens and dozens of order in council

appointments made since February of this year, to stand up and identify anyone who was not a high ranking Conservative.

The point I am trying to make is that the Conservatives said that appointments would be made on merit. They put this into legislation but they did not follow it. There has not been one appointment made and if there is one I would ask anyone to stand up but nobody will stand up.

What I am saying is—

• (1705)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): I apologize to the member but the time provided has run out.

Resuming debate, the hon. member for Ottawa Centre.

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will begin my comments by following up on the point the member for Cambridge was enunciating on cleaning up politics. It is a pleasure to again speak to a bill that we worked hard on and to which I have personally contributed on the committee.

I will begin with the title of cleaning up politics because that is the title of the document put forward by my predecessor, Ed Broadbent, before the last election. The document is entitled "Cleaning up Politics: Demanding Changes in Ethics and Accountability". The seven point plan that Mr. Broadbent put forward is pretty straightforward but still a little elusive, notwithstanding some of the important things that have been brought forward.

The first point was to have democratic accountability for MPs. What he was referring to was that no MP should ignore the wishes or intents of his or her voters for personal gain. What he was talking about is that MPs should not be able to cross the floor simply so they can be vaulted into cabinet. It is important to note that he was not talking about the present government. He was talking about the previous government. That is something we were not able to attain in this bill but we will continue to fight for that because the basic premise of democracy is not to have MPs cross the floor at their will and for their personal gain. It must stop. The government in Manitoba is putting forward a bill that will do that and the Government of Canada should do the same.

The second point on his list was fixed election dates. I am glad to say that Bill C-16 is on its way. Hopefully it will pass through the Senate a little easier than Bill C-2 will, for the sake of all of us.

The third point was to have transparent leadership contests. A certain member of the Liberal Party, who went on to become the leader of the Liberal Party and the prime minister, was able to raise \$12 million for his leadership campaign. Some would say that the \$12 million were not necessary because, as we all know, it was not much of a contest. However, before the government gets too high on its horse, the present Prime Minister spent \$2.7 million for his leadership contest. It seems like a bargain by comparison but, nonetheless, we need to have less money injected into the body politic and take the money out of politics. We saw what kind of effect that can have on the body politic in the most recent American elections.

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The fourth point was real electoral reform. We will continue to fight for this. We do not believe that what we have seen with the unelected Senate is anything that anyone can be proud of and it is certainly showing that our democratic institutions need an overhaul. One of the things we have put forward, following along many reports going back to the Pépin-Robarts report and others, is the need to change our democratic institution so it is reflective of the will of the people. We can look at perhaps a first past the post system with proportionality, such as they have in New Zealand, Scotland and, in fact, in most of the rest of the world save two other jurisdictions.

The fifth point was to end unregulated lobbying. I am pleased to say that there are changes in Bill C-2 about lobbying. I am sad to say that there are some amendments being put forward by the Senate to change that. What seems to be elusive is what my colleague, Mr. Broadbent, put forward, which is that we deal with firms that act as both lobbyists and government consultants. This is a conflict of interest as they are playing both sides of the street. We saw that with the previous government and we do not want to see that happen in the future. If a firm is working for government one day, the firm should not be able to turn around and lobby the next day. It creates a perception of influence peddling, and we have seen examples of that before.

What we need to still deal with is the fact that lobby firms, public relations firms, must have clear rules in front of them for the sake of our democratic institutions and we need to ensure it is understood that government is here to serve the people and not the friends of any particular party. Sadly, Bill C-2 does not end that type of lobbying and we need to continue to work on that. We provided amendments but they were ruled out of order.

• (1710)

The sixth point on Mr. Broadbent's list was ethical appointments. Just recently a panel of experts looked at reforming the National Capital Commission here in Ottawa. It should be noted that the National Capital Commission, which goes back to 1959, was always an appointed body based on who one knew and on political patronage. We hope that will change but it should not be based on a whim. It should be based on a structure so that appointments can function properly.

We proposed, and the bill does have amendments, to have a public appointments commission. Those amendments were taken from Mr. Broadbent's work on ethical appointments. We believe we should toss out the whole idea of patronage when it comes to appointments. With a possible 4,000 appointments, we believe it is dangerous to allow them to be motivated by politics. In fact, they should be motivated by merit to serve Canadian people and not to serve any political party which, sadly, was the case, not just with the previous government but back all the way to Macdonald. Canadian history is littered with problems in and around political appointments.

The commission that my colleague from Winnipeg worked on and was derived from Mr. Broadbent's idea makes sense. As was mentioned earlier, the government had concerns about the person it tried to appoint to fulfill this job. The problem was not necessarily with Mr. Morgan's abilities to do the job but with the way in which it was being done. We had in front of us a bill that would change the appointments process and the government tried to cut off the process

and appoint its own person but then cried foul when it was not accepted.

The point was that we had a bill before the House which talked about a public appointments commission but the government decided it knew better and wanted to appoint its person who, quite rightly, was rejected. It was not because of the person himself or his merit. It was because the government put forward someone ahead of a bill that was in front of Parliament to create a public appointments commission. On another day I could give my opinion on that person for that job, but I will leave that.

We need to have a public appointments process and that brings in ethical appointments. It is too important for Canadians and for the body politics.

The final point Mr. Broadbent put forward was to reform the access to information and, my gosh, do we need work there. We have problems presently with the government. I recently had an access to information on something that was not controversial and I received three lines and 18 pages blanked out. I wondered if something as controversial as a museum was actually of note to the security of the country and puts us all in jeopardy. Apparently it does and one of the problems is that the Access to Information Act is too limited, too controlling and does not serve Canadians well. We clearly need to change that.

We need to ensure light is shed on government and that we have a window on the decision making of government, not simply to allow people who want to be critical of the government, while that is important, but to allow anyone who wants to understand how government works and the motivations behind policy and, quite frankly, being able to form policy, are allowed to have their voices heard by way of knowing what the decisions were of the government. There are changes in Bill C-2 but we need a heck of a lot more.

I want to talk about some of the things that we were able to provide and propose as a party. We did not oppose the idea of Bill C-2. In fact, in principle we supported it in committee and where we thought changes were needed we proposed alternatives. I already mentioned our proposal for the public appointments commission which was accepted as amended and put into the bill. One of the things I put forward was to ensure that all contracts of \$10,000 or more be on the public record. We had to fight to get that in but it is in Bill C-2.

• (1715)

One concern Canadians had with the previous government in the sponsorship case was contracts without a paper trail. Often we did not know who was providing the service or what that service was. One of the amendments the NDP put forward in the area of procurement was to ensure that all contracts of \$10,000 or more would now be on the public record. I would have preferred that it had been a lesser amount, but that is what we agreed to on compromise. Now any Canadian can find out who is providing a service to the government and who is getting the contracts. They will know if they are getting value for their money.

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The NDP believes fundamentally in lowering the donation that people can make to \$1,000. Sadly, in the amendments before us, the Senate has deemed it in its infinite unelected wisdom to change that to \$2,000. I know this was something the Liberal Party preferred. I think most people would agree that \$1,000 is fine and reasonable. We would like to see that amendment defeated. No constituent of mine has called me to ask me to ensure the donation limit is increased from \$1,000 to \$2,000. In fact, I would submit that any member of the House could go out and claim that was a good idea in a town hall meeting or in a householder.

The NDP also believes it is important to strengthen the whistleblowing protection in the act. Before I was elected to this place, I worked with many people in the community around whistleblowing. When Bill C-11 was before the House, it was not sufficient. I was delighted to see it was not proclaimed because it was not good legislation, as some might have suggested. In fact, people who had been negatively affected as whistleblowers were adamant. They said we needed to change those parts of the whistleblower protection act to ensure it reflected their concerns. That has been done and I hope we will not tinker with that.

Conflict of interest rules allowing Canadians to make complaints to the new conflict of interest and ethics commissioner is something we have provided by ensuring that positive propositions were added to Bill C-2.

The protection of first nations' rights within the act is something I personally moved through committee to ensure they were not sideswiped by something that was not about them. First nations were almost folded into the equation when they should not have been.

The NDP amended the bill to ensure we not only changed the appointments process, but in effect changed the whole notion of patronage. If there is one thing, as my colleague from Winnipeg has said, we should ensure that the public appointments process remains in the bill.

The way appointments were done in previous governments was via a telephone and a Rolodex and who was known in the PMO. Those days are gone, fineto, adios. Canadians have been clear that this kind of politics is not only admonished, but it is something that will not be accepted. I challenge anyone in this place to go out and debate the need to bring back patronage appointments in our democratic system and our democratic framework. Thankfully those days are gone.

We need to ensure we have a clear understanding of the bill. It is not about getting a pound of flesh. If it is about that, then I suggest members have missed the point. If the government or any of the opposition parties are trying to exact revenge with this bill, then they are clearly misguided. Canadians are tired of it. We do not need to deepen the cynicism of politics. In fact, what the opposition is trying to do is to ensure there are clear rules so we can build back the trust that has been lost with Canadians.

• (1720)

Recently I saw some appointments that caused me concern. The Conservative government has appointed someone to the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada who goes against the consensus within the scientific community on climate

change. It has appointed someone who will be responsible for providing a grant to researchers, a person who is out of step with the mainstream scientific body on climate change.

Again, we need to pass the bill to ensure we have merit based appointments so we no longer have people appointed to bodies, which are so important to the public good, who potentially undermine the public good.

If we look at the bill in total, all of us have concerns about it. We have stated those concerns in committee. We proposed alternatives to it so it would be something of which we could be proud. In the end, we wanted to go back to our constituents and say that we did everything we could to ensure we had clear rules that would bring back responsibility to government, that would bring back clear representation to our citizens, the constituents we represent. No longer could we say that the decisions being made in government were being made under a cloud of suspicion over whose interests were being served. Quite frankly, that was the equation.

We need to ensure the following: when people are lobbying the government, they are not doing it because of who they know; when people blow the whistle, they will not have their career ruined because they stood up for the public interest; when someone is appointed to the head of a Crown corporation, it is based strictly on merit alone; and when people decide they will contribute to government, it is based solely on the public good and not on their private interests. Those are the key issues we all have to look at when we look at Bill C-2.

Sadly, the amendments that have come back to this place from the other place do not do that. They are riddled with self-interest. They will undermine the public trust and ultimately, I believe, undermine the whole notion of the necessity for the other place. When we have the other place sending legislation back to this place, legislation that has been gutted of many well thought out sensible ideas for its self interest, it speaks for itself.

I could underline many of those amendments, but two in particular are worth underlining. First is changing the limit one can give from \$1,000 to \$2,000. This has been put forward by people who are not even elected, which raises all sorts of question marks. Many people in the other place spend much of their time raising money for political parties. Perhaps that is the reason. The other issue we have to examine is changes to lobbying. We need to strengthen our oversight on lobbying, not weaken it.

In the end, we have an unelected body, the other place, sending back to an elected body incredible amendments in terms of the number, but more important, in terms of the scope and what they will do to the bill. That raises the question of the value of the other place when it does such a thing.

When we talk about real accountability and when we see what has recently happened and how the bill has been played with and manipulated by the other place, we have to then suggest this. The next project, after the bill has passed, is to take a look at how we can reform, modify and change the other place to make it a lot more accountable and democratic so it will not meddle in the voice of everyday Canadians who elected us.

Finally, if the bill is destroyed and not passed, every one of us will have to answer as to what we did and why. My belief is Canadians wanted to see us pass a bill with clear rules and clear reform for them. The bill is not about us. It is about Canadians. We need to pass the bill and ensure the values that Canadians entrusted to us to promote are the bottom line, not the interests of people in the other place or anywhere else.

● (1725)

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the member spent a bit of time talking about the whistleblower act, Bill C-11, which came up two Parliaments ago. It was worked on for about a year and all last Parliament.

As a consequence of the work of the government operations and estimates committee, the bill was virtually rewritten. One of the changes was to create a new position, a new public integrity officer of Parliament, who would be in the same vein as the Auditor General or the Privacy Commissioner, et cetera. That bill was unanimously passed by all parties in committee with all of those changes. It came to the House, was fully debated and unanimously passed by all parties in this place. In fact, on the second last day of the last Parliament, it received royal assent.

That bill is extremely important to the whole accountability mechanism. It provides protection for the public service, for those who feel they have information about some alleged wrongdoings or other reprisals, as defined in the bill, to come forward to get explanations to this watchdog who will report to Parliament. It is a very important bill.

I understand Bill C-2 proposed some amendments to the whistleblower bill. What I want to understand, and maybe the member can help, is that Bill C-11, although it received royal assent in the last Parliament, has not been proclaimed. This means that although it is law, it is not in force yet. All the work has been done by Parliament and passed by both Houses and given royal assent, but it is still not operative. We still do not have a process of bringing in this new officer of Parliament. We still do not have the directions to all the crown corporations and agencies that will be swept in under this because it has not been proclaimed. The government has been in office for several months and it still has not been proclaimed. It is important.

Could the member try to explain to the House and to Canadians why Bill C-11 has not been proclaimed so we can have accountability, openness and transparency now?

Mr. Paul Dewar: Mr. Speaker, I will be very succinct. In my opinion, and in the opinion of many people with whom I worked before being elected to this place, Bill C-11 is substandard. I am delighted it was not proclaimed. I can name people who pushed to ensure that it did not see the light of day because they wanted a better bill. To be quite direct about it, it is yet another reason to get this bill through the House, back to the Senate, get the bill passed and stop the ping-pong between the two places.

Bill C-2 would change the whistleblower legislation to ensure there would be a more comprehensive way for people to report misdeeds and that they would not go into a process where they would have to wait for long periods of time. That is exactly what Bill C-11 would have done.

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I was on the committee and supported the changes. It was helpful to make amendments to ensure they would have a choice. If people were to blow the whistle now, they would have the choices that were in Bill C-11 and additional ones, if they chose to use them. That is really important. This is cutting edge and if Bill C-11 had been proclaimed then, the government of the day would have had the excuse of saying it wanted to see it operate for a while.

Speak to people who have actually blown the whistle, like Dr. Chopra. Ask what he thinks of it. He would tell us, because I have talked with him, that Bill C-11 is substandard. It does not meet the test. He is delighted this is coming forward.

The final thing is to pressure the government to clean up all those cases before Bill C-2 is proclaimed and enacted. I have asked the government to do that and I hope it does it soon. People's careers have been destroyed, like Dr. Chopra, for doing nothing more than standing up and doing the right thing in the interest of Canadians.

● (1730)

Mr. Paul Szabo: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the member's comments on this, but I still need to get some clarification. If Bill C-2 is going to make amendments to Bill C-11 to make it better, Bill C-11 still has to be proclaimed before Bill C-2 is proclaimed. We have to have an act that is actually in force and in law before Bill C-2.

If the member wants Bill C-2 to be in place and passed before we rise on December 15, should not Bill C-11 be proclaimed so that we can get the process moving? Everyone would understand the rules of the game under which they would be operating. It just is not clear enough to the public service whether or not the provisions in Bill C-11 as amended by Bill C-2 are going to be in place.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Mr. Speaker, the concern I would have is if the government proclaimed Bill C-11 and Bill C-2 was not passed, we would end up with Bill C-11 on the books. What I am saying to the member very directly is that Bill C-11 was flawed. Procedurally the member is correct in terms of the sequence that needs to happen and could happen.

What is in front of us right now is a bill that was passed here as amended and sent to the other place where it was meddled with. Quite frankly in some cases it was gutted and the whole orientation of the bill was changed and sent back to us.

For those who would blow the whistle it is small comfort to them that the intent of the other place was to improve it. At the end of the day what we have to look at is those markers that I mentioned before. The rules have to be clarified. The public interest has to be established. In the case of whistleblowers, having Bill C-11 proclaimed and then having Bill C-2 come into play could happen.

The concern I would have is if Bill C-11 were proclaimed and Bill C-2 did not pass, we would have a substandard whistleblower act. That is not good enough for the women and men who work in the public service.

Government Orders

Another side to that is that we need to extend the whistleblower legislation beyond crown corporations and governments. We need to talk about people who receive public dollars who are doing research. We have heard stories of people who are doing research in universities who are trying to follow the public interest and do the public service by blowing the whistle and they are not covered by the bill. We need to take a look at that after the bill is passed and perhaps amend it down the road. I suppose that is for another day but for now, we should pass this bill. Then we could get on to getting really decent whistleblower protection for the women and men in the public service.

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak to Bill C-2, the so-called accountability act, a bill that was put together with a great deal of haste and one which has returned from the other place with a number of important amendments. I would like to speak to the spirit of this bill and the underlying motivations that seem to have resulted in legislation which, as we have discovered, is technically flawed in many respects and substantively flawed in its objectives.

I appreciate the work of the senators in the other place from both parties, in particular Senator Joe Day who has put forward reasonable amendments to make this legislation better. There were 30 days of hearings in the other place, 150 witnesses and a lot of very positive work.

When Bill C-2 was presented in this House it was done so under the political environment of a recent election and the concern that many Canadians had about ensuring that the taxpayers' money was protected from abuse. From the outset many of us were uncomfortable with the rapid and now we see irresponsible rush in which the President of the Treasury Board proceeded. Liberal members raised these concerns at committee.

In fact, the vast majority of amendments proposed by the Liberal members on the Bill C-2 committee last spring were defeated by the NDP-Conservative coalition. This was done for political and partisan reasons. It was clear then that public relations and scoring cheap political points were more important than bringing forward legislation that would in fact live up to its name.

After hearing more than 140 witnesses through many hours of hearings, the Senate committee under the leadership of Senator Day has placed before us amendments that we should seriously consider. Notwithstanding the constant flow of feigned outrage from the Treasury Board president, it would be totally irresponsible for the government and the House to ignore reasonable amendments that seek to strengthen the legislation thereby ensuring that it is in line with the charter and in the public interest.

In fact, it was the Treasury Board president who suggested in his own appearance before the Senate that the bill had been, to use his exact words, "examined with a microscope". We now find out that this microscope was more like a periscope: long on rhetoric and narrow in focus.

David Hutton, coordinator of the Federal Accountability Initiative for Reform, described the drafting process that was employed to craft Bill C-2 as "deeply flawed". He said that the bill "is complex and is full of loopholes when you dig into it. I feel that the

committees have been given an impossible task, namely trying to turn this into effective legislation that meets intent".

In addition to repairing numerous drafting errors which should have been caught before the bill was introduced, key amendments that came back include political financing. This is an area of particular importance to me, as it is to all members of the House of Commons. Not only am I a member of Parliament but, as many other members have done, I have run campaigns for other candidates and have worked a lot of elections. I was the president of the Nova Scotia Liberal Party sitting on the national executive and got involved in the financing of political parties.

It is important that we ensure that any new political donation regime does not unfairly restrict the participation of political parties in debate. I suggest the proposed change to \$2,000 per year, the limit that came back from the other place, is an important change.

In 2003 Bill C-24 was introduced and passed by the Liberal government of former prime minister Jean Chrétien. It radically changed how elections are financed in Canada, notably reducing the amount of allowable donations to political parties. The current President of the Treasury Board acknowledged the usefulness of Bill C-24, which in fact contained a clause for its review, but there has been no review. There has just been introduction in this bill of more political reform, which I do not think makes a lot of sense.

Clearly, the government has failed to produce any evidence that the existing limits are undermining the electoral process at the federal level. Furthermore, political donations play an important role in our democratic system. Limiting them too strictly has the potential to limit participation of smaller political parties, as well as all Canadians who wish to participate in the political system.

Why would the government introduce these strict limits? If we look across Canada at what provinces are doing in their own electoral districts, it is pretty interesting. I would like to take a minute to let people know what those limits are across Canada right now.

• (1735)

In Newfoundland and Labrador there are no contribution limits to political parties.

In Prince Edward Island there are no contribution limits.

In Nova Scotia there have been none. In fact, last week new political financing legislation was brought forward into the House of Assembly in Nova Scotia. I believe the limit there would be \$5,000.

In New Brunswick there is a maximum of \$6,000 during a calendar year to each registered political party or to a registered district association of that registered political party.

In Quebec contribution limits are a maximum of \$3,000 to each party, independent member and independent candidate, collectively, during the same calendar year.

Government Orders

Ontario has contribution limits. The maximum contribution a person, corporation or trade union may make is \$7,500 to each party in a calendar year and in any campaign period; \$1,000 in any calendar year to each constituency association; an aggregate of \$5,000 to the constituency associations of any one party; \$1,000 to each candidate in a campaign period; an aggregate of \$5,000 to candidates endorsed by any one party.

In Manitoba individuals may contribute a maximum of \$3,000 in a calendar year to candidates, constituency associations or registered political parties, or any combination.

In Saskatchewan there are no limits on contributions.

In Alberta the limits are \$15,000 to each registered party, \$1,000 to any registered constituency association, and \$5,000 in the aggregate to constituency associations of each registered party, and then further regulations in any campaign period: \$30,000 to each registered party, less any amount contributed to the party in the calendar year.

In British Columbia registered political parties or constituency associations may accept a maximum of \$10,000 in permitted anonymous contributions. Candidates, leadership contestants and nomination contestants may accept a maximum of \$3,000 in permitted contributions.

In Yukon there are no contribution limits.

The Northwest Territories has what seem to be the strictest limits. An individual or corporation may contribute a maximum of \$1,500 to a candidate during a campaign period, but a candidate may contribute a maximum of \$30,000 of his or her own funds in his or her own campaign.

These election limits that have been brought in dramatically exceed any other election financing reform that has been brought in across Canada, reforms that have been brought in, in provinces led by a whole series of different types of government, different parties in power.

One witness at the Senate committee, Arthur Kroeger, the chair of the Canadian Policy Research Networks and a former deputy minister in five federal government departments, told the Senate committee:

What problem are we trying to solve? Were there abuses when the level was \$5,400? I do not know. I do not remember reading of any such abuses. Were there abuses that merit the reduced levels of contributions that were permitted by business and unions? If you cannot identify the problem that justifies a provision in the bill, then have you lost balance and have you pushed things too far? Those are questions in my mind...Do we truly need to go that far to achieve good governance and are we risking harm? It is possible.

When we look at what provinces across the country have done, that would seem to back that up.

It is certainly not just Liberals who are making the case that these stringent donation limits are unreasonable and unnecessary. Lowell Murray, a Progressive Conservative senator from the great province of Nova Scotia, a highly respected figure and a former close adviser to two Progressive Conservative former prime ministers, the Right Hon. Joe Clark and the Right Hon. Brian Mulroney, said in the Senate recently, I believe on third reading, after the committee

hearings, "I would delete from the bill all the provisions respecting political financing".

There are a lot of very interesting comments, but let me just stick to the political financing piece. He talked about examples of how this legislation is flawed. He went on to say:

Another example is in the creation of a directorate of public prosecutions. This may or may not be necessary—probably not—

To get back to financing, he said:

This bill purports to introduce further reforms to our political financing and elections laws. The committee has recommended amendments to the government's proposals. I am more persuaded by the argument of Professor Peter Aucoin, who told the committee that those proposals have no place in the omnibus Bill C-2 and should be considered as part of an overall examination of elections and political financing law.

He said later in his speech:

The examination of our political financing and election laws that I believe is necessary must go forward, in my view, and my amendment would remove from Bill C-2 the various provisions relating to political financing in the hope of a principled examination of this whole field, a principled examination of our electoral and parliamentary democracy, by people who have relevant experience in it.

• (1740)

That speaks directly to the issue of this bill being too large and too cumbersome, trying to do too many things for political reasons and not being based on evidence nor history.

Increasing the maximum personal contribution to \$2,000 from the proposed \$1,000 would still be a significant reduction from the current \$5,400 that came in under Bill C-24, but I would support the \$2,000 limit.

There are many other amendments that involve access to information and technical changes that were necessary because it was rushed legislation. Certainly, the clearest proof of that was the recent attempt to alter the legislation to cover up the practice of the Conservative Party of not counting delegate fees as political donations, which was clearly not the intent of the act. It was never understood by any political party that I know of as being the case, and it has been acknowledged by Canada's Chief Electoral Officer as being the wrong policy.

One of the advantages of the other place looking at this so carefully was that it gave people a chance to make some comments, people who have expertise in this area. I had mentioned before Mr. Kroeger, the chair of the Canadian Policy Research Network. He also said:

If the legislation had been written by a government with more experience in office, it may not have some items in it that it does, which I will explain in a minute.

He went on to explain, and then said:

There is the other problem that some of the contents of legislation were, I think, developed during an election campaign, and there is always a risk of a bit of overkill for the sake of achieving a public effect—

Dr. David Zussman, the Jarislowsky Chair in Public Sector Management at the University of Ottawa, indicated, in talking about the new positions in this bill:

In each case, we are creating new positions at considerable cost to the taxpayers of Canada, so we have to ask ourselves simply will these costs produce results that will make a tangible difference or a marginal difference over the information and analysis that we already have.

Government Orders

Alan Leadbeater, deputy information commissioner of the Office of the Information Commissioner, suggested:

—Bill C-2 would authorize new and broad zones of secrecy, which will have the effect of reducing the accountability of government through transparency...Bill C-2 will reduce the amount of information available to the public, will weaken the oversight role of the Information Commissioner, will increase government's ability to cover up wrongdoing and shield itself from embarrassment.

These are a number of comments that came from the hearings that were held in the other place.

This is a deeply flawed bill. I support accountability and I support some of the measures that are in this bill, but these amendments that have come back from the other place are worthy of everybody's attention and support.

It is obvious to most people, except perhaps those on the government side, that this bill is a blunt instrument to achieve political gains. As is so often the case when politics is the primary motivation, bad law is created, and thankfully we now have an opportunity to correct these flaws. I encourage all parties to support these amendments and to make this legislation live up to its name, the accountability act.

• (1745)

Hon. John Baird (President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened with great interest to the speech by my colleague from Nova Scotia. If the amendments presented by the Liberal Party are not adopted, does he plan to go on record as opposing the bill?

Mr. Michael Savage: Mr. Speaker, I think it is safe for anybody in public life to take things one step at a time. The most important thing for us to do is to make the case for these amendments, to put them forward, and to convince my hon. colleague, the President of the Treasury Board, that they in fact enhance his bill and make it easier to accomplish the goals that are stated.

We should all vote on those amendments and then decide how we vote on the bill. He is not Kreskin. He will not know how I vote until later this week or next week, but I will give it every consideration.

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is interesting how the government talks about the Liberal senators who hung the bill up, but I know that the President of the Treasury Board actually accepted a very large number of those amendments. Of some 140, I think 40 were actually made by Conservative senators. They have a job to do and it is reflective of the work that they did. It is a mischaracterization of the Senate's work to say that they are dragging their feet because they did their job. They had the time to do it which we were not given in this place. That is the reality.

The member for Dartmouth—Cole Harbour raises some interesting aspects, but I want to share with him one thing I found at a conference two weeks ago at which I was a panellist. It dealt with accountability. One of the consistent messages coming from the legal professors and experts commenting on the bill was that they were concerned that the bill was based on a foundation of presumption of guilt of the public service, politicians and everyone involved in public life as opposed to the presumption of innocence. The concern was that many of the administrative overlays being proposed in Bill C-2 would decrease the productivity of the public service because everyone was swept under the same umbrella of guilt.

It is an interesting point for them to raise. I wonder if the member has a comment on whether or not the concerns with regard to the accountability of this place should have focused more in terms of where the risk elements were and where we needed to shore up things rather than to blanket the whole system with a layer of administrative and unproductive activity.

• (1750)

Mr. Michael Savage: Mr. Speaker, my colleague's point is entirely correct. One of the things that makes the bill so flawed is that it attempts to solve a lot of problems which actually do not exist and does not get at some of the problems that do exist.

We heard from the opposite side that some of these recommendations came as a result of circumstances reported by Justice John Gomery. In fact, Professor Denis Saint-Martin of the University of Montreal said, in terms of recommending what needs to be fixed, the two approaches are totally different. In some other ways, as I indicated with political financing, we are not getting at what the problems really are. We are focused on the wrong issues and taking attention away from those things that really matter.

We in this place all agree that the people at the Public Service of Canada are worthy of our respect and we are thankful to them. They are honest hard-working people. We need to ensure that any changes that we make respect that and if there is behaviour that needs to be corrected, we catch that behaviour, but not blanket the entire public service and direct our attention on circumstances or issues that are not broken. We should focus on things that need attention.

Mr. Mike Wallace (Burlington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the presentation made by my counterpart across the way. I just checked the member's financial return on the Elections Canada website. He had four individuals who gave \$1,000 or more. One of them gave over \$1,000. I want to know, if he only had one donation in the last election from an individual for over \$1,000, why he is worried about capping it at \$1,000? He did get six corporate donations of \$1,000 or more which is interesting, but I want to know why he is concerned about that one donation?

Mr. Michael Savage: Mr. Speaker, I am glad that my colleague from Burlington cares enough about me to be checking up on my personal information and my campaigns. I would be happy to send him my brochures and he might learn a little bit from that.

The fact that I only had one donation of more than \$1,000 shows that we do not act in self-interest on this side of the House. We act in the public interest on this side of the House. We want to do what is right for Canada. We want to do what is right for all people. We want people to participate in the democratic process in a way that makes sense.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Carole Lavallée (Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to speak this afternoon about Bill C-2, the Federal Accountability Act. The Bloc Québécois really liked this bill, which seeks to make democracy more transparent. That is why the Bloc Québécois put its heart and soul into studying this bill, a process that was conducted at a fast pace.

Government Orders

This morning, the President of the Treasury Board stated that he was proud of his race for the Guinness record. He said that this bill could have been adopted just nine weeks after the election on January 23 and that members had put in 90 hours of work in six weeks and had passed the bill in 72 days. He was bragging and very proud of this performance, when he should have been a bit sad. Today, he can see that that whole mad dash was for nought.

I had the pleasure of sitting on the Bill C-2 legislative committee. I saw, with my own eyes, that the witnesses did not have time to explain fully. They had only two minutes each and had to speak in quick succession. The witnesses had no time to go into detail, and we did not have time to question them. They gave us lengthy documents that we did not have time to consult. We did not even have time to read them between the meetings.

It is only natural that a bill that was looked at quickly should come back to this House today with so many amendments. This is a substantial bill approximately 200 pages in length, with 300 clauses. Some witnesses even refused to appear before the Bill C-2 legislative committee, saying that they had not had time to study and analyze the bill. As a result, we did not hear all the important witnesses.

When there were witnesses, I nearly always used what little time I had to ask them one question that I felt was crucial. I asked them whether they believed that, with the bill as it is currently written, the sponsorship scandal could happen again.

Unfortunately none of the witnesses said this could not happen again, despite the 300 clauses in the bill. This needed to happen quickly and we did not have the time to look at anything. Furthermore, we knew, and we said, that this bill had some problems. If you check the blues of that committee, you will see that a number of committee members—witnesses as well as MPs—noticed these problems, raised them and deplored them. We said time and time again that there would be problems.

There is a saying that goes, “Slowly but surely”. Another one goes, “Something worth doing is worth doing well”. We cannot make a flower grow any faster by pulling on its stem. Often a bill is like a small flower. Today, this government is no further ahead. It is far from its nine weeks—maybe it had an even shorter goal—and 72 hours of work. We should have taken our time.

The work done in committee is extremely important. However, it is nice to have the time, between two witnesses, to read what the witnesses have prepared or even to read it in advance if they had time to send documents beforehand. The members of the legislative committee did not have time to read the documents beforehand and did not have time to read them afterward because they had to hurry off to attend another committee meeting. In the meantime, while we were going over Bill C-2, the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics slammed on the brakes, even though the Access to Information Act should have been included in Bill C-2.

The Access to Information Act was passed in 1983. Despite a number of requests for its review, it has stayed essentially the same. The Conservative government chose not to include the Access to Information Act in its Bill C-2. We know this is a mistake.

The President of the Treasury Board contends that further consultations are necessary. His colleague, the Minister of Justice, appeared before the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics and told us to draft legislation. We told him that the legislation was already in place. Back in 1987, the Standing Committee on Justice and the Solicitor General made 100 recommendations to reform the act.

• (1755)

In August 2000, the President of the Treasury Board and the Minister of Justice at the time struck a task force to review the act, the regulations and the policies on which the present access to information scheme is based. In November 2001, the Bryden committee—I do not know if that name rings a bell, Mr. Speaker, but it has been coming up regularly for quite a while in this place—proposed a dozen recommendations that it regarded as priorities. I should point out that the current Minister of Justice signed that report. This House also had an opportunity to debate this act, when a number of members introduced private members’ bills. The Information Commissioner even proposed a complete bill to the government in October 2005, that is to say one year ago.

When the justice minister came and asked us to submit a new bill to him, we said no, adding that he already had enough information, which he could have included in Bill C-2. We asked him to introduce a new access to information bill no later than December 15.

I bring up this very important motion passed in committee because I want to remind the Minister of Justice that he has very little time left to draft this bill. He has only 20 days or so left. I hope he is already working on it.

Of course, there is another proverb which says that nature abhors a vacuum. This is why the Senate proposed 158 amendments. Senators took their time. They reviewed the legislation and in fact they heard witnesses who had come before our committee. However, they took the time to talk to these people, to read their submissions and to listen to what they had to say. So, senators proposed 158 amendments. Now, the government is coming back with 50 clauses that it wants to change regarding these amendments. The Liberal Party also has an amendment dealing with at least four aspects of the bill, while the Bloc Québécois is proposing an amendment dealing with four measures.

This means that the House of Commons is doing the work that the committee should have done last spring, slowly, not too quickly, but surely.

The Bloc’s amendments are very relevant. First, we have the two ethics commissioners. It is obvious that there should only be one commissioner, because the Senate’s ethics counsellor is only accountable to a Senate committee. There is no need to elaborate on this situation. Let us just say that their ethics counsellor is somewhat like the Howard Wilson that we had here, who was accountable to the then Prime Minister.

Government Orders

As for the Canadian Wheat Board, it is appropriate that it be added to the list of organizations subject to the Access to Information Act. Why? Because three administrators are appointed by the government. The Auditor General already has the right to audit this board. Some say that the government does not fund this organization, but that is not true. It guarantees the contracts of the board's clients. For 20 years the Canadian Wheat Board has cost Canadian and Quebec taxpayers several billions of dollars. That is right. The money is not an issue. But at least the board should be subject to the Access to Information Act.

The Bloc amendments also require that documents used to prepare internal audit reports be subject to the Access to Information Act. Recent events, including the sponsorship scandal, have shown that it is absolutely necessary for the public to have access to these documents.

There is also an interpretation clause on the public interest. It seems to me that it is important to be able to act in the public interest when a document is not accessible. We must prove that it is in the public interest to have access. If it is proven to be in the public interest, it seems normal to me that a government open its books.

Finally, delegate expenses at political conventions must be considered donations because that is what they are. Delegates are charged almost \$1,000 to attend a convention or meeting. However, we know that is not the real cost. Obviously a profit is made and that must be considered as financing.

These are the Bloc subamendments. As I mentioned earlier, the House of Commons is now doing the work that it should have done slowly but surely last spring.

In closing, I absolutely want to remind the President of Treasury Board's colleague, the Minister of Justice, that he only has 20 days to submit his access to information bill to the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics.

• (1800)

Hon. John Baird (President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to begin by saying to the people watching this broadcast on television that the member for Malpeque will probably be making a speech. I therefore recommend that they postpone their suppers, because if they stay tuned, I am sure they will hear a good speech.

I would like to thank my colleague, the member for Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert, for her speech. I am comfortable supporting the subamendment our colleagues from Quebec introduced. In light of the sponsorship scandal, it is very important for us, for all members of Parliament, to clean up the regulations and to clean up Canada's laws, and I am pleased with the member's positive intervention during this debate.

• (1805)

Mrs. Carole Lavallée: I would like to thank the President of the Treasury Board for his comments. Nevertheless, I would like to emphasize what I said about the question I asked each one of the witnesses who appeared before the legislative committee that studied Bill C-2. I asked each one of them if they believed that the measures in Bill C-2 would have prevented the sponsorship scandal. None of them said yes.

I would just like the minister to think about that. I know that Bill C-2 is a valiant attempt, but it cannot prevent the sponsorship scandal from happening again, even though that is what it set out to do.

[English]

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have a question for the member. I am still really baffled by the Bloc's position on the Canadian Wheat Board. In the member's remarks, her information was inaccurate on several points as it related to the Canadian Wheat Board. I know that the committee was rushed. I know the Conservative government tried to rush the bill through so as not to give members on the committee time to really review the act properly.

The member indicated that there are three directors appointed by the government. There are actually five directors appointed by the government. There are 10 members elected by producers. According to the legal definition under the act, and by the government's own legal advice, it is not an agency of the government. In fact, subsection 4(2) of the Canadian Wheat Board Act states:

The Corporation is not an agency of Her Majesty and is not a Crown corporation within the meaning of the Financial Administration Act.

The fact of the matter is that what will be the net impact by the Bloc amendment putting the Canadian Wheat Board under access to information and doing Prime Minister Harper's bidding for him is—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): I remind the hon. member for Malpeque that he must refer to other members of Parliament by either their riding name or their title, not their family name.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Speaker, my sincere apologies.

The president of the Canadian Wheat Board, in his letter to the Senate committee, not the House committee, said that this is what the impact would be:

The cost of responding to such requests is not insignificant...Therefore, the true beneficiaries of adding the [Canadian Wheat Board] to [Access to Information Act] will primarily be non-farmers such as competitors and foreign antagonists that would be able to make information requests.

In other words, these are nuisance requests.

There are several single desk selling agencies in Quebec quite similar to the Canadian Wheat Board, without, of course, appointed directors, but they are not entities of the government of Quebec either. Why would the Bloc Québécois be willing to impose, desirous of imposing, additional costs on primary producers? It is the producers who pay all the costs to the Canadian Wheat Board, not the Government of Canada. Why would the Bloc be willing to get in bed with the Prime Minister and disadvantage western Canadian grain farmers in terms of competing with the rest of the world? Why?

Government Orders

[Translation]

Mrs. Carole Lavallée: Mr. Speaker, the Bloc Québécois does not wish to be a nuisance to any organization or individual, quite the contrary. You know how committed to the interests of Quebecers we are; we always go for what makes good common sense.

Common sense would have it that the Canadian Wheat Board should be subject to the Access to Information Act. There might be five directors instead of three, but becoming subject to the act does not weaken the board. In fact, it would allow it to become even more relevant, to self-criticize, to be more transparent and more democratic. The fact of the matter is that the last remarks of the hon. member for Malpeque could be applied to every other crown corporation so as to exempt them for exactly the same reasons, arguing that there will be nuisance requests.

The Access to Information Act contains all that is necessary to deal with requests that are frivolous, unfounded or a waste of time.

The Canadian Wheat Board has cost taxpayers in Quebec and Canada a few billion dollars over the past 20 years. Given that it comes under the Auditor General's supervision, it would only be normal that it also be subject to the Access to Information Act.

• (1810)

Mr. Jean-Yves Laforest (Saint-Maurice—Champlain, BQ): Mr. Speaker, my hon. colleague mentioned earlier a few sayings that have to do with the time it takes to act. I would like to add another one, *Age quod agis*. This proverb defines the municipality where I live and it means, "whatever you do, do it well". It is similar to what my colleague was saying. She referred to the fact that she felt rushed. She noted that the witnesses called by the legislative committee on Bill C-2 were also rushed and did not have enough time to properly give their testimony.

In the member's opinion, would the bill be better and would it protect public interest better if the legislative committee had taken longer to study it thoroughly and properly, and if the whole issue of access to information had been referred to the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics?

Mrs. Carole Lavallée: Mr. Speaker, I would first like to thank my colleague from Saint-Maurice—Champlain for his question.

One of the cities in his riding is Shawinigan, which calls to mind the origins of Bill C-2, the federal accountability act.

To answer his question, I have to say that the undue speed of the work did not make for speedier results in this case. That is why I quoted several proverbs about the time it takes to do something well. Things that are worth doing are worth doing well. In the end, we always have to check and redo something we have done poorly.

As for Bill C-2, even though the government stepped up the work and tried to win a special prize from the *Guinness Book of World Records*, today, on November 20, we are no further ahead, and the President of the Treasury Board is no further ahead than he would have been if he had taken the time to do things properly. In addition, we would be even more pleased and even happier to pass this bill.

[English]

Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, for the first time this year I will have to agree with the President of the Treasury

Board: when the member for Malpeque speaks, he will be dynamic, so people at home should wait and listen.

I want to ask again about the Canadian Wheat Board. In a normal year and under normal circumstances, the Wheat Board costs the Government of Canada absolutely nothing.

The members of the House are perplexed that the Bloc is not supporting the amendment, because Quebec depends on supply management. Would the member like all the supply management organizations in Quebec to come under the federal government? The idea is that the Wheat Board is not a federal government body. It is the farmers' organization. We do not want to impose federal government regulations on the Wheat Board. We want to keep it independent.

[Translation]

Mrs. Carole Lavallée: Mr. Speaker, it seems that the member for Malpeque's speech is not to be missed.

I thought that my colleague was going to talk about my speech, but that is okay.

The Canadian Wheat Board is financed in part—if one can say "in part"—by Quebec and Canadian taxpayers. That is why we feel it is important that it be subject to the Access to Information Act.

The Auditor General can investigate the organization. The government appoints five directors. It is not quite the same as a crown corporation, but we cannot say that whether some crown corporations are subject to the act depends on how much money they get from the government. The Canadian Wheat Board is funded in part by the government—indirectly, perhaps, but it is funded. Directors are appointed and the Auditor General can investigate. We think it makes sense for it to be subject to the Access to Information Act.

• (1815)

[English]

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to begin by commenting on a point the member made in his remarks. The fact is that the Government of Canada does not in any way subsidize the Canadian Wheat Board.

What the Government of Canada does, from time to time, by order in council, is it provides guarantees to the wheat pools in terms of the marketing of grain. I will give an analogy. It would almost be the same as acting like a bank. If the government were to provide a loan guarantee to a manufacturer, it would not be reasonable to expect that the manufacturer should then become subject to access to information. On the contrary. A person interested in the issue would make an access to information request to the government that provided the money.

Government Orders

It therefore is wrong to suggest that the Government of Canada is providing billions to the Canadian Wheat Board because it is not. An incident occurred five or six years ago where it had to provide some millions of dollars to back up the government guarantee on initial prices but that money went to producers, which was a good thing. I would hope that the Bloc Québécois reconsiders its motion to put the Canadian Wheat Board under access to information.

I am pleased to speak to the accountability act and amendments made thereto. Specifically I will address the amendment made to put the Canadian Wheat Board under the Access to Information Act. It was interesting earlier listening to the Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board as he tried to justify putting the Canadian Wheat Board under access to information but he failed miserably in terms of his argument.

When I asked the parliamentary secretary to justify his statement that farmers wanted access to information to apply, he failed to answer the question and went on a bit of a rant by saying that anyone who would oppose access to information must not want any crown corporation to fall under access. He knows that is not true. We believe that, yes, government agencies and government departments should fall under access to information, but let us be clear, the Canadian Wheat Board is not a government agency and that is the bottom line.

However, even the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food has tried to imply the same thing many times. In fact, in a letter to the chair of the Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs who was looking at this bill, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food said:

Mr. Ritter argued that the CWB is not considered a Crown corporation. However, it is a government entity that was established by the Government of Canada through legislation and regulation. The CWB is therefore accountable to the Government of Canada and access to information rules should apply.

It is also important to note that the Government of Canada does [not] have [any] involvement in the operations of the Canadian Wheat Board.

That parliamentary secretary is wrong also. The Canadian Wheat Board does provide basically the same as access to information but does not need to deal with the nuisance requests that we get through access to information. It provides an annual report. It has elected directors and those directors hold meetings with their constituents, the same as we do. That is a way of providing access. They hold annual meetings at which financial officers of the Canadian Wheat Board are there to answer questions. They have full access through the audited report. The Auditor General also is a possibility, as well as the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food.

• (1820)

In many ways, the government opposite does remind us of a government in the 1800s in terms of some of the policies it brings forward. Maybe it is thinking back to the time prior to 1998, when in fact the Canadian Wheat Board was seen as an agency of the Government of Canada, but that changed legislatively in 1998. Amendments to the Canadian Wheat Board Act were made and control of the corporation was given over to farmers. What it says in the act itself about whether it is an agency or not is found in subsection 4(2) of the Canadian Wheat Board Act, which states:

The Corporation is not an agent of Her Majesty and is not a Crown corporation within the meaning of the Financial Administration Act.

Simply put, this amendment is back in here by the Bloc at the behest of the Prime Minister, who will do almost anything to undermine the board's competitiveness. The parliamentary secretary and the President of the Treasury Board are basically allowing it to happen.

Let us look at a little history. Initially, the government and the President of the Treasury Board himself did not bring forward a government amendment to put the Canadian Wheat Board under access to information in the first instance. There is a reason for that. The minister knows and he knows full well that the legal advice from within the Government of Canada from the Department of Justice was not to put the Canadian Wheat Board under access to information, because it is not a government entity and it is not a government agency. That is why. To this day we have not seen an amendment from the government itself to put the Canadian Wheat Board under access to information.

When the bill was at committee, it was really the NDP member for Winnipeg Centre, in his brief love affair with the Conservative government as they worked on the accountability act together, who was trying to do things. I do not know why or for what. For a favour? Certainly we often see the leader of the NDP getting up to support the Prime Minister time after time. They are certainly in bed together on the environmental issues and in terms of destroying Kyoto, but I digress.

Clearly the member for Winnipeg Centre made an amendment in haste to put the Canadian Wheat Board under access to information and the government was overjoyed to accept it. When the bill came back to the House, the NDP had seen the error of its ways and agreed to vote in favour of another amendment that would have taken access to information out of the bill.

However, in the meantime, something happened. We really do not know what. We do know that the Prime Minister had a little chat with the leader of the separatists and suddenly the Bloc Québécois voted against the amendment to take the Wheat Board out from under access to information.

Was a deal cut? I do not know, but it seems awfully strange to me that a discussion between the Prime Minister of Canada and the leader of a separatist party would create a deal to put the Canadian Wheat Board under access to information. It is awfully suspicious.

We do know what the end result of this will be. The Prime Minister will do anything to undermine the Canadian Wheat Board. What for? The Americans have challenged us 11 times and we have won every time. The people who will gain if the Canadian Wheat Board is destroyed are those in the international grain trade, mostly centred in the United States. Is the Prime Minister doing favours for them? Or who? In any event, we know that the Bloc sold out western farmers in that amendment by putting access to information up against the Canadian Wheat Board.

When the bill got to the Senate, the place of sober second thought, the Senate did in fact amend it and got it out again.

• (1825)

When the bill got to the Senate, the place of sober second thought, the Senate amended it and sent it out again. Now we have the Bloc bringing forward the amendment again. What is happening is interesting. Something is going on between the Prime Minister and the leader of the separatist party but it will be the farmers in western Canada who will be paying a price for the Prime Minister's little arrangement with the leader of the separatist party.

Now we have this deal for the third time to weaken the board by access requests. The government has only one agenda with respect to the Canadian Wheat Board and that is its destruction through any means, which it will take right up to the very line of legality.

The parliamentary secretary told the western producer, which was quoted in an April 20 article of this year after the bill had been introduced and the provision of the Canadian Wheat Board was not included, and keep in mind that I said the President of the Treasury Board and the government did not include it, that "The minister", meaning the President of the Treasury Board, "told me that there is every intention to make the change (to include the Canadian Wheat Board) but there just wasn't time to get it into the bill".

He went on to say that the real problem was trying to "get the wording right" in order to find a way to prevent the loss of commercially sensitive information. Given that the government never introduced the amendment, we can only conclude that it never found the right wording to protect the commercially sensitive information and the government accepted the NDP amendments to include the Canadian Wheat Board because it no longer cared if that information was protected.

Hartley Furtan, a noted agriculture economist, in a recent report on the Canadian Wheat Board, stated:

The cost of CWB services varies from year to year depending upon the volume handled. The actual costs are reported each year in the annual report. Comparable marketing costs for large private grain trading firms are not publicly available.

What we are really seeing here is that the Canadian Wheat Board is being put at a disadvantage. We must keep in mind that the Canadian Wheat Board is for farmers. It maximizes returns back to primary producers and farmers pay the full cost. The cost of access to information and these nuisance requests coming from the likes of Cargill and Archer Daniels Midland, friends of the Prime Minister obviously, will be a cost that farmers bear. No other commercial grain organization is under that kind of requirement. Why is the Government of Canada imposing that kind of prohibitive cost on primary producers in western Canada?

In a letter from the president of the Canadian Wheat Board to the standing committee on legal and constitutional affairs had this to say:

Farmers already have access to the sorts of information that ATIA could provide for them through the information policy instituted by the board of directors. If the CWB becomes subject to ATIA the administrative costs to farmers will increase with no incremental benefit in increased transparency. The cost of responding to such requests is not insignificant. Therefore, the true beneficiaries of adding the CWB to the ATIA will primarily be non-farmers such as competitors and foreign antagonists that would be able to make information requests.

Subjecting the CWB to ATIA will put it at a disadvantage to its commercial competitors. These competitors could gain access to types of information about the CWB that the CWB could not obtain from them. It would also open up sensitive information to access by its international antagonists (primarily, the United States).

Adjournment Proceedings

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): The hon. member for Malpeque will have five minutes left for his speech the next time the House resumes consideration of this bill.

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

A motion to adjourn the House under Standing Order 38 deemed to have been moved.

• (1830)

[*English*]

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased that in the modernization of parliamentary proceedings, a change was made where during the adjournment proceedings the presenter and respondent were permitted to take a place that was opposite each other. Because there were so few people in the House it would give them a chance to have a dialogue. That change was adopted by the House and I am pleased that I had an opportunity to leave that fingerprint on this place.

Back in June I asked a question of the foreign affairs minister. It had to do with Mr. Huseyin Celil who had travelled to Uzbekistan, had been detained by the Uzbek authorities and had been sentenced in absentia to death in China for apparently alleged terrorist activities, et cetera.

I have had this conversation with the parliamentary secretary before, but it is timely that we have just come through a situation with the APEC meetings that the Prime Minister had an on again, off again, on again, off again meeting, albeit an informal one, 15 minutes long to discuss numerous issues. Interestingly enough the name that came up with regard to human rights was Huseyin Celil.

Mr. Celil has become the government's poster boy on the issue of human rights. I am really surprised that at the APEC meetings the Prime Minister chose Mr. Celil as the person whose case would be used with regard to our concerns for human rights.

Canada has a long tradition of defending the rights and freedoms of the individual. We have a Canadian citizen, Mr. Celil, an imam of the Muslim faith.

I had asked my question at a time when Mr. Celil had been detained by the Uzbek authorities. There is a relationship between Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, China and others. It is called the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. It is similar to Interpol. It basically says that if someone is in a jurisdiction and there is a quasi-Interpol notice that the person be detained, it will cooperate and have the person extradited to a jurisdiction.

Adjournment Proceedings

The issue is that Mr. Celil was detained in Uzbekistan when he was there visiting with family members and he was going to be extradited. I asked the foreign affairs minister whether he would visit the ambassador in the U.S., since Canada does not have an ambassador from Uzbekistan, to negotiate the release of Mr. Celil and send a delegation to Uzbekistan to get Mr. Celil into Canada's hands. The answer from Uzbekistan was that it would have preferred to have Mr. Celil released to Canada but Canada had shown insufficient interest in the file.

After Mr. Celil has been extradited to China, why is it that now we are talking about Huseyin Celil when it is in fact too late?

Mr. Deepak Obhrai (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in his presentation, the member for Mississauga South said that Mr. Celil had been sentenced in absentia, and I can tell him that he has not. As far as we are concerned, we have been informed that the investigation continues, that Mr. Celil has not been tried or sentenced so far, and no trial date has been set. I thought I would correct that piece of information and bring it to the member's attention.

In reference to the issue of Mr. Celil, the Minister of Foreign Affairs has made extensive representations to the government of China. The minister has met with Mr. Celil's family and continues to take a personal interest in this case. The Government of Canada takes this case very seriously and continues to approach the Chinese at every opportunity and at every level of government.

Repeated representations have been made. In fact, just this past weekend, the Prime Minister spoke directly with the Chinese president and raised Mr. Celil's case. Canada continues to stress that he is a Canadian citizen. The Minister of Foreign Affairs has raised this issue with the Chinese foreign minister on three occasions, most recently in person during a bilateral meeting at the APEC meeting in Vietnam.

I would like to assure the hon. member that we are making every effort to obtain access to Mr. Celil in China. We will continue efforts to confirm Mr. Celil's well-being and to ensure that he is afforded due process and that his rights are protected. Meanwhile, DFAIT officials continue to maintain regular contact with Mr. Celil's family in Canada.

Canada and China share important political, economic and people to people ties. Canada remains committed to building our strong bilateral relationship. This government is charring Canada's relationship with China very effectively. Our primary goal is to protect the interests of Canadians in tune with our values. We understand China's considerable and growing importance to Canada and to the world politically and economically. For these reasons, we are committed to full and constructive relations with the government of the People's Republic of China wherever our interests are at stake, including in trade and investment, human rights and the rule of law, security, for example, on crime and terrorism, health and on the environment.

Are there challenges in our relationship? Of course there are challenges. There are differences in outlook and interests in all bilateral relationships. That is the nature of and reason for diplomacy. This government will always defend the interests of Canadians and will seek to influence China on issues of significance to Canada.

Canada maintains five diplomatic missions throughout China. Canada's embassy in Beijing is our largest in the world. It operates major trade and political development assistance and immigration programs. China is Canada's second largest trading partner after the United States, and commercial activity between our two countries continues to grow. China is also a source and destination for investment and a partner for science and technology.

The government is working to create the right environment for Canada's business community to benefit from China's potential in all these areas through the negotiation and implementation of various agreements. Therefore, our relationship with China is very important and we bring this issue out in front.

● (1835)

Mr. Paul Szabo: Mr. Speaker, the parliamentary secretary is totally misinformed. I am really saddened that he brought in this information.

In fact, China does not recognize dual citizenship. It does not recognize Mr. Celil's Canadian citizenship.

Contrary to what the parliamentary secretary said, Mr. Celil has been tried. He has been sentenced to 15 years in prison. There was no legal representation. This was in violation of the Vienna convention and a bilateral agreement on consular affairs. We were not advised that he was in China's custody. There was no disclosure of the charges. There was no consular access. He was not assured of having due process under the law, and in fact, he had no legal representation.

The parliamentary secretary is a good man, I understand that, but he is totally misinformed. Mr. Celil has now been sentenced to 15 years and it is because of the incompetence of the Conservative government that he is in jail. It did not take action when it was asked to take action, to go to Uzbekistan and get that man out.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: Mr. Speaker, I can understand the passion of my colleague from Mississauga South. After all we are dealing with a Canadian citizen but I would like again to confirm that the information about the 15 years was verified and it was confirmed not to be true.

● (1840)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): The motion to adjourn the House is now deemed to have been adopted. Accordingly, the House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 10 a.m., pursuant to Standing Order 24.

(The House adjourned at 6:40 p.m.)

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